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This 1934 advertiser had presumably not read Ford’s novel.
CARING TO KNOW: NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE
AND THE ART OF PUBLIC NURSING
IN THE GOOD SOLDIER

Barry Sheils

Abstract
John Dowell’s narrative voice in The Good Soldier is suffused with the language of professional care. Not only do many of the novel’s major scenes take place in the vicinity of a health institution, but Dowell also designates himself a sick nurse or carer several times throughout the text. In one respect, this conforms to his role as onlooker and cuckold: Dowell is a perennial third party whose dramatic power resides in his apparent facility for abidance and observation. However, as this essay suggests, the nursing metaphor extends beyond Dowell-as-character, to Dowell-as-narrative-device. Through a close reading of Florence Nightingale’s 1859 seminal handbook Notes on Nursing: What it is and what it is not, I show the remarkable extent to which Nightingale’s healthcare prescriptions for nurses were also directed at novelists. The Victorian novelists had got illness completely wrong as far as Nightingale was concerned; and since nursing was equally a question of representing illness, it behoved a good nurse to record and, where necessary, revise in writing whatever the patient or the ‘Victorian’ figure of the doctor might say. I argue that Dowell’s narrative reflects the hermeneutic predicament as well as the power of Nightingale’s modern nurse. Within the context of an historical affiliation between novelistic technique and the social technologies of care, this essay examines the tight bond between nursing and writing as it is identified in Ford’s novel.

It is a critical truism that the narrative technique of The Good Soldier cultivates a sense of epistemological uncertainty. While narrator John Dowell’s not-knowing then but knowing now establishes the basic retrospective framework for the novel, the reader is simultaneously confronted with the possibility that Dowell retains his ignorance up to the present moment of his ‘actually writing’.1 ‘I don’t know’, he tells us, or warns us, several times in the opening few pages of the novel: he doesn’t know whether at Nauheim he was stepping out a minuet or standing in ‘a prison full of screaming hysterics’ (GS 13); or whether, when ‘only this afternoon’ she recounted to him her abortive affair (14), Leonora spoke with the exceptional boldness of a harlot or with ordinary hypocrisy. ‘And, if one doesn’t know as much as that about the first thing in the world, what does one know and why is one here?’