THE GOOD SOLDIER AND THE PROBLEM OF COMPOSITIONAL (UN)RELIABILITY

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Abstract
The notion of unreliability entails the reader’s perception of a split between two communicative levels: one that includes the narrator, who communicates directly with his/her addressee, and one that includes the author, who communicates indirectly with the reader, sending him/her messages that differ from those the narrator seems to be responsible for. In most cases of assessing the tensions or discrepancies between these communicative levels, the critics’ main interest lies in epistemological and ethical issues; this essay, however, focuses on the compositional level, an aspect much less often dealt with in this context. I believe The Good Soldier constitutes a particularly powerful instance of what may be termed ‘compositional unreliability’: the narrative is told by an ‘amateurish’ narrator in a seemingly rambling, associative, and unorderly manner, while at the same time the text is perceived by the reader as highly planned, structured, and organized. The positing of Dowell as a compositionally unreliable narrator is integral to Ford’s modernist-impressionist poetics, helping him achieve two of his major aesthetic goals: a strong mimetic illusion and progression d’effet.

The problem I would like to address in this essay is related to the familiar issue of unreliable narration, but can, I hope, shed some light on it from a new angle, with regard to both the general phenomenon and Ford’s novel. Basically, the notion of unreliability entails the reader’s perception of a split between two communicative levels: one that includes the narrator, who communicates directly with his/her addressee, and one that includes the author, who communicates indirectly with the reader, behind the narrator’s back, so to speak, sending him/her messages that differ from those the narrator seems to be responsible for.1

Critical discussions of ‘unreliability’ amount, in most cases, to assessing the tensions or discrepancies between these two communicative levels. Usually, the critics’ main interest lies in epistemological and ethical issues – that is, the ways in which the narrator’s understanding, interpretation, and evaluation of the facts reported by him differ from those of the (reliable) author; the narrator is perceived as someone who does not comprehend the full implications of what he is
telling, because he is not smart enough, or sensitive enough, or suffers from a certain ‘blind spot’ in his vision of the world, and so forth. The critical history of *The Good Soldier* is, indeed, very rich in discussions pertaining to this issue, with varying verdicts on Dowell’s degree of (un)reliability.²

An aspect which is much less often dealt with in this context, but that in my opinion is highly relevant to the same critical and interpretative framework, relates to what may be termed the *compositional* dimension of the text. That is, the question of the tensions that exist between the author and the narrator regarding this dimension: to what extent does the narrator share with the author the responsibility for this aspect of the text, and to what extent do the two part company – either because the narrator is perceived as lacking aesthetic or rhetorical control over the discourse, or because his control is perceived as directed to other ends than those of the author; in other words, how ‘compositionally (un)reliable’ is the narrator?

The following observation by David Lodge, who uses *The Good Soldier* as a typical example of a modernist novel (in its suppression or displacement of the author), should give an immediate sense of the kinds of effects on the reader – and some of the interpretative problems – involved here:

> The Narrators of modernist novels – e.g. the teacher of languages in Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*, or Dowell in Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, must pretend to be *amateur* narrators, disclaiming any literary skill even while they display the most dazzling command of time shift, symbolism, scenic construction, etc.³

Lodge’s response to Ford’s novel reflects a kind of dual quality, or effect, which is indeed very prominent in the text. On the one hand, the novel creates the impression of being told in a very rambling, associative, and unplanned manner – a sort of stream of consciousness on the level of narration. But on the other hand, the novel also leaves an impression of being highly planned, structured, and organized. Lodge’s formulation suggests that he considers this duality as a kind of ‘cheating’ by Ford; I would prefer to view Ford’s novel as a particularly powerful instance of what I have termed ‘compositional unreliability’. That is, I believe that essentially, the way we are supposed to react to the double effect of the novel is to hold Dowell, the narrator, responsible for the ‘unordered’ aspect of the text, while perceiving Ford as responsible for its ordered aspect,⁴ which is disguised – or mimetically motivated – by the nature of Dowell’s narration.