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Vacillation of Ford Madox Ford : *A Call : The Tale of Two Passions*

Keiko Kawachi

The first decade of this century witnessed Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939) living a turbulent life. Ford moved to Winchelsea in January 1901 with his wife Elsie, whom he had married in 1894, and two little daughters. His Winchelsea stay spanned most of these ten years and much of what happened then was to influence the rest of his life. He was enjoying his fruitful friendship with Joseph Conrad and was forming his relationship with Henry James ; moreover he came to know Arthur Marwood,⁽¹⁾ whose existence and way of life impressed Ford so much that his influence was to echo through many of his works.

Since publishing a children's book *The Brown Owl* in 1891, Ford never stopped his creative work and by the end of 1909 he wrote no fewer than ten novels, eight essays, four poetry collections and a few children's books.⁽²⁾ It was also during these years that Ford planned, edited, and wrote for *The English Review*, which turned out to be one of the most important literary magazines published in England.

A prolific writer in various genres of literature ; a talented editor endowed with the keen insight to discover young geniuses ; a good husband and happy father leading a quiet life in Winchelsea, East Sussex ; a warm-hearted fellow enjoying stimulating literary discussions with fellow writers—these positive features convey only the bright side of Ford's life. Beneath the tranquil surface was a life of anguish quivering with a variety of crises.

In 1904 Ford suffered from a serious nervous breakdown and had to spend some time in convalescence in Germany. One of the causes of this nervous collapse may have been his affair with Elsie's sister, Mary Martindale. And there were constant worries about money. His books did not sell well. Elsie's father, who financially supported the Ford family, committed suicide in 1902 and Elsie herself was not enjoying good health. It was around 1908 that Ford's life was brought to a climax. First of all, Elsie's illness was diagnosed as a tubercular kidney and she had an operation on May 30 to have the infected kidney and the infected part of her bladder removed. Ford managed to pay for this by borrowing the money from Arthur Marwood but he did not stay in Winchelsea to take care of his wife. He was busy in London working to establish *The English Review*.

Ford made every effort to make this literary magazine a success; he appointed Douglas Goldring secretary and stopped writing weekly articles for *The Daily News* to concentrate on *The English Review*. The first issue featured poetry and stories by Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and H. G. Wells. Ford's skill as an editor not only attracted contributors from different literary genres but also discovered new writers such as Norman Douglas, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and D. H. Lawrence. Although the striking quality of *The English Review* was clear to all and Ford became a prominent figure in London, he met a series of troubles. He simply lacked the skill in managing a literary magazine. Various kinds of cooperation and praise were offered. Complaints and demands for payment, however, were incessant.

Another major event to bring Ford's life to a climax in 1908 was his affair with Violet Hunt (1862-1942). Hunt was the daughter of the novelist Mrs Alfred Hunt (1861-1912) and of the painter A. W. Hunt

(1830-1896) ; she was thus brought up in literary and artistic circles. She was a writer and suffragette; she wrote about the problems encountered by emancipated New Women of her generation and she herself experienced them. Violet Hunt was thirty-five years old (eleven years older than Ford) and had experienced two bitter love affairs with men who were married and much older. Ford and Hunt met for the first time in 1907 and became lovers by 1909 and the affair was to last a decade. In Violet Hunt he found the tenderness and comfort which the invalid Elsie was unable to offer. Ford was feeling that his heroic idealism in founding *The English Review* was crumbling away because of financial difficulties and the lack of understanding among the hard and practical men around him. In addition to his anxiety about *The Review*, his married life with Elsie was in confusion : their marriage had been on the edge of collapse long before Ford met Violet Hunt—probably since he suffered from the first nervous breakdown.

Matters went from bad to worse: when Ford asked Elsie for a divorce, she began a petition for restitution of conjugal rights. On January 11, 1910, Mr. Justice Bargrave Deane issued an order in response to her petition. Ford was summoned to the Marylebone Police Court and sentenced to ten days in Brixton gaol. Two days of this sentence were commuted, since they fell on a weekend.

Ford's life was literally in a chaotic state. There was always gossip about his devastated married life and scandalous affairs. To make him more irritable and lonely was the fact that his friends began to avoid him; some of them were offended by his poor management of *The English Review* and others were disappointed and disgusted with his life style. Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Arthur Marwood, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy all turned their backs on him :

By the spring of 1909 Ford had been driven by the troubles of the *Review* and the confusion of his private affairs to the edge of a breakdown, and he became extremely irritable. (Mizener 164)

Out of this chaos of emotional volatility Ford wrote *A Call* which is regarded by many critics as his best novel prior to *The Good Soldier*.⁽³⁾ *A Call* was produced “under emotional pressure, and at great speed” (Saunders 299). The work began as a short story entitled “4692 Padd,” and “was re-imagined as a novel, and serialized in *The English Review* between August and November 1909” (Saunders 299). Being too short for a novel, *A Call* was turned down by a few publishers. Ford revised it, added an “Epistolary Epilogue”, and the book was finally published by Chatto & Windus on February 3, 1910.

Ford left *The English Review* in May 1909 to his great disappointment but it may be rightly said that one of the entanglements of his life was thus removed. Ford was, however, deeply hurt to realize that his ideal and dream were shattered because of his lack of practical knowledge and management skills. Moreover, his severe struggle continued: he had to fight against Elsie who would not set him free; he had to endure the cold attitude of his friends and relatives. He was really afraid that he might suffer from another nervous breakdown and because of constant worry he hinted at the possibility of suicide. In a lonely struggle against these pressures Ford Madox Ford kept writing. He imagined and reimagined, wrote and rewrote *A Call* as if to untie the entangled state of his life. In order to derive a pattern, any pattern, out of the confusion, he continued to work on the novel. It was as if Ford were seriously playing a subtle cat’s cradle, though with very clumsy hands.⁽⁴⁾

A Call: The Tale of Two Passions

The protagonist Robert Grimshaw is a half-Greek, half-English man of wealth aged thirty-five. Having lost both his parents before he was three years old, Robert Grimshaw was brought up by his uncle, Peter Lascarides, and aunt in the daily society of his cousins, Ellida and Katya. Robert became engaged with Katya but their marriage was postponed because Mrs Lascarides died shortly before the wedding ceremony. Four months later Mr Lascarides died suddenly and their engagement was broken off, though no clear reason was given. As Mr Lascarides died intestate, Robert became his uncle's sole heir according to Greek law and he acted exceedingly kindly to the benefit of his cousins. Although it is generally believed that the rupture between Robert and Katya was mainly caused by their religious differences—Katya was attached to the Greek Orthodox Church whereas Robert was received into the Church of England—there is no explanation why Katya left Robert. What can be pointed out is that Katya, who was very much devoted to her mother, suffered from a nervous breakdown after the latter's death. Having passed some months in a hydropathic establishment on the Continent, she left for America to study the more obscure forms of nervous diseases and we find her working as a psychoanalyst there. Left behind in England, Robert was so shocked that he disappeared for a time from London society. But little by little he has regained his health and mental equilibrium.

Robert Grimshaw is introduced into the novel "like a seal":

He was like a seal who is thrusting his head and shoulders out of the water, and, with large, dark eyes and sensitive nostrils, is on the watch. *All that could be known of him seemed to be known; all that could be known of the rest of the world he moved in he*

seemed to know. (*A Call* 7, italics mine)⁽⁶⁾

The novel gradually reveals what Robert knows about the world, to what extent the world knows about Robert Grimshaw, and how profound his knowledge about himself is. Grimshaw has been faithfully waiting for Katya but he falls in love with Pauline Lucas. He marries off Pauline to his best friend, Dudley Leicester, so that she will be cared for and that he can remain honourably loyal to Katya :

“One wants Katya,” Grimshaw said--“One wants Katya. She is vigour, she is life, she is action, she is companionship. One wants her, if you like, because she is chivalry itself, and so she’s obstinate ; but, if one can’t have Katya, one wants. . . tenderness, fidelity, pretty grace, quaintness, and, above all, worship. Katya could give me companionship ; but wouldn’t Pauline have given me worship?” (13)

“I suppose what I really want is both Katya and Pauline. . . . It’s my business in life just to wait for Katya, and to see that Pauline has a good time.” (23-24)

Grimshaw is torn between two types of women and is also torn between love and friendship—or, in other words, between passion and duty. Grimshaw’s self-appointed duty and noble wish is to maintain the ruling- class traditions through Dudley Leicester who seems to him “the best fellow in the world” (23). Grimshaw firmly believes that Pauline will make a man of him by giving him a career :

So tall that he looked over most men’s heads, so strong that his

movements must be for ever circumscribed and timid, Dudley Leicester had never in his life done anything. . . . Least of all did he ever realize personal attitudes in those around him. . . . Dudley Leicester perceived absolutely nothing, no complexities, no mixed relationships. . . . The tradition of the public service was in his blood. He owned a slice of his kingdom that was more than microscopic on the map. But though he had come into his great possessions at the age of twenty-seven, he made no effort whatever to put things straight. . . (30)

It was Robert Grimshaw who put things straight by setting his estates in order, finding him a young steward familiar with modern methods, and providing him with Pauline. Aged thirty-two, “with an air of immense indifference, of immense solitude, and of immense want of occupation” (31), Dudley has nothing in the world to do. This innocent is entangled in a complicated web while Pauline is away, nursing her mother. Actually Pauline “put her hands on her husband’s chest and pushed backwards out of the crowded house” (29), for there were too many people in her mother’s house. This is a symbolic act. Being pushed out by his wife, Dudley—who never realizes that it was Pauline herself who did it—is trapped in a snare of society.

Dudley meets his ex-fiancée Etta Stackpole (now Lady Hudson) at a dinner and walks her home. She invites him in and once inside, the telephone rings. In their haste to prevent the servants from waking, Dudley answers it in the guise of the butler. This call turns out to be fatal :

Dudley Leicester put the receiver to his ear. A peremptory “*Are you 4259 Mayfair?*” made him suddenly afraid, as if a

schoolmaster had detected him in some crime. Hitherto he had no feeling of crime. It was as if he had merely existed in the tide of his senses. An equally peremptory "*Don't go away*" (original emphasis) was succeeded by the words: "Get down", and then: "Is that Sir William Hudson's?"

Leicester answered--he had the words clearly fixed in his mind --but already he was panting: "Yes, but Sir William's in Paris, and Lady Hudson in bed." And he did not omit to add "sir." . . . Then suddenly--still low, distinct, stealthy, and clear--the voice of the invisible man asked: "*Isn't that Dudley Leicester speaking?*"

He answered "Yes," and then with a sudden panic he hung the receiver upon the hook. (47-48, italics mine)

The mysterious caller recognizes Dudley's voice without identifying himself: "Isn't that Dudley Leicester speaking?" This phrase plunges Dudley into darkness--"into a world of dread" (50). Afraid that his disgraceful secret of the night will become known to the world, Dudley begins to seclude himself. Everyone seems to be reserved and disapproving. Even Robert Grimshaw's eyes seem to show reproof, judgement and condemnation. Dudley is finally reduced to a catatonic state. He complains that there are cobwebs in his brain and one day in panic-stricken agitation he rushes out of the house to find the man who rang 4259 Mayfair. Dudley runs into a little dark hat-ironing shop and, leaning over the counter, grabs a small man by the waistcoat and asks him :

"Are you the chap who rang up 4259 Mayfair?"

"Sir! sir!" the little man cried out. Dudley Leicester shook him

and shook him : a white bandbox fell from the counter and rolled almost into the street.

“Are you? Are you?” Dudley Leicester cried out incessantly.

And when the little man screamed : “No! no!” Leicester seized the heavy rounded smoothing-iron and raised it to the height of his arm so that it struck the brown, smoked ceiling. The little man ducked beneath the counter, his agonized eyes gazing upwards.

But at Grimshaw’s cool, firm grasp upon his wrists, Leicester sank together. He passed his hand so tightly down his face that the colour left it, to return in a swift flush. “I’ve got cobwebs all over my face,” he muttered, “beastly, beastly cobwebs.” (80-81)

After this disastrous incident Dudley becomes unable to speak. Guilt and fear weave themselves into a cobweb to deprive Dudley of his ability to communicate with other people. This aphasia is shared by Ellida Langham’s six-year old daughter Kitty. To rescue her niece from a speechless world Katya comes back to England at Ellida’s request. She is described as a woman of pensive introspection and tranquil resolve. With her professional insight Katya diagnoses Kitty’s silence as a manifestation of passion and determines that it should be cured by feigned indifference. Having lived alone with Katya in deep silence for three weeks, the child speaks for the first time when Grimshaw comes to visit them. “Nobody must be loved but me. Nobody must be loved but me” is what the child passionately repeats. In these words Katya recognizes the torture of her own passion. And the reason why her engagement to Grimshaw was broken is revealed through Katya’s confession of her concealed feelings.

Katya was devoted to her mother and earnestly wished to live as

her mother did ; so when she found out that her parents were not legally married but rather bound together with trust, she decided to be Grimshaw's mistress. Grimshaw, however, wanted to marry her properly. Katya tried to persuade Grimshaw by telling him that her mother "regarded marriage--the formality, the vows--as a desecration. Don't you see, she wanted to be my father's chattel, and trust him absolutely--to trust, to trust! Isn't that the perfect relationship?" (71) Her eloquence conveys not only her deep love for Grimshaw but also her strong will to possess him. Grimshaw refuses her again saying:

"If I grow very tired--very, very tired--if I cannot hold out any longer, well I may consent--to your living with me as your mother lived with your father." (72)

Grimshaw goes to see Etta Hudson in order to find a clue to Dudley's madness. He honestly tells her that he suspected Dudley was carrying on an affair with Etta so that he followed them when Dudley walked her home. Etta accuses him of peeping and prying and calls him a "confounded foreigner". Grimshaw admits that he is a foreigner with a clan name and eloquently expresses his ideology regarding society, class and responsibility :

"Belonging to a clan makes you have what no Englishman has--a sense of *responsibility*. I can't bear to see chaps of my class--of my clan and my country--going wrong." (93, italics mine)

"English men haven't any *sense of responsibility*. . . . They can work; they can fight ; they can do things; but it's for themselves alone. They're individualists. But there is a class that's got the

sense of *duty* to the whole. They've got a rudimentary sense of it --a tradition, at least, if not a sense. And Leicester comes of that class. But the *tradition's* dying out." (101, italics mine)⁽⁶⁾

Being half foreigner Grimshaw is more conscious of the responsibility and duty of his class to maintain the traditions of England. Etta insists on Dudley's innocence and tells Grimshaw of "the meddling fool at the end of the telephone" who literally threw Dudley into the chaos of mad silence. Who is the meddling fool?

Katya refuses Grimshaw when he implores her to diagnose Dudley. She calls Grimshaw "a soft, meddling creature" and bursts into a full torrent of anguish, love and jealousy.

Pauline also reproaches Grimshaw for being so meddling as to ruin the lives of others :

"You're in love with me and I'm in love with you. We're drifting, drifting. But I'm not the woman to drift. I mean to do what's right and I mean to make you. There's no more to be said." (126)

"You do not love Katya Lascarides : you are as cold to her as a stone. You love me, and you have *ruined all our lives*. But it doesn't end, it goes on. We fly as far asunder as the poles, and it goes on for good." (150, italics mine)

When he forced Dudley Leicester upon Pauline, he really believed that he could marry off a woman he loved to his best friend without enduring all the tortures of jealousy. He forgot that he too possessed emotions. He now feels deep remorse: What has he done to Pauline, to Katya, and to Dudley? Grimshaw confesses, "It was I that rang up 4259

Mayfair" (152). He was the "meddling fool."

Utterly defeated and completely lost, Grimshaw admits that he is very tired and lonely and tells Katya :

"It's you who are strong and get what you want, and I'm only a meddler who muddles and spoils. That's the moral of the whole thing. Take me on your own terms and make what you can of me." (157)

Katya, seeing he loves Pauline, says, "I think, my dear, as a precaution. . . . I think you had better marry me." Meddlesome Grimshaw is firmly caught in a cobweb of Katya's obstinate will.

Grimshaw and Dudley make up a *Doppelgänger* combining the two aspects of a man : innocence and experience, silence and speech, protector and protégé. Either personality can be meddlesome—Grimshaw by interfering with the lives of other people, and Dudley by becoming stagnant amidst the flow of life. Their attitudes and lifestyles certainly reflect those of Ford Madox Ford constantly conscious of his role in English society and the literary world.

Katya and Pauline also form a *Doppelgänger*—a stubborn and dominant woman who sometimes appears sensitive and pretty. Max Saunders argues that Grimshaw's feelings for Katya combine elements of Ford's feelings for Elsie and Violet : "As the dominant woman he no longer loves but who won't let go their relationship, she stands for Elsie ; as the other dominant woman he is about to bind himself to, she represents Violet" (Saunders 303). Ford vacillates between these doubles. And when this vacillation is forced to stop, Ford retreats into the shell of paralysis which certainly foretells his nervous breakdowns. In depicting himself as a vacillating, meddlesome existence Ford in a sense achieved cathartic liberation from the world of lonely self-

negation.

Richard A. Cassell regards the novel as an ironic comedy of retribution (Cassell 109) while Arnold Bennett calls it “a mild novel dealing with tragic matters mildly” and considers it “to be profoundly and hopefully untrue to life.” He goes on to say: “regard *A Call* as an original kind of fairy-tale, and it is about perfect” (MacShane 33-35). The novel can be read both as an ironic comedy and as a fairy-tale or, as Robert Green insists, it can be paradigmatic work suggesting Ford’s deep scepticism of the future of democratic institutions.

It is, however, important to remember what Ford says in “Epistolary Letter” :

[F] or me--since to me a novel is the history of an “affair”--finality is only found at what seems to me to be the end of that “affair.” There is in life nothing final. So that even “affairs” never really have an end as far as the lives of the actors are concerned. (Ford 161)

Virtually in the centre of an affair himself, Ford regards himself as an actor vacillating between two passions--between Elsie and Violet, between the role of writer and that of editor, between friendship and hatred--and he writes about this actor with an objective distance. This distance turns the novel into a “comedy” or “fairy-tale.” It enables the writer to stare at himself. Thus *A Call* vacillates between fiction and biography and in this vacillation Ford Madox Ford looms, playing cat’s cradle with an awkward hand and at the same time looking for a playmate, a reader, to take it up, because this string game needs two players; the pattern depends on two pairs of hands.⁽⁷⁾

NOTES

- (1) Arthur Marwood (1868-1916). His family descended from Edward III. He was a mathematician and studied at Trinity College, Cambridge. He suffered from tuberculosis. Ford's feudal Toryism was greatly influenced by Marwood.
- (2) See Green 3.

Date	Novels	Prose	Poetry	Children's Books
1891				<i>The Brown Owl</i>
1892	<i>The Shifting of the Fire</i>			<i>The Feather</i>
1893			<i>The Questions at the Well</i>	
1894				<i>The Queen Who Flew</i>
1895				
1896		<i>Ford Madox Brown</i>		
1897				
1898				
1899				
1900		<i>The Cinque Ports</i>	<i>Poems for Pictures</i>	
1901	<i>The Inheritors</i>			
1902		<i>Rossetti</i>		
1903	<i>Romance</i>			
1904			<i>The Face of the Night</i>	
1905	<i>The Benefactor</i>	<i>Hans Holbein The Soul of London</i>		

1906	<i>The Fifth Queen</i>	<i>The Heart of the Country</i>		<i>Christina's Fairy Book</i>
1907	<i>Privy Seal An English Girl</i>	<i>The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood The Spirit of the People</i>	<i>From Inland</i>	
1908	<i>The Fifth Queen Crowned Mr Apollo</i>	<i>The English Review</i>		
1909	<i>The "Half-Moon"</i>	<i>The English Review</i>		

- (3) See Hoffmann 32; Meixner 135; Saunders 299.
- (4) Ford often applied the image of a cat's cradle to his method of construction. See Stang 7.
- (5) All subsequent references to *A Call* are to *A Call : The Tale of Two Passions* published by the Carcanet Press in 1984.
- (6) This approach to English class and society is again brought up in detail in Grimshaw's conversation with an Orthodox priest. (116-122)
- (7) For this metaphor of a cat's cradle, see Stang 7.

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