

Dr. Nagihan Haliloğlu

Fatih Sultan Mehmet University, Istanbul

The Country House and Plot in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*

Ford Madox Ford was a modernist writer who experimented both with the reliability of narrators and telling his stories in a non-linear way. The way he anchored his stories, I argue, is to place a country house at the heart of his novels, against which the reader can chart the physical and emotional journeys of the characters and measure their worldviews. The plots of his novels trace not only the life of his characters but also the changes that are happening in England as a whole. The titles of the two novels I'm looking at, *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End* suggests that Ford is looking at the end of 'good soldiering' in England or soldiering on without making a fuss. The good soldiers of both novels are products of the English country house and both seem to be losing their authority over it. In both novels Americans lay siege to the country house and end up taking possession of it, however there are other, more domestic forces that lay claim to the country house: both good soldiers are married to Catholics. It is indeed, as I will try to show, the battle between these various claims on the country house that determine the plot and condition the fates of his characters. Even the relationships between the men and women that have the country house at their centre, almost as a third party.

English house as the embodiment of English character does indeed make it a battleground of different ideologies- in Ford's case this becomes very apparent in the

way in which he details Catholic and Protestant claims – a duality, which, one can argue, is at the very heart of English consciousness. Indeed, we can take the first **movement** of both plots to be the arrival of the Catholic wife into the country house. In both novels the hero due to a sense of personal or historical guilt relinquish all claims on the house to their wives. In *The Good Soldier*, it is more personal: Leonara arrives in Teleragh, Branshaw Manor from Ireland, soon to discover that her husband is a philanderer, not only of his amorous affections but also of his estate's resources. With her Irish frugality she saves him from financial ruin, thereby becoming the protector of the house. Her efforts are recognized by Ashburnham, Edward Ashburnham, Captain, Fourteenth Hussars, of Branshaw House, Branshaw Teleragh,¹ the good soldier of the title, and he suggests, even insists that they build a catholic chapel as repentance for the emotional distress he has been causing her.²

While the 'violence' Ashburnham visits upon his wife is mostly emotional, the good soldier of *Parade's End*, Christopher Tietjens, carries the mark of violence-violence visited upon catholics by the protestants, in his very Dutch, protestant name. Throughout the book he's referred to as Tietjens of Groby but as we are made more and more privy to his thoughts we see he is obsessed with the way Groby came into his family, Protestant conquerers requisitioning Catholic property. Both men's

¹ Branshaw Manor lies in a little hollow with lawns across it and pine-woods on the fringe of the dip. The immense wind, coming from across the forest, roared overhead. But the view from the window was perfectly quiet and grey. Not a thing stirred, except a couple of rabbits on the extreme edge of the lawn. It was Leonora's own little study that we were in and we were waiting for the tea to be brought. I, as I said, was sitting in the deep chair, Leonora was standing in the window twirling the wooden acorn at the end of the window-blind cord desultorily round and round. She looked across the lawn and said, as far as I can remember:

"Edward has been dead only ten days and yet there are rabbits on the lawn."

² Ironically enough, the first real trouble between them came from his desire to build a Roman Catholic chapel at Branshaw. He wanted to do it to honour Leonora, and he proposed to do it very expensively. Leonora did not want it. [...] There was a period when he was quite ready to become an emotional Catholic.

understanding of their crime- and the way they try to make up for it involves conceding all rights of the English house to their Catholic wives. Tietjens, when through his love-affair realizes, as a good soldier and gentleman, that he has made his claim to the house forfeit, and must relinquish it to his catholic wife, remembers ‘the curse’, that is supposed to be on the Dutch settlers who came to win England to Protestantism:

It was, perhaps, time that there should be a Papist owner of Groby again.

‘You’ve read Spelden on sacrilege about Groby? . . . ’

She said:

‘Yes! The first Tietjens who came over with Dutch William, the swine, was pretty bad to the Papist owners . . .[...] ‘Spelden on sacrilege,’ he said, ‘may be right after all. You’d say so from the Tietjenses. There’s not been a Tietjens since the first Lord Justice cheated the Papist Loundeses out of Groby, but died of a broken neck or of a broken heart.

Just as the violence at the foundation of the English house results in the burning of the house in Jane Eyre, in Parade’s End, it ends with the destruction of a wing of the house when the old tree is uprooted.

The second movement of both plots, if we simplify for the purposes of this paper, starts with the introduction of a second **claimant to the good soldiers’ affections and the country house**. In *The Good Soldier*, it is the married American woman, proud of her Protestantism, Florence, which the country house summons from across the Atlantic. In *Nauheim* where both the Ashburnhams and Florence and her husband are

‘taking cures’, they become lovers, as is recounted by the rather tricky narrator Dowell himself: ‘You see, she had two things that she wanted. She wanted to be a great lady, installed in Branshaw Teleragh.’

For it had been discovered that Florence came of a line that had actually owned Branshaw Teleragh two centuries before the Ashburnhams came there. Yes, it was a bad fix for her, because Edward [...] could not give her Branshaw Manor, that home of her ancestors being settled on his wife, she could at least have pretty considerably queened it there or thereabouts, what with our money and the support of the Ashburnhams. (GS 64)

Indeed, the country house works its magic to bring together these two couples together, and condition their relationships from beyond the English channel. Thus, an element of uncertainty is introduced as to who the lawful or natural claimant to Branshaw and Ashburnham’s affections is—the protestant woman who actually has the pedigree, or the Catholic woman who emasculates Lord of Teleragh with her frugality?

The same uncertainty is even more in evidence in *Parade’s End* and who will inherit Groby is a constant question, the last book of the tetralogy dealing almost exclusively with that. Mark,³ though the elder brother, and not a very good soldier at all, realizes

³ he would never marry her because she was a Papist, but he was aware that then he was only chipping at Spelden, the fellow that wrote “Spelden on Sacrilege,” a book that predicted all sorts of disaster for fellows who owned former Papist Church lands or who had displaced Papists. When he had told Christopher that he would never marry Charlotte — he had called her Charlotte for reasons of camouflage before the marriage — he had been quite aware that he was chipping at Spelden’s ghost — for Spelden must have been dead a hundred years or so. As it were, he had been saying grimly if pleasantly to that boggy: “Eh, old un. You see. You may prophesy disaster to Groby because a Tietjens was given it over the head of one of your fellows in Dutch William’s time. But you can’t frighten me

he is not made of material that would be able to bear the country life (even his mistress is French, height of urbanity!),⁴⁵ and the war having taken the other Tietjens brothers it falls upon Christopher, our protagonist. Valentine Wannop the suffragette is introduced in the second movement as claimant on the good soldier's affections. Because she knows the centrality of Groby in Tietjens life Valentine asks him to describe it for her. This description of Groby, which we get only in tangential fragment, works almost like their vows for one another – as this is the last topic they speak of before their conversation is cut and then Tietjens leave for the French front. However, from the very start, she is aware that she cannot have any claims on Groby

'Tell me about Groby,' the girl said at last.

Tietjens began to tell her about his home . . . There was, in front of it, an avenue that turned into the road at right angles. [...]

'My great-great-grandfather made it,' Tietjens said. 'He liked privacy and didn't want the house visible to vulgar people on the road [...]' It came suddenly into his head that he wasn't perhaps the father of the child who was actually the heir to that beloved place over which generation after generation had brooded. Ever since Dutch William! [...]

On the bank his knees were almost level with his chin. He felt himself slipping down.

into making an honest woman — let alone a Lady of Groby — out of a Papist."

⁴ Groby will have to be looked after, and even if you do not live there you can keep a strong hand on Sanders, or whoever you elect to have as manager. That monstrosity you honour with your name — which is also mine, thank you! [...] And she *keawert ho down i' th' ingle and had a gradely pow*. You remember how Gobbles the gardener used to say that. A good chap, though he came from Lancasheere!

⁵ He had a vision of Mark, standing on the lawn at Groby, in his bowler hat and with his umbrella, whilst the shooters walked over the lawn, and up the hill to the butts. Mark probably never had done that; but it was so that his image always presented itself to his brother and he smokes! Not man of Groby at all

‘If I ever take you there . . . ’ he began.

‘Oh, but you never will,’ she said.⁶ ‘My dear!’ she said, ‘you won’t ever take me to Groby . . . It’s perhaps . . . oh . . . short acquaintance; but I feel you’re the splendidest . . .

However, Valentine’s claim to Groby isn’t quite so unthinkable as one may suppose at first glance. She is the daughter of a female author whom old Tietjens used to sponsor, and as the novel progresses we learn that the old Tietjens even had plans of marrying the girl. At the very moment that Tietjens makes it clear that his affections lie elsewhere, his wife, Sylvia, decides that in return, she must have complete control of Groby, in a way, who becomes a stand in for Tietjens himself, Tietjens, indeed, of Groby. In failing to claim Tietjens, she claims Groby:

So, on the spur of the moment, she had invented a desire to live at Groby with the accompanying necessity for additional means. For, although she was a pretty wealthy woman, she was not wealthy enough to live at Groby and keep it up. The immense old place was not so immense because of its room-space, though, as far as she could remember, there must be anything between forty and sixty rooms, but because of the vast old grounds, the warren of stabling, wells,

⁶ So Valentine WAS destined for Groby!:

She was a lady: she would have managed Groby very well; and, although the entail on the property was very strict indeed, he would, at least, have been able to put her beyond the reach of want after his death. But as for his not going to live at Groby: if he is setting up house with Miss Wannop . . . Well, he could not flaunt her in the face of the country

rose-walks and fencing . . . A man's place, really, the furniture very grim and the corridors on the ground floor all slabbed with great stones.⁷

While the plots of both novels are a product of the battle between the different claims made by the characters, there are, as have been pointed out, more general and claims on the house, **conditioned by England's history of reformation and expansion.**

Groby has been stolen from the Catholics, and Branshaw is saved from ruin by Ashburnham being stationed there to economize. The country house is at once the product and the producer of English history:

Before they left for India she had let Branshaw for seven years at a thousand a year. She sold two Vandykes and a little silver for eleven thousand pounds and she raised, on mortgage, twenty-nine thousand [...] They were just frills to the Ashburnham vanity. Edward cried for two days over the disappearance of his ancestors and then she wished she had not done it; but it did not teach her anything and it lessened such esteem as she had for him. She did not also understand that to let Branshaw affected him with a feeling of physical soiling—that it was almost as bad for him as if a woman belonging to him had become a prostitute. That was how it did affect him; but I dare say she felt just as bad about the Spanish dancer.

Just as Groby is a stand in for Tietjens, Branshaw is like a fifth limb for Ashburnham, and violence done to it is considered violence to him. While out in India, they meet Maisie Maidan who becomes a long time mistress for him, and it is mostly on her

⁷ She warned him that, if he got killed, she would cut down the great cedar at the south-west corner of Groby. It kept all the light out of the principal drawing-room and the bedrooms above it . . . He winced: he certainly winced at that. She regretted that she had said it. It was along other lines that she desired to make him wince.

account that the Ashburnhams go to Nauheim where they meet the Dowells. Indeed, the country house makes its presence felt very much indeed whether in peace or war. Tietjens finds himself in the company of a young man in the trenches, who, it appears, has very fond memories of Groby. They start talking about it, and amidst the firing and the blasts, it becomes the symbol of all that is good and just, the very thing they are fighting for:

He had often been to Groby of a Sunday afternoon. His mother was a Middlesbrough woman. Southbank, rather. [...] ‘They say,’ the boy said, ‘that the well at Groby is three hundred and twenty feet deep, and the cedar at the corner of the house a hundred and sixty.’⁸ The depth of the well twice the height of the tree!’ He had often dropped stones down the well and listened: they made an astonishingly loud noise. Long: like echoes gone mad! His mother knew the cook at Groby, Mrs Harmsworth.

The third movement of the plot sees the Americans installed in the country house, with the English owners abdicating their responsibility, like their prince. In *The Good Soldier*, Ashburnham commits suicide as he cannot bear the psychological burden of his latest, this time almost incestuous affection for his protégé Nancy, and Dowell, the husband of the woman who had seen herself as the mistress of Branshaw, buys it off

⁸ Mark said: “Oha!” to himself. Groby Great Tree was the symbol of Tietjens. For thirty miles round Groby they made their marriage vows by Groby Great Tree. In the other Ridings they said that Groby Tree and Groby well were equal in height and depth one to the other. When they were really imaginatively drunk Cleveland villagers would declare — would knock you down if you denied — that Groby Great Tree was 365 foot high and Groby well 365 feet deep. A foot for every day of the year. . . . On special occasions — he could not himself be bothered to remember what — they would ask permission to hang rags and things from the boughs. Christopher said that one of the chief indictments against Joan of Arc had been that she and the other village girls of Domrémy had hung rags and trinkets from the boughs of a cedar. Offerings to fairies. . . . Christopher set great store by the tree. He was a romantic ass. Probably he set more store by the tree than by anything else at Groby. He would pull the house down if he thought it incommoded the tree.

the Catholic wife, and finds himself as the warden of Nancy, who has lost her mind. The two people who had no designs on the house end up living in it- and not in very good health or spirits either.

Similarly, in the fourth and last book of the *Parade's End* tetralogy, the Catholic wife sells the house to the Americans. *The Last Post*, as denouement, gives us information about certain things that have been hinted at, an exegesis of the preceding 400 odd pages occur, as we go into the minds of all the characters who have now ended up either in Groby like Sylvia and General, or Mark, his mistress, Tietjens and Valentine who have taken up lodging in the vicinity.⁹ Indeed, giving up Groby becomes the symbolic sacrifice that bind Tietjens and Valentine together and absolves them from Spelden's curse: 'For, in effect, they had surrendered Groby in order to live together and had endured sprays of obloquy that seemed never to cease to splash over the garden hedges.'

Indeed, from the very beginning, the characters are pulled and pushed by the country house, and at the end of both novels, it becomes more of a burden than a privilege to be living in it. Dowell has found himself as a nurse to yet another unstable woman living in Branshaw, and the American owner of the house, by uprooting the Groby tree causes the destruction of a wing of the house which will now need endless repairs; the English house will continue to have its pound of flesh yet. However elsewhere Tietjens and Valentine, and Eleanor and her new husband continue to thrive as the inheritors of a new England. Ford seems to be suggesting that the

⁹ Either Spelden or Groby Great Tree had perhaps done for the others. Groby Great Tree had been planted to commemorate the birth of Great — grand-father who had died in a whoreshop — and it had always been whispered in Groby, amongst the children and servants, that Groby Great Tree did not like the house. Its roots tore chunks out of the foundations, and two or three times the trunk had had to be bricked into the front wall. It had been brought as a sapling from Sardinia at a time when gentlemen still thought about landscape gardening. A gentleman in those days consulted his heirs about tree planting.

country house- which he suggests is ill-begotten and unlawfully sustained- is too burdensome a responsibility to carry—it is in sacrificing one’s claim to the country-house that one could perhaps live a more fulfilling life. But of course by placing the characters not so far from it at the end, Ford recognizes that the epistemological pull of the country house abides, as the repository of claims and sacrifices that comprise both personal and national history.