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Rowan Morris

Western University, rowan.e.morris@gmail.com

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Wee Whizz Bang: Englishness and Noise in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*

Rowan Morris

Abstract: This paper explores representations of Englishness in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*, identifying in particular a taciturn, monoglossic form of pre-Great War Englishness that is threatened by the cacophonous, heteroglossic post-War world. Through close formal analysis of "noise" in Ford's tetralogy, framed by an historicist reading of the socio-political contexts of the First World War, this paper demonstrates how *Parade's End* simultaneously eulogizes a "stiff-upper-lip" Englishness while marking such reticence as an obsolete mode of thinking that is incompatible with modernity. In contrast to criticism that identifies *The Last Post*, the final novel in the tetralogy, as a return to or rebirth of a "true" form of Englishness, this paper argues that Englishness continues to be problematized at the tetralogy's close. Ford's work reveals an Englishness irrevocably infiltrated by the noise of modernity; pre-War Englishness becomes a fantasy, idealized but unsustainable. By analyzing Ford's representations of Englishness, this paper gives insight into how national identity is mythologized, constructed, and restructured during moments of historical crisis.

Keywords: Englishness; Ford Madox Ford; noise; national identity; war

Parade's End is a clamorous tetralogy. In a work whose representations of Englishness are so intertwined with taciturnity, with a stiff upper lip and a show of keeping calm and carrying on, noise is particularly noticeable. *Parade's End* charts a struggle to define Englishness on multiple levels (international, national and individual), all while expressing a growing anxiety as to whether that Englishness will be drowned out in the cacophony of modernity. Englishness is an imprecise term, but in Ford's work its pre-War forms connote silence. Christopher Tietjens is the individual embodiment of this national ideology, the subject whose taciturnity is threatened by a modernity which is announced with a confusing array of noises. The reticent English gentleman must learn to cope not only with the bursting of shells in the trenches of France, but also with new, mainly American voices chattering away on English soil. Ford's work is, on one level, highly critical of English silence: the text characterises the repression of emotions and an unwillingness to speak as destructive to the self, and Tietjens both voluntarily and involuntarily breaks English silence. But in some ways, Ford's answer to the troubles of modernity is not for the Englishman to learn how to communicate, but rather for him to retreat into a fantasy of insularity. *The Last Post*, the elegiac final novel of *Parade's End*, responds ambiguously to these ideological issues.

As Englishness is hardly a static concept, discussing it requires some care. In *The Spirit of the People*, Ford makes a "frontal assault on the conception of national character as a stable and unchanging inheritance" (Parrinder 7); it would therefore be unwise to read *Parade's End* as a narrative of either the decline or the reconstruction of some 'true' form of Englishness. Rather, there are two broad categories of pre-War Englishness within Ford's text, both of which are characterised by taciturnity, and both of which modernity threatens. Modernity comes in the form of the Great War, a watershed in English history; it is "a point of historical discontinuity

between the relatively stable order of nineteenth-century nation-states, and an emergent 'post-modern' multinational order" (Meyer 84). As Robert Colls notes, "Englishness has had to be constantly reproduced, and the phases of its most intense reproduction -- borne as its finest moments -- have simultaneously been phases of threat to its existence from within and without" (qtd in Brown 162). *Parade's End* captures Englishness in this moment of reproduction and perilous transformation.

The two prevalent forms of Englishness in the tetralogy are an imperialist ideology, as represented by General Champion and his ilk, and the insular, idyllic Englishness of Christopher Tietjens. Champion is a man who desires to "have" India (Ford 794), a man for whom "Open confession is next to reform" (75). His Englishness is a virulently masculine one wrapped protectively around an insecure ego: "The general was afraid of talk. He practically never talked with anyone except about his job -- certainly never with Tietjens -- without being proved to be in the wrong, and that undermined his belief in himself" (352-353). This shying away from talk "is essential to a discourse of imperialism, as imperialism and nationalism function through the assumption that theirs is the only discourse adequate to the subject; that is to say, they are monoglossic" (Riede 213). According to Patrick Parrinder, "the idea that the English are cold, unemotional, and repressed is largely a twentieth-century perception . . . owing much to the code of behaviour that was impressed on the imperial ruling classes sent out in their small numbers to govern far-flung and heavily-populated lands" (12). Reticence, however, also plays a large part in Christopher Tietjens's reconstruction of a pastoral, seventeenth-century England: insularity, after all, is a form of silence -- not an overpowering of other voices, but an act of retreating from them altogether. Tietjens ultimately makes a compromise between complete silence and engaging with the many voices of modernity, but he is still drawn to the idea of an insular,

pastoral England. For Tietjens, England is "A man and a maid walk[ing] through Kentish grass fields: the grass ripe for the scythe," the young couple's "minds cluttered up with all these useless anodynes for thought, quotation, imbecile epithets! Dead silent, unable to talk, from too good breakfast to probably extremely bad lunch" (Ford 105). This pastoral fantasy survives the deafening roar of the Great War: in *The Last Post*, Valentine supposes that Christopher wants their child to be "a contemplative parson farming his own tythe-fields and with a Greek testament in folio under his arm" (812). The desire for Englishness to remain something local sets Tietjens in opposition to Champion and the imperialists: "Damn the Empire! It was England! It was Bemerton Parsonage that mattered! What did we want with an Empire!" (591). Loeffler argues that while "empire threatens the island core of Englishness with territorial expansion and cultural contamination," Tietjens represents a return to a "national tradition that has evolved in symbiosis with the earth itself" (16). Though one can argue that the novel privileges insularity above imperialism, the former is not without its problems and Ford's treatment of it is not unequivocal. Insular Englishness possesses its own taciturnity which makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, for it to exist in the heteroglossic post-War world.

Tietjens is thus obsolescent in his taciturnity. He is the epitome of the stiff-upper-lipped English gentleman: "the basis of Christopher Tietjens' emotional existence was a complete taciturnity -- at any rate as to his emotions. As Tietjens saw the world, you didn't 'talk.' Perhaps you didn't even think about how you felt" (Ford 6). This taciturnity is intimately connected to the land itself. Christopher and Sylvia's son, thinking in Latin of his father, makes a revealing stumble, one which conflates silence with the soil: "*Vox adhaesit*. . . . 'His feet were rooted to the earth.' . . . No, *vox adhaesit faucibus* meant that his voice stuck to his jaws" (713). One cannot help but note Ford's somewhat extreme love of ellipses, a stylistic feature which itself is

indicative of silence, of things left unsaid. Mark, when carefully thinking around the suspicious circumstances of his father's death, allows his thoughts to trail off into silence, creating an absent presence out of the possibility of suicide: "He appeared to have crawled through the hedge, dragging his loaded gun, muzzle forwards, after him. Hundreds of men, mostly farmers, die from that cause every year in England. . ." (211). Mr. Tietjens's relationship with his children is based upon mutual silence; after all, there is no need for communication where there are no differences. Christopher thinks of himself and his father as "like two men in the club -- the *only* club; thinking so alike that there was no need to talk" (7). This is monoglossia -- a discourse so well understood that it need not be voiced.

Ford, though not unambiguously opposed to insularity and silence, is rightly critical of the Englishman's habit of repression. Christine Berberich, when writing of *The Good Soldier*, expresses ideas that are equally applicable to *Parade's End*: "Ford challenges very English ideals: chivalric ideals are undermined, the idea of emotional control highlighted as nothing but emotional frigidity" (204). Berberich writes of Ford's "ambivalence with regard to 'Englishness'," how he "admires the ability to keep a stiff upper lip" while simultaneously being appalled by the Englishman's emotional reticence (204). Tietjens himself acknowledges the disadvantages of English silence:

It has been remarked that the peculiarly English habit of self-suppression in matters of the emotions puts the Englishman at a great disadvantage in moments of unusual stresses. In the smaller matters of the general run of life he will be impeccable and not to be moved; but in sudden confrontations of anything but physical dangers he is apt -- he is, indeed, almost certain -- to go to pieces very badly. (Ford 178)

Tietjens considers self-suppression to have been a great advantage prior to "the later months of the year 1914" (179) before the "unusual stress" of the Great War wreaked havoc upon the English consciousness. In *The Last Post*, Mark's fate, to be rendered mute in illness, is the cruel fulfilment of the English desire for silence, the tetralogy's final scathing indictment of taciturnity. When Marie remembers telling Mark of the terms of the Armistice she is "almost certain" that Mark said that "he would never speak again" (689); later, Mark recalls that "he had said to Christopher that morning -- the 11th of November, 1918 -- that he would never speak to him again" (735). Mark is "finished with the world" and will "never again stir lip or finger" (728). Englishness, at least in the way that the Tietjenses perceive it, is singularly ill-adapted to modernity, and seems to hold no proper place in the post-War world.

Silence, then, is something both admirable and unbearable. At times of emotional turmoil Tietjens, against his own will, breaks that silence. In *Some Do Not*. . . he is assailed by the thought that he might not be the father of Sylvia's child; he groans aloud and General Campion overhears (78). This gives Tietjens "a nasty turn. He hadn't been able to pigeon-hole and padlock his disagreeable reflections. He had been as good as talking to himself" (78). Tietjens's irrepressible groans are particularly marked in *No More Parades*. After receiving a troubling letter about Sylvia "he groaned and sank more deeply on to his beef case" (314); anxieties regarding Valentine cause "A groan to burst from him" (337); eventually, plagued by his domestic issues, "Tietjens groaned so audibly that McKechnie, from the other end of the hut, asked if he had not said anything" (348). The "unusual stresses" of modernity are cracking the veneer of Englishness, demanding some sound from the taciturn, even if that sound is only an incoherent groan. These stresses wear away at both the ability and the desire to self suppress;

when Levin embarrassedly informs Tietjens that the latter talks in his sleep, Tietjens is shockingly unbothered. "You mean you don't care. . . . Good God!" Levin exclaims (453).

It is perhaps not all that shocking that Tietjens's English taciturnity should show signs of deterioration; he is, after all, living in a world in which not only everyone but everything speaks, and not only speaks but screams and shouts. The defining aspect of modernity is cacophony. When Tietjens encounters the suffragettes fleeing across the golf course he is startled because "Screams protesting against physical violence were at that date rare things in England. Tietjens had never heard the like" (Ford 67). This incident is only the first harbinger of modernity. During Tietjens's time in the trenches the noise rises to a crescendo, the orchestra brings in "*all the brass, all the strings, all the wood-wind, all the percussion instruments*" (559), and the sound of warfare intrudes upon and threatens the self: "An enormous crashing sound said things of an intolerable intimacy to each of those men, and to all of them as a body" (293). In *A Man Could Stand Up--*, Ford demonstrates a remarkable ability to anthropomorphise, in twisted and startling ways, the coldly mechanised war. The shells all speak to Christopher Tietjens: "A familiar noise said: 'We . . . e . . . e . . . ry!' Shells always appeared tired of life. As if after a long, long journey they said: 'Weary!' Very much prolonging the 'e' sound. Then 'Whack!' when they burst" (601). The picks in the trenches talk amongst themselves: "Chop, chop, chop, a pick whispered. Chop? another asked in an undertone. The first said Chopchopchop. Then *Chup*. . . . And a silence of irregular duration" (563). Notably, all this noise impedes the thought process of the Englishman: "In terrific noise; noise like the rushing up of innumerable noises determined not to be late, whilst the earth rocks or bumps or quakes or protests, you cannot be very coherent about your thoughts" (556). At one point Tietjens is so overcome with noise that it creates a "mental darkness" (637). Loeffler argues that Englishness is intertwined with knowledge (2), and

that "Tietjens serves as the representative knowing subject of the early twentieth century" (8). That noise should play such a significant part in Tietjens's loss of knowledge is yet more evidence of its threat to Englishness.

Noise, then, fragments the monoglossic stability of Englishness. In the third volume of *England and the English*

[Ford] defines Englishness as a certain manner of discourse that perpetuates itself by rendering impossible the introduction of new concepts into the lexicon, thus insuring the stability of the current power structure, but also rendering it impotent and unable to assert itself amongst the din of contending voices from other power structures. (Riede 215)

In the trenches Tietjens is no longer a member of an exclusive club, "thinking so alike that there was no need to communicate"; rather, he is surrounded by a plurality of peoples from disparate cultures. *No More Parades* opens with a description of Welsh and Canadian soldiers who go on "talking and talking" (Ford 291), their idiomatic dialogue clearly identifying them as members of a lower class. When Tietjens surveys the sleeping army his listing of religious functionaries reveals the heteroglossic nature of the camp: "parsons, priests, rabbis, Mormon bishops, Brahmins, Lamas, Imams, Fanti men, no doubt, for African troops" (330). Though Tietjens's particular brand of Englishness may be "impotent and unable to assert itself," he still attempts to raise his voice above the din of warfare, because "if you could out-shout the row you were safe. . . . That was not sensible, but you got ease that way!" (305). If solace cannot be found in silence, then it will be found in the shout of a single, unfragmented voice.

The sounds of modernity, however, are not localized in the trenches; they are not something that can be physically or ideologically distanced from England. *The Last Post* has often been read as sentimental indulgence or elegiac pastoralism (Radford 327), a strangely

idyllic book which jars unpleasantly with the harsh realism of the first three novels -- this is emphatically not the case. Rather, the cacophony of *No More Parades* and *A Man Could Stand Up*-- pervades the supposed Arcadia of *The Last Post*, belying the novel's pastoral calm. Loeffler states that *Parade's End* charts the reconstruction of "an authentically English rural landscape and the traditions that inhere within it" (3), but he fails to acknowledge that those traditions are tainted by descriptions that belong more to the battlefield than the farmyard. When Marie is tending to the chickens a hen "crooned menacingly, then screamed with the voice of poultry disaster as her hand approached it. The sympathetic voices of other hens outside came to her, screaming with poultry disaster" (Ford 696-697). The behaviour of the rural animals is conflated with politics, particularly the "contagious" political alliances which resulted in world-wide war: "The ducks on the pond continued to make a great noise, churning the water, up the hill, boisterously with their wings, and squawking. [. . .] They went mad, contagiously. Like nations or all the cattle of a county" (680). The heteroglossia of the trenches is echoed in the many and disparate voices now making themselves heard on English soil; Eric Meyer notes that "The novel is overrun by denationalized characters like Mrs. Bray de Pape, the American woman who claims to be a reincarnation of a French aristocrat, or Marie Leonie, Mark's French-speaking mistress" (91). Tietjens, that knowing subject, carries home with him the knowledge of the noise of war. In his 'Arcadia,' Tietjens still talks in his sleep: "*Bringt dem Hauptmann eine Kerze. . . . Bring the Major a candle,*' he would shout dreadfully beside her in the blackness. And she would know that he was remembering the sound of picks in the earth beneath the trenches" (Ford 813). Perhaps the most explicit instance of modern noise infiltrating pre-War Englishness is the felling of Groby Great Tree, that "symbol of Tietjens" (733). Mrs. Bray de Pape accomplishes this feat, and she does it by employing "the latest Australian form of tree-stump extractor -- the Wee

Whizz Bang" (823), a foreign machine whose onomatopoeic name clearly connotes the clamour it creates. To read *The Last Post* as a pastoral fantasy, or a story of renewal, is to disregard the troubling sounds that pervade the novel.

Moreover, Tietjens, though he by no means embraces heteroglossia, makes a compromise between clamour and complete silence. Tietjens "sees taciturn English existence as an ideal, but he also sees that modernity has made a less perfect discourse necessary" (Riede 214), and so, in addition to involuntarily breaking silence, Tietjens also willingly rejects taciturnity in order to live in the modern world. Communication, of course, is necessary for survival in modernity, as it is for survival in the trenches: "It was perhaps the dominant idea of Tietjens, perhaps the main idea that he got out of warfare -- that at all costs you must keep in touch with your neighbouring troops" (Ford 624). Tietjens finds a medium between the clamour of shells and the silence of Englishness. That medium is Valentine:

She was, in effect, the only person in the world that he wanted to hear speak. Certainly the only person in the world that he wanted to talk to. The only clear intelligence! . . . The repose that his mind needed from the crackling of thorns under all the pots of the world. . . . From the eternal, imbecile 'Pampamperipam Pam Pamperi Pam Pam!' of the German guns that all the while continued. (604)

Valentine is a repose from deafening noise, but she does not offer complete silence; the suffragette is different enough from the antique Tory (a class of people she thought "were all in museums" [135]) that they will never be a club of two, with no need to speak to one another. Tietjens now realises that "One has desperate need. Of talk" (659), and he shuns the company of those with whom he can remain in a state of non-communication:

To be in close mental communion with either an English bounder or an Englishman of good family would, he was aware, be intolerable to him. But, for a little, shivering artistic Jew, as of old for Macmaster he was quite capable of feeling a real fondness -- as you might for an animal. Their manners were not your manners and could not be expected to be. (752)

Certainly the condescension of this passage is palpable, and it problematises Tietjens's rejection of English taciturnity. He may now be willing to talk, but it is with the understanding that his Englishness, his discourse, is still superior and preferable.

In no way can one read *Parade's End* as an unambiguous rejection of pre-War Englishness. Ford writes in a state of limbo "with regard to Englishness: neither whole-hearted admiration, nor complete condemnation; neither total identification with values of the past, nor those of the modern" (Berberich 197). The tetralogy returns to the idea of an insular, pastoral England with Tietjens's proclamation that "the land remains" (Ford 566). According to Valentine, Tietjens presumably believes that the "green comeliness" of English soil will "go on breeding George Herberts," and it will do so "In spite of showers of Americans" (814), that is, in spite of modernity. Just as one cannot disregard the sound of Groby Great Tree falling, neither can one ignore the pained nostalgia of *The Last Post*. Tietjens undeniably desires the sanctuary of a pre-War existence.

Yet to view *The Last Post* as either "elegiac pastoralism" or "a bold endeavour to re-conventionalise the sense of landscape" (Radford 327) is to misread the novel. The first three novels in the tetralogy narrate the futile battle between silent Englishness and noisy modernity; *The Last Post* continues this narrative. Loeffler argues that Christopher Tietjens is the "epistemological center of *Parade's End*," the embodiment of "the solid unity of landed English

power and its accompanying traditions" (7); if this is the case, then the absence of his focalizing consciousness in *The Last Post*, the fact that he has, as Austin Riede puts it, "galumphed off in obscurity" (222), signals the displacement of Herbertian Englishness. It is important to note that one of the novel's primary focalizers is the "denationalized" Marie who identifies pastoralism as an act of self-destructive navel-gazing: "No wonder this nation was going to rack and ruin when it wastes its time over preserving the nests of sparrers and naming innumerable wall-flowers!" (Ford 766) Valentine also presents a less-than-flattering portrait of pastoral life: "Pushing the little roots into crevices with her fingers; removing stones, trowelling in artificial manure, stooping, dirtying her fingers would make her retch" (809). Not only do Wee Whizz Bangs and the sound of the trenches infiltrate this Arcadia, but the pastoral fantasy itself is conceived as problematic.

Parade's End, then, boldly faces the cacophony of modernity while elegising a silent, antiquated form of Englishness. In the trenches of France and on English soil, noise surrounds the country gentleman who is singularly ill-equipped to live in the post-War world. The text reveals taciturnity to be inadequate on both international and national levels, though it may still survive on an individual level, as a pastoral fantasy which serves to sooth the mental wounds of the Great War. Tietjens's pastoral fantasy may be characterised as a type of practical idealism. His complete faith in an Herbertian England is paradoxically coupled with the acceptance that he cannot battle the forces of modernity; other men may stand up on hills, but it is the fate of the Tietjenses of the world to "get into some hole" (668). As Parrinder notes, "Ford could be accused of a wish to stop the lantern show of history and to turn the clock back, though he knows this can never be done" (12). The lantern show of history will go on, and England will continue producing Englishness in forms that may be alien to Christopher Tietjens. After all, Englishness

is not "a stable and unchanging inheritance," and the clamorous Great War was a catalyst for change. In the trenches, Tietjens imagines that "An immense collection of fire-irons: all the fire-irons in the world fell just above their heads. The sound seemed to prolong itself in echoes" (Ford 610). There are, and always will be, echoes of that noise in England's ears.

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