Abstract
The well-recognized problems in the chronology of The Good Soldier can be readily explained once we recognize the palimpsestic date, July 4. The masking of the Declaration of Independence by the imperialist and nationalist violence that erupted, for Britain, on August 4 emerges, in a broad paradigmatic way, as the vital tension underwriting the overt plot. The contest between freedom and fatality constitutes a dynamic struggle not only in the composition of this novel but in the compositional efforts of the narrator-protagonist John Dowell as well. The plot of narration (as opposed to the plot of action) reveals Dowell’s longing for an emotional human relation that would free him from his repetitive and convention-bound life. This palimpsestic interior text emerges through his employment of empathetic and embodied Free Indirect Discourse, until his glimpsed freedom is again overwhelmed by the inexorability of external forces. Ultimately, the novel encompasses three conflicting discursive modalities: the Protestant-Enlightenment narrative of independence, the determinist, mechanistic narrative of modernity, and the ironic plot of modernist ethics that requires inhabiting two different positions at the same time.

Situation One: A man, convinced that his wife has a heart condition that precludes any kind of sexual activity or indeed emotional excitement, believes he is fulfilling the role of a virtuous, supportive husband by devoting himself to a life of platonic care. They meet another couple, and their seemingly perfect friendship relieves his loneliness. But in ‘four crashing days’, nine years and six months after their momentous meeting, he discovers that his wife was deceiving him; his closest friends were deceiving him, and he has been deceiving himself. Has truth then replaced falsehood, or does the disclosure shatter the paradigm of epistemological certainty, including the viability of making true/false distinctions, with the multiple realities of layered simultaneous and contradictory perceptions?

Situation Two: Critics reading Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier (1915) interpreted the novel’s obsessively repetitive placement of events on August 4 as a covert reference to the real-world events on August 4, 1914, the day German troops invaded Belgium and England declared war. Approximately fifty years after the publication of Ford’s
novel, editorial work on the early drafts of Ford’s novel exposed a reference to August 4 in a portion of the text apparently written before August 4, 1914. Did this discovery then correct a false reading with a true, exposing the arbitrariness of the seemingly portentous date? Or does Ford’s pre-war planning merely add another layer to this complicated text? Are we left with an uncanny parallel between John Dowell’s attempts to unravel his life history and our critical attempts to unravel the mysteries of the text’s composition and the numerous and contradictory interpretations it has produced?

A Palimpsestic Chronology
To begin to tackle these questions, I return once more to the perplexing labyrinth of the novel’s hopelessly muddled chronology. I follow the conjecture of most of The Good Soldier’s textual scholars: that Ford used the date August 4 before August 4, 1914, but that after the entrance of Britain into the European conflict, he heightened the emphasis on this day as a pivotal date. What I do further, however, is to take seriously an early, but later revised, reference to July in the manuscript, and the indirect, but still evident, allusions to July that remain in the published text. Just possibly, I suggest, the published text is haunted by an earlier plotting that involved the contrasting paradigm of a different date.

On two occasions, Dowell emphasizes the uncanny calendrical coincidences in his wife Florence’s life: she is born (1874), she embarks on a world cruise (1899), she begins an affair with her cousin Jimmy (1900), she marries Dowell (1901), she begins an affair with Edward Ashburnham (1904), and she dies (1913) – all on August 4. The first of these summaries (minus her death) appears in the apparent first draft of the novel, but since the relevant passage is in an undated carbon copy typed by Ford (Stannard 203), the date of its composition is impossible to determine, based on material evidence alone. The second complete summary is a later addition to H. D.’s [Hilda Doolittle’s] script, made in Ford’s hand (206). Stannard correctly observes that it is impossible to date Ford’s marginal insertion; however, H. D.’s husband Richard Aldington wrote, in a letter dated by his editor 4 July 1914, that Hilda was breaking down ‘through working too hard with Hueffer on his novel’. Since the page in question appears in the first of the three portions in H. D.’s hand, less than half way through the total number of pages she transcribed, and approximately one third of the way from the point where her