

David Gilligan

**BEATI IMMACULATI
THE HIDDEN GOD OF FORD MADOX FORD**

Ford Madox Ford was a curious figure in terms of both his life and work. Though one of the most influential figures in the modernist movement he was also a penetrating critic of the social mores of the new society which emerged in the wake of the First World War. His literary reputation has often been overshadowed by the bizarre and semi-fictional quality of his private life while his published views on cultural philosophy were curiously at odds with his own private behaviour and the nature of his works of fiction.

This duality was conveyed in his fiction by the use of impressionistic narrative techniques and a tendency to create characters who were in conflict with themselves. There was also a discernable difference in the world view which emerges in Ford's critical prose and the more indulgent approach to life in his novels. Ford notoriously was less than scrupulous, when it came to the "facts" of his own vividly imagined and freely reconstructed autobiography because his notions of truth became increasingly influenced by the relativistic notion that the truth was an imaginative literary construct and that almost everything was, consequentially, an act of translation. For Ford the truth became increasingly metaphorical.

Ford was a man at odds with "the filthy modern tide," but he also learned to come to a creative if bewildered accommodation with the post-war zeitgeist. Like W. B. Yeats he was an undoubted master of ambiguity in his use of words. On more than one occasion he had declared himself to be "a papist by tradition and sentiment" but in fact he had converted to Catholicism in late adolescence for pecuniary considerations to please his German relatives.

Ford was also like Yeats in the sense that he was a great poseur and liked to present himself as a Tory squire and quintessential Englishman. His notion of the truth was as essentially poetic as Yeats's was insofar as

he sought the essence or heart of any situation and was at times oblivious to finite details and surface textures. Sympathetic critics of Ford such as Max Saunders have praised his writing for its civilised vision, its "humane percipience, unostentatiousness, internationalism and resistance to propaganda."¹ In fact there were many dimensions to Ford's thought and in both fictional and non-fictional prose he had decried liberalism and multiculturalism.

A valuable insight into Ford's thought is provided by an essay entitled *Pure Literature* which he wrote in 1922 but which was unpublished in his own lifetime.

Here in Saunders view was found Ford's "most searching explorations of a question that perpetually vexed him: that of the relationship between literature and morality, and of the purposes and effects of imaginative literature" (6). Ford's reaction against the Victorian standards of literature is well known but in this essay he attempted to show "how moral emotion or instruction may inhere in art, without being its purpose" (6). Ford, like many modernists, admired the qualities of aloofness and objectivity in authors and their works and so developed a distinctive anti-romantic sensibility.

In this essay Ford suggests that while it is possible to obtain ethical instruction for literature "pure literature" as such does not aim at moral instruction. He saw Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as the supreme example of a book, purely moral in purpose, which had attained its purpose and status because of the artistic genius of its author. Works of pure literature could have a moral basis and for this reason Ford was an unapologetic admirer of eighteenth century Anglican devotional poetry and the hymnology of Isaac Watts. In Ford's view the poetry of George Herbert had displayed a great "one-ness" with the soul of the English people and collectively the written art of Bunyan, Herbert, Herrick and their like conveyed a strong feeling of actual life in seventeenth century England.

Thus in Ford's view, sincere expressions of genuine spirituality were not incompatible with literary excellence. Ford's dislike of eighteenth century literature was grounded in his view that the scepticism of that era was concealed by a hypocritical and deferential response to revealed religion. Thus Ford was determined to present his own secular (and as he saw it ignoble) century in its true colours.

Ford, like many of his fictional heroes, came to see himself as something of an anachronism, a man born into the nineteenth century but forced to accommodate himself to the shifting and dissolving values of the twentieth century. Because of his experiences as a front-line officer in the Great War

¹ Max Saunders, *Agenda Special Issue on Ford Madox Ford* (Agenda Trust: London, 1989-1990), p. 5. All references in the text will be to this edition.

he began to accept life in its existential immediacy and diversity and came to a reluctant accommodation with his own secular age.

This response to life is suggested by the memorial to a young dancer of Antibes in the novel *The Rash Act* (1933). Here is a symbolic pagan figure from the past who danced, gave pleasure and is dead (*Saltavit, Placuit, Mortuus Est*). For critics such as C. H. Sisson this sort of leitmotif and the general tone of Ford's text suggest that Ford had come to a position where his approval was given to an existential paganism rather than the metaphorical evocation of Christian and classical values found in his earlier work such as *Parades End*.

The Rash Act is a central novel about the post war lost generation. It is a leave-taking, a shadowy tenebrous, and philosophically nervous work, which employs an under-current of quasi-religious language to contemplate the attempted and successful suicide of its two main characters. One character survives to experience a form of social resurrection. It is a rebirth in which Henry Martin, a victim of the Depression, assumes the identity and life of Hugh Monckton a victim of the Great War. Significantly the real suicide takes place on the 15th August the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The character who survives and assumes the identity of the victim lives on merely to perpetuate the materialistic "beanfeast" of the millionaire protagonist who has taken his own life. For Sisson and other critics it seems as though Ford is suggesting that life and fate are in appearances and that these are the absolutes in the new wasteland he has portrayed.

But there is a submerged sense of transcendence in this work even if the God who is glimpsed is the inexorable, inscrutable god of the storm clouds, an unpredictable force of nature and destiny who seems indifferent to human fate. Ford may have had *Ecclesiastes*, one of the Old Testament books of Wisdom, in mind while he worked on this novel.

Ecclesiastes appears to be the most pessimistic book in the Bible, an examination of the futility of life and of the quest for wisdom. Ford's novel is set, "under the sun," in Provence, where Ford had spent a good part of his life. In the biblical Hebrew of *Ecclesiastes* the formulaic phrase "under the sun" is employed to describe the futility of a life divorced from the purposes of God. The drama which is enacted under the sun of Provence seems to be pagan and fatalistic but Henry Martin reflects upon the fact that Destiny is "probably virtuous and reads the gospels" although the "left hand of god" is equally active. An inexorable sense of destiny haunts this novel and suggests, with the author of *Ecclesiastes*, that to every time there is a season and a time to every purpose "under heaven" as well as "under the sun" but there is a final ambivalence about the fate of these two interchangeable characters who suffer such different fates.

There are moments when Ford's leading protagonist, Henry Martin, struggles with his New England, puritan conscience as he negotiates the moral and social realities of this strange new world. He is ill at ease with his unexpected good fortune and with the hedonistic, cosmopolitan culture of southern Europe which both threatens and promises to absorb him.

Ford had collaborated with Joseph Conrad on several novels and in Henry Martin we see a character who "goes native" in a rather more sophisticated way than Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* but here, possibly, is a character who literally gains the world materially but may be losing his soul. Martin, comes to realise that "the times were out of joint but the cursed spite was that he was not the fellow that was called to set them right."² This, perhaps, was a conclusion that Ford himself came to.

The figure of the dancer at one with the dance was also very much a Yeatsian one. Other parallels can be found in the work of the two maturing writers. The decline of the great aristocratic houses, the destruction of the woods of Arcady and of the antique glory of Groby Great Tree speak of the destruction of symbolic trees whose roots had reached "deep into ancestral consciences."³ Both men had struggled against the forces of modernity in their lives. There is a similar defiance of nature and of death but one can sense that Yeats had more stomach for the fight. In Ford one finds a more forgiving spirit which was not unrelated to his latitudinarian Catholicism. Ford did not share Yeats's "savage indignation" with his own generation because he was too well aware of his own personal limitations.

Although he wrote *The Rash Act* to expose the lack of physical and moral courage in the post-war world the English writer was never overtly censorious in his fiction. His portrayal of social change in the early decades of the twentieth century includes an insistent awareness of spiritual realities and of forces beyond humanity. Although Ford was a catholic he was a highly individual one. There was little that was evangelistic in his work and where this was so-as with the early and conspicuous literary failure *Mr Apollo* (1908) – the mistake was not repeated.

One can perhaps sense that within Ford's fiction there is the sense of a loss of vision of an ideal community and a confused quest for its restoration. All of this is very apparent in Ford's acknowledged pre-war masterpiece *The Good Soldier* (1915). The ideal images of a unified culture in that novel – the Arthurian round table, the social and cosmic minuet, the Yeatsian symbolism of the eternal fountain – are subtly undermined by the pseudo-religious language of the morally confused narrator who asks

² Ford Madox Ford, *The Rash Act* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1983), p. 344.

³ Kenneth Young, *Ford Madox Ford* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, Green and Co. Ltd, 1970), p. 32.

despairing and elemental questions (the sort of essential questions that were being abandoned by the Cambridge philosopher's of Ford's own generation):

Isn't there any heaven where old beautiful dances, old beautiful intimacies prolong themselves? . . . And yet I swear by the sacred name of my creator that it was true. It was true sunshine; the true music; the true splash of the fountains from the mouth of stone dolphins.⁴

This is all part of a discourse which ensues between the Christian and pagan perceptions of the ideal life which run through this novel. "What is one to think of humanity?" That is the prime question of this narrative because in the absence of God "It is all a darkness" and human nature is "A queer shifty thing" as divine essence no longer determines human existence. The separation of faith and reason is made explicit in the novel by the fact that the credal statement "Credo in unum Deum omnipotentum" is uttered repeatedly by an insane girl who has gone mad, appropriately enough, crossing the Red Sea. Two of the characters who dominate the story, Edward Ashburnham and Florence Hurlbird, are essentially pagan but Edward's optimistic humanist assumptions are also shown to be without foundation.

He was cursed by his atrocious temper; he had been cursed by a half mad wife, who drank and went on the streets. His daughter was totally mad and yet he believed in the goodness of human nature. (213)

Ford realised that the loss of the idea of a divinely conferred identity affected the consciousness of modern people and that this had an effect on personal relationships. The quest for identity was relocated into the sexual sphere of life. Old Testament writers had also identified this tendency when they wrote about the "circumcision of the heart." In Biblical Hebrew the term "heart" did not have emotional connotations as in Romanticism but actually meant the centre of the will, the centre of one's being. The Biblical author's were implying that ultimate identity is not to be found in one's sexuality but in a relationship with the divine source of life.

In Ford's novel the heart is used as a metaphor of the ills of a society obsessed by its own diseased eroticism. His close identification with the self-deceiving libertine Captain Ashburnham amounts to an almost wistful and ironic apology for his own life (a very different "Apologia pro vita sua" to the one presented by another famous convert, Cardinal Newman). Underlying this sad story (the original title of the novel) is the sense of the loss of divine vision or of any transcendental dimension to life. This

⁴ Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1977), p. 14. All references in the text will be to this edition.

theme of loss is suggested, perhaps ironically, by the Latin inscription (*Beata Immaculata*) which prefaces this his most famous novel.

Finally Ford came to see that "one must live, one must face, with equanimity, the circumstances of one's own age."⁵ Yet he also believed that it was "unbearable to exist without some view of life as a whole" (12). Some pointers were needed in the midst of moral dilemmas but as the narrator Dowling puts it in *The Good Soldier* "there is nothing to guide us . . . It is all a darkness."

In a short section from his autobiography *It Was The Nightingale* (1933) Ford confessed to having given little thought to the question of the supernatural but rather of having a great sense of benediction and of a feeling for the numinous and the auspicious aspects of life in the form of twists of fortune, signs and omens. As a teenager he had confessed to a Passionist Priest that he found it difficult to believe in the Trinity. The old priest advised the young Ford to calm himself, believe as much as he could and to leave such thoughts to the theologians. Ford went on to say that from that time onwards he had never given a thought to what he called the "Supernatural Major." It is certain that his novels are not "theological" in any major sense but a religious awareness, albeit in a minor key, does permeate much of his subsequent fiction. Coincidences and significant twists of fate proliferate in his work.

His final group of major novels were written during the economic depression of the nineteen thirties. *The Rash Act* was the book most typical of this period. In his introduction to the novel C. H. Sisson noted that "the world has changed, and Ford has noted the symptoms" (12). Earlier novels such as *The Good Soldier* had introduced an uncertainty principle into the narrative procedure and the equivocations of the narrator introduce a strong sense of relativism and ambivalence into the chorus of narrative comment. Ford's fiction begins to consist of one large and systematic interrogation of reality not unlike Yeats's interrogation of Nature in *The Tower*. However, Ford's questions are directed mainly at a society from which Ford feels culturally and morally estranged but which he is increasingly obliged to come to terms with.

Ford's characters continually ask questions of life to which no clear answer is given. Hugh Monckton, one of the suicidal characters who inhabit the pages of *The Rash Act* asks the seminal question,

What's become of religion? . . . I suppose that when one contemplated death in the old days, one wondered where one was going. Now one doesn't . . . why? (213)

⁵ Ford Madox Ford, *The English Novel* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1983), p. 14. All references in the text will be to this edition.

This novel of the "lost generation" is permeated with a religious diction which is subverted by the fact that in the consciousness of the perishing protagonist the "problem of life" becomes a morbid obsession and his death seems to be denuded of any real spiritual significance. Hugh Monckton has been doomed in his mother's womb and by the vagaries of a free market economic system. Ironically the day of his death, the Feast of the Assumption, becomes the occasion of a dance of death. Many other seminal questions are asked in Ford's novels but they all spring in one way or another from these primal questions of life and death and the confrontation with one's own mortality. Ford himself, faced with recurring legal, financial and marital problems, had often felt himself on the edge of social extinction especially during the thirties.

A typically tragic leitmotif that one can find in Ford's fiction is that of the individual who carries within himself or herself the values and perceptions of a former age. These living fossils, the beautiful, heroic and idealistic as both Ford and Yeats saw them, have little in common with the twentieth century. This disposition can be found in the suicidal Henry Martin of *The Rash Act*. Here we have the characteristic Janus mentality verbalised:

It was as if he were not all of one piece. It was perhaps that. Born in the nineteenth and having lived the great part of his life in the twentieth century. (130)

Ford, like Yeats, tried to live vicariously through a series of Persona who provided a link with the past and in the process manifested some essential truths which were tied to race, ancestral memory and the soil. Ford's preoccupation with locating the essence of the English soul can also be found in various nineteenth century Russian writers such as Dostoyevsky and Turgenev, Christopher Tietjens and Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin who features in *The Idiot* are both the embodiment of national virtue and in a way are both Christ-like figures or "fools for Christ." Christopher Tietjens, like Prince Myshkin, was an idealised character who acted as both a critic and a catalyst of a corrupt society in a sort of inverted picaresque pilgrimage through the wasteland of the First World War and its social aftermath. Each character was instructed in the amoral realities of their own time. Myshkin is taught that it is not easy to achieve heaven on earth and Tietjens, through increasing engagement with the new social realities of post-war England learns to temper his ideals with practicality and moral empiricism. The whole drift of Ford's fiction is towards this sort of accommodation with a modern paganism though in the process the "heart" of his characters is strangely disturbed. This is graphically symbolised by the running imagery of *The Good Soldier* where the "failure of the heart" is a dominant motif.

By the post-war era this process of doubt and character disintegration is much more marked in Ford's fiction. The search for an objective standard of truth in philosophy art and literature was being abandoned by the time Ford came to write *The Rash Act*. Man was increasingly caught in a closed system in which the particular, the natural, was devouring grace or any sense of the Universal. The result of this mood of despair as C. H. Sissons notes is an apparently chilling endorsement of suicide in that novel.

Ford once noted that it was characteristic of the modern age that "Truth" itself should have developed a bewildering chameleon-like ability to change and that it had become Janus-like and two-faced. This Ford personally attributed to the "disappearance of probity, continence and belief in revealed religion."⁶ As Frank MacShane points out, religion is an important element in *Parades End* where the "need of a responsible return to old and tried values" underlines portions of the text.

There is also a sense in which an impossible idealism which is both admirable and inappropriate to the modern age is found in Ford's wartime novels but here the concepts of Herbert's Anglicanism and the Roman Catholicism of Groby are primarily metaphorical in nature. In a novel such as *The Rash Act* Ford presents his readers with something more than an historical and sociological vignette of his times. This is a semi-allegorical book, one that involves a scrutiny of the human heart, of the well-springs of human behaviour and conduct.

Ford had always made a distinction between what he saw as the genuine poetry of life and "romance", the latter being viewed as something of an artificial construct. He endorsed the poetry of the normal:

The poetry of the innumerable little efforts of mankind, bound together in such a great tide that with their hopes, their fears, and their reachings out to joy, they formed a something at once majestic and tenuous, at once very common and strangely pathetic.⁷

This expression of what G. K. Chesterton once called the "divine ordinary experience of life"⁸ grew out of a mystical experience of the unity of life which Ford had on a London street in 1907. By the thirties this note of the transcendent had become noticeably attenuated in Ford's fiction. Parallel with this the sense of a vibrant community had also shrunk. Though this was never prominent in the work of any modernist writer one gets the sense that in Ford as with Yeats, there was the quest for an ideal community, or at least an audience or clerisy. Neither was content to spin fiction or poetry out of their intestines or for their literary work to be the

⁶ Frank MacShane, *Ford Madox Ford. His Life And Work* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 179.

⁷ David Harvey, *Ford Madox Ford, A Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 159. All references in the text will be to this edition.

presentation of a point of view. Ford may not have had quite the same Homeric aspirations as Yeats but he wanted his fiction to have moral link with society. By the thirties Ford and his shrinking coterie of ex-patriate characters occupy a shrinking modernist circle of estranged marginalised and alienated individuals.

Ford rejected romance as a literary genre because he saw it as "ethically wicked, a cause of national deterioration of character, of selfishness and of cowardice" (184). This notion is reinforced in one of Ford's published attacks on liberalism. In one outburst in *Outlook* magazine in 1914 he bemoaned the flabby intellectual and spiritual morass of his times:

I think that what we want most of all in the literature of today is religion is intolerance, is persecution, and not the mawkish flap-doodle of culture, Fabianism, peace and goodwill. (194)

However, Ford unlike Mussolini did not reach for his gun (or his pen) when he heard the word "culture". Roland Barthes has said, rather mischievously, that the author is killed by the text. This strident version of Ford becomes sublimated and diffused in the world of his own texts. If anything it could be said that moral evasion and "flap-doodle" is something that is rather conspicuous in the behaviour of some of his most prominent characters. They inhabit an ethically grey world where a spirit of doubt and compromise seems to eat up any sense of a higher spiritual purpose. The fact is Ford was trying to present his own world, a world of reduced horizons and fading ideals, in as realistic a way as possible and this, paradoxically, called for an impressionistic style of presentation. His aversion to Dostoyevsky's melodrama and to romanticism was well known and Ford had written that he was "tired of variations of the Christ legend" in fiction. His own proclaimed literary ideal was a book,

So quiet in tone so clearly and unobtrusively worded, that it should give the effect of a long monologue spoken by a lover at a little distance from his mistress's ear – a book about the invisible relationships between man and man; about the values of life; about the nature of God.⁸

These hidden religious concerns are whispered and insinuated throughout his work.

The convergence of the life circumstances of Ford and that of his literary hero Christopher Tietjens has been noted by some Fordian critics. Both Ford and his literary hero went into a hidden, semi-pastoral, post-war retirement:

⁸ Richard M. Ludwig, "The Reputation of Ford Madox Ford," in: Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

As a small producer, where a man could stand up for his ideals. In the face of Ford's sometimes lurid public life, these ideals were frequently hidden.⁹

Ford's religious vision and idealism is similarly hidden within the matrix of his fiction. One example is this brief but stirring encounter of one of his characters with something numinous in nature, a stirring vision of the living god that is glimpsed in the approach of the cyclonic storm which pursues Henry Martin, the survivor in Ford's novel *The Rash Act*:

That thing of God appeared to go perfectly straight across the inlet. Like a great wall with a whitewashed foot. It towered completely up into invisibility. (198)

Ford's gestures towards the metaphysical take many forms in his fiction. Whether he is dealing with the hidden god of the storm-clouds as in this instance or the later still small voice of a New England conscience within the same Henry Martin or the vision of a concealed heaven revealed only to the dying vision Mark Tietjens, last inheritor of the house of Groby, such moments are fleeting and evanescent. The mundane world continually reasserts itself.

Henry Martin is reborn under the subsumed identity of Hugh Monckton the despairing English millionaire who is yet another casualty of the First World War, the Depression and one might say, the twentieth century. The Feast of the Assumption has been secularised in this novel because its significance is that one character has assumed the social identity of another and is born into a new life in a social rather than a spiritual sense. It is a novel packed with synchronistic events and touches of the numinous that tremble on the edge of transcendental significance yet it ends, ambiguously, with the mere continuance of one more materialistic existence, albeit a pleasant one, on earth.

It is an existence that seems to have become bereft of any sense of transcendence or higher purpose. What is certain is that in Ford's evolving vision only the dying, like Christopher Tietjens, could see the truth because no-one could cope pragmatically with his ideals in an unsympathetic century. No one could see Ford's God and live.

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⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

*David Gilligan***BEATI IMMACULATI. UKRYTY BÓG FORDA MADOX FORDA**

Ford Madox Ford był zagadkowym człowiekiem i pisarzem. Podobnie jak o Grahamie Greene można o nim powiedzieć, że był dość ekscentryczny w swoim katolicyzmie. Ford był przede wszystkim pisarzem, a dopiero później katolikiem, który unikał w swojej twórczości propagandy i dydaktyzmu. W jego powieściach można jednak odnaleźć głębokie zainteresowanie sprawami moralnymi i metafizycznymi.

Przez wielu uznawany za pioniera modernizmu, Ford nie czuł się pewnie w XX w. i był jego ostrym krytykiem. Można go nazwać Eurypidesem jego czasów: on również dostrzegał niebezpieczeństwo, jakie niesie ze sobą odejście od wiary i powierzchowność świeckiego podejścia do życia.

W połowie lat trzydziestych Ford osiągnął pewnego rodzaju kompromis z nowym typem społeczeństwa, które narodziło się z początkiem I wojny światowej. W powieściach z okresu 1915–1933 obserwujemy rosnącą akceptację egzystencjalnego stosunku do życia, ciągle jednak wyczuwalna jest świadomość istnienia boskości ukryta w tekście w ten sam sposób, w jaki Ford starał się stłumić idealizm w swoim własnym życiu. Twórczość Forda, poprzez minimalizację transcendentnych aspektów życia i nacisk na kompromis z otaczającym go światem, do którego miał stosunek co najmniej ambiwalentny stanowi więc odzwierciedlenie ówczesnej teologii i filozofii.