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Ford and Life-Writing

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In a 1927 review of G. Jean-Aubry's *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* in *The New York Herald Tribune Books*, Ford opens with a seemingly nonchalant and casual—although typically precise and artful—first-person anecdote, which encapsulates much about his extremely complex and ambivalent relationship to life-writing. Half-way through reading Jean-Aubry's biography, Ford tells us, he found himself impelled towards his bookshelves, where, almost unconsciously, his hand fell on Conrad's *The Shadow-Line* (1917), which he began to read, and within two or three words, was 'saying "Thank God!" with a feeling of deep, of grateful, relief' (Ford 1927: 2).

The relief Ford feels comes from the 'pure poetry' of Conrad's prose, as a salve for the 'properly noncommittal prose' of the 'Official Biography', but also for the confirmation that returning to Conrad's work provides that 'there is true truth—and truth' (Ford 1927: 2). Ford himself had published his own book on Conrad, his friend and ex-collaborator, *Joseph Conrad: a Personal Remembrance*, in 1924. He does not refer to that book here, we should note, but specifically to one of Conrad's most generically indeterminate books, *The Shadow-Line*, subtitled 'A Confession' by Conrad, and claimed by him as 'exact autobiography' (Conrad 1917: 25), although clearly fictional in many ways. The real Conrad, Ford implies, is found here, not in any biography, no matter how accurate.

Life-writing—a term used by a later contemporary, Virginia Woolf (Woolf 2002: 92), if not by Ford, but which nonetheless usefully groups together a plethora of forms, including biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, letters, and diaries—always elicited characteristically dual, ambiguous critical and creative responses from Ford. Yet Ford was a prolific and innovative life-writer himself: at various points a biographer, an autobiographer, and a writer of 'Literary Portraits', as well as a letter-writer, if not a diarist. Ford's work across the entire field of life-writing is marked by its fusion of different modes and genres, often blending autobiography and biography, criticism and fiction, in unconventional combinations.

Criticism of Ford has tended to focus more on his novels than his life-writing, although a considerable array of work, beginning with assessments from contemporary reviewers of Ford's books and early biographers, does deal with it, as we will see. But only more recently—most notably, Max Saunders in his two-volume biography of Ford in 1996—have critics made the crucial step of bringing together accounts of Ford's life-writing with his own manifold views *on* life-writing. For Ford thought about, and wrote about, the aesthetics of life-writing continually, evolving sophisticated, if irreverent and sometimes contradictory, theories about biography and autobiography. These theories were often informed by his own practice as a life-writer, and increasingly, came to underpin it. And, as Saunders's *Self Impression* (2010) also suggests—opening up an intriguing field for further study—Ford's own theories about life-writing also resonate with the wider context of shifts in the status and practice of autobiography and biography in the early twentieth century, especially the work of Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and the 'New Biography' of the 1920s, and autobiographies and memoirs by Ford's contemporaries.

In what follows I assess the whole range of Ford's life-writing,[1] and the critical reactions to it, approaching it in particular from two seemingly opposing, but intricately linked areas: his biographical writing and his reminiscences. To take his more overtly biographical work first: aside from fairy tales and his novel *The Shifting of the Fire* (1892), Ford began his writing life with his biography of his grandfather *Ford Madox Brown* (1896), and much later authored *Joseph Conrad* when he heard of Conrad's death. From 1907 onwards, he wrote 'Literary Portraits' for the *Daily Mail Books*, continuing in *Tribune* and *Outlook*,[2] culminating in the 1930s with a portrait series for *The American Mercury*, collected as *Mightier Than the Sword* (1938) in England and as *Portraits from Life* (1937) in America. *The March of Literature* (1939) also contains many short biographical asides within its criticism, as do Ford's art-critical books *Rossetti* (1902), *Hans Holbein* (1905) and *The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1907), more so than his 'critical study' *Henry James* (1914), where Ford declares that 'it is not my business to be unnecessarily biographical' (Ford 1914a: 54).

Ford also started early as an autobiographer. Saunders notes that the 'habit of reminiscential anecdote is well-established by 1903' with the essay 'Nice People' (Saunders, 1996: I, 67). While acknowledging that there is an irrepressible autobiographical element in Ford's fiction—'*I* never have written a book that has not by someone or other been called autobiography' (Ford: 1965, 28–9), as Ford wrote to H.G. Wells in 1908—in this chapter I will concentrate on his 'reminiscences': *Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections: Being the Memories of a Young Man* (1911), *Thus to Revisit: Some Reminiscences* (1921), *Return to Yesterday: Reminiscences 1894–1914* (1931) and *It Was the Nightingale* (1934), as well as the more uncategorisable *No Enemy: a Tale of*

Reconstruction (1929). All these volumes fuse elements of fiction with their reminiscences, in ways that have often been misunderstood. Hugh Kenner wrote in 1949 that Ford's fame should eventually rest on his memoirs (Kenner: 1949, 696–9),[3] yet for every such appreciative comment about Ford as an autobiographer, there have been opposing voices. Given the formal and stylistic ingenuity of all of these autobiographies, they have been surprisingly neglected by critics other than their initial reviewers and Ford's biographers: especially *Ancient Lights* and *Thus to Revisit*.

The recurring theme in criticism of Ford's life-writing is the relationship of fact and fiction. Ford's nearest approach to purely 'documentary' life-writing was *Ford Madox Brown*, which was respectfully reviewed when it was published. Initial responses to Ford's reminiscences, however, ranged from delight at his inventiveness, to correction of his 'facts' and outright indignation. William Rossetti wrote to the *Outlook* with a list of errors in *Ancient Lights* in 1911 (Harvey 1962: 305–6); H.G. Wells lamented Ford's 'imaginative reminiscences' in objection to the first instalment of 'Thus to Revisit' in the *English Review* in 1920 (Harvey 1962: 335–6); and Conrad's wife Jessie wrote to the *TLS* when *Joseph Conrad* was published in correction of 'a few of the most fantastic statements regarding my husband' (Harvey 1962: 349–50). Edward Garnett reviewed *Joseph Conrad* twice, seemingly torn between amusement and irritation. In his first piece, Garnett found Ford's book 'quite a clever production', yet was sceptical about the 'fantastic inventions' in the text (MacShane 1972: 134–6).

Garnett hints at something compulsive or unconscious about such inventions for Ford, who 'cannot help embellishing'—even while suggesting that these effects are 'forced' and artificial, albeit alive, 'vibrating'. Two months later, Garnett is still grappling

with Ford's biographical Impressionism: 'He improvises, he exaggerates, he adds and suppresses, he lets his imagination run amok, and then he surprises you by telling you something really true, something that really happened' (MacShane 1972: 140).

The blurring of fact and fiction in Ford's life-writing has been especially noted by Ford's biographers: Douglas Goldring (1948), Frank MacShane (1965), Arthur Mizener (1972), Thomas C. Moser (1980), Alan Judd (1990) and Saunders, who note the damage Ford's reinventions in his reminiscences did to his literary reputation, while conceding that Ford's autobiographies are innovative, wonderfully effective texts. Goldring writes of Ford's 'quasi-fictional memoirs', and defends them, in terms highlighting the ethical implications of Ford's technique. Ford was free with facts, Goldring writes, yet 'where his artistic conscience was concerned, as in impressions of character, his perception was keen and his integrity above suspicion' (Goldring 1948: 29). This ethical dimension would be apparent in other critiques, above all when Ford was criticised of being a 'liar' in his fictionalising memoirs.

Mizener noted of *Return to Yesterday* and *It Was the Nightingale* that Ford 'practically invented a form of fictional reminiscence; it may be a dubious genre, but in it he wrote two fascinating books' (Mizener 1972: xxi); at the same time, Mizener locates a deep-seated need in Ford to paint an improved portrait of himself, bordering on 'uncontrollable vanity' (xviii). Yet for Alan Judd, Ford's reminiscences form 'a great rich unreliable tapestry which gives an impression of his life that no biographer could hope to equal' (Judd 1990: 3). Scholars of many of the writers Ford wrote about, in particular Conrad and Henry James, have been critical of Ford's fictionalising tendencies, often implying that Ford sought to boost his reputation through association with his masters.[4]

Every major writer on Ford has noted his loose use of fact. Sondra Stang declared in 1981 that 'the issue has assumed an inordinate importance […]. What is surprising is how little scrutinised the matter has been, how little critical imagination has gone into the effort of understanding what Ford might have been up to in those stories of his' (Stang 1981: xviii).

Saunders's biography offers the most sustained analysis of Ford's autobiographies. The generic hybridity of Ford's reminiscences is discussed throughout *a Dual Life*, most conspicuously in the chapter 'Ford's Autobiography', which also looks at other aspects of the reminiscences, including Ford's conception of 'literary personality'; the charge of egotism and vanity; mirrors and doubles; omissions; retelling; and role play. Saunders also dwells on the explanatory prefaces to Ford's autobiographies. These framing prefaces offer a key to the more complex effects in the portraits and reminiscences, yet they have seldom been taken seriously enough as statements of aesthetic intent.

In *Self Impression*, and in other essays,[5] Saunders explores different aspects of the reminiscences, relating them to modernist experiments in life-writing and fiction—fusions which, following a 1906 essay by Stephen Reynolds, he terms 'autobiografiction'. *Self Impression* situates Ford among other autobiografictional fusions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) and fin-de-siècle auto/biography, as well as experimental biographies, memoirs and autobiographies by Richard Aldington, Conrad, James, Wyndham Lewis, Gertrude Stein, Woolf, and others, moving on to the late twentieth century. In this reading, Ford's inaccuracies and self-defended subjectivities in his life-writing appear not only deliberate, but an intrinsic aspect of his Impressionism. Ford's conception of literary Impressionism applies as much to his

life-writing as to his novels, and in the realm of his approach to 'non-fictional' fact, is a crucial element of his reminiscences and biographical texts.

Other critics have also traced how Ford's life-writing not only aligns with other modernist texts, but also prefigures aspects of postmodernism. Paul Skinner, writing of *No Enemy*, situates it alongside the New Journalism of the 1960s and 70s, and the work of W.G. Sebald, which likewise brings fictional techniques to bear on largely factual material (Skinner 2002: vii–xxiii). (The title of Sebald's first book in German was *Schwindel. Gefühle*, which means 'Vertigo' but also plays with the meaning of 'Schwindel' on its own, which means conjuring or confidence trick.) Gradually, then, and belatedly, Ford's life-writing has been seen increasingly as the result of conscious innovation and generic fusion. In this view, less emphasis on the reminiscences' specific adherence to fact, and more focus on the manifold other aspects of their content, form and style, is relevant.

Many themes in Ford's life-writing still offer scope for fresh analysis. These include the ways in which the autobiographies interlock with and relate to each other; the extent and aesthetic effects of Ford's omission and evasion, especially in depicting relationships with women and the war; the use of anecdotal repetition, digression and artfully managed chronology; the role of exaggeration, humour and caricature; and the mimicking of the workings of memory. All of these themes are touched on this chapter, as is the mingling of biography and autobiography in Ford's work, and how Ford wrote portraits which often read like reminiscences and reminiscences which form group portraits.

Less has been written by scholars on Ford's biographical writings than on his reminiscences. However, to discuss one is always to refer by implication to the other, and the two aspects of Ford's writing constantly illuminate each other. Although Ford's

biographical writings are arguably more disparate and scattered than his autobiographies, the two areas connect, sometimes inextricably.

Ford's Biographical Writings

Ford was generally disdainful of biography in his writings about literature. Yet this disdain must be tempered by the fact that he was a biographer himself and used many biographical elements in his work. Throughout his life, Ford oscillated between scorn for and attraction to biography; and his own biographical writings are often radically innovative because of his knowledge and mistrust of many conventional examples of the genre, and because of his desire to expand or subvert it.

In 1919, Ford declared that 'there is no great man that is not belittled and rendered common by his biographer' (Ford 1919: 6). Elsewhere, he often wrote about how biographies of writers vie with their work. 'Alas, Boswell killed Johnson,' Ford lamented, complicating the matter here by referring to the biographer of a sometime biographer: 'Who reads *Rasselas* or even the *Life of Drake*?' (Ford 1927: 2). 'The fact is,' Ford wrote in *Return to Yesterday*, adding layers of paradox again by making this point within one of his reminiscences, 'that people read consciously or unconsciously as much out of curiosity about the life and person of an author as for any other reason. If they can get that curiosity satisfied outside the author's books they surely won't read the books' (Ford 1931: 265). Yet in *The March of Literature*, Ford allows that 'once you are really saturated in the work of a writer it is legitimate to enquire into the circumstances of his life' (Ford 1939: 685).

Ford was asked to undertake *Ford Madox Brown* by his uncle William Rossetti, when he was twenty. Many critics have not known what to make of the biography and its serious, 'official', conscientious, impersonal tone. Ford kept himself—and his usually irrepressible humour—out of the text. His self-effacement is startling, as when he refers to Madox Brown's painting of him, *William Tell's Son*, as 'a portrait of the artist's grandson' (Ford 1896: 311); and it is here that he first learned techniques of omission he would use in his autobiographies to efface his own private life, in the service of art.

As an 'Official' biographer, Ford concentrated on Madox Brown's work, and quoted liberally from his letters and diary, as in the typical Victorian 'Life and Letters'.[6] The objectivity of tone created a text which has remained authoritative. Yet Frank MacShane locates a 'refusal on Ford's part to be completely bound by the tradition' (MacShane 1965: 27) in *Ford Madox Brown*'s moments of humour and personal knowledge. Ford's wry, mischievous voice can be detected, for example, when he writes of Madox Brown as a 'capital *raconteur*' (Ford 1896: 18) and of 'the myriad wildly impossible tales' of Dumas which Madox Brown heard as a student—some of which Ford retells briefly in the biography, with a caveat: 'it is, of course, scarcely necessary to state that these anecdotes have little or no foundation on fact' (31–2).

Ford's art-critical books were also written in a scholarly, sometimes slightly biographic, manner. In *Rossetti*, Ford (as in his first biography calling himself 'the present writer' rather as he calls himself 'the writer' in *Joseph Conrad*) apologises 'for the intrusion of a certain amount of biographical matter and of personal facts' which he deemed necessary to include 'because Rossetti's work is almost always a matter of re-reflected personal influences' (Ford 1902: 4). Yet Ford already sees the amassing of biographical

facts as suspect: a theme to which he returned throughout his life with increasing vehemence. Even in 1905 he can be found writing characteristic pieces against biography and biographers (‘I myself being of the number’) whose facts give us, ultimately, ‘nothing’ (Ford 1905: 1290–1).

From 1914 onwards, Ford specifically associated an avidity for facts with a ‘Prussian’ academic mindset (and by association, with war). In *Hans Holbein*, however, biographical material is suspect, Ford suggests, for a different reason: ‘it must be remembered that biographical details regarding Holbein are largely conjectural and more than largely controversial’ (Ford 1905b: 19). Ford’s thoughts here also developed from his experience writing *The Fifth Queen* (1906–8), which, as he relates in his essay ‘Creative History and the Historic Sense’ (1903–4), came about after his idea of writing a biography of Henry VIII was thwarted when someone else took on the project: Ford wrote a biographical novel sequence instead. In the essay, Ford dwells on the impossibility of an objective view of history, and reflects that ‘in their really higher manifestations History & Fiction are one’ (Ford 2002: 13).

A few years later, the dedicatory letter to *Ancient Lights* asserts that Ford has tried ‘to get the atmosphere of these twenty-five years’, something he had not done before, even though ‘my impression is that I myself have written more than 17,000,000 wearisome and dull words as to the facts about the Pre-Raphaelite movement.’ In a key, defining statement, which appears facetious but is in fact in earnest, Ford asserts that ‘this book […] is full of inaccuracies as to facts, but its accuracy as to impressions is absolute’ (Ford 1911: xiv–xv). In earlier prefaces, Ford had been moving towards similar points, but here he outlines his ‘non-fictional’ Impressionism most defiantly.

Ford developed his depiction of writers' characters in his 'Literary Portraits' (1907–1915). In an essay on Ford's portraits, Anna Viola Sborgi positions them among other modernist biographical writing: the 'New Biography' of Woolf, Strachey, and Harold Nicolson, as well as Gertrude Stein's portrait-writing and movements in the visual arts including Cubism and Futurism (Sborgi 2009: 119–34). Ford's portrait-practice, Sborgi suggests, is transitional, both experimentally modernist and retaining aspects of tradition.

Ford's *Joseph Conrad*, in many ways his most experimental biographical work (although it is also an autobiography), makes even more sense in the context of the 'New Biography' than the early portraits, appearing as it did in the 1920s, after Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and *Queen Victoria* (1921). Yet while Ford's focus on portrait-writing shared Strachey and Woolf's emphasis on writing brief lives—Strachey's preface to *Eminent Victorians* declared his wish to preserve 'a becoming brevity […] the first duty of the biographer' (Strachey 1918: viii–ix), in reaction against the monolithic tomes of the Victorians—Ford was much less concerned with foregrounding sexuality and breaching old codes of privacy than were the practitioners of the New Biography.

Ford's preface to *Joseph Conrad* again outlined his Impressionist aesthetics, this time in terms that play daringly with duality and paradox, but make perfect sense in light of his assertions about history and fiction:

> This then is a novel, not a monograph; a portrait, not a narration: for what it shall prove to be worth, a work of art, not a compilation. It is conducted exactly along the lines laid down by us, both for the novel which is biography and for the biography which is a novel … it is the writer's impression of a writer who

> avowed himself impressionist. Where the writer's memory has proved to be at fault over a detail afterwards out of curiosity looked up, the writer has allowed the fault to remain on the page (Ford 1924: 6).

As a biographer, Ford prefers the truth and the primacy of memory—faulty though he knows it is—to the secondary record of fact. Biography's distance from first-hand impressions of life was a central problem, for Ford; hence many of his portraits and biographies focus on people he had met. This is why his biographical work is so enmeshed with his autobiographies. Another problem with biography, Ford felt, was its reluctance to see that it was often, essentially, fiction. Ford thought the same of 'the fiction which is called memoirs' (Ford 1921: 32). He even suggested that biography and factual writing could only become literature by virtue of inaccuracies, writing in *Thus to Revisit* of George Borrow, for example, that his 'mendacities give to his work such literary quality as it has', and of E.J. Trelawny, that his invention of 'unspoken speeches' in *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (1858) gave 'the true truth about Shelley' (Ford 1921: 190–1).

Hence fictional techniques inform the art of *Joseph Conrad*. Fictional techniques are also the *subject* of the book, as Ford uses his portrait of Conrad to explain the technical effects of his fiction: the time-shift, *progression d'effet*, dialogue, and other aspects of style. As Joseph Wiesenfarth has highlighted, *Joseph Conrad* is a technical *tour de force*, 'metafiction in the form of memoir' (Wiesenfarth 2000: 48),[7] as its narrative turns on the writing of *Romance* (1903) by Conrad and Ford—just as Conrad's *A Personal Record* (1912) was constructed around the writing of *Almayer's Folly* (1895). *Joseph Conrad* is a memoir and a biography, a work of criticism and a 'novel': a highly multivalent text which

now seems postmodernist in its fusions, as well as a prime example of post-Strachey 1920s biographical experimentation.

In the 1930s, Ford's reprised literary portraits for *The American Mercury* were collected in *Mightier Than the Sword*. Writing to Ford about the American edition of this book, *Portraits from Life*, William Carlos Williams remarked on its spanning of styles: 'I don't know what it is that you are offering in your book—something extremely old and very new' (quoted in MacShane 1965: 249). This fusion, which, again, we could see as postmodern, while also pointing much further backwards to classic biographical texts from the seventeenth century such as Izaak Walton's Lives or John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, eludes neat critical labels.

Mightier Than the Sword spans genres, being simultaneously a work of autobiography, biography, fiction, and criticism, reprising stories told in earlier reminiscences and portraits by Ford, about James, Conrad, Crane, Hudson, Wells, Galsworthy, Hardy and Lawrence. Its miscellaneous flavour can be seen in the final chapters, on Turgenev, Dreiser, and Swinburne: a very odd trio. It is a form of group biography, in which Ford wants the characters to be seen, as he writes in the dedicatory letter, 'pretty much as you would see the characters in a novel' (Ford 1938: 5). *Mightier Than the Sword* represents a critical and creative summing up of the part of Ford who defined himself through portraying others.

Ford often used the idea of the 'composite photograph' to explain his portraiture, for example in *The Spirit of the People* (1907): 'a great number of photographs of individuals is taken, and one image being set upon another, a sort of common denominator results, one face blending into another, lending salient points, toning down exaggerations' (Ford 1907b:

xii–xiii). The remark here about exaggeration—one of Ford's key techniques in his life-writing—points clearly to how Ford used repetition and restatement. His literary portraits, biographical writings and his reminiscences often make outrageously exaggerated initial strokes, which, having made their impression, are then revised through more calibrated points.

Mightier Than the Sword, with its repeated portrayals of writers, also builds up to reflect the presence of Ford, the writer, behind them. In this way it accords with Ford's ideal in his essay 'On Impressionism' (1914), where he suggests that writing should be deliberately self-effacing, like looking through 'bright glass' (Ford 1914b: 174) while at the same time always reflecting, rather more faintly but always distinctly, from its pages and surfaces—while ostensibly describing something else—the author.

Ford's Autobiographies and Reminiscences

In *Ancient Lights*, Ford placed the portrait by his grandfather of himself as *William Tell's Son* as the frontispiece, captioned, 'I seem to be looking at myself from outside' (1911: vi). *Ancient Lights* was Ford's first major self-portrait and, despite contemporary caveats about 'indolent exaggeration' (Harvey 1962: 306) and veracity, prompted one reviewer to remark that 'this is the book that Mr Hueffer, by nature, upbringing, and acquired experience, was designed by Providence to write' (Harvey 1962: 305). *Ancient Lights* sees Ford grappling with his artistic inheritance and the Victorian titans who overshadowed his childhood. Its tone follows the 'Literary Portraits' in being sharply hyperbolic and caricaturist. Ford was

young to begin writing his autobiography, being thirty-seven at the close; and he turns *Ancient Lights* into a catalogue of embarrassments and transgressions, which nearly always portray him in a humorous, blundering light. From the outset, he intended the volume to be 'only the first instalment of a large number of volumes of reminiscences' (quoted in Saunders 2000: 145).

Ancient Lights holds considerable psychological interest as an account of Ford's early formation and childhood.[8] Yet its focus, as in subsequent volumes of memories, is seldom really on Ford himself. He reveals himself only obliquely, through his portrayals of others. The way in which these autobiographies are also group biographies, with Ford always there as an organising presence, is however a central aspect of Ford's self-presentation and identity. As Laura Colombino writes, Ford's 'constant meditation on and often fictionalisation of great figures of the present and past, in art monographs, memoirs and reminiscences, is certainly also an indirect attempt at gradual self-definition—the building up of an awareness of his own worth as a writer and of the improvement of his own techniques' (Colombino 2009: 19–20). By writing of other writers and artists, Ford continually reasserts his own identity as a writer, and the importance of the writer's role.

He also situates himself in relation to other artistic movements. As Andrzej Gasiorek and Daniel Moore have noted, 'a significant aspect of his recollections is his emphasis on the links between literary networks and artistic practices' (Gasiorek and Moore 2008: 23). Ford's autobiographies consistently help him find his place among, and see him re-remembering and reorganising, circles, clusters, groups and nuclei of artistic activity. *Ancient Lights* focuses on the Pre-Raphaelites and Victorians; *Thus to Revisit* surveys English writing from the *Yellow Book* to the *English Review*, with interspersed

discussions of Crane, Hudson, Conrad and James. *Return to Yesterday* portrays the 'ring of foreign conspirators' around Kent and East Sussex in more detail: Conrad, Crane, Hudson, James, and Wells, as well as describing the *English Review* and the period up to the war. *It Was the Nightingale* tackles the 1920s Paris of the *transatlantic review*.[9]

Part of Ford's Impressionism in these reminiscences is not only how he creates vivid impressions of all the figures in these groups, but also how he *does* impressions of them, and how they *impress* their creative stamp on him. Throughout the reminiscences, Ford also strikes other poses, and figures himself for us in diverse roles and personas. As Saunders has noted, 'the sheer diversity of Ford's roles is as astounding as the zest with which he observed himself playing them' (Saunders 1996: II, 461): a young pre-Raphaelite in *Ancient Lights*, or rural recluse living in Kent; Conrad's collaborator; editor and Edwardian man about town in *Return*; small producer and farmer after the war; ghost and Parisian avant-gardist in *Nightingale*.

Ford's personal life is effaced in all these self-presentations. His main relationships—with his first wife Elsie, Violet Hunt, Stella Bowen, and Janice Biala—are absent from his autobiographies, yet some of these figures wrote extensively about Ford when they wrote their own memoirs: Hunt in *The Flurried Years* (1926) and Bowen in *Drawn from Life* (1941). Ros Pesman writes that '[Ford] erased [the women] from the public record' (Pesman 1999: 657);[10] and this is true of his autobiographies, although Ford was drawn to declaring his affections in his dedicatory letters to his books: for example, the dedication to his two daughters with Elsie at the outset of *Ancient Lights*, and to 'Stella Ford' in the 1927 American edition of *The Good Soldier*.

The omission of Ford's personal life, and the constant focus on literature, is partly what enables the reminiscences to be so close to group biography and to criticism. And Ford is explicit about his self-effacement in the opening dedicatory letters of his reminiscences. In *Return*, he writes that the only excuse for 'setting down one's life on paper […] is that one should give a picture of one's time' (Ford 1931: vii). In reminiscences, Ford notes later, 'the narrator should be a mirror not any sort of actor' (Ford 1931: 139). His terms here strikingly echo Woolf's piece, 'The New Biography', an essay-review of Harold Nicolson's *Some People* which appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* in October 1927 only weeks after Ford's review of Jean-Aubry's Conrad biography. 'Each of the supposed subjects,' Woolf wrote of *Some People*, 'holds up in his or her small bright diminishing mirror a different reflection of Harold Nicolson […] It is thus, he would seem to say, in the mirrors of our friends, that we chiefly live' (Woolf 1927: 154).

In the dedicatory letter to *Nightingale*—styled as his first real attempt at I-centred autobiography rather than reminiscence—Ford noted, as he tried to shift the central focus for the first time onto himself, that previously, 'I have written reminiscences of which the main features were found in the lives of other people and in which, as well as I could, I obscured myself' (Ford 1934: vi). Here Ford mentions that he is no longer afraid of 'the charge of vanity', yet there must have been deeper reasons for the suppression of his personal life. Alan Judd notes that 'he remained silent […] about all his intimacies, unless forced. He kept no diaries or letters, was not indiscreet with friends and seems to have mistrusted any impulse towards introspective analysis' (Judd 1990: 94). Yet Ford did write about other aspects of his life which he might have suppressed: in particular, the 1904–1905 period of agoraphobia recounted in the 'Some Cures' chapter of *Return*.

The other element evaded or omitted in these autobiographies is the war, and Ford's participation in it as a soldier. This occurs at a structural level, as *Return* ends in 1914 and *Nightingale* begins in 1919, leaving a glaring lacuna. *Thus to Revisit*, written soon after the war, is the least reminiscential of the four texts, and it too evades writing of conflict, even though its title, via an allusion to *Hamlet*, suggests that Ford is a ghost revisiting the literary world, a motif taken up again in the ghostly early part of *Nightingale*.[11]

Ford would write about the war at length in fiction in *Parade's End* (1924-8). Yet in his life-writing, most of his war experience went into his least categorisable book: *No Enemy* (1929).[12] Here, passages of first-person writing by Ford, some previously published years earlier under his own name as articles, were reposed as fiction, with a framing device involving a war veteran, Gringoire, narrating his experiences to a writer-journalist, 'the Compiler'. Critics still do not know where to place *No Enemy*. Rob Hawkes notes how *No Enemy*, which Ford himself thought was 'betwixt & between' a novel and non-fiction or 'Serious book', has troubled critics unable not to read it *either* as fiction *or* as autobiography, more than those who have recognised the generic instability and duality of this text, and how its absolute refusal to fit into established categories mirrors the fractured mind-set of the soldier during and after war.[13]

Part of *No Enemy*'s generic unconventionality comes from its piecing together—suitably for 'a tale of Reconstruction'—published and unpublished texts. All Ford's autobiographies reconfigure articles in new arrangements, or, in the case of *Return* in particular, which re-uses parts of *Thus to Revisit*, reprint parts of earlier books. This implies that the act of autobiography, for Ford, was one of pattern-forming, rearrangement and reconfiguration as much as one of memory. Ford deliberately repeated himself in his

reminiscences, making repetition a pivotal part of his modernist aesthetic. The anecdotal nature of much of his autobiographical material also lent itself well to such retellings; and detachable anecdotes recur across the four volumes of reminiscences, with differences.

The effect this has, as Haslam writes, is often one of ‘fragmentation and simultaneous multiplication of the point of view’. In *Ancient Lights*, for example, Ford recounts his earliest memory of seeing Barbary ring-doves in the breeding-box outside the window of his grandfather’s house, and being reprimanded. As Haslam points out, ‘Ford returns to the incident of the Barbary doves many times in his writing career, retelling it, always furnishing his reader with new information, with new parts of the memory. It is never complete, never known. In a way it is always unstable’ (Haslam 2002: 22). This is ‘like Monet painting Rouen cathedral under different lights,’ writes Saunders (2010: 285–6). Such effects return us to Ford’s image of the ‘composite photograph’. Ford’s portraits of Conrad, James, and Wells, just a few of the figures who reappear across the reminiscences, become composite overlays.

This is also part of the way that the volumes connect, and in so doing, defy regular chronology, aligning with Ford’s notion of the time-shift and the workings of memory. The use of the time-shift in Ford’s reminiscences is as artful as in his novels, and Ford reflects on his own chronological artfulness in the texts themselves, for example in *Thus to Revisit* (1921: 55) and in *Joseph Conrad* (1924: 129–30, 180–2), stressing how non-linear time-schemes, in literature, more accurately reflect how we experience, narrate, and remember life, in reality. Taken as a group, the reminiscences also criss-cross backwards and forwards, while moving forward broadly in time: from the Pre-Raphaelite *Ancient Lights* to the Edwardian years of *Return* and the Parisian reminiscences of *Nightingale*.

Ford's use of novelistic techniques became more elaborate with each volume of autobiography. In 'The New Biography', Woolf had been sceptical about fusing fiction with biography and memoir. Nicolson, writes Woolf, 'is trying to mix the truth of real life and the truth of fiction. He can only do it by using no more than a pinch of either. For though both truths are genuine, they are antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other' (Woolf 1927: 154). Ford never conceded, and perhaps never felt, this antagonism between fact and fiction, and in the 1930s his writing revelled more and more in fusing them. Woolf's own *Orlando* (1928), meanwhile, also suggested that the borders between fact and fiction were more permeable than she asserted in 'The New Biography'.

In the dedicatory letter of *Return*, Ford discusses reminiscential form, relating how he conceived the book while lying in a New York studio with a bandaged foot, staring up 'at the criss-cross of beams in the roof'. 'The literary form of the work is inextricably mingled with those Cubist intricacies,' Ford declares, before asserting that 'this is a novel […] The accuracies I deal in are the accuracies of my impressions' (Ford 1931: vii). In the dedicatory letter of *Nightingale*, there is less emphasis on the criss-cross as a motif, and more on how this is Ford's first 'autobiography' (as opposed to reminiscences), yet also a 'novel', in which 'I have employed every wile known to me as novelist' (Ford 1934: v).

The criss-cross as a metaphor for the form of *Return* is apparent from the opening, as Ford describes arriving by train at Rye reading Kipling's stories when he was eighteen—connecting this volume with a passage near the end of *Ancient Lights*, where Ford takes the train from Hythe to Charing Cross, and finishes a story from the same volume. The criss-cross pattern is also evident towards the end of *Return*, interlocking with a central motif of *Nightingale*, as in the 'Coda' of the earlier book, Ford describes how he stood on the kerb

of Piccadilly Circus on 28th June 1914.[14] In *Nightingale,* Ford again takes up the 'kerb' motif, in a much bolder way, pausing:

> with one foot off the kerb at corner of the Campden Hill waterworks, nearly opposite the stable in which, thirteen years before, I had used to breakfast with Mr Galsworthy. I was about to cross the road. But, whilst I stood with one foot poised in air, suddenly I recognised my unfortunate position (Ford 1934: 15).

Ford then begins a series of digressions, always returning to the comically artificial, though photographic, image of standing on the kerb, paused and suspended for nearly one hundred pages, until he decides (in a bravura display of *progression d'effet*) to leave London. Even after this sequence, digression remains one of the organising principles of *Nightingale*, which is daring in its associative flights from subject to subject, while also slipping its ostensible time-scheme more than *Return*: beginning in 1919, yet briefly dwelling on events before, and during, the war.

It Was the Nightingale also connects continually with Ford's fiction. John Coyle writes that 'very slowly, and through waves of interweaving significance, the real purpose of *It Was the Nightingale* emerges: as a companion volume to *Parade's End*' (Coyle: 2007, xiv). And indeed something similar applies to all the autobiographies, and the way in which they depict the genesis of Ford's fiction, and his creative growth generally, as well as offering comment and self-criticism on his *oeuvre*. The relationship of the autobiographies to each other, to Ford's fiction, and to his criticism remains a potentially fertile area for

further study. There is also more to be said about their form and technique, and about the many specific portraits of writers and artists set within them.

The duality, ambiguity and ambivalence of Ford's generic fusions in his biographical writings and his autobiographies reflects the ambivalence he felt towards life-writing itself: a seemingly twinned suspicion and attraction. The multiplicity of Ford's life-writing also courts a deliberate prompting of doubt vis-à-vis the veracity of such narratives, which Ford himself highlights in his dedicatory letters. Unreliability is a quintessentially modernist or postmodernist tactic in fiction, though one less familiar in supposedly 'non-fictional' texts—where such questioning is all the more appropriate, as Ford well knew from experience. For as he wrote in 'On Impressionism', after he himself spent almost ten years researching 'facts about Henry VIII', he found that he really knew—'so delusive are reported facts—nothing whatever […] There are so many contradictory facts; there are so many reported interviews, each contradicting the other' (Ford 1914b: 171). Only fiction, Ford suggests—or fusions of life-writing with fiction—could offer the 'true truth'.

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[1] I have not discussed Ford's letters in this chapter, however, as this is the subject of another chapter in this volume. Nor have I discussed Ford's topographical books, which are frequently autobiographical, for similar reasons.

[2] A selection of some 'Literary Portraits' is reprinted in Ford (2002), *Critical Essays*, 33–55, 110–85, and also in Stang (1986), 162–186. The literary portraits are catalogued in Harvey (1962), listed in the section on 'Contributions to Periodicals'. But they remain uncollected as a whole.

[3] For more of a selection of contemporary responses to Ford's autobiographies, see Harvey's *Bibliography* and Frank MacShane (1972).

[4] The tendency to denigrate Ford runs throughout Conrad and James studies, having been established early on especially by biographers of both writers, in too many instances to list definitively here. For more sympathetic biographical discussions of Ford among Conrad and James, see Nicholas Delbanco, *Group Portrait* (1982) and Miranda Seymour, *a Ring of Conspirators: Henry James and his Literary Circle* (1988).

[5] Other key essays on Ford's life-writing by Max Saunders include 'Ford's Lives', in Ashley Chantler and Rob Hawkes (eds), *An Introduction to Ford Madox Ford* (2015), 7–22, which offers an introductory biographical and critical account of Ford's work as an autobiographer in particular; and 'A Life in Writing: Ford Madox Ford's Dispersed Autobiographies', *Antaeus* 56, Spring 1986, 47–69, which tackles all the reminiscences (and *Mightier Than the Sword*), bringing out 'their neglected formal ingenuities' (48), providing key analyses of their dedicatory letters.

[6] Criticism of *Ford Madox Brown* is relatively scarce, although the book is discussed in some way by all Ford's biographers. Angela Thirlwell discusses the biography in 'From Paint to Print – Grandfather's Legacy' (2009), 29–38. See Angela Thirlwell, *Into the Frame: the Four Loves of Ford Madox Brown* (2010) for a contemporary account of Madox Brown's life.

[7] For more on Ford's *Joseph Conrad*, also see Vita Fortunati, 'Biography and Fiction in Ford's *Joseph Conrad: a Personal Remembrance* in Keith Carabine and Max Saunders (eds), *Inter-Relations: Conrad, James, Ford and Others* (2004), 149–60.

[8] Sara Haslam discusses psychoanalytical issues in *Ancient Lights* in *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the Novel and the Great War* (2002), 20–35, 120–29. This remains a potentially fruitful aspect of *Ancient Lights* for further study.

[9] Patrick Deer offers a useful account of *It Was the Nightingale* and its conception of transatlantic modernism in '"Scattered but all Active": Ford Madox Ford and Transatlantic Modernism' in Sara Haslam and Seamus O'Malley (eds), *Ford Madox Ford and America*, IFMFS 11 (2012), 69–82.

[10] Also see Pesman's essay '"Drawn from Life": Stella Bowen and Ford Madox Ford', in Robert Hampson and Max Saunders (eds), *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, International Ford Madox Ford Studies 2 (2003), 221–38 for more on Stella Bowen's memoir in particular. Ford is seen through Jean Rhys's writing in Annette Gilson, 'Internalizing Mastery: Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, and the Fiction of Autobiography', *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.3 (2004), 632–56.

[11] As Max Saunders writes in 'Ford's Lives' in *An Introduction to Ford Madox Ford*, the title of *Thus to Revisit* 'alludes to Hamlet's question to the ghost: "What may this mean, / That thou, dead corpse, again in complete steel, / Revisitst thus the glimpses of the moon[?]"' (Saunders 2015: 16).

[12] Seamus O'Malley's *Making History New: Modernism and Historical Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) offers discussions of Ford's fictional accounts of the war as well as *No Enemy*.

[13] See Rob Hawkes' chapter 'Fictionality at the Front: Genre, Trust and the War Memoir' in *Ford Madox Ford and the Misfit Moderns: Edwardian Fiction and the First World War* (2012) for more discussion of *No Enemy*. Other important discussions of *No Enemy* include Samuel Hynes, 'The Genre of *No Enemy*', *Antaeus* 56, Spring 1986, 125–42; Cornelia Cook, 'Constructions and Reconstructions: *No Enemy*', in Hampson and Saunders (eds), *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, IFMFS 2, 191–205; Jonathan Boulter, '"After … Armageddon": Trauma and History in Ford Madox Ford's *No Enemy*', in Joseph Wiesenfarth (ed), *History and Representation in Ford Madox Ford's Writings*, International Ford Madox Ford Studies 3 (2004), 77–90 and Paul Skinner, 'Introduction' in Ford, *No Enemy*, ed. Paul Skinner (2002). Contemporary reviews of *No Enemy*, which was only published in America during Ford's lifetime, were very positive.

[14] For a discussion of the end of *Return* and Ford's agoraphobia, see Beaumont (2010), 37–49. Also see Peter Easingwood's 2006 essay 'What I Am Always Wanting to Say' for comparisons between *Return to Yesterday* and *Ancient Lights*.