

Interruption Overload: Telephones in Ford Madox Ford's "4692 Padd", *A Call* and *A Man Could Stand Up*—

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ABSTRACT

Ford Madox Ford's short story "4692 Padd" (1908), his novella *A Call* (1910), and his novel *A Man Could Stand Up*— (1926) all exploit the narratological potential of the rhetorical tropes of interruption. In each text, the interruption is caused by a cutting-edge contemporary gadget: the telephone. In "4692 Padd" and *A Call*, the phone-calls have a parenthetical nature. But by the time of *A Man Could Stand Up*—, Ford is experimenting with extreme interruption by telephone, or what is known in ergonomics as "interruption overload." The narratological effect of interruption overload is both to record and recreate a specific historical moment of geo-political uncertainty: the end of the First World War.

KEY WORDS

Ford Madox Ford / telephones / interruption / parenthesis / Modernism

In the writings of Ford Madox Ford, literary and technological innovation coincide. Ford's 1908 short story "4692 Padd," his 1910 novella *A Call*, and his 1926 novel *A Man Could Stand Up*— (the third volume of the *Parade's End* tetralogy) all exploit the potential of the rhetorical tropes of interruption with recourse to the technical and sociological qualities of a contemporary gadget: the telephone. The result is a Modernist techno-rhetoric with radical narratological consequences. In the story and novella, the phone-calls have a parenthetical character, but, by the time of the novel, Ford is experimenting with extreme interruption by telephone, or what is known in ergonomics as "interruption overload." The narratological effect of interruption overload is to recreate a specific historical moment of uncertainty: the end of the First World War.

By 1 January 1912, the date on which Britain's telephone systems were nationalized, there were 5,476 private subscribers' direct lines in the eponymous Paddington exchange of "4692 Padd" and 6,409 in the Mayfair exchange to which Lady Hudson's line belongs in *A Call* (Baldwin ix, 663). Telephony was expensive. In 1901, the Post Office and National Telephone Company was charging London subscribers £17 per annum for unlimited usage or £6 10s for a measured rate service within the County of London and £5 10s in outer London (Perry 78). Possessing a phone "was by no means considered a necessity, but indeed, something of a luxury;" indeed, "to have a telephone in one's house was simply beyond the economic reach of the labouring classes" (Perry 74, 77). On 14 January 1902, the "telephone question" reached a London *Times* editorial:

When all is said and done the telephone is not an affair of the million. It is a convenience for the well-to-do and a trade appliance for persons who can very well afford to pay for it. For people who use it constantly it is an immense economy, even at the highest rates ever charged by the telephone company. For those who use it merely to save themselves trouble or add to the diversions of life it is a luxury. And overwhelming majority of the population do not use it and are not likely to use it at all, except perhaps to the extent of an occasional message from a public station. They have no concerns that call for its use, and no time to amuse themselves by talking to people at a distance. ("The Adjourned Conference of Local Authorities" 7; qtd in Perry 75)

The relative rarity of the telephone is instructive. By making the technology central to his short story and novella, Ford focuses on the wealthy and advantaged (Arnold Bennett found *A Call* to be "profoundly and hopelessly untrue to life" because it treated "of the lazy rich" (34)), and on the metropolitan (as late as 1913, London accounted for a third of the telephones

in the whole of Britain (Perry 76)). But Ford also foregrounds characters whose technological bent reveals their modernity as well as their wealth: they not only make phone calls (Etta is scornful of Dudley when he fumbles with the handset and appears not to know how to take it off the hook), but send Marconigrams and dodge electric trams.

But the fact that Lady Hudson is “a subscriber to the Post Office telephone system” (163) does more than place her in an elite technological vanguard: it also marks what seems to have been a minority use of the technology in the early 1900s—that is, for private purposes. In *The History of the Telephone*, published in the same year as *A Call*, the Canadian Herbert N. Casson emphasizes the commercial and public uses of the instrument:

It is used to call the duck-shooters in Western Canada when a flock of birds has arrived; and to direct the movements of the Dragon in Wagner’s grand opera “Siegfried.” At the last Yale-Harvard football game, it conveyed almost instantaneous news to fifty thousand people in various parts of New England. (201)

In America (a culture Ford once dismissed as “a civilization of bath-tubs and telephones” (qtd in Saunders 1996 vol. 2, 142), the expiry of the Bell patents in 1894 meant that new, independent companies entered the telephone industry: “[a]s a consequence, the telephone became widely available to women and adolescents” (Aronson 31) and social use became more widespread. But the same sociology did not obtain in Britain. As the *Times* editorial quoted above makes clear, talking on the phone “to add to the diversions of life” or for “amusement” was an expensive “luxury.” David Trotter has drawn attention to the fact that advertising of telephones in Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century concentrated on the instrument’s usefulness in practical matters and emergencies (14, 15). This is corroborated by Marghanita Laski, who writes of Edwardian domestic life: “the telephone, usually inconveniently located in the flower-room, in a corner of the hall, or in a lobby between the smoking-room and the gentleman’s lavatory, was seldom used for chats” (190). The phone’s use in effecting mass participation in public events (from 1884, the Electrophone Company offered subscribers connections to theatres, concerts and church services (Briggs and Burke 145)) and in creating networks of practical assistance reinforced the public, communalizing character of the device. When Robert Grimshaw picks up the phone to check his hunch concerning the propriety of Dudley Leicester’s behavior, he reveals himself to be in the forefront of usage of the technology. The moment proves Ford to be exploiting the latest technology, and the latest uses of that technology, to transform literary situations and effects.ⁱ Ancient literary devices such as unreciprocated recognition, hidden identities and asymmetrical encounters are imaginatively re-worked.

The telephone’s communalizing tendencies prompted the editor of one London newspaper to question “what will become of the privacy of life?” (qtd in Casson 247). Another London writer was quoted in the January 1897 issue of *American Electrician* as lamenting, “[w]e shall soon be nothing but transparent heaps of jelly to each other” (qtd in Marvin 68). Invading the private, the telephone call has two ontological effects. The first is to define the individual through location: in picking up the receiver, a person proves himself or herself to be in a specified place (though this is no longer true in the days of mobile phones, the same effect is provided by satellite tracking facilities). Someone Dudley doesn’t know knows where he is. The second is to summon the individual to interaction, interpellating him or her into at least a dialogic function. (“What does it mean to answer the telephone,” asks Avital Ronell, “to make oneself available to it in a situation whose gestural syntax already means yes, even if the affirmation should find itself followed by a question mark: Yes?” (5)) Though Ford warned against it,ⁱⁱ it is hard to resist interpreting this phenomenon as a form of vocation, as the phone calls the individual away from what he or she is engaged in and to another activity. The phone’s shrill ring performs the technological equivalent of parenthesis, one of the tropes of interruption (analyzed in greater detail below). If the answerer is interrupted in the course of an utterance, the call is also the analogue of apostrophe, a turning of speech from one audience to another.

Trotter has coined the felicitous term “e-Modernism” for what he calls “a technologically mediated revolution of the word” (1). He argues that the telephone was the “primary catalyst” for this revolution, which he identifies as taking place from around 1930 (1, 5). e-Modernism, as Trotter sees it, begins when the technological event such as the telephone call loses “symbolic proportions in and for the literary text” (6)—as it does, in his argument, in the work of Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell. Yet it is doubtful whether “e-Modernism” is the most apposite term to describe the use in literature of technology for its own sake, as opposed to its symbolic potential. The application of the e-prefix is questionable. According to the OED, e- is “prefixed to nouns to denote involvement in electronic media and telecommunications, usually to distinguish objects or actions from their non-electronic counterparts.” In other words, “e-” means “virtual”: that is, intangible, disembodied, existing in cyberspace – and as Trotter’s opening remark acknowledges, “[t]here was no e-literature, as such, before digitalisation” (1). Now, although it involves different technology (electrical analogue rather than electronic digital), there may be something “e-” about a telephone conversation, especially a telephone conversation conducted in a half-darkened entrance hall as in “4692 Padd” and *A Call*. Ghostly, disembodied voices are familiar elements in literature, but here they are speaking by means of a piece of technology. (Indeed, in “4692 Padd,” the operator’s voice at the other end of the wire conjures up an “odd sensation of blindness, distance and ghostliness” (7), while in *A Call*, the question “Are you 4259 Mayfair?” sounds in Dudley’s mind as a haunting revenant (49). The first adjective used in relation to the telephone in *A Man Could Stand Up*— is “supernatural” (7).ⁱⁱⁱ A more accurate nomenclature would, however, dispense with the e- prefix: hence the use in this article of “techno-rhetoric” to refer to technology-based—specifically, telephonically-based—tropes.

In the texts under consideration, the telephonically-based tropes allow Ford to exploit the narratological effects of interruption, specifically parenthesis. The circumstances of the calls are themselves parenthetical. The telephones’ location is the first indication. In “4692 Padd” and *A Call*, the crucial calls are taken in the hall of the Hudsons’ house. As Trotter, writing about a slightly later period, remarks, “the entrance hall was the location most frequently chosen [for situating the telephone] in domestic dwellings”: “[a]s a liminal area,” it is “secluded at once from public attention and from too exclusive a privacy” (20). This location—the most public part of a domestic space, the site where greetings and farewells are exchanged and social encounters begin and end—is a parenthetical locus between exterior and interior. Ford does not describe the actual telephone which Dudley answers, though it seems likely that it resembles the one at the head of Grimshaw’s bed: “the telephone instrument, like a gleaming metal flower, with its nickel corolla and black bell, shone with reflected light” (155). Writing on the 1923 model of the candlestick telephone, Kenneth Haltman suggests that the design “served to soften the effects of and to humanize this new and disruptive, ‘preemptory’ technology” (343). Ford’s description serves rather to demonize the instrument, which gleams seductively in the bedroom, a disconcerting amalgam of the vegetable (“flower,” “corolla”) and the metal (its counterpart in *A Man Could Stand Up*— is simply described as “wicked” (10)).

In both texts, the telephone bell rings in darkness: “absolute darkness” in “4692 Padd” (6) and “thick darkness” in *A Call* (47). The aural interruption of the obscurity is an instance of synaesthesia, a cross-wiring of the senses. In both cases, it is almost instantaneously followed by a photic interruption. Light immediately “well[s]” above Dudley’s head in *A Call* as Etta turns on the landing light (she switches it off again as soon as she sees he has the receiver to his ear in “4692 Padd”): the effect is of a Damascene revelation, reinforcing, *pace* Ford, the impression of the call as a vocation or interpellation. The telephone conversation in “4692 Padd” takes place in darkness; that in *A Call* proceeds in at least subdued illumination, a kind of parenthetical half-light. The effect of this is to emphasize both the disturbing nature of the interruption—discussed further below—and the phone call’s ability to “[split] sound from the rest of communication,” to create “pure speech communication” (Hopper 30, 6). Visual cues absent, this is a curious, hybrid interaction, at once intense and distant. Dudley, already shaken by his encounter with Etta, is further

disorientated: small wonder, then, that he will fail to recognize Grimshaw. The caller is simply “the voice of the invisible man” (47). As Philip Horne remarks, “[t]he telephone [...] casts reality into doubt; it offers in the present something analogous to what memory offers from the past: a vivid intangibility, a paradoxical half-reality” (109). Similarly, for Ronell “[t]he phone phones [...] establishing the phony, the shady Other, like the moon, whose identity and therefore also ours is held in suspension [...] performing and inducing fraud” (45). Half-real, phony: the heard but unrecognized voice is another example of the parenthetical, the between-thing.

In the darkness, the telephone bell rings “suddenly,” “whirring as if it were a scream,” “intermit[s] for a moment” (47) – even the interruption is interrupted – and recommences. In “‘4692 Padd,’” it rings with a “particularly damnable explosion,” a bell that “jarr[s] and jarr[s]” (6). This is not just interruption, it is dramatic, un-ignorable interruption. Whatever was going to transpire between Etta and Dudley once inside her house is aborted; on Dudley’s part, an apostrophe is about to occur. In his book *Telephone Conversation*, an “ethnomethodological” study that will inform much of what follows, Robert Hopper notes that the “telephone opening packs a great deal of information and communicative accomplishment into just a few seconds” (xiii, 51). This is discourse at the point of semantic overload. Observing that “[c]aller hegemony waxes strongest near the opening of the phone call,” Hopper argues that “[t]he answerer’s role includes the obligation to speak first, which entails vulnerability to be recognized by a still-unrecognized caller and to assent to whatever the caller asks” (xiii, 34). Aware of this potential vulnerability, Etta instructs Dudley how to neutralize it (Dudley invents his own, similar lines in “‘4692 Padd’”): “Tell whoever it is,” she said, “that Sir William is in Paris and Lady Hudson in bed. Say ‘sir’ when you speak, and they’ll think it’s the second footman!” (47). The “caller’s role,” by contrast, “includes first chance to show recognition of the other and first chance to launch preliminary inquiries [...] inquiries that may intrude into the answerer’s privacy” (Hopper 34). But the “canonical opening” described by Hopper (34) is undermined in “‘4692 Padd’” and *A Call*. In the short story, two voices speak before Dudley makes an utterance: the first is that of the Exchange operator (since the call is made from a public call office), the second is simply described as “the voice” (7). Both say exactly the same thing: “‘Is that 4692 Padd?’” (7). By the time of *A Call*, Ford has refined this, removing the operator’s voice by making the call direct. The conversations in both cases, that is, open unconventionally with the caller speaking first. The query in *A Call*— “‘Are you 4259 Mayfair?’” (47) (note the change to a more directly personal address)—is described as “peremptory,” a word with legal elements in its etymology suggesting that, although couched interrogatively, the identification is definitive. Coached and in performative mode, Dudley then “pants” through the lines given to him by Etta and this is followed by:

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. (48)

It is notable that the caller has scant evidence on which to base his recognition but, as Hopper points out “[a]nything answerer says in the first turn provides a voice-sample useful for identification” (59 emphasis original)—and, of course, in these two texts, the caller (Grimshaw) has seen Dudley enter the house. This fact means that the final exchange between Grimshaw and Dudley satisfies William Paulson’s definition of informational redundancy as “the portion of a message given over to the repetition of what is already found elsewhere” (58). In rhetorical and psychological terms, however, Grimshaw’s query is not redundant. Addressing Dudley by name interpellates him in two senses: he is both interrupted in what he was doing and produced as a subject, brought into new being as a guilty party. His affirmation in response to “Isn’t that Dudley Leicester speaking?” is more of an acquiescence in a proffered identity than a confirmation of an established one. He feels “afraid, as if a schoolmaster had detected him in some crime” (47).

It is notable, too, that the interpellation is couched, not as “Isn’t that Dudley Leicester?” but as “Isn’t that Dudley Leicester *speaking?*” (emphasis added). Dudley’s new, “criminal” identity is constructed specifically as a speaking subject, and it is surely this that underlies his imminent pathological speechlessness. As Carolyn Marvin writes:

[T]he early history of electric media is less the evolution of technical efficiencies in communication than a series of arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life; among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed. (4)

His brief time on the phone affects, and infects, Dudley with these issues directly. Coached and caught out, disadvantaged in the conversation’s balance of power, he subsequently loses both confidence in speaking and authority to speak. A further narratological effect can therefore be attributed to Grimshaw’s call. Though it aborts whatever was going to transpire between Dudley and Etta, it also, by pricking Dudley’s conscience, hypostatizes a guilty act. This act, never described, is projected through the novel, allowing Ford to keep in play multiple scenarios at one time.

Now, “the principle of interactive simultaneity” (Trotter 4) involved in a phone call has already been critically invoked in relation to Ford. Horne notes the telephone’s ability to divide presence. Even as the answerer is specifically sited by answering the phone, he or she, through the connection, is, in another sense, “in two places at once” (113, 110). Horne links this with Max Saunders’ description of Ford as “the novelist of spatial dualities, one of whose great subjects was how the mind is usually somewhere quite other,” the chronicler of “*homo duplex*: a poor fellow whose body is tied in one place, but whose mind and personality brood eternally over another distant locality” (Horne 114; Saunders 1996 vol. 2, 201).^{iv} In his 1914 essay “On Impressionism,” Ford wrote:

It is, however, perfectly possible that a piece of Impressionism should give a sense of two, of three, of as many as you will, places, persons, emotions, all going on simultaneously in the emotions of the writer. It is, I mean, perfectly possible for a sensitised person, be he poet or prose writer, to have the sense, when he is in one room, that he is in another, or when he is speaking to one person he may be so intensely haunted by the memory or desire of another person that he may be absent-minded or distraught. And there is nothing in the canons of Impressionism, as I know it, to stop the attempt to render those superimposed emotions. (173)

As a literary device, the phone-call allows Ford to superimpose emotions: through Dudley Leicester’s mind, “quickened by his emotions of fear,” shoots “the idea that now they must go away; that it was all over; that he was very tired; that he must sit down and rest” (48). He is subject, that is, to a very rapid series of progressing mental states. But rather than simultaneity, or superimposition, the real literary potential of the telephone call for Ford lay in the effects offered by interruption, here particularly parenthesis. A comment about methodology is in order at this point. Invoking Ford, Tim Armstrong has shown that distraction is a widespread phenomenon in Modernist texts (1998 esp. ch. 7; 2005 esp. ch. 5). What follows does not contradict Armstrong’s persuasive analysis, but diverges from it in two important ways. First, the analysis is directed towards rhetorical effect, rather than cultural history. Second, the phenomenon of interruption is subtly different from that of distraction. Distraction is characterized by duration: consciousness is diverted for more than a moment. Interruption is characterized by immediacy: the stimulus demands an instant response.

One view of the tropes of interruption depends on a Platonic conception of text as orderly, harmonious, organic (see Williams 57). In this conception, the interruption tropes are “disorderly,” a word used by George Puttenham throughout his 1589 treatise on rhetoric, *The Arte of English Poesie*. Puttenham terms interruption a “figure of defect,” which occurs “when we begin to speake a thing, and breake of in the middle way, as if either it needed no further to be spoken of, or that we were ashamed, or afraide to speake it out” (166). This

description treats the primary discourse as somehow inferior—matter to be ashamed or frightened of uttering—but interruption itself is as often characterized as a hindrance or obstruction (OED 3). Both views are predicated on a hierarchical understanding of text(s) in which different textures may be superior or subordinate. But another, less pejorative understanding of interruption is also possible. In their introduction to *The Book of Interruptions*, David Hillman and Adam Phillips observe, firstly, that “[a]fter you [feel] interrupted, you [realize] that it was a sequence in which you [were involved]” and, secondly, that “[w]hen an interruption is insistent it becomes a sequence” (7). An interruption, therefore, far from disordering a text, may have the singular narratological effect of creating sequence, both retrospectively and prospectively. This is something more pointed than the simple juxtaposition of anachronistic blocks of time. The calls in “4692 Padd” and *A Call* retroactively confer qualities of continuity on Dudley’s marriage and also, in the case of the novella, inaugurate a new sequence, drawn out through the text by Dudley constantly asking different individuals whether it was they who were at the other end of the line.

At this point, it is important to consider the precise nature of the interruption. Essentially, the calls in “4692 Padd” and *A Call* are parentheses, the device Puttenham calls the “first figure of tollerable disorder” (169). As John Lennard points out, the term “parenthesis” can be applied, not only to typographical marks such as lunulae (round brackets) and crotchets (square brackets), but to the rhetorical trope of insertion (1): parenthesis is both sign and content, that is. *A Call* is a work rich in parenthesis (as, within its more restricted confines, is “4692 Padd”). Linear narrative is broken asunder by the delaying of information (the praeteritio trope), paralepses and analepses, imbrications and digressions. Blocks of time are switched out of chronological order, with frequent recourse to the pluperfect tense. Dashes routinely break up sentences, often to accommodate intrusions by the authorial voice. The telephone call itself disrupts Dudley’s evening with Etta and his life in the weeks following, but his meeting Etta is already a digression, an interruption in his new married life. Indeed, the duration of the parenthesis might be judged to coincide with that of the telephone call, or extend for the whole period of Dudley’s catatonic state, drawing to an end only as Katya Lascarides stands behind him, preparing him to ask the question that will elicit Grimshaw’s confession. The catatonia itself is interrupted by other parentheses—the plot-line involving Katya curing Kitty’s muteness, Grimshaw’s encounter with the Greek Orthodox priest—as Ford holds a number of time-frames superimposed.

All these examples—as well as the crucial telephone call itself—raise the question: what is the status of parenthetical material? To answer this in relative terms—what is central and what is aside—may miss the rich potential of the figure. Robert Grant Williams proposes a more illuminating relationship between the parenthetical and the non-parenthetical: that they are “parallel” textualities (64). As Williams notes, parenthesis does not necessarily depend upon incompleteness: as well as rectifying omissions, interpolated material may act as a reinforcement (even to the point of superfluity) (57). Hence, parentheses can be understood in the same way as Derrida’s parerga:

A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the ergon [the work] [...] but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. (54)

The calls in “4692 Padd” and *A Call* are such parerga: small works-in-themselves that point and thicken the narrative, simultaneously raising and refusing to answer the question of their relationship to the rest of the text.

Now, to an extent, any interruption by a message or sign could have the effects described above. What, then, is distinct about interruption / parenthesis brought about on the level of plot by a phone-call? The telephone, in addition to highlighting the characters’ modernity, facilitates both dialogue and reverie, but requires continual recurrence to caller and answerer in their fixed places. It records the sound of intrusion, demands a certain rapidity of exchange and elicits instant reactions, even if those reactions are then extended. Above all, it gives interruption an intensity and immediacy. Having exploited all these effects

of techno-rhetoric in “4692 Padd” and *A Call*, Ford was next to apply the telephone-trope in a more historically significant context. *A Man Could Stand Up*— is a novel in which the question of whether a telephone call interrupts or is interrupted takes on added significance, since the potential interruption is the end of the First World War.^v

There are two significant telephone calls in *A Man Could Stand Up*—: the first punctuates the first three chapters (the whole of Part I); the second the last two chapters (the whole of Part III). In both calls, the first answerer hands over to a second answerer, so that a tripartite scheme of communication is established. This telephonic choreography is one of a number of symmetries drawing attention to the affinities between the calls in the opening and closing parts of the novel and Tietjens’ war experiences in the middle part.^{vi} As will be seen, the most significant of these affinities for present purposes is that of the state of continual interruption. The two calls are set eight years later than their counterparts in “4692 Padd” and *A Call* on 11 November 1918 and it is instructive to note the similarities and differences both between them and between them and their predecessors.

As in “4692 Padd” and *A Call*, neither telephone belongs to the first answerer. Location is, again, important. The first is situated “in a corner of the great schoolroom without any protection” (7). The schoolroom is compared to a “nonconformist chapel,” “non-conformistically distempered in torpedo grey” (13, 27), and this detail is a clue to the “ingeniously torturing reason” (7) for the phone’s location: both non-conformist protestant morality and the martial discipline implied by “torpedo grey” would frown on any use of the instrument other than for serious practical purposes. Non-urgent, personal telephone conversation is therefore, as in “4692 Padd” and *A Call*, highlighted. Like the entrance halls in the short story and novella, the corner of the great schoolroom is a parenthetical space between public and private. The second call takes place in Tietjens’ apartment in Gray’s Inn, another ambiguous space since it is both a home and curiously undomesticated because it has not been lived in for so long. One receiver stands in the bedroom, the other in a downstairs room on a mantelshelf. The description of the latter location is as follows:

Pure Parian marble, the shelf supported by rams’ heads. Singularly chaste. The ceilings and rectilinear mouldings in an intricate symmetry. Chaste too. Eighteenth century. But the eighteenth century was not chaste. ... *He* was eighteenth century. (186)

This establishes a complicated moral scheme. “Chaste” and “rectilinear” might suggest the values of the non-conformist schoolroom, but these implications are immediately undermined by the suggestion that the eighteenth century, which informs the architectural style of the room, is “not chaste.” But, pages later, this too is undermined in the comment that, if Campion had committed adultery with Sylvia Tietjens, Tietjens “would call him out. Quite properly. In the eighteenth-century tradition for soldiers” (209). Certain traditional values therefore surround this receiver. The passage underlines the connection Ford insists on between the telephone and private morality. In all the texts under consideration, a call imputes guilt in the context of extra-marital relations. Valentine explicitly anticipates it in the second call:

She ought not to have answered this. She was in a compromising position. Her voice might be recognised. Let it be recognised. She desired to be known to be in a compromising position! (192)

The word “Maritally!” “burst[s]” out of the telephone “like a blue light!” (210), its resemblance to ordnance another link to Tietjens’ war experiences. In the first call, Lady Macmaster’s hissing pronunciation of “Lincolnss.s.s. ... sInn” leads Valentine to an immediate connection: “Sin! ... Like the Devil!” (12). Like those in “4692 Padd” and *A Call*, this call brings an unwanted connection: reminded of Tietjens, Valentine feels “blown out of the mouth of the telephone” (27, 30) and goes so far as to destroy the instrument:

She marched straight at the telephone that was by now uttering long, tinny, night-jar’s calls and, with one snap, pulled the receiver right off the twisted green-blue cord. ... Broke it! With incidental satisfaction.

Then she said:

“Steady the Buffs!” [...]

She had smashed a telephone because it had been like smashing a connection with Edith Ethel; or because she hated tinny night-jars; or because she had smashed it. (40-1)

“Steady the Buffs!” is what Tietjens exclaims in *Some Do Not* (1924), after almost kissing Valentine during their nocturnal walk with the dog-cart (172). Destroying the phone is an attempt to break the connection.

The summonses to the phone are, again, peremptory. But the circumstances of the first are rather unusual. The novel opens:

Slowly, amidst intolerable noises from, on the one hand, the street and, on the other, from the large and voluminously echoing playground, the depths of the telephone began, for Valentine, to assume an aspect that, years ago, it had used to have—of being a part of the supernatural paraphernalia of inscrutable Destiny. (7)

Vincent Sherry comments on this: “Valentine Wannop, lover to Tietjens and emergent heroine of the story, hears a telephone ringing on the morning that the war has ended” (229). But there is no explicit mention of Valentine hearing the ring of the phone. Rather, she is “called imperatively” (7) (the adverb is noteworthy, as an imperial war is in the throes of ending) to it by a message from the headmistress, who has already been talking to the caller for half an hour. The absence of any telephonic ring is in stark contrast to the call at the end of the novel, which makes Valentine spring “right off her feet,” causing her to wonder whether she has had “a fit” (192). The peculiar quality of the sound, its crescendo and decrescendo constituting a kind of Doppler effect, is precisely noted by Ford: “It was only the telephone. It went on and on. Drrinn; drinnnn; d.r.R.I.n.n.” (192). This specificity of this aural notation takes its place in a novel in which sound—particularly the sound(s) of war—is crucial. Critics have already discussed Ford’s auditory awareness in some detail; Sara Haslam, for instance, writes:

It is the overwhelming experience of sound that [...] was most commented on by soldiers, particularly novices, as they arrived at the Front. [...] The noise often terrified Ford, and yet the results of his simultaneous literary awareness can be seen in the precise transcriptions of different artillery sounds – in the air, and exploding on impact – throughout his war books. (2011 xxii)

What is still worth pointing out is that the aural qualities of the telephone calls at the beginning and end of the novel prefigure and rehearse, respectively, the soundscape of the war as Tietjens experiences it. In particular, the key-bugle or cornet (Tietjens cannot make up his mind which it is), echoes the oscillatory qualities of the phone ring, with the *mise-en-page* doing the job of the majuscules:

Fair *kind. ...*
 and
Fair *Fair* *Fair* *kind. ...*
 and ... *and ...* *and (86)*

More specifically, the battle soundscape replicates the phone-calls’ polyphony: noise is layered on noise, competes with noise, reinforces noise:

Noise increased. The orchestra was bringing in *all* the brass, *all* the strings, *all* the wood-wind, all the percussion instruments. The performers threw about biscuit tins filled with horse-shoes; they emptied sacks of coal on cracked gongs; they threw down forty-storey iron houses. (79)

The noises-within-noises in this passage are matched by the “sea of shrill girls’ voices from the playground, in an ocean of factory-hooters ululations, amongst innumerable explosions” that make it so difficult for Valentine to hear what is said in the novel’s first phone-call and by the “intense, hollow reverberations” that make it so difficult for Tietjens to hear what is said in the second (8, 199). The plurality of sounds compounds the interruptive effect of the calls, which is discussed in further detail below.

Like the calls in “4692 Padd” and *A Call*, those in *A Man Could Stand Up*— exploit speaker etiquette. In the first, Valentine is the second answerer and so is obliged to speak first in order to convey the fact that she has arrived at the phone. Like Dudley Leicester, she is unaware of the caller’s identity; unlike him, she presents herself positively as a speaking subject: “Valentine Wannop speaking” (8). Her confidence dented by the contents of the conversation, Valentine later loses faith in her own confident self-assertion: “Look here, did that person—Lady Macmaster!—speak to you as if you were me? Our names are near enough to make it possible” (48). The call at the end of the novel is preceded by Valentine feeling under an obligation to telephone her mother, only to find that the receiver is dead: when the other receiver, in the bedroom, startles her, she picks it up and says, “Who are you?” (192). Reversing the order of “4692 Padd” and *A Call* and complying with more standard speaker etiquette, she now makes the first utterance as first answerer. Her voice is immediately recognized by the caller who is, in turn, immediately recognized by Valentine:

A voice, heavy and old, said:
 “You *are* there, Valentine. ...”
 She cried out:
 “Oh, poor *mother*. ...” (192)

This instant mutual recognition contrasts with the other instances of telephonic identification across the three texts. Tietjens, who also asserts himself to Mrs. Wannop as a speaking subject (“Christopher Tietjens speaking!” (197)) makes another species of identification, recognizing his interlocutor not only for who, but also for what, she is: “Standing at the telephone Tietjens had recognised at once that this was a mother, pleading with infinite statesmanship for her daughter” (207).

Like the calls in “4692 Padd” and *A Call*, the two in *A Man Could Stand Up*— feature interruptions of interruption. As she listens to her mother in the call at the end of the novel, Valentine is distracted by a letter from Sylvia Tietjens’ lawyers. Fragments of this text are intercalated with her thoughts and utterances. Tietjens’ conversation with Mrs. Wannop is, similarly, interspersed with memories, visions and deliberations. As a result, the instrument that should be a means of linking people (Valentine’s reaction is that “[t]hey would be cut off from the world on Armistice Night” when she first thinks Tietjens’ phone has been disconnected (188)) paradoxically serves to sever them. But it is in the first call, the one opening the novel, that Ford goes furthest in exploiting telephone techno-rhetoric and it is with this call, and with what has been termed “extreme interruption,” that the rest of this article is concerned.

Over the three opening chapters, the interruptions of interruptions are interrupted, parenthesis intrudes into parenthesis within parenthesis and the result goes far beyond the imbrications of “4692 Padd” and *A Call* to form an inextricable tangle of discourses. The first sentence of the novel begins, not so much *in media res*, as *in media vocis* (mid-call), immediately bringing to the fore issues of priority and precedence. As in “4692 Padd” and *A Call*, Ford disrupts strict chronological order, but here he is working on a more intricate scale: it is not blocks of time that are being moved around, but chunks comprised of minutes, even seconds. Provided with a most precarious fixed-point (the ongoing phone-call), the

reader is then given a further complicated set of timings: “[t]he thing, out there, miles and miles away must have been signed – a few minutes ago” (8); the headmistress spoke to the caller “ten minutes ago” (9); the staff meeting took place “two and a half hours or so ago” (19); the war had been “over a quarter of an hour” (26); Valentine sits on a pine bench “ten minutes before she interviewed Miss Wanostrocht; ten seconds after she had been blown out of the mouth of the telephone” (27); there would be a “pressing national problem [...] in twenty minutes’ time” (32). On analysis, Ford’s timings over these three chapters are revealed as impeccable: to the casual reader, they are bewilderingly difficult to follow. Reinforcing the effect of this temporal confusion are a carefully calibrated vagueness of reference (“[t]he thing, out there” (8), “whichever it had been” (9), “the noise, whatever it was” (10)) and a plethora of digressions. *Homo duplex* is replaced by *femina multiplex* as Valentine’s mind “[runs] about” in an “unbridled, Cockney school-girl’s vein,” ranging over the consequences of the end of the war to visiting the Mediterranean to her relationship with Tietjens: “a remarkably great deal! ... to have thought of in ten seconds!” (15, 29). The narrative darts from time to time and from subject to subject, stutters, chokes, fails to engage.

The formal principle of the three chapters is therefore inchoateness. As a consequence, it is no longer apt to apply the term “parenthesis.” This is pure interruption on every level. Valentine is “plunged immediately” into “incomprehensible news” (7). She has been interrupted in the act of drilling the girls in the playground, but the exercises themselves have been interrupted and were in any case a displacement activity. The interruption of an interruption, the call is further interrupted by other sounds: “intolerable noises” from the “voluminously echoing playground,” “innumerable explosions,” an “appalling row” (7, 8) – and these sounds, of course, turn out to be important as they mark the signing of the Armistice and the formal end of World War I. As she holds the telephone receiver to her ear, Valentine is assailed as follows:

Intense heat possessed Valentine Wannop. She imagined indeed her eyes flashing. Was this the moment?

She didn’t even know whether what they had let off had been maroons or aircraft guns or sirens. It had happened—the noise, whatever it was—whilst she had been coming through the underground passage to answer this wicked telephone. So she had not heard the sound. She had missed the sound for which the ears of a world had waited for years, for a generation. For an eternity. No sound. When she had left the playground there had been dead silence. All waiting: girls rubbing one ankle with the other rubber sole. ...

Then. ... For the rest of her life she was never to be able to remember the greatest stab of joy that had ever been known by waiting millions. There would be no one but she who would not be able to remember that. (9-10)

The call to the phone has made Valentine miss the historic moment of the Armistice; the sounds of the Armistice being celebrated interrupt the phone-call. The call itself is strictly a sub-call (the headmistress has listened to the caller for half an hour before transferring her to Valentine) and lasts longer than its duration, as Valentine ponders its significance and discusses it with the headmistress after ceasing to speak with Lady Macmaster. Indeed, she does not replace the receiver but simply stops listening—it is as though “large impassive arms” have carried her away from the phone and “deposited [her] on a clamped bench against the wall” (29)—so that Lady Macmaster’s ongoing utterances are heard as a weird species of bird-call: a “quack” and “long, tinny, night-jar’s calls” (28, 41). Both shorter and longer than a standard call (and, in a sense, longer and shorter than itself), this call largely consists of talking over and over-talking as Valentine and Edith Ethel speak and listen at odds with each other: at one point, Valentine is simply “tittering in front of the telephone from which Lady Macmaster’s voice [is] now coming” (15).

Critics have responded to Ford’s strategies of interruption with various interpretations. Saunders describes the opening of *A Man Could Stand Up*— as “a syntax of controlled interruption,” noting that the accompanying time-shifts are “one of Ford’s chief

resources for disturbing his readers” (1996 vol. 2, 218, 175). He also draws attention to Ford’s account of his discussion with Conrad about dialogue:

We both desired to get into situations, at any rate when anyone was speaking, the sort of indefiniteness that is characteristic of all human conversations, and particularly of English conversations that are almost always conducted entirely by means of allusions and unfinished sentences. (Ford 1924 135; qtd in Saunders 2010 xxxiv)

This routine indefiniteness resonates with Jonathan Crary’s model of human perception at the end of the nineteenth century, when, he posits, attention was seen “as part of a dynamic continuum in which it was always of limited duration, inevitably decomposing into a distracted state” (289). In another reading, Sherry posits the First World War as a “disruption” to “models of progressive time” (226): in his thesis, matching this disruption narratologically is a means of refuting those Liberal philosophies and discourses that led to the war in the first place. “In the opening moments of several novels in the war series,” Sherry writes, “[Ford] repeatedly features this idea of progressive time in crisis” (228). There is nothing to fault in these readings, but a further interpretation is also possible, one that is more specific about the “disturbance” caused to the reader by the Fordian interruption and one that is peculiarly apt to the moment at which the opening and closing parts of *A Man Could Stand Up*— are set.

The first three chapters of the novel convey a state of extreme and chronic interruption: *über*-interruption, as it were. This kind of interruption is incapable of conferring continuity, retrospectively or prospectively, in the manner described by Hillman and Phillips. Its effect goes beyond the routinely limited attention span identified by Crary. Rather, it exemplifies the notion of “interruption overload,” a phenomenon of interest to recent ergonomic studies (Rigby; O’Connell; Zijlstra et al). In Rhymer Rigby’s account, workers in a “continual partially interrupted state (CPIS)” (those, that is, under constant bombardment from emails, instant messages, phone calls, text messages and so on) suffer from decreased productivity: in CPIS, recovery time from an interruption takes five to fifteen minutes and individuals’ “effective IQs” are reduced by ten points (8). The plight of harassed twenty-first-century office workers resembles that of Ford’s extremely interrupted reader, who is, as a consequence, potentially less “productive” or effective at the task of reading. Defying standard narrative protocols, the opening of *A Man Could Stand Up*— renders a reader expecting a conventional telos disorientated, puts him or her on hold. Reading falters, becomes effortful, even if it does not stop entirely. The cause behind the effect is this: interruption is rude. Butting in—in narrative text as in real-life conversation—flummoxes, cuts off and ultimately silences the interruptee.

The effect is explicitly commented upon in Ford’s novel: “‘We shouldn’t,’ Miss Wanostrocht said, ‘be in the extraordinary muddle to which you referred if you did not so continually interrupt me’” (55). It is dramatized in the following passage:

“It’s precisely,” Valentine said, “because of that that one should want ... shouldn’t one ... Because it’s because of the War ...”
The sentence would not finish itself. (52)

The sentence, its flow interrupted by pauses, repetitions, qualifications, naturally stalls. Ford terms the stalled state that of “suspension” (which he contrasts with the state of “suspense”) (30). It is a familiar psychological state to a soldier at war. In a passage of free indirect discourse in Part II, Ford writes:

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. (76)

Resonating with the “intolerable noises” that interrupt Valentine’s first phone-call, the “innumerable noises” here halt the progress of Tietjens’ cogitations. Running through Part II in counterpoint to the state of constant interruption that is the battlefield is a thematic strand emphasizing the importance of connected communication. Tietjens’ “mania,” “the main idea that he got out of warfare” is that “at all costs you must keep in touch with your neighbouring troops” (150, 159). His obsession reflects the fact that, during the First World War, field communications were not of a high quality: as Haslam observes, cables were not laid deeply enough because of the state of the ground, with the result that they were easily cut by shellfire (2012 51).^{vii} The jerkiness and contingency of battlefield communications infect Tietjens’ thinking about personal relationships as, for an extended period, he constantly changes his mind about whether or not he will write to Valentine. Indeed, “Peace” comes, for him, to mean “some one to talk to” (139):

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. ... (136)

Crucially, peace is here aligned with clear and intelligent communication, with the absence of threatening noise, with the state of not being interrupted. Its opposite, for Tietjens as for Valentine and for the reader, is a slowing of momentum.

The state of stalling readership is narratologically singular in any circumstances. But it assumes added significance when the setting is just before 11am on 11 November 1918. The call opening *A Man Could Stand Up*— forces the reader to a halt at the point of another great ending. The First World War finishes, in Ford’s treatment, in fits and starts: indeed, the official conclusion is lost in Valentine’s walk to the phone through the underground passage. Obligated to pause and stop, the reader experiences this spasmodic conclusion personally. The paradox is underlined that a piece of technology which might have been expected to facilitate the transmission of news of a world event of this magnitude instead eclipses it. Moreover, the narratological disorientation resonates with another key phenomenon associated with the war’s cessation: the sense that the world is on the brink, that revolution and anarchy may be about to ensue. The mistresses and head at Valentine’s school fear that, if they “should cease to be respected because saturnalia broke out on the sounding of a maroon the whole world would go to pieces!” (16). The “future mothers of Europe” might “[get] out of hand”; there might be “[n]o more respect. ... For the Equator! For the Metric system. For Sir Walter Scott! Or George Washington! Or Abraham Lincoln! Or the Seventh Commandment!!!!!!” (17, 18). The conditional tense and the catastrophising convey the point that this is a moment of un-knowing, a “crack across the table of History,” “the World Turned Upside-Down” (17, 19). Anything might happen, and so people wait to see what will. Confused and interrupted, the reader waits too.

A comparison of “‘4692 Padd’,” *A Call*, and *A Man Could Stand Up*— reveals that the telephone-based techno-rhetoric that Ford was beginning to exploit in his short story and novella becomes a radical narratological device in the novel. In the two earlier works, Ford uses the phone to re-invent and re-energize literary elements such as delayed recognition, misconstrued identity and withheld knowledge that have been in use in literature at least since *The Odyssey*. Fascinated as he was by the ways in which linear narrative could be broken up, Ford deploys telephone-based interruption in “‘4692 Padd’” and *A Call* not only to juxtapose disparate time frames but also to create new textualities and form retrospective and prospective sequences. But in *A Man Could Stand Up*— the trope, *in extremis*, becomes a formal principle in tune with a crucial historical moment. That piece of cutting-edge technology, the telephone, raucous, shrill and irresistible, turns out also to be the basis of a piece of cutting-edge rhetoric that effectively reproduces an instant of geopolitical un-knowing.

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ⁱ The role of the telephone in extra-marital liaisons was already beginning to be felt in America. Phone conversations were accepted as grounds for granting a divorce by a New Haven court in 1889 (Marvin 69).

ⁱⁱ "[A]nother reader [...] has insisted to me that in calling this story 'A Call' I must have had in my mind something mysterious, something mystical," Ford wrote in his Epistolary Epilogue to *A Call*, warning, "it does not mean in the least that Mr Grimshaw felt religious stirrings within him or 'A Call' to do something heroic and chivalrous, such as aiding women to obtain the vote" (163).

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1877, when Alexander Graham Bell was demonstrating telephones, American newspaper reaction emphasized the supernatural qualities of the new technology: see Brooks 209-10.

^{iv} The *homo duplex* quotation comes from Ford 2007 197.

^v Telephone calls do not intervene in the narrative structure of *The Good Soldier*, which, published in 1915, comes between *A Call* (1910) and *A Man Could Stand Up—* (1926), though the narrator John Dowell does mention that he 'grumbles like a stockbroker whose conversations over the telephone are incommoded by the ringing of bells from a city church' (51)—another instance of an interrupting call itself being interrupted—and Edward Ashburnham telephones Nancy Rufford's mother in the course of arranging for her to be sent to her father in India (199-200).

^{vi} The tripartite structure is the mirror image of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927), the middle part of which is taken up by the First World War years, flanked by parts set in the pre- and post-war peace.

^{vii} There is just one reference to battlefield telephony in *A Man Could Stand Up—* (89): no problems are reported.