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**‘LONG LETTERS ABOUT FORD MADOX FORD’:
FORD’S AFTERLIFE IN THE WORK OF HAROLD
PINTER**

Angus Wrenn

At first glance Ford Madox Ford and Harold Pinter would appear to have little in common. Ford is known chiefly for his prose fiction and, although he produced a significant body of poetry, made only a handful of sorties into writing for the stage, all equally devoid of success. Pinter did write an early novel, *The Dwarfs*, long withheld from publication, but has built his international reputation, recognized in 2005 by the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, as one of the greatest playwrights of his age. Ford died only nine years after Pinter’s birth and belonged, at least in terms of his upbringing, to the nineteenth century, a contemporary of Conrad and James, scion of the Rossettis and the Pre-Raphaelites. Pinter, born in 1930, grew up as the grandson of Jewish immigrants from Poland in London’s East End, although he subsequently abandoned religion. Ford became a Catholic in his adolescence and makes Catholicism a prominent theme of his work. Ford’s most famous fiction – *The Good Soldier* and the *Parade’s End* tetralogy - is predicated upon a pre-First World War social order, although the latter work certainly shows it, after 1918, undergoing transformation. That social system is characterized by rigid hierarchy. The Kilsyte case is able to occur because Edward Ashburnham, who should be travelling first is actually, owing to Leonora’s economies, travelling third class. The centre of gravity is unquestionably the employing classes, indeed in *The Good Soldier* the leisured, continental spa-haunting classes. Tietjens’s wife Sylvia has aristocratic connexions, albeit Valentine Wannop offers a vision of a more modern woman. Pinter’s most celebrated plays, the plays which

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gave the word 'Pinteresque' to the language, belong by contrast to a much more proletarian world. *The Birthday Party* (1957) is set among tenants of a bottom-of-the-range seaside boarding house on the South Coast of England. *The Caretaker* (1960) goes a stage further, including in its cast the central figure of Davies, who is a homeless tramp, the very bottom of the social hierarchy, and a level to which Ford never descended in his fiction. *The Room* (1957) is set among tenants of a mysterious, sinister and absent landlord. The setting here and in some of the other early plays is surely Hackney, where Pinter grew up. Ford refers to the experience of Pinter's family in the generations before the playwright's birth in *The Soul of London*: 'A Polish Jew changes into an English Hebrew and then into a Londoner without any legislative enactments, without knowing anything about it',¹ but in Ford's fiction this East End world does not figure. Ford's politics are emphatically Tory, albeit he espoused feminism, where Pinter has been a lifelong adherent of the Left. Ford volunteered for military service in the First World War at the advanced age of 41, whereas Pinter was a conscientious objector to National Service in the 1940s and as recently as 2003 took an active part in protests against the Allied invasion of Iraq.

And yet, for all this long litany of their differences, in certain regards surprising parallels can be drawn between both authors' work, and this is nowhere better demonstrated than in Pinter's 1978 play *Betrayal*. This play, subsequently filmed, and revived in the West End four years ago, is of a quite different character from the plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s mentioned above. The working-class world of Pinter's early plays may be in some limited measure an expression of kindred spirit with contemporary plays of the so-called 'kitchen sink' school produced by Arnold Wesker and John Osborne. They are also, as betokened by the tramp in *The Caretaker*, indebted in at least as great a degree to Beckett's plays, first performed in Britain only five years before. But even from as early as 1963² another strand was emerging in Pinter's drama, in the one act play *The Lover*, originally broadcast on independent television. This play involves a married couple and is set in an affluent Home Counties

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suburb, from which the husband commutes into the City of London each day to work. They have, as far as we can tell, no children. (Perhaps – if they do exist - they are safely off the scene at a boarding school.) Each afternoon, in the husband's absence, the wife entertains her lover. With similar frequency, up in town, the husband visits a prostitute. The wife is what might be termed a 'trophy wife' – she does not seem to need to pursue a career for financial reasons – although perhaps in 1963, still twelve years before the Equal Opportunities legislation of the mid 1970s, she is a less unusual figure than she would certainly appear today. The part of the wife's lover is taken by the same actor who plays the husband, the doubling of roles serving to emphasize the calling into question of the artificial conventions alike of drama and of society beyond the stage. The play is by no means straightforward realism, for the husband reveals that he is privy to his wife's liaison, at which she bats not an eyelid, while she is fully aware that he visits a prostitute up in town. The play is an early foretaste of a quite different genre of drama which came increasingly to make its mark in Pinter's later output. This would appear, at least on the surface, to bear uncanny parallels with the so-called well-made play and the society drawing room drama of the Inter-War period and of the 1940s (practised above all by Terence Rattigan). Indeed here Pinter's world is not so far from the employing classes of novels of Ford's such as *A Call*, *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*. In *The Lover*, *The Collection*, and the later *No Man's Land* and *Betrayal*, Beckett's tramps and Wesker's kitchen sink (or Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* ironing board) are nowhere to be found. Instead the setting is usually a smart, civilized drawing-room equipped with coffee table and a well-stocked cocktail cabinet. The denizens of this world are educated and socially and materially privileged. If they do not have aristocratic titles neither do they speak in the accents of Hackney and the East End where Pinter grew up in the 1930s.

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Betrayal, Pinter's play first performed in 1978, is a full evening in the theatre but employs a cast scarcely larger than that of the one-act *The Lover*. Where that play was a two-hander, with the emphatic doubling of parts, *Betrayal* runs to a cast of four, although one of these is the relatively perfunctory part of a waiter in a restaurant for a solitary scene out of the nine which make up the play. The three main parts in *Betrayal* are those of Robert, aged 40 in 1977, his wife Emma, aged 38, and Robert's close friend Jerry, also 40 in 1977. Robert is a successful publisher, Emma runs an art gallery, and Jerry, a literary agent, who has known Robert since undergraduate days, was best man at their wedding. The play's nine scenes cover the period from 1968 to 1977 (a year before the play's National Theatre premiere). The social milieu of literary London might make the play seem like a hark-back to the world of Rattigan or even Coward, and the setting of one scene in Venice does nothing to counter this sense of a materially privileged world. However, where the play goes against the canons of the well-made play is rather in its theatrical technique. For the play starts in 1977 but finishes in 1968.

The summary given so far does not suggest any emphatic link with the work of Ford, and perhaps nothing further might be thought of any connexion between the two authors, were it not that Pinter has the publisher, Robert, say to Emma in Scene Five:

He used to write to me at one time. Long letters about Ford Madox Ford. I used to write to him too, come to think of it. Long letters about ...oh, W.B. Yeats, I suppose. That was the time when we were both editors of poetry magazines. Him at Cambridge, me at Oxford. Did you know that? We were bright young men. And close friends. Well, we still are close friends. All that was long before I met you. Long before he met you. I've been trying to remember when I introduced him to you. I simply can't remember. I take it I did introduce him to you? Yes. But when? Can you remember?³

Why these writers should be mentioned at this juncture in the play (or indeed anywhere else in it) is far from immediately apparent. It might be considered simply plausible realistic detail, to flesh out the characters of the two men, both of whom work in the literary world.

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Ford and Yeats (perhaps above all Ford, as the more recherché of the two) are precisely the kinds of author it would be expected that such men might discuss. Ford was in the past and even today remains, *pace* the Ford Society's mission, a writer probably more mentioned and discussed (in the same breath as Pound, Conrad, Joyce and other canonical writers of the early twentieth century) than actually read by most of Pinter's audience.

Little has been written on the links with Pinter in the context of Ford studies, and among Pinter studies scarcely more has been made of this allusion in *Betrayal*. Most Pinter scholars prefer to concentrate on the references to Yeats, since Yeats is mentioned elsewhere in the play, and perhaps because he himself was a dramatist of significance. William Dohmen says

'It is no coincidence that both men in *Betrayal* are fond of reading William Butler Yeats, whose belief in the wheels and gyres of history underlies his numerous poetic and dramatic portrayals of the recurrence of the past. In fact *Betrayal*'s structure invites comparison with Yeats's concept of "Dreaming Back" e.g., as experienced by the Old Man in *Purgatory*.'⁴

Anthony Roche in 'Pinter and Ireland' (*Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*) mentions the importance of the letters which Robert and Jerry wrote to each other as undergraduates and budding literati⁵. Penelope Prentice is alone in going beyond the importance of Ford as a synecdoche for literary connoisseurship, to suggest a possible parallel with *The Good Soldier* in particular:

Robert's allusion to Ford Madox Ford, recalling *The Good Soldier* with its brilliant ambiguities, its searing yet restrained passion, and its heartbreakingly revealed betrayal, suggests one source in the play's inspiration, just as Emma's name suggests another (82). Whereas many of Pinter's earlier central women characters carry Biblical names – Ruth, Jesse, Sarah – the central woman in this play invites a Western audience's comparison with Emma Bovary, who like her nineteenth century counterparts, Anna Karenina and Tess of the D'U[r]bevilles, must pay with her life for infidelity. Pinter does

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not kill off his twentieth-century heroine. Although Emma may privately suffer diminished circumstances in the end she does so almost equally with the two men in her life, and all remain publicly successful.⁶

However more can surely be said about the 'brilliant ambiguities' of *The Good Soldier* and the way they might be said to inform *Betrayal*. In the play Pinter's dramatic technique can be seen as corresponding to Ford's narrative method in *The Good Soldier*, which famously employs in the figure of Dowell an unreliable narrator. Unreliability is the very essence of *Betrayal*, and extends not only to the unreliability of communications between characters but also to the unreliability of a character's own memory of his or her own past. It is often said that *Betrayal* is technically radical because it tells its story chronologically in reverse: 'the play was technically original in its arrangement of the scenes in reverse chronological order.'⁷ While this may be true overall – the opening scene takes place in 1977 and the final scene in 1968 – in fact the movement between each of the play's nine scenes is not consistently in a single direction. If it were that would make it a foreshadowing of another postmodern work, Martin Amis's novel *Time's Arrow*, of 1992, where the whole life story of the Nazi war criminal Tod is told backwards from the moment of his 'appearance' at death through to his 'disappearance' at birth. A close examination of Pinter's play, however, reveals that its action is presented in an order less consistently linear (albeit in reverse) and closer to the 'intricate tangle'⁸ which Ford felt he had achieved in *The Good Soldier*. Thus the play's scenes actually go in normal chronological order, from 'Spring 1977' to 'later Spring 1977', then backwards until Scene 5 (Summer 1975) before going forwards again between Scene 5 (Summer 1973) and Scene 7 (Later Summer 1977). Between Scenes 7 and 9 the movement is again backwards, from 1977 by way of 1971 to 1968.

In another sense the action of *Betrayal* may be said to take a further cue from *The Good Soldier*. Clearly the two works share the theme of marital infidelity and betrayal, but it is not simply the act of adultery which constitutes betrayal in either case. Edward Ashburnham does

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indeed betray his wife in the most basic and conventional sense of the word, but Leonora also betrays Edward by throwing Nancy Rufford upon him in order perversely 'to keep him'. In *Betrayal* Jerry certainly betrays his best friend Robert by conducting a seven year affair with his wife, but she and her husband then betray Jerry by not revealing for four years that Robert now knows about the affair.

A more controversial area in which the two works may be said to share common ground involves the relationships between Robert and Jerry in the play and Dowell and Ashburnham in the novel. At least since Mizener's biography there has been a school of thought in Ford criticism which sees a (perhaps repressed) homosexual component to their friendship. 'I loved Edward Ashburnham because he was just myself.' (GS 217)

In the play Jerry and Robert's friendship, going back to undergraduate days at Oxford and Cambridge respectively, predates Robert's marriage to Emma. (Indeed crucially, it is perhaps because he remembers the letters Jerry used to write to him about Ford that Robert recognizes the hand in which the intercepted letter to Emma at the hotel in Venice has been addressed.) Pinter makes a great deal of the much-discussed all-male ritual of the game of squash between Jerry and Robert, from which they pointedly exclude Emma. At one point Robert tells Emma:

I've always liked Jerry. To be honest, I've always liked him more than I've liked you. Maybe I should have had an affair with him myself.⁹

A still more controversial area, where another parallel may perhaps be identified, concerns the issue of paternity. Saunders, in *A Dual Life*, discusses the possibility that the Ashburnhams' ward, Nancy Rufford, is in fact an illegitimate daughter whom Edward fathered by Mrs Rufford, who subsequently committed suicide. 'It is only once one realizes that the truth verges on incest that the plot doesn't seem like

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romantic melodrama.'¹⁰ Thus Edward's suicide would be spurred not by mere remorse at having embarked on yet another adulterous liaison, but by the discovery that he had done so, unwittingly, with his own natural daughter. That might also be taken to explain Nancy's subsequent decline into insanity. There are, it would seem, no incestuous relationships in *Betrayal*, but the question of paternity does certainly arise

ROBERT

How long?

EMMA

Some time.

ROBERT

Yes, but how long exactly?

EMMA

Five years.

ROBERT

Five years.

Pause

Ned is one year old.

Pause

Did you hear what I said?

EMMA

Yes. He's your son. Jerry was in America. For two months.¹¹

Finally, while the bulk of these suggested parallels put forward so far are to *The Good Soldier*, it is worth stressing that the reference in Pinter's text merely mentions Ford without specifying any particular work. Although the letter in Scene 5 provides the occasion for the revelation of one of the betrayals in the play, another moment of betrayal is provided in Scene Six, where Jerry recounts returning home from an assignation with Emma, giving the excuse that he had been with one of his authors, called Spinks, only to be told by his wife Judith that Spinks had just rung to ask to speak to him, thereby blowing his alibi and rousing his wife's suspicions of his infidelity. In Ford's *A Call*, Dudley Leicester is put into a compromising position by answering a telephone when it rings in his ex-fiancée's house.

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Moreover this work, as does Pinter's *Betrayal*, involves the suspicion of a love rivalry between a husband and his closest friend (and best man) for the same woman.

Mention of *A Call* leads to possible evidence of further parallels with Ford elsewhere in Pinter's work. In *The Collection* (1961), a play originally written for television, and subsequently staged, Pinter also strays from the down-at-heel world of *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Caretaker* – his cast comprises successful fashion designers and the settings include drawing-rooms with chic coffee tables and cocktail cabinets. The play involves two couples – James Horne, a jealous husband in his thirties and his wife Stella, who may or may not have slept with Bill Lloyd, a man 'in his late twenties' who lives (in what looks like a homosexual ménage) with Harry Kane, a fashion designer in his forties, evidently successful enough to own a house in Belgravia. The accusation of adultery arises following an initial anonymous telephone call made, as in Part II Chapter 1 of *A Call*, during the night. (*The Collection*, Scene 1). This alone would not constitute a conclusive link, however a number of other coincidences, when taken together, seem striking. In an exchange between the jealous stalker James and the suspected adulterer Bill, the latter says 'I'm expecting guests in a minute. Cocktails. I'm standing for Parliament next season.'¹² while in *A Call* Ford describes Dudley Leicester as

At thirty-two, with a wife whom already people regarded as likely to be the making of him, a model land-lord, perfectly sure of a seat in the House, without a characteristic of any kind or an enemy in the world, there, gentle and exquisitely groomed, Dudley Leicester was a morning or so after his return to town.

(*A Call* p 31)

Further surprising parallels come to the surface when *A Call* and *The Collection* are read side by side. At the end of Chapter II Part 1,

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Dudley Leicester's imagination leaps to dire conclusions when he unexpectedly receives a broken necklace in a letter from his wife:

His wife's letter frightened him; when there fell from it a bracelet, he started as he had never in his life started at a stumble of his horse. He imagined that it was a sort of symbol, a sending back of his gifts. And even when he had read her large sparse words, and discovered that the curb chain of the bracelet was broken, and Pauline desired him to take it into the jeweller's to be repaired – even then the momentary relief gave way to a host of other fears. For Dudley Leicester had entered into a world of dread.

(*A Call*, p. 50)

In *The Collection* Stella 'enters from a bedroom fixing a bracelet on her wrist.'¹³ This could of course be an entirely innocent, naturalistic detail. However Stella has just committed (or it is suggested *may* have committed adultery.) The bracelet as a symbol for infidelity is hardly unique to Ford. It certainly features in this capacity in 'Beyond the Pale' in Kipling's *Plain Tales From the Hills*,¹⁴ and it may have its origin in Maupassant, whom of course Ford revered (*La Parure*). However in context, together with the other details, the sense of *déjà vu* when watching *The Collection* is strong. A final, apparently naturalistic detail which provides a link between Ford and Pinter is the attention given to animals in both texts. In *A Call* abnormal prominence is given to Peter, a dachshund.¹⁵ His role is quite versatile for Ford's purposes. In a novel where it is suggested that humans conceal their motives behind inscrutability (very much a foreshadowing of *The Good Soldier*, which was to come five years later) the dog provides a clear contrast 'Between his feet Peter was uttering little bubbles of dissatisfaction whenever Sir William spoke, as if his harsh voice caused the small dog the most acute nervous tension.' (*A Call*, p 115) and earlier 'Between his feet Peter's mouth jerked twice and a little bubble of sound escaped. He was trying to tell his master that a bad man was coming up the stairs.' (*A Call*, p 114) The dog serves, in its muteness, as an ironic parallel to Dudley Leicester, rendered dumb by his paranoid breakdown following the intercepted telephone call.

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The little dog with the flapping ears was running wide on the turf, scenting the unaccustomed grasses.

‘Oh, Peter’s as near speaking as he ever can get,’ Grimshaw said.

Katya laughed. ‘That would be a solution,’ she said, ‘if you took me on as Peter’s nurse. But who’s your dumb child now? I suppose it’s your friend...ah!...Dudley Leicester.’ (*A Call*, p 134)

This makes an interesting comparison with Pinter’s use of a cat in *The Collection*. Here a white Persian kitten is associated with the heroine Stella. Apart from being something of a stock symbol of sexuality (the cat in Manet’s *Olympie* comes to mind) the kitten also surely stands, as Peter does in *A Call*, for dumbness. While humans have the capacity to articulate love through speech, they can also by the same means draw a veil over infidelity in a way that animals cannot. Moreover Pinter gives further stress to the comparison of humans with animals in regard to sexual attraction by having the aggrieved husband James say to his (possibly) errant wife:

JAMES Mmm. Only thing ... he rather implied that you had led him on. Typical masculine thing to say, of course.

STELLA That’s a lie.

JAMES You know what men are. I reminded him that you’d resisted, and you’d hated the whole thing, but that you’d been – how can we say – somehow hypnotized by him, it happens sometimes. He agreed it can happen sometimes. He told me he’d once been hypnotized by a cat. Wouldn’t go into any more details, though.¹⁶

In *A Call* an animal, admittedly a dog rather than a cat, is used in a similar fashion to characterize some of the human cast and the relations between them. Just as Peter the dog follows his master Dudley about with ‘complete docility’ (*A Call*, p 7) and can be prevailed upon to show similar obedience towards Robert Grimshaw, so Dudley at school was Grimshaw’s obedient fag;

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Dudley Leicester, who, whatever he had, had no head for business, had been Robert Grimshaw's fag at school, and had been his almost daily companion at Oxford and ever since.' (*A Call*, p 19)

and

Dudley's the best fellow in the world: I know everything he's ever done and every thought he's ever thought for the last twenty years. (*A Call*, p 23)

However it is perhaps in another and more famous early play by Pinter that the most striking example of speechlessness is to be found. In Act II of *The Birthday Party* (1957) the rapid-fire question and answer pseudo-interrogation which Stanley Webber undergoes at the hands of McCann and Goldberg ('Who watered the wicket at Melbourne?...Why did the chicken cross the road?'¹⁷) reduces him to a state of docility and literal aphasia. (The extent to which *The Birthday Party* arguably needs to be seen as an intertextual play may be gauged when the scene where Stanley's spectacles are smashed is viewed in the light of a similar episode in William Golding's seminal novel of 1954, *The Lord of the Flies*.¹⁸) Unlike Stanley, who seems destined for an institution, Dudley Leicester is restored from his paranoid breakdown to normal speech, his faithful wife and a happy family in *A Call*, but could this early novella of Ford's nevertheless have furnished an formative inspiration for what was to become one of the most striking moments in post-War British theatre?

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¹ *The Soul of London*, 1905, London: Alston Rivers, p. 12

² In fact Michael Billington in *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*, London, Faber, 1996, p.97 dates the beginnings of Pinter's interest in the bourgeois earlier still, to the radio play *A Slight Ache* of 1958

³ *Betrayal*, 1978, London: Faber, pp. 82-83

⁴ William Dohmen 'Pinter Plays with Disjunctive Chronologies' in *Harold Pinter: Critical Approaches* ed. Steven H Gale London/Toronto Associated University Presses 1986, p. 198

⁵ Anthony Roche 'Pinter and Ireland' in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, ed. Peter Raby, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 175-191.

⁶ Penelope Prentice *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic*, NY Garland, 1994, p. 234

⁷ Michael Billington *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*, p. 258

⁸ *The Good Soldier*, Manchester, Carcanet, 1996, p. 11

⁹ *Betrayal*, p. 87

¹⁰ Max Saunders *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 423-4

¹¹ *Betrayal*, pp. 85-86

¹² Harold Pinter *The Collection* in *Plays: 2*, London, Faber, 1996, p. 119

¹³ *Plays: 2, The Collection*, p. 110

¹⁴ Rudyard Kipling 'Beyond the Pale' in *Plain Tales From the Hills* (1889), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p. 163

¹⁵ See Sara Haslam *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the novel and the Great War*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002, pp.74-76, where the Freudian and phallic connotations of Peter the dachshund are explored in some detail.

¹⁶ *Plays 2: The Collection*, p. 131

¹⁷ Harold Pinter *Plays 1: The Birthday Party*, London, Faber, 1996 p. 45

¹⁸ William Golding *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) London, Faber, pp. 75-76 and 186-88. The smashing of Piggy's spectacles is central both in the process of rendering him vulnerable and in the group's descent from social norms.