

# Vanity of Vanity

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 2:1-2)

Thus begins *Ecclesiastes*, the most unusual book in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Unlike the rest of the Bible, this book claims that the nature of the world is neither revealed to us nor accessible to reason. The universe and its Creator pay us no particular regard. Man is not special. Heretical though these thoughts might be, *Ecclesiastes* contains some of the world's most widely quoted verses of scripture. The words of the Preacher resonate through the seasons of our lives. This post comments on several selections from the book.

## Qohelet

The author of the book is called *Qohelet* (קוהלת in Hebrew). This word derives from a root meaning to “assemble” or “bring people together.” The name suggests a sage who teaches a group of disciples. The translators have taken it to mean someone who preaches in a church (Latin, *ecclesia*). Yet Qohelet was clearly neither priest nor preacher. He was a rich man, a master of estates and an owner of palaces. The title *Ecclesiastes* is inappropriate. As pointed out by Lessing (1998),

thus do the living springs of knowledge, of wisdom, become captured by institutions, and by churches of various kinds.

According to the first line of the book, its author was Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. However, although Qohelet may have been a descendant of David, linguistic evidence (reviewed in Bundvad, 2015, pp 5-9) indicates that he

wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE during the Hellenistic period (323-63 BCE), some seven hundred years after Solomon. Other scholars have suggested that the author may have written several centuries earlier during the Persian period (539-323 BCE), but this would still be long after Solomon (10<sup>th</sup> Century BCE).

The first line of the book may have been added by a later editor who wished this scripture to partake of Solomon's fame. More likely, it is original, indicating that *Ecclesiastes* is a fictional testament: an imagined description of what Solomon might have thought (see discussion in Bartholomew, 2009, pp 43-54). However, the book is ambiguous in terms of its narration. As the book progresses Qohelet becomes clearly distinguished from Solomon. And even Qohelet vacillates between two minds: that of a Jewish believer and that of a Greek philosopher (Bartholomew, 2009, p. 78).



Ben Shahn (1971) imagines Qohelet as a simple teacher. Though once rich and powerful, his thoughts have led him to withdraw from high society. Although dismayed that he has not been able

to understand its meaning, he still enjoys the life he has been granted.

## Vanity



Qohelet's summary of his philosophy is that "All is vanity." Shahn (1971) presents the beginning of the second verse in calligraphy:

The full verse and its transliteration follows. Note that the Hebrew goes from right to left whereas the transliteration goes from left to right (As Qohelet later says, "The wind goeth toward the south and turneth about unto the north"):

הָאֵלֶּם הָאֵלֶּם אָמַר קֹהֵלֶת, הָאֵלֶּם הָאֵלֶּם הַכֹּל הָאֵלֶּם

havel havalim amar kohelet, havel havalim hakkol havel.

The sound of the Hebrew follows (just in case you wish to denounce the world's latest frivolity out loud):

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ecclesiastes-1-2.mp3>

The key Hebrew word is *havel* (הָוֵל). This

indicates the flimsy vapor that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air (Alter, 2010, p 340)

The word can be directly translated as “vapor” or “breath.” Alter translates *havel havelim* as “mere breath.” It denotes something without material substance or temporal persistence. Many translators have characterized it in abstract terms: meaningless, transient, empty, useless, absurd, futile, enigmatic, illusory.

The word *havel* has the same letters as the name of Abel, the second son of Adam, slain by his brother Cain. Qohelet was likely aware of this association (Bundvad, 2015, pp 79-80). Abel was the first man to die. His life was fleeting and uncertain, his death unjust, his person only faintly remembered.

The King James Version of the Bible (1611) translates *havel* as “vanity.” This word comes from the Latin *vanus* meaning empty. The translators used “vanity” to denote a lack of meaning, value or purpose. The secondary, now more common, meaning for the word – self-admiration, excessive pride (the opposite of humility) – may have come about as a particular example of worthless activity.

At the time of the King James Version, the term *vanitas* was also used to denote a type of painting became popular in Flanders and the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The example below is by Pieter Claesz (1628). These paintings arrange objects to show the transience of life, the limits of understanding and the inevitability of death. Despite their meaning, the paintings are imbued with sensual beauty:

The appeal of the *vanitas* painting tradition lies in its successful capture of the subtle balance between transient and joyful modes of living, so vociferously endorsed by Qoheleth. (Christianson, 2007, p 122).



## Benefit

After introducing himself and summarizing his message, Qohelet poses the main question of the book:

What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Ecclesiastes, 1:3)

The word translated as “profit” is *yitron* (יִטְרוֹן). This word is only found in the Bible in *Ecclesiastes*. Perhaps “benefit” might be a better translation (Bartholomew, 2009, pp 107-108). The “labour” involves both physical and mental work. The idea is how best we should lead our lives.

The answer begins with the glorious poem

One generation passeth away,  
and another generation cometh:  
but the earth abideth for ever.

The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down,  
and hasteth to his place where he arose.

The wind goeth toward the south,  
and turneth about unto the north;  
it whirleth about continually,  
and the wind returneth again  
according to his circuits.

All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not  
full;  
unto the place from whence the rivers come,  
thither they return again.

All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it:  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be;  
and that which is done is that which shall be done:  
and there is no new thing under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 1: 3-9).

The poetry is beautiful but there is no profit in it. Human beings come and go. The human mind cannot gain sufficient knowledge of the world to understand its workings or to change it in any significant way. The world is as frustrating as it is beautiful. The more one knows, the more one is convinced of one's transience:

For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1: 18)

Qohelet realizes that life can nevertheless be enjoyable.

There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2: 24)

This is the old man's version of the Andrew Marvel's "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." The sentiment is perhaps as old as

poetry. The Roman poet Catullus in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE also wrote how the sun arises after it goes down but man does not:

*soles occidere et redire possunt;  
nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux  
nox est perpetua una dormienda.  
da mi basia mille, deinde centum*

Walter Raleigh in his *History of the World* (1614) translated this as

The Sunne may set and rise  
But we contrariwise  
Sleepe after our short light  
One everlasting night.

Raleigh does not translate the continuation of the poem wherein Catullus goes on to request a compensatory thousand kisses from his lover Lesbia.

## **Time**

Qohelet has been considering the passage of time. The word used for time in Ecclesiastes – *eth* (עֵת) – generally refers to a moment of time. The other Hebrew word for time is *olam* (עוֹלָם) which takes all of time into account and is usually translated as “for ever” (as in Ecclesiastes 1:4). In the first chapter Qohelet contrasted world time with human time.

In Chapter 3, he considers a different aspect of time. God has ensured that events occur at their appropriate time. Eternity has been arranged in its proper sequence.

To every thing there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up  
that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones,  
and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace,  
and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to rend, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time of war, and a time of peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)



Ben Shahn (1971) portrays the essence of these lines with a wheat field at harvest time:



These verses can be interpreted in two main ways. The first proposes that time has been pre-ordained to work out the purposes of God, that we cannot change these things, and that we should be resigned to what happens. Everything is for the best. The other interpretation uses these words to justify one's actions. Martin Luther quoted these verses when the time had come to speak out against the Catholic Church (Christianson, 2007, p 166). Thus are human actions divinely justified. Luther believed in predestination. He spoke out not by choice but because he had no choice: he could not do otherwise.

These verses were set to music by the folksinger Pete Seeger in the late 1950s. His lyrics directly quote the King James Version using the first verse with the addition of "Turn! Turn! Turn!" as the refrain. After "a time of peace" Seeger added "I swear it's not too late." The song became an anthem of the peace movement. The following is an excerpt:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/seeger-second-half.mp3>

Qohelet recognizes the beauty of God's time. Yet he is frustrated that he can never understand it:

I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.

(Ecclesiastes 3: 14-15)

This idea of time as divinely ordered but incomprehensible to

the human mind pervades T. S. Eliots' *Burnt Norton* (1935) which begins:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.

Qohelet goes on to state that since we cannot understand we are no different from other animals. We live, we die.

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts;  
even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth  
the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath  
no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to  
dust again.

(Ecclesiastes 3:19-20)

These statements go against all previous Jewish teachings.  
Qohelet's book

amounts to a denial of divine revelation, and of the belief  
that man was created as an almost divine being, to care for  
and exercise dominion over the other creatures and all the  
works of God's hands. ... In the final analysis man is like  
the animals rather than superior to them (Scott, 1965, p.  
205)

Johannes Brahms was devastated when his friend Clara Schumann  
suffered a stroke in 1895 and was close to death. During this  
time, he composed his *Four Serious Songs Opus 121*. The first  
song is uses Luther's translation of *Ecclesiastes* 3: 19-22.

The following is the beginning (up to *wird wieder zu Staub* “turn to dust again”) as sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/brahms-4-serious-songs-1-fischer-dieskau.mp3>

Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem Vieh; wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch; und haben alle einerlei Odem; und der Mensch hat nichts mehr denn das Vieh: denn es ist alles eitel.  
Es fährt alles an einen Ort; es ist alles von Staub gemacht, und wird wieder zu Staub.

This first song is desolate – we die like beasts, our life is empty, we are made of dust. The later songs in the series progress from deep sadness to quiet resignation. The final song sets verses from the New Testament, among them

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (I Corinthians 13:12)

Brahms called his songs “serious” (*ernst*) rather than “sacred.” This is a fitting description of the book *Ecclesiastes*.

## **Justice**

After considering the inevitability of death, Qohelet turns to evaluate the course of human life. He finds that success does not necessarily reward those who most deserve it:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.  
(Ecclesiastes 9:11)

A brief adaptation of this verse was included in the posthumously published *Last Poems* of D. H. Lawrence

(1932). The poem *Race and Battle* is notable for its image of the “streaked pansy of the heart” which recalls the title of his earlier book *Pansies*, itself a pun on Pascal’s *Pensées*. Lawrence attempts to explain how to accept that life may be unfair and preserve a personal sense of justice.

The race is not to the swift  
but to those that can sit still  
and let the waves go over them.

The battle is not to the strong  
but to the frail, who know best  
how to efface themselves  
to save the streaked pansy of the heart from  
being trampled to mud.

Lawrence’s poem adds to Qohelet’s resignation some of the later teachings of Jesus – Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God (Matthew 5: 5,8).

## **Instruction**

Qohelet’s search for wisdom has led him to dismay. Death is inevitable and unpredictable. Life is without justice. Nevertheless, Qohelet urges us to enjoy our life:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.  
Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

(Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

White clothes are worn for festive occasions. Their whiteness contrasts with the black of mourning. Anointing one's hair with oil is another sign of gladness. Yet the most important of Qohelet's injunctions is to work at whatever needs to be done.

Qohelet's advice is related to the philosophies of Epicurus (341-270 BCE) in its enjoyment of life and of the stoic Zeno (334-262 BCE) in its promotion of right action. If, as most scholars now believe, Qohelet wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE, he could have been influenced by such Greek philosophies. He certainly based his search for truth on reason rather than on revelation. Yet his philosophy is his own. It is religious rather than materialist.

Scott (1965, p 206) summarizes Qohelet's reasoning:

Thus the good of life is in the living of it. The profit of work is in the doing of it, not in any profit or residue which a man can exhibit as his achievement or pass on to his descendants. The fruit of wisdom is not the accumulation of all knowledge and the understanding of all mysteries. It lies rather in recognizing the limitations of human knowledge and power. Man is not the measure of all things. He is the master neither of life nor of death. He can find serenity only in coming to terms with the unalterable conditions of his existence, and in enjoying its real but limited satisfactions.



Ben Shahn presents the thoughts of Qohelet as balanced between his inability to understand and his realization that life can nevertheless be enjoyed:

Qohelet has much in common with the existentialism of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Albert Camus remarks in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942):

*Je ne sais pas si ce monde a un sens qui le dépasse. Mais je sais que je ne connais pas ce sens et qu'il m'est impossible pour le moment de le connaître. [I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I cannot grasp that meaning and that it is impossible now for me to grasp it.]*

Camus is much more tentative than Qohelet in his conclusion that we should nevertheless enjoy our life. He retells the

myth of Sisyphus who was condemned by the Gods because he had tried to cheat death. He was made to roll an immense boulder up to the summit of a mountain, but every time he reached the top, the rock would roll back down and Sisyphus would have to begin his task again.

*La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme; il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.* [The very struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. ]

## **Bread upon the Waters**

Qohelet presents us with multiple proverbial injunctions about how one should live one's life. Perhaps the most quoted of these is:

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.

Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

(Ecclesiastes 11: 1-2)

The verses have been interpreted in many ways. Merchants have considered them in terms of overseas trade. Christians have proposed that it means to spread the teachings of Christ throughout the world. This idea derives from Christ's statement that he was the "bread of life" (John 6:35). Qohelet had neither of these ideas in mind. He was encouraging us to be generous, to provide for our fellows. He was suggesting that such human charity could compensate for life's injustice.

In his own old age, the wise Richard Wilbur (2010) wrote a poem about these verses

We must *cast our bread*  
*Upon the waters*, as the  
Ancient preacher said,

Trusting that it may  
Amplify be restored to us  
*After many a day.*

That old metaphor,  
Drawn from rice farming on the  
River's flooded shore,

Helps us to believe  
That it's no great sin to give,  
Hoping to receive.

Therefore I shall throw  
Broken bread, this sullen day,  
Out across the snow,

Betting crust and crumb  
That birds will gather, and that  
One more spring will come.



## Light and Dark

Qohelet reminds us that life brings both enjoyment and dismay.  
The verses are illustrated by Ben Shahn on the left.



Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:

But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many.

(Ecclesiastes 11: 7-8)

## **Remember Now**

The last chapter of *Ecclesiastes* contains its most famous poetry. Qohelet, who has become old and wise, advises his youthful followers. He tells them to rejoice in their youth for life is beautiful. Yet they must always bear in mind that they must grow old and die:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,  
while the evil days come not,  
nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say,  
I have no pleasure in them;

While the sun, or the light, or the moon,  
or the stars, be not darkened,  
nor the clouds return after the rain:

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble,  
and the strong men shall bow themselves,  
and the grinders cease because they are few,  
and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

And the doors shall be shut in the streets,  
when the sound of the grinding is low,  
and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird,  
and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high,  
and fears shall be in the way,

and the almond tree shall flourish,  
and the grasshopper shall be a burden,  
and desire shall fail:  
because man goeth to his long home,  
and the mourners go about the streets:

Or ever the silver cord be loosed,  
or the golden bowl be broken,  
or the pitcher be broken at the fountain,  
or the wheel broken at the cistern.

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was:  
and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 12: 1-8)

Qohelet refers to God as the Creator (*borador*, בוראדור). This is the only time he uses this term; elsewhere he uses *Elohim* (אלהים). Qohelet is here invoking Genesis: we must view the end of an individual life in relation to the beginning of all life. Some commentators (Rashi; Scott, 1965, p. 255) have remarked on the relations of this word to *bor* (בור) which occurs in the 7<sup>th</sup> verse. This means “pit,” in the sense of either a “grave” or a “cistern.” This verbal association also brings the end of life back to its source.

The poem is as enigmatic as it is beautiful. The initial verse of the poem clearly states that it is concerned with human mortality. Yet how the images relate to old age and death is as uncertain as the breath that ceases. And the poem ends on the words that began the book – all is vanity, merest breath.

A literal interpretation is that the poem describes a village or estate in mourning for a once-great person lately fallen on hard times. Perhaps Qohelet is foreseeing his own death. The windows of the house are darkened, the mill is quiet as the

workers remember their late master, the mourners go about the streets, and finally dust is scattered over the body as it is buried.

A long tradition has provided allegorical interpretations of the images, relating them to the physical and mental decline that attends old age. The underlying idea is that the aging body is like a house in decay. For example, the commentary of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish rabbi Rashi suggests

the keepers of the house: *These are the ribs and the flanks, which protect the entire body cavity*

the mighty men: *These are the legs, upon which the body supports itself*

and the grinders cease: *These are the teeth*

since they have become few: *In old age, most of his teeth fall out*

and those who look out of the windows: *These are the eyes.*

And the doors shall be shut: *These are his orifices.*

when the sound of the mill is low: *the sound of the mill grinding the food in his intestines, and that is the stomach*

The problem with such specific allegories is that different commentators provide different meanings. Do the doors that shut denote the eyelids or the lips?

Other interpretations are more abstract. Does the pitcher broken at the fountain represent the bladder or the loss of the life force? Is the silver cord the spinal column or the genealogical tree that ends at the death of a person with no heirs?

Some Hebrew interpretations consider these verses as representing the desolation of Israel following the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The image of the golden bowl might then represent the broken

lamp that no longer lit the sanctuary.

Some Christian interpretations see the imagery as a vision of the end times that will precede the final judgment. This fits with the epilogue that follows the poem.

No single interpretation conveys the sense of the poem. All meanings overlap. The poem is better listened to than imagined. The following is by the YouTube reader who goes by the name of Tom O'Bedlam

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tom-o-bedlam-ecclesiastes-12.mp3>

## **Judgment**

The book concludes with an epilogue that many take to be the words of a later editor. However, it rings true to Qohelet:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

(Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14)

Why else should one remember one's Creator? Why else should one bear in mind one's ultimate old age and death? The sentiment is similar to Marcus Aurelius (167 CE):

Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good.

(Meditations IV:17)

Qohelet is also proposing that to be good is to be truly human – “the whole duty of man.” Any judgment of us as human beings must rest on whether we have done good or ill. Qohelet's instruction derives from man as much as from God.

The following presents the Hebrew (in Ben Shahn's calligraphy) together with its transliteration and an audio version of Ecclesiastes 12:13

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.



סוף דבר הכול נשמע את האלהים  
ורא זאת מצותיו שמור כי זה כל האדם

sovf dabar hakkol nishma eth ha'elohim yera eth mitzvotav  
shemovr ki zeh kol ha'adam.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ecclesiastes-12-13.mp3>

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## The Saddest Story

“This is the saddest story I have ever heard.” So begins Ford Madox Ford’s 1915 novel *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion*. The narrator, John Dowell, and his wife Florence were rich Americans, living in Europe. They spent their summers at the spa town of Bad Nauheim, Germany, where Florence underwent therapy for her heart condition. In 1904, the Dowells had met an English couple, Edward and Leonora Ashburnham, at the spa. In the following summers, the two couples continued to meet there:

We had known the Ashburnhams for nine seasons of the town of Nauheim with an extreme intimacy – or, rather with an acquaintanceship as loose and easy and yet as close as a good glove’s with your hand. My wife and I knew Captain and Mrs. Ashburnham as well as it was possible to know anybody, and yet, in another sense, we knew nothing at all about them (p. 11).

The narrator immediately triggers our interest. He also alerts us that he may not completely understand the story he is about to tell us. Why is it the saddest story he has ever heard? Who

told it to him? We shall quickly find out that he was one of the main characters in the story. He directly experienced most of its events, but was apparently quite unaware of their causes. His understanding was pieced together later from what others told him, and may not be correct. We may have to figure out what happened for ourselves.

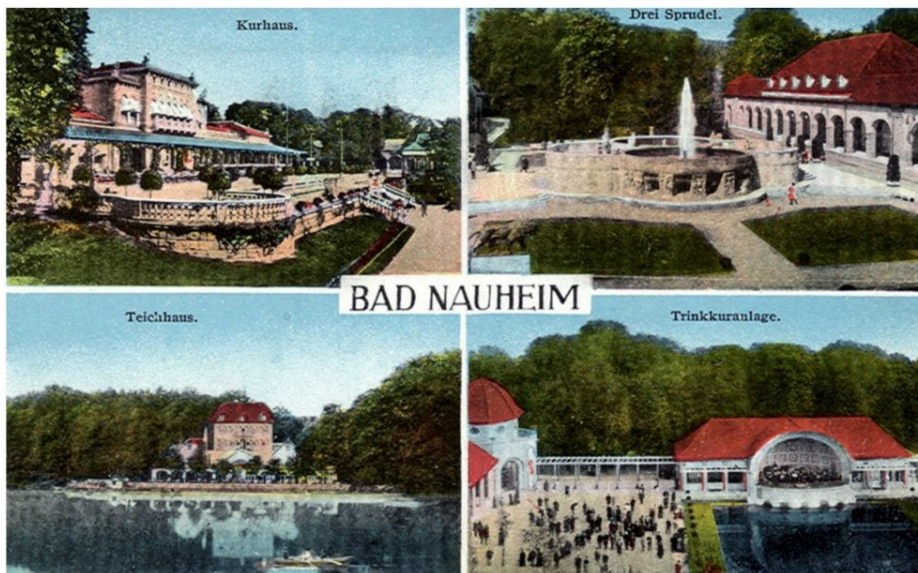
This posting considers the story and its context. It describes the complex relationship between two couples in Europe in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I. It shows a way of life that was falling apart, and a world wherein one was no longer governed by any general morality, but simply sought what one desired.

## **Outline**

A brief summary of the plot of *The Good Soldier*, arranged chronologically rather than in the order of John Dowell's narration, follows. This outline is far simpler than the actual plot, but it will provide some hooks on which to hang my comments.

1892: Edward Ashburnham, a landed English gentleman, marries Leonora Powys, an Irish Catholic. Their marriage turns out to be unhappy, and Edward, according to Leonora, has affairs with other women, some involving much loss of money. In order to improve their financial situation, the Ashburnhams rent out the family home, and go to India where Edward takes up a commission with the British Army.

1900: John Dowell, a rich American, marries Florence Hurlbird, and takes her to Europe for their honeymoon. During the voyage across the Atlantic, Florence suffers a crisis of the heart during a violent storm. Her physicians forbid any further sea voyage and any sexual relations with her husband. The Dowells wander through Europe, spending their summers at Bad Nauheim, where Florence is treated for her heart condition. The following is a postcard from Bad Nauheim from around 1914:



1904: Edward's affairs have continued, the most recent of which has involved Maisie Maidan, a young woman with a heart problem, and the wife of one of Edward's fellow-officers. The Ashburnhams come to Bad Nauheim for treatment of Edward's "heart" disease, and bring Maisie with them. The Dowells and the Ashburnhams meet at the spa. Soon after their meeting they visit the nearby town of Marburg which has significant associations to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. During the visit Florence flirts with Edward, and upsets Leonora by insulting the Irish Catholics. On their return to Bad Nauheim, they find that Maisie has died of a heart attack.

Summer 1913: The two couples have been meeting in Bad Nauheim each summer for 9 years. This year Nancy Rufford, the 21-year old ward of the Ashburnhams, has joined them. Edward appears to be falling in love with Nancy and accompanies her to an evening concert in the spa grounds. Florence later goes to join them. She returns very upset, goes to her room, and dies, apparently of a heart attack.

Autumn 1913: John Dowell inherits a great deal of money from the Hurlbird family. He is invited to visit the Ashburnhams in England. Leonora informs him that Florence's death was a suicide. For years she had been carrying on an affair with

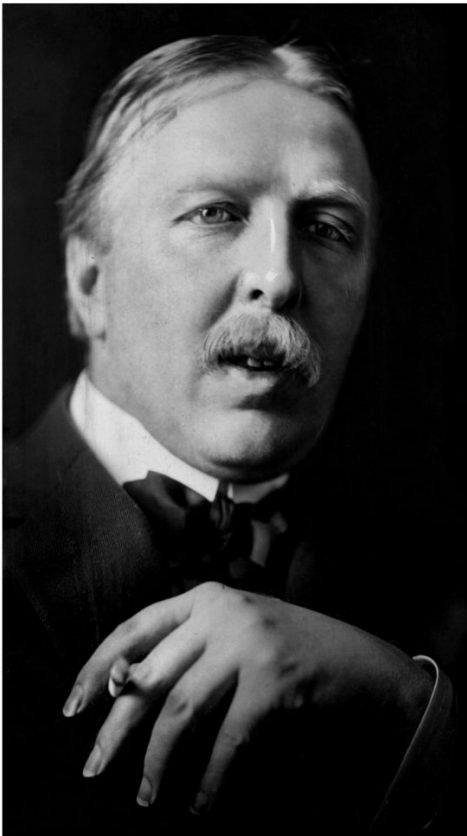


Edward without John being aware. On the night of her death, unobserved by Edward or Nancy, Florence had heard Edward tell Nancy that she was the person he cared most for in the world. She was devastated to realize that her affair with Edward was over.

End of 1913: Edward has become unhappily and madly in love with Nancy. He is starting to behave irrationally. Leonora decides that Nancy should sleep with her husband to save his sanity. Nancy comes to Edward's bedroom but he rejects her. He decides to send Nancy away to India to be with her father, but hopes that she will remain in love with him. Edward bids farewell to Nancy at the train station without betraying any emotion. A few days later, Nancy sends a telegram from Brindisi in Italy, where she is about to board the steamer to India, saying that she is having a wonderful time. Edward believes that she no longer loves him and commits suicide. Nancy hears of his suicide and goes mad.

1914: Leonora marries again. John Dowell buys the Ashburnham home. He goes to India and brings Nancy back. She remains insane.

## **The Passionate Author**



Photograph of Ford Madox  
Hueffer by E. O. Hoppe,  
1912

The story of the novel is complexly intertwined with the life of its author (Saunders, 1996). Ford was born in 1873 as Ford Hueffer. His maternal grandfather was the Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown. After his father, the German-born music critic for the *London Times*, died in 1889, Ford left school without going on to university and became a writer. One of his early books was a biography of his grandfather. Ford collaborated with Joseph Conrad, wrote reviews and published many novels, the most popular of which were the three books about Catherine Howard and Henry VIII, *The Fifth Queen*.

Ford had eloped with Elsie Martindale, a school classmate, in 1894. After several years, their marriage became unhappy, and Ford apparently began to have affairs with other women. One of his affairs in the early years of the new century may have been with Elsie's younger sister, Mary, who was far more

vivacious than his serious wife. Succumbing to these family tensions, Ford went to Germany for treatment at various spas for depression, anxiety and agoraphobia. He later recalled

The illness was purely imaginary; that made it none the better. It was enhanced by wickedly unskilful doctoring. ... But the memory of those years is of one uninterrupted mental agony (Ford, 1932, p. 261).

In 1908 Ford founded the *English Review*, a literary journal which published work by various established authors with whom he had become acquainted – Hardy, Conrad, Galsworthy, James – and supported the early careers of Joyce, Pound, and Lawrence. His colleague in this endeavor was Arthur Marwood. The finances of the review were precarious, and Ford was forced to sell it in 1909. In addition to the monetary problems, Marwood had apparently made improper advances to Elsie, and Ford could no longer trust him.

In 1908 Ford began an overt affair with the novelist Violet Hunt, which lasted until the war. Elsie refused to give him a divorce. In 1910 Ford went to Germany to obtain German citizenship on the basis of his father's birth, and then to arrange a German divorce. Although this plan did not work out, Ford returned to England and introduced Violet as Mrs. Hueffer. Elsie sued and Ford was briefly imprisoned in 1911 for bigamy.

Ford published *The Good Soldier* in 1915. He subsequently served in the British army in France, an experience which later led to the *Parade's End* sequence of novels (1924-1928). After the war, Ford became involved with the artist Stella Bowen. He changed his name to Ford Maddox Ford in 1919. One reason was that he disliked the German name. Another was perhaps that he could live together with Stella under the new name. A new edition of *The Good Soldier* published in 1927 was dedicated to Stella Ford.

Ford was a man who easily became passionately involved with women. In *The Good Soldier*, John Dowell remarks

... the real fierceness of desire, the real heat of a passion long continued and withering up the soul of a man is the craving for identity with the woman that he loves. He desires to see with the same eyes, to touch with the same sense of touch, to hear with the same ears, to lose his identity, to be enveloped, to be supported. For, whatever may be said of the relation of the sexes, there is no man who loves a woman that does not desire to come to her for the renewal of his courage, for the cutting asunder of his difficulties. And that will be the mainspring of his desire for her. We are all so afraid, we are all so alone, we all so need from the outside the assurance of our own worthiness to exist.

So, for a time, if such a passion come to fruition, the man will get what he wants. He will get the moral support, the encouragement, the relief from the sense of loneliness, the assurance of his own worth. But these things pass away; inevitably they pass away as the shadows pass across sundials. It is sad, but it is so. (pp.92-93)

### **An Unreliable Narrator**

John Dowell's telling of the story is like that of someone recalling the past, often digressing to explain the background of some person or event, often going back over what he has already described but from a different perspective. It is remarkably similar to the way in which Ford wrote *Return to Yesterday*, his 1932 set of autobiographical essays. His essay on *Some Cures* begins with the different therapies he underwent for his agoraphobia, but soon digresses to recall breakfasts with John Galsworthy, the humane way to slaughter pigs, and an anecdote about Émile Zola in London.

Ford called his approach to a story-telling "Impressionism," describing the technique in two issues of *Poetry and Drama*,

published in 1914 (and reprinted in the 2010 Oxford edition of the *The Good Soldier*). The idea was to intrigue the reader:

For the first business of Impressionism is to produce an impression, and the only way in literature to produce an impression is to awaken interest. And, in a sustained argument, you can only keep interest awakened by keeping alive, by whatever means you may have at your disposal, the surprise of your reader. You must state your argument; you must illustrate it, and then you must stick in something that appears to have nothing whatever to do with either subject or illustration, so that the reader will exclaim: 'What the devil is the fellow driving at?' And then you must go on in the same way – arguing, illustrating and startling and arguing, startling and illustrating – until at the very end your contentions will appear like a ravelled skein. And then, in the last few lines, you will draw towards you the master string of that seeming confusion, and the whole pattern of the carpet, the whole design of the net-work will be apparent. (p. 208)

Though Ford called his technique "Impressionism," the only thing it really shares with painterly Impressionism is the idea that "A picture should come out of its frame and seize the spectator." Ford's approach is essentially Modernist and is more related to Cubism, which was developing at that time in the visual arts. This technique fits very well with cinematic adaptation, where flashbacks, rapid cuts, and shifting perspectives are natural (Harris, 2015). The BBC adaptation of the novel (Billington, 1981) is surprisingly effective.

However, John Dowell's digressive approach to the story is not his most striking aspect as a narrator. Much of what he tells us is second-hand, pieced together from what others told him. He, himself, is remarkably lacking in perception. We have very good reason therefore to doubt his interpretation of the events. He is an "unreliable narrator" (Booth, 1961, pp. 155-159). Such a

narrator considers the story from a perspective that differs from that of the actual author. Unreliable narrators come in all sorts: some are simply unaware, others are deceptive (Kermode, 1974; Segal, 2015). The reader is left with uncertainty: we must make up our own minds about what happened and why, and we shall never know for sure. The unreliable narrator emphasizes our epistemological uncertainty (Hynes, 1961). Even though we may be fairly confident about the external world, we can never know what is going on in the mind of another. "I don't know" recurs like a refrain throughout the book.



The central event of the book is the death of Florence, who had gone to bring Edward and Nancy back from the concert in the park. According to her husband, she was upset to hear that Edward considered Nancy, and not herself, the person that he loved most in the world. The cover of the first edition of the book illustrated this episode (right). John Dowell's description is

Anyhow, there you have the picture, the immensely tall

trees, elms most of them, towering and feathering away up into the black mistiness that trees seem to gather about them at night; the silhouettes of those two upon the seat; the beams of light coming from the Casino, the woman all in black peeping with fear behind the tree-trunk. It is melodrama; but I can't help it. (pp. 89-90)

Yet John Dowell was not there. He only heard about what Edward told Nancy several months later from Edward. He did not know what happened. He only heard several months later from Leonora that Florence had been carrying on an affair with Edward for the preceding nine years. He initially had another explanation for why Florence was upset: that she saw her husband with a man named "Bagshawe," who was telling him about Florence's other sexual affairs with a person known as "Jimmy."

John concluded that Florence's intense anxiety brought on a heart attack. She was found dead in her room with a bottle of amyl nitrate heart medication in her hand. Later he came to believe that she did not have a heart problem, and supposes that she actually took prussic acid. This poison was known to Ford. His father-in-law, William Martindale, had committed suicide in this manner. During the dark years of his depression, Ford himself carried around a bottle of prussic acid. Supposedly his affair with Violet Hunt began in 1908 when she took away his bottle and suggested that he try "the old traditional way of comfort" (Saunders, 1996, p. 285; Abdalla, 2015).

However, we may question John's account of Florence's death. Florence's uncle had recently died and left her a large amount of money. This was likely why she was dressed in mourning, and therefore unobserved by either Nancy or Edward on the night of the concert. After Florence's death, Florence's personal money and the inheritance from her uncle all came to John. John's description of these bequests (pp. 152-4) comes long after the description of his wife's death. Florence's uncle wished that a significant part of his money be used to found an institute

for patients with heart disorders. John describes the legal confusion about this part of the will. Despite his claim that he does not need the money, it seems clear that none of it will ever go to any such institute.

Was the death of Florence something other than suicide? Was it murder? There was motive enough – John stood to gain immensely from her death. Poole (1990) has interpreted the story of *The Good Soldier* along these lines. Nothing is for sure. In an interesting aside John Dowell remarks

I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their path through what may be a sort of maze. I cannot help it. I have stuck to my idea of being in a country cottage with a silent listener, hearing between the gusts of the wind and amidst the noises of the distant sea, the story as it comes. And, when one discusses an affair – a long, sad affair – one goes back, one goes forward. One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognizes that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places and that one may have given, by omitting them, a false impression. I console myself with thinking that this is a real story and that, after all, real stories are probably told best in the way a person telling a story would tell them. They will then seem most real. (p. 154)

Here John Dowell is using the techniques of literary Impressionism. Perhaps he is lapsing into the persona of the novel's author Ford Madox Ford. Or perhaps what he is telling us is actually a work of fiction, a story to excuse and cover up what actually happened.

## **Life at the Spa**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was fashionable for the rich to spend time in the spa towns of Europe, undergoing various kinds of therapy for various ailments, both real and



imaginary. Water therapy has a long history (Mihina & Anderson, 2010; van Tubergen & van der Linden, 2002). In Europe many towns with access to natural springs developed spas, the term coming from the town of Spa in Belgium, which had been famous for its curative waters as far back as the Middle Ages.

Much of the story of *The Good Soldier* takes place at the spa town of Bad Nauheim. Ford stayed there with Violet Hunt in August 1910. The spa in Bad Nauheim underwent a striking Jugendstil renovation between 1901 and 1911. The following photographs are from a recent album.





The actual therapeutic effectiveness of spa therapy is controversial. Although it can improve a patient's feeling of wellbeing, spa therapy likely does not change the underlying disease process (e.g. Verhagen et al., 2015). The spa may be a source of rest and relaxation, but it is not a place for cure or care.

Spas are perhaps symptomatic of a decadent society, wherein the rich waste their time in pampered luxury. Times have changed. Unfortunately, we still have the idle rich and we still have spas.

## Something evil in the day.

Soon after they meet, the Dowells and the Ashburnhams go on a day-trip to Marburg, a small town not far from Bad Nauheim. The town's picturesque castle is illustrated in the following postcard from 1909:



Marburg Castle was the site of a 1529 meeting between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. The purpose was to develop a unified set of principles for the new Protestant belief. Unfortunately they could not agree on the nature of the Eucharist. They both disagreed with the Roman Catholics position that the bread and wine served during the celebration of the Holy Supper actually became the body and blood of Christ: the outer attributes remained the same but the inner substances changed – “transubstantiation.” However, they could not agree on a new beleif. Zwingli and the Calvinists believed that the Eucharist was symbolic and that the bread and wine did not change. Luther believed in “consubstantiation” – that the consecrated bread and wine were both bread and wine and body and blood of Christ. Documents at Marburg Castle describe this major disagreement at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. .

The term “Protestant” comes from another document. After the



1521 *Edict of Worms* had condemned Luther's ideas as heretical (as covered in my previous posting *Here I Stand*), another congress published the *First Edict of Speyer* in 1526, which granted the member states of the Holy Roman Empire some freedom in their choice of belief. A *Second Edict of Speyer* revoked this freedom in 1529. Various princes and leaders in the Empire quickly issued the *Protest at Speyer* objecting to this second edict. This Protest maintained the right of the princes and their subjects to determine the way in which they practised their religion, and asserted that Christian belief should derive solely from the scriptures. This all sounds very idealistic, but the protest goes on to affirm the edict's condemnation of Anabaptists as heretical and urges that they be brought to trial and executed.

The *Protest at Speyer* may have led to the name "Protestant," but it does not really establish the core beliefs of Protestantism. For Lutherans, these were enshrined in the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530. Over succeeding years, other Protestant factions each wrote their own Articles of Belief.

If anything, the Colloquy of Marburg demonstrated clearly that there was to be no unity in belief. The legacy of the Reformation was one of strife. Against the Roman Church and ultimately among themselves.

During the visit to Marburg Castle, Florence Dowell is acting as tour guide. She gets her history wrong but she is enthusiastic. She points to a documents from the Colloquy of Marburg:

She continued, looking up into Captain Ashburnham's eyes: "It's because of that piece of paper that you're honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived. If it weren't for that piece of paper you'd be like the Irish or the Italians or the Poles, but particularly the Irish. . . ."

And she laid one finger upon Captain Ashburnham's wrist.

I was aware of something treacherous, something frightful, something evil in the day. I can't define it and can't find a simile for it. It wasn't as if a snake had looked out of a hole. No, it was as if my heart had missed a beat. It was as if we were going to run and cry out; all four of us in separate directions, averting our heads. In Ashburnham's face I know that there was absolute panic. I was horribly frightened and then I discovered that the pain in my left wrist was caused by Leonora's clutching it. (p 40).

What was the evil? Leonora runs out of the castle with John. She asks him why he does not see what is going on. Later John would understand that this was the beginning of Florence's affair with Edward, but at the time he was completely unaware. Leonora realizes John's naiveté, and claims that she felt insulted because she is Irish-Catholic. John is relieved – this can easily be solved by an apology.

Perhaps, the evil that John sensed was the complete breakdown of society's codes of sexual morality. Green (1981) says that *The Good Soldier* portrays "a bitter, nostalgic vision of a world in which a sense of responsibility has been whittled down to a façade of respectability" (p 94), "a world whose only certainty is its lack of moral architecture" (p 102). John wonders

Is the whole thing a folly and a mockery? Am I no better than a eunuch or is the proper man – the man with the right to existence – a raging stallion forever neighing after his neighbour's womankind?

I don't know. And there is nothing to guide us. And if everything is so nebulous about a matter so elementary as the morals of sex, what is there to guide us in the more subtle morality of all other personal contacts, associations, and activities? Or are we meant to act on impulse alone? It is all a darkness. (pp 16-17).

But surely this was not the evil that was felt on that

afternoon in Marburg? The reader senses some deeper moral horror, something worse than the shocking sexual goings-on, worse even than murder, if that was indeed the cause of the deaths of Maisie on that very day, and of Florence nine years later.

Protestantism may have played a role in this meaninglessness. Perhaps the Protestant Reformation had fostered individual ambition at the expense of the general good. Ford enjoyed the easy Catholicism of Southern Germany, and hated the striving Protestantism of the Prussian North (Preece, 2015). A year after the Marburg visit, the authoritarian Prussians would precipitate the First World War.

This then is perhaps the real evil that we sense. This is why everything seems to happen on August 4<sup>th</sup>: Florence's birthday, her elopement with John Dowell, the meeting between the Dowells and the Ashburnhams, and the visit to Nauheim. Great Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, when Germany rejected an ultimatum to remove its troops from Belgium.

World War I was the horror lurking under what happened at Bad Nauheim and Marburg. Society danced its way through sexual desire and monetary greed. It focused on its own imaginary ailments and paid no attention to what was happening in the world. Society was oblivious: death was in the air and no one noticed. Within five years 18 million people would be killed.

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