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'[M]en's Dwellings Were Thin Shells': Uncertain Interiors and Domestic Violence in Ford Madox Ford's War Writing

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Abstract: The standard image of First World War soldiers is of men in open trenches: waiting to attack or be attacked; walking, sitting, sleeping, dead. Ford's *Parade's End* includes such scenes. But it is a different kind of image which predominates in his war writings and often produces its most memorable passages: images of houses or house-like shelters. The mind seeks protection in such structures; but they offer little security against the destructiveness outside, against the bombardments, gas, shrapnel, bullets. Ford wrote that the experience of war revealed: 'men's dwellings were thin shells that could be crushed as walnuts are crushed. . . . all things that lived and moved and had volition and life might at any moment be resolved into a scarlet viscosity seeping into the earth of torn fields [. . .]'. This realisation works in two ways. The soldier's sense of vulnerability provokes fantasies of home, solidity, sanctuary, while for the returnee soldier, domestic architecture summons war-visions of its own annihilation: 'it had been revealed to you', adds Ford, 'that beneath Ordered Life itself was stretched, the merest film with, beneath it, the abysses of Chaos'. It is now customary to read war literature through trauma theory. Building on analyses of Ford's use of repression, but drawing instead on object relations theory, I argue that Ford's houses of war are not screen memories but images of the failure of repression to screen off devastating experiences. The abysses of Chaos can be seen through the screen or projected upon it. Attending to Ford's handling of this theme enables a new reading of his war writing and a new case for its coherence. The essay will connect the opening of *No More Parades* (in a hut, during a bombardment) with the war poem 'The Old Houses of Flanders'; the postwar poem *A House*; the memoir *It Was the Nightingale* (quoted above); and the otherwise puzzling, fictionalised memoir *No Enemy*, structured in terms of 'Four Landscapes' and 'Certain Interiors'.

Keywords: Ford Madox Ford; First World War; trauma; architecture; Interior; violence; fiction; memoir

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Ford Madox Ford had joined the army in August 1915. When the Battle of the Somme began on 1 July 1916, he narrowly missed being there and being killed on the bloodiest day of British Military History. Instead, he arrived there later in the battle. He had been given a commission in the 3rd Battalion of the Welch Regiment, had left Cardiff for France on 13 July, and arrived in Rouen around 18 July (where he had been attached to the 9th Battalion of the Welch); there, he was placed in a support trench with the First Line Transport, near Bécourt wood, just behind the front line near Albert. On 28 or 29 July, he was 'blown into the air by something'—a high-explosive shell landing too near; he fell on his face and damaged his mouth and teeth. The concussion erased whole patches of his knowledge: 'I had completely lost my memory so that [. . .] three weeks of my life are completely dead to me'. He even forgot his own name for thirty-six hours.

He was sent to a Casualty Clearing Station at Corbie—an experience which haunted him all his life, and which he was to draw on in the expressionist scene in *Parade's End* when Tietjens is in hospital and a fellow-patient tries to strangle him. But by at least 23 August, he had left Corbie to rejoin the 9th battalion of the Welch regiment, which was now stationed in the Ypres salient near Kemmel Hill.

It was while he was there that he wrote his most significant piece of prose while on the Western Front, the essay 'A Day of Battle', dated 15 September 1916, signing 'Miles Ignotus'—the unknown soldier—remember, his own name had been unknown to him a few weeks earlier. Ford gave the first part the sub-heading 'Arms And The Mind', playing off the Virgilian 'Arms, and the man, I sing'. This Fordian war epic was going to be a psychological affair. 'Arms And The Mind' starts with a problem—he feels unable to write about his war experiences:

> "I have asked myself continuously why I can write nothing—why I cannot even think anything that to myself seems worth thinking!—about the psychology of that Active Service of which I have seen my share. And why cannot I even evoke pictures of the Somme or the flat lands round Ploegsteert? With the pen, I used to be able to "visualize things"—as it used to be called. [. . .] To-day, when I look at a mere coarse map of the Line, simply to read 'Ploegsteert' or 'Armentières' seems to bring up extraordinarily coloured and exact pictures behind my eyeballs—little pictures having all the brilliant minuteness that medieval illuminations had—of towers, and roofs, and belts of trees and sunlight; or, for the matter of that, of men, burst into mere showers of blood and dissolving into muddy ooze; or of aeroplanes and shells against the translucent blue.—But, as for putting them—into words! No: the mind stops dead, and something in the brain stops and shuts down [. . .]
>
> As far as I am concerned an invisible barrier in my brain seems to lie between the profession of Arms and the mind that put things into words. And I ask myself: why? And I ask myself: why?[1]"

One might say that all Ford's subsequent writing begins here and from that problem. In *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, I read that phrase 'an invisible barrier in my brain' as an image for repression; repression of traumatic experience, which left Ford feeling that all he could write about the war was effectively comparable to what Freud had called 'screen memories'; arbitrary associations carrying a high emotional charge connected with the thing they conceal.[2] I still think repression is important here; though the process is more complicated than that makes it sound. The vision Ford describes when he imagines the image, as he puts it, 'of men, burst into mere showers of blood and dissolving into muddy ooze', might be thought to articulate its traumatic memory vividly enough; except that the splatter of blood and the red-stained mud is itself a sign of a worse trauma, and one that can't be seen or heard, in the chaos of an explosion.[3] The silence of that description is perhaps part of its horror. But the key point is that Ford is not saying his war experiences were repressed from his conscious mind; rather, that what is repressed is his conscious art. He can still see them; he just cannot make us see them.

That suggests the alternative reading explored in this essay, according to which the screen does not screen or repress enough. It is an idea which we shall trace through several of Ford's post-war works. The most evocative statement comes in *It Was the Nightingale*, the volume of Ford's reminiscences that takes up the story immediately on his demobilisation. It seems to recall the earlier passage from 'Arms And The Mind', or at least a similar complex of feelings. 'One had had', he says of the insouciance of pre-war London life, 'little sense of the values of life if indeed one had the sense that life had any values at all'. Standing on the kerb, and looking over London from Campden Hill in 1919:

> "it was as if some of the darkness of nights of air-raids still hung in the shadows of the enormous city. Standing on the Hill that is high above that world of streets one had the sense that vast disaster stretched into those caverns of blackness. A social system had crumbled. Recklessness had taken the place of insouciance. In the old days we had seemed to have ourselves and our destinies well in hand. Now we were drifting towards a weir. . ..
>
> You may say that everyone who had taken physical part in the war was then mad. No one could have come through that shattering experience and still

> view life and mankind with any normal vision. In those days you saw objects that the earlier mind labelled as houses. They had been used to seem cubic and solid permanences. But we had seen Ploegsteert where it had been revealed that men's dwellings were thin shells that could be crushed as walnuts are crushed. Man and even Beast . . . all things that lived and moved and had volition and life might at any moment be resolved into a scarlet viscosity seeping into the earth of torn fields [. . .] Nay, it had been revealed to you that beneath Ordered Life itself was stretched, the merest film with, beneath it, the abysses of Chaos. One had come from the frail shelters of the Line to a world that was more frail than any canvas hut." (Ford 1934)

The view itself had changed little over the five years of war. But Ford's impression of it has changed. He feels the shadow of the war superimposed over London, even though the war has ended. That shadow, he says, has 'revealed' two things to be terrifyingly different from their pre-war appearance: houses and civilisation.

Yet that last image, of the film that separates us from the 'abysses of Chaos,' is paradoxical. It is offered as something revealed by the war. Yet what it offers is a vision of a civilisation that has always been suspended over its annihilation but merely hadn't realised it. Or rather, a civilisation which had been distracted from it by the 'hectic gaiety' (48) of the eve of the war. For there had been glimpses, which Ford knew well, in the years before the war, that London, the world city, the apex of civilisation, the heart of empire, had a heart of darkness. Indeed, that vision of annihilation had been contemplated even as early as thirty years before the war by William Hale White, writing as Mark Rutherford: 'Our civilisation seemed nothing but a thin film or crust lying over a volcanic pit, and I often wondered whether some day the pit would not break up through it and destroy us all'.[4]

To Ford, who was 42 in 1916, and to the younger generation serving with him, it must have felt as if that was exactly what had happened. He had certainly read Rutherford,[5] and he knew T. E. Hulme, the philosopher, critic and poet who was killed in the war in 1917 and who had been working for at least a decade on a work called 'Cinders', which Herbert Read described as 'a personal philosophy, cast into an allegorical form perhaps analogous to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and having as its final object the destruction of the idea that the world has unity, or that anything can be described in words'. 'The world is a plurality', writes Hulme:

> This plurality consists in the nature of an ash-heap. In this ash-pit of cinders, certain ordered routes have been made, thus constituting whatever unity there may be a kind of manufactured chess-board laid on a cinder-heap. Not a real chess-board impressed on the cinders, but the gossamer world of symbolic communication already spoken of.[6]

It is possible Ford heard Hulme discussing these ideas or heard mutual friends such as Ezra Pound or Richard Aldington discussing them. Hulme's vision of a game of chess superimposed over a barren waste land appears to have made its impression on Eliot too. The point is that it was the experience of the post-war city which brought such images back.

Virginia Woolf, too, used a similar image in representing a similar disorientation in the business of walking about on the streets and pavements of an immediately postwar London which had supposedly returned to orderly life. A diary entry from 1920 begins: 'Why is life so tragic; so like a little strip of pavement over an abyss. I look down; I feel giddy. I wonder how I am ever to walk to the end'.[7] At first, she develops the idea through very personal anxieties about 'having no children, living away from friends, failing to write well, spending too much on food, growing old'. But then she turns outward to the public and political sphere of Ireland and to the violent civil war which had erupted:

> its life itself, I think sometimes, for us in our generation so tragic—no newspaper placard without its shriek of agony from someone. McSwiney this afternoon and violence in Ireland; or it'll be the strike. Unhappiness is everywhere; just beyond the door; or stupidity, which is worse.[8]

That 'shriek of agony' indicates that this is no self-indulgent *crise de quarantaine*, but a response to real physical violence in the UK.[9] Her response was public and political too; she signed a petition, organised by Ford and his friends; a protest to the government from leaders in thought and the arts against the repressive policies being brutally enforced by the Black and Tans in Ireland.[10]

Her other main comment on the Anglo-Irish war comes on 13 March the following year and also invokes a barrier keeping violence from full consciousness:

> In the way of history the Germans [the unsuccessful delegation to the Reparations Conference] have gone back to Germany. People go on being shot & hanged in Ireland. Dora described mass going on all day in Dublin for some wretched boy killed early on Monday morning. The worst of it is the screen between our eyes & these [?] gallows is so thick. So easily one forgets it—or I do.[11]

Here, the deaths in Ireland are juxtaposed with the First World War and the concept of reparation. Here too, an image of a screen shielding the mind from the devastation, to put alongside Rutherford's film or crust, Ford's film, Hulme's gossamer. Ford was repeatedly drawn to images of invisible or transparent barriers between the soldier and violent death; and, as we shall see, the hint of the cinematic in these images is telling.

In *It Was the Nightingale*, Ford is attempting to recreate the damaged and fragile mental state in which he found himself immediately after the war. He had already published *No Enemy* (Ford 1929), which was mostly written in the immediate aftermath of the war, subtitled 'A Tale of Reconstruction' (Ford 2002)—implying that the post-war project of reconstruction was not only, or should not only be, a matter of restoring the land and buildings that had been damaged and of trying to repair injured bodies, but of reconstructing people's psychologies and reconstructing civilisation itself. In Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu*, the soldiers pass the village where one of them, Poterloo, had lived. It has disappeared so completely he cannot even find the site of his house, and he says: 'It's wiped out too much—all my life up to now. It makes me afraid—it is so completely wiped out'.[12] Such habitations can be reconstructed, even if they are beyond repair. Surgery and prosthetics can mitigate some damage to injured bodies; but the abject bloody human remains—that 'scarlet viscosity seeping into the earth'—cannot be reconstructed. What of the mind traumatised by such annihilations?

There are continual intimations in *It Was the Nightingale* of a suicidal mindset—as here, where doubting that 'that life had any values at all' is perilously close to doubting whether it had any *value* at all. The whole idea of life, what it was, what it was for, what it was worth, had itself been damaged, possibly beyond repair. The book goes on to recount how, once he has decided to leave London and sets up home in the Sussex countryside, while cooking his first meal, he makes a pact with destiny that if the skins of the onions he has despairingly thrown into the stew separate and rise to the surface he will resolve to keep on going.

The moment on Campden Hill is an earlier stage in this process of existential indecision. He is poised on the edge of the kerb as he's about to cross the road: 'as I extended my foot to make that crossing something snapped. It was the iron band around my heart that had hitherto made it London's own' (64). The narrative keeps returning to this moment, with the effect of leaving him teetering on the edge of the abyss. It is the moment he determines to leave London; to go to live with Stella Bowen in the Sussex cottage 'Red Ford'—a move which would eventually lead to his leaving Britain altogether. The tone is a complex balancing act; the comic freezing of the frame catching him with one foot in the air, set against the surrounding somberness—not just of London and its war memories of air raids, but of the stories he has been telling of physical and mental wrecks before the war and after, as the narrative builds to this Rubicon moment. Graham Greene described one of Ford's later reminiscential books, *Provence*, as being written 'out of a kind of hilarious depression' (Greene 1938).

Ford's and Woolf's abysses are—at least at first glance—more metaphysical than Rutherford's volcano, which allows them also to suggest war and disorder; but then his concrete images of volcano and crust are metaphors for metaphysical and moral dilemmas,

crises of faith, whereas their more abstract metaphors express both real physical horrors and the mind's attempts to keep them at bay. But there are three other differences in Ford's version. First, in the Rutherford, the film is the civilisation; just a thin layer that keeps us from destruction; the equivalent of Woolf's pavements, whereas in the Ford, the film is beneath civilisation; a barrier of sorts between what he calls 'ordered life' and death.

Second, where Rutherford talks of 'civilisation', with all its grand and abstract notions of history and culture and value, and Woolf uses the image of 'a little strip of pavement over an abyss' as a simile for the tragic quality of life, Ford uses that phrase 'ordered life'. It is neutral, yet highly suggestive, collaging different kinds of ways life can be ordered: by civilised regulation, yes; but also by military orders; or by the order of art, whether in fiction or autobiography; or indeed, in poetry. Ford also used the phrase in his postwar poem that won the 1921 prize from the Chicago magazine *Poetry*; the poem simply called 'A House'.[13] The unnamed woman, the 'She' of the poem, though evidently based to some extent on Stella Bowen, longs for 'an ordered life in a household' (Ford 1997).

Writing about that passage from *It Was the Nightingale* about 'ordered life', I argued it showed 'how the envisaged "order" is something more ontological than a matter of domestic arrangements'.[14] What was at stake was a sense that Ford's writing between the war and *Parade's End* struggles to relate personal relationships and anxieties to war sufferings. 'A House' expresses as much anxiety over domestic difficulties as about trench battles. Ford's first published postwar novel, *The Marsden Case* (Ford 1923), covers a similar timeframe to *Parade's End*—pre-war to post-war—but unlike the tetralogy, avoids representing the war itself, wanting us to feel the pathos of the protagonist's despair at purely personal and familiar anxieties as somehow equivalent to the war. Ford had written—in the opening of *The Good Soldier*, before the war:

> Some one has said that the death of a mouse from cancer is the whole sack of Rome by the Goths, and I swear to you that the breaking up of our little four-square coterie was such another unthinkable event. (Ford 2012)

The novel didn't appear in book form until 1915, by which time it had had its name changed from 'The Saddest Story' to something more military; but it is not a war novel, despite the carnage amongst the characters (three dead, one mad).

Though I still stand by these critical judgements, I think what goes awry in 'A House' or *The Marsden Case* is instructive about what goes right in *Parade's End* or *It Was the Nightingale*. It is the effort to fend certain memories off, to keep them out of the narrative or the poem, which distorts them—at least for us. Perhaps contemporary readers would have understood better and wanted themselves to keep the abysses of Chaos at bay just as much. That effort to stop thinking of things was in a sense Ford's subject; and arguably had been even before the war, in his tales of suppression and obtuseness like *A Call* or *The Good Soldier*; but what you see so vividly in the passage from *It Was the Nightingale* is the haunting realisation that however hard you try, the horror of war cannot be screened off from the mind; that the very things you rely on to keep it out—ordered life, London streets, houses, walnuts—keep making you think of it. That is why the image of the house is so important: because to the postwar mind, 'domestic arrangements' cannot be kept separate from war.

That is the third difference from Rutherford's image. Rutherford imagined apocalypse on an epic scale, destroying civilisation. Hulme imagined civilisation as already incinerated. Ford gives us a house. He domesticates the terror; which is not to say, tames or subdues it; but adds to it, by unleashing it in the very place that should offer sanctuary. It shows how there is no longer any order in life that can keep the domestic and the ontological terror apart. Being in the war showed how a solid wall can be crushed like a walnut; was as frail as canvas; as fragile as 'the merest film'. So now, back amongst the solidities of civilisation, the walls of houses keep making Ford think of their destruction, or of being in a canvas hut. (There is a similar effect in Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, when the narrator imagines postwar city streets as part of gigantic and 'intricate trench systems' of social hostility.) (Aldington 1929).

One of the few passages in *The Marsden Case* that mentions the war says:

> I used to think that, once out there, we should be surrounded by a magic and invisible tent that would keep from us all temporal cares. But we are not so surrounded, and it is not like that [. . .] round your transparent tent, the old evils, the old heartbreaks and the old cruelties are unceasingly at work. (Ford 1923)

This too recalls the essay written in the Salient, 'A Day of Battle', which also had a fantasy of a protective 'magic ring'.[15] The ontological complexity increases, since not only is there the ambiguity of the barrier (a tent, but invisible; a wishful fantasy of security), but also the ambiguity over what has been fended off: not just bullets and shells, but domestic anxiety as well.

The Italian critic Mario Praz, writing, after the Second World War, in a book called *The Philosophy of Interior Decorating* of the bombed ruins of the Roman Gate at Viterbo, was drawn towards a comparable conjunction of domestic interior, wartime destruction, and uncanny screen: 'the magic screen of memory' is 'brutally torn away, and your mind [is] gripped by rubble, destruction and horror'.[16]

Ford's writing about war, then, keeps returning to this notion of some kind of perplexing screen: invisible barrier; merest film; frail canvas hut; invisible tent; magic ring. In the third novel of *Parade's End*, *A Man Could Stand Up*, Tietjens imagines an 'inviolable sphere' of safety.[17] There is an element of wishful thinking. If there is nothing there, you imagine a shelter; but then, if there is a shelter, the imagination of war makes its fabric transparent. War becomes visible through it. It is so frail you imagine things penetrating it (and you). The effect continues even if the shelter has the solidity of a peacetime house of bricks and mortar, since those too can be pulverised by shellfire. So, if you're in a real house, you keep imagining it as a tent or invisible film. But this effect persists after the war too, so peacetime house walls no longer keep out the anxiety of danger.

What makes this such a potent cluster of ideas for Ford, I think, is the power of his longing, and presumably that of most of the participants, to be back at home, in a house.[18] *No Enemy* images the house as a gingerbread cottage; a childish fantasy of a house to protect you from the infantilising terrors of the grown-up world at war. The received image of soldiers on the Western Front is of men in open trenches or exposed in the open spaces of No Man's Land; but often, they were sheltering in simulacra of houses: dug-outs at the Front, or tents and huts behind the lines. These may have kept the worst of the elements out, but they offered little protection against artillery or aerial attack.

It is in the first chapters of *No More Parades*, the second novel of *Parade's End* and the first passage in the tetralogy to describe the Western Front directly, that Ford is able to bring all these ideas together with extraordinarily powerful effect. The novel begins:

> WHEN you came in the space was desultory, rectangular, warm after the drip of the winter night, and transfused with a brown-orange dust that was light. It was shaped like the house a child draws. Three groups of brown limbs spotted with brass took dim high-lights from shafts that came from a bucket pierced with holes, filled with incandescent coke and covered in with a sheet of iron in the shape of a tunnel. Two men, as if hierarchically smaller, crouched on the floor beside the brazier; four, two at each end of the hut, drooped over tables in attitudes of extreme indifference [. . .]
>
> An immense tea-tray, august, its voice filling the black circle of the horizon, thundered to the ground. Numerous pieces of sheet-iron said, "Pack. Pack. Pack." In a minute the clay floor of the hut shook, the drums of ears were pressed inwards, solid noise showered about the universe, enormous echoes pushed these men—to the right, to the left, or down towards the tables, and crackling like that of flames among vast underwood became the settled condition of the night. Catching the light from the brazier as the head leaned over, the lips of one of the two men on the floor were incredibly red and full and went on talking and talking. . .. (Ford 2011b)

'It was shaped like the house a child draws'. The house in Ford's poem *A House* is imagined saying: 'I am the House!/I resemble/The drawing of a child/That draws "just a house"'.[19] The 'space' is hard to make out, presumably as it would be for someone coming into the brown-orange dust and dim light. The phrase 'that was light' has a faint echo of the creation in beginning of *Genesis*; only in this site of destruction, the process is in reverse: the light has become dust. Then we gather that the space we are in is a hut. Where it is situated remains obscure. We gather that it is near enough to the Front to be targeted by enemy artillery. All we know of its construction is that it has a clay floor, only mentioned because it shakes. The first glimpse we get of its structure is through the dead eyes of O Nine Morgan, who bursts in to announce his own death with an extraordinary stoic joke: "Ere's another bloomin' casualty':

> The face below him grinned at the roof—the half face! The nose was there, half the mouth with the teeth showing in the firelight. . .. It was extraordinary how defined the peaked nose and the serrated teeth were in that mess. . .. The eye looked jauntily at the peak of the canvas hut-roof. . ..[20]

Morgan was hit outside. But anyone following his glazed gaze up to the roof would be reminded what negligible protection this house-like space affords. Is this the kind of 'canvas hut' of the passage in *It Was the Nightingale*? Whether it is or not, the image of the house a child draws is very deliberate. Not just a basic hut, but one which conjures familial, domestic life in this no child's land of the war. Whatever the walls are made out of, they are not thick enough to keep out the noise; to stop war's violence forcing itself through the roof, the walls, even the floor (Tietjens also has nightmarish fantasies of German soldiers undermining the Allied trenches); nor the thoughts of home. In *No More Parades,* Tietjens has to live in a 'sackcloth hut' (14). This may be a different hut; but its textile roof leaves it comparably vulnerable. It is a passage like this that shows why a house never seemed just a house after the war; because things that are so obviously not houses became permeated with thoughts of houseness—

> Two stories down below someone let two hundred-pound dumb-bells drop on the drawing-room carpet; all the windows of the house slammed in a race to get it over.[21]

—so that, reciprocally, once back in actual houses, those then seem permeated by war. That is why it is important to Ford to begin the close-up description of war in *No More Parades* by invoking a house; or why, in his poem 'A House', his anxieties over trying to keep his animals alive brings back memories of the trenches.

What is inside this parody of a house in *No More Parades* is a parody of a domestic hearth: the brazier the men are crouching round to keep warm; described as 'a bucket pierced with holes, filled with incandescent coke and covered in with a sheet of iron'. The coke and sheet iron evoke industrial processes. This is what mechanised mass war does to domestic space; but the iron is also another version of the image of a sheet, a thin barrier, between us and the destructive element—the erupting volcano, the abysses of Chaos; and lest that suggestion seem too far-fetched, look at the connections Ford is so careful to establish. The 'sheet of iron' of the brazier is echoed by the 'sheet iron' invoked to express the noise of the explosions; and also by the 'Teatray'—again, a domestic object which acquires a paranoid terror in this context. And then, the 'incandescent coke' inside the hut is connected with the shelling outside. After the bombardment, there is a noise of 'crackling like that of flames among vast underwood' which 'became the settled condition of the night'. Only the childish imagination of a house is between the men and the conflagration; and so it will be back home.

Considering this group of texts enables us to see that Ford's writing about war involves writing about houses to a surprising extent. It is hard to think of another poet who could write as evocative a war poem as the one Ford called 'Old Houses of Flanders' (Ford 1918):

> The old houses of Flanders,
> They watch by the high cathedrals;

They have eyes, mournful, tolerant and sardonic, for the ways of men,
In the high, white, tiled gables.
The rain and the night have settled down on Flanders;
It is all wet darkness; you can see nothing.
Then those old eyes, mournful, tolerant and sardonic,
Look at great, sudden, red lights,
Look upon the shades of the cathedral
And the golden rods of the illuminated rain,
For a second . . ..
And those old eyes,
Very old eyes that have watched the ways of men for generations,
Close for ever.
The high white shoulders of the gables
Slouch together for a consultation,
Slant drunkenly over in the lea of the flaming cathedrals.
They are no more, the old houses of Flanders.[22]

He was as attentive to war's destruction of houses and the ordered life they stood for as to its destruction of their occupants. His vision of London remaining under the shadow of the war was in part a product of his having seen war *in* London before and after seeing it in France and Belgium. *It Was the Nightingale* describes going to see if his mother is all right during a Zeppelin raid and finding her in her house, 'sitting in her bedroom window—which she should not have been!—reading *Lorna Doone* in between the shrapnel flashes in the sky' (80):

> "I can assure you [wrote Ford] that walking along High Street, Kensington, was a sufficiently frightful experience, so that I prayed I might be back in places where you would be hit by a nice clean piece of shell-casing. In there the air seemed to be filled with bits of flying chimney pots and coping stones and our own shrapnel [. . .]" (79–80)

Ford and Violet Hunt had written about the fear of Zeppelin raids in *Zeppelin Nights* and been criticised for being unpatriotic cowards for doing so during wartime. The scenario there is a group of Londoners sitting out the raids indoors by listening to historical sketches. If the source of the frightfulness here is partly the anticipation of horrible messy injuries, it is also to do with the uncanniness of bits of house not behaving like houses should.

Dennis Brown, in a fine essay, connected *Parade's End* with W. R. Bion's psycho-analytic concepts of container and contained; ideas which D. W. Winnicott developed into the idea of 'holding'.[23] In *Attention and Interpretation,* Bion wrote: 'According to his background, a patient will describe various objects as containers, such as his mind, the unconsciousness, the nation; others as contained, such as his money, his ideas' (Bion 1923). These ideas theorise the relation between infant and mother: the mother 'holds' the baby, not just literally, but psychically, guaranteeing its security and protection however stricken it is by anxiety or rage; acting as container for those emotions that the infant projects, and which otherwise would flood the infant's entire world. According to the post-Kleinian object-relations theory that both men contributed to, our relations with objects reflect, and also develop, this primal relationship.

A house, according to this view, is never just a house; never just a physical container for people and furniture, but it is also a psychic container; something we rely on to protect us from real threats like weather, or hostile animals or people; but also to protect us against our own anxiety. It is not irrelevant to this discussion that Bion served in tanks on the Western Front. When Ford writes 'men's dwellings were thin shells', it is as if they were our protective carapaces; as if war reveals the thinness of our skin—our literal container; and makes our desire for better containers a matter of life and death.

Think of how we react to houses blown open, by explosion or natural disaster—whether bombs and missiles in Syria and Ukraine; or the blitzed ruins of the buildings the Woolfs had lived in in London's Tavistock and Mecklenbugh Squares, interior walls

with doors and decorations and fireplaces left clinging to the exterior; or the devastation of hurricanes like Katrina and Sandy. That sense of insides not staying inside, but spilling outwards, can mobilise all the 'powers of horror' at our human vulnerability that Julia Kristeva writes about in her analysis of abjection (Kristeva 1980). Trauma—the kind of trauma Ford experienced amidst shell explosions—is uncontained panic. When memories of it recur, they have all the unpredictability and plenitude of Proustian involuntary memory, but not in a good way; annihilating and overwhelming rather than ecstatic and restorative. The panic couldn't be contained at the time; nor will it remain contained by the past, but instead keeps flooding back through associations, nightmares, visions, or apparently, just at random. The soldier feeling exposed to gunfire and shellfire longs for a protective container; but he sees the very houses that should offer such security themselves being annihilated by war. So, he also knows that they will never feel as if they really can contain the terror. Robert Graves described how visions of war would burst into his postwar bedroom (Graves 1986). The more disturbing the memory, the harder it is to say *Goodbye to All That*.

Criticism of war literature has become so dominated by trauma theory that we neglect kinds of writing, like Ford's or Graves's, in which shocking experiences have not been fully repressed—banished to the unconscious—but recur and overshadow the present. Tietjens has not blanked out the memory of O Nine Morgan's death. His hallucinatory vision of a map with blood flowing over it is, rather, an involuntary *memento mori*. The map is another variant on the screen: a paper sheet giving a euphemistic representation of the sites of carnage; but which—perhaps because the names of places on it summon back memories of the actual places—becomes a transparent film through which the carnage returns. Like the pages of a book, perhaps. Rather than loss of memory, this is memory in excess: a kind of overwhelming flood of reminiscence. Of course, the memories which recur may themselves be screening worse, genuinely traumatic ones. But they are not Freudian screen memories, the point of which is that they have no obvious or logical link with the traumatic memory they mask. In Ford's houses of war, the trauma is projected onto the screen memory.

Ford's houses of war are thus both images for repression—or rather, of the desire to repress, to keep threats at bay; and also images of the failure of repression and self-protection. The Fordian house in war functions at two levels. It is an actual container, offering some form of shelter, however inadequate; but it is also a symbol of containment; of the possibility of anxiety being able to be contained. Ford's postwar anxiety about the insubstantiality of houses correspondingly works on two levels. It is about the terror of feeling unprotected on the Western Front, even when inside huts or houses; about the feeling, then, that the walls of the dugout or hut couldn't keep the terror out. But it is also about the feeling that houses after the war cannot keep the terror from coming *back*. The walls are insubstantial, like a cinematic 'screen'—*No Enemy* ends with a chapter on 'The Movies'—because the mind, as Ford describes it, is always in two places at once; ranging out through the walls of space and time:

You would think that, out there, in a French dug-out, in a tent in support; in an army hut, you would at least be cut off from the anxieties of the everyday world. But you will find yourself a prey to the worst of all anxieties [. . . Such a man] is indeed *homo duplex*: a poor fellow whose body is tied in one place, but whose mind and personality brood eternally over another distant locality.[24]

To give a final example of how this view might let us see Ford's war writing differently, let us consider *No Enemy*: a work the generic hybridity and fragmentariness of which has tended to resist analysis. As suggested, Ford's posing of it as 'a Reconstructionary Tale' (11) is psychically motivated, as much as it is motivated by economics or demographics or politics. This reading offers a new sense of its structure. It is, after all, remarkably odd: dealing with the war and its aftermath not directly, but obliquely, through reminiscences of places and people; b these are gathered into two halves: Four Landscapes, and Certain Interiors. It might, at first glance, seem fairly arbitrary; or to be making an aesthetic claim, as if we were looking at pictures in an exhibition: landscapes on this wall, on this, interiors;

but the distinction between outside and inside is crucial. The insides represent places that are supposed to be refuges from war: a grand hotel; a billet, a bathhouse, the movies, etc; but violence or the memory of violence will keep creeping in. The last of the interiors concerns the Belgian woman Ford calls Rosalie Prudent, who sits sewing in her house in a town that has recently been shelled by the Germans.[25] In many ways, she embodies a maternal, containing function: repairing clothes, talking about her menfolk; and she represents, too, that kind of feminine resilience that Ford so admired—and needed—in characters like Meary Walker, the Romney Marsh peasant whose motto was 'I keep all on going'. They are 'certain interiors' in the sense of 'just a few'; but 'certain' also implies other qualities: houses you can be sure of; on which you can rely, like your mother's fearlessness (or is it oblivion?) during danger, as in an air raid. Ford says, in a note to the opening of the next chapter, 'The Movies': his persona Gringoire has asked the fictional 'Compiler' to note that Rosalie's real name was not Prudent but *Dutoit: le toit* being the roof. On the other hand, the notion of interiors which are certain might imply the opposite: *un*certain interiors. It is because one feels one's own interior to be uncertain (or, as a psychoanalyst might say, unconscious), that one wants one's domestic interiors to be certain.

There is, thus, finally, a very different story sharing the same domestic space. Gringoire is introduced as having survived the war:

> to inhabit in tranquillity with the most charming of companions a rural habitation so ancient, frail and unreal that it is impossible to think of it otherwise than as the Gingerbread Cottage you may have read of in the tale of "Hansel and Gretel." (7)

The charming cottage turns out in the fairy tale to be very sinister: luring the children in so the wicked witch can cook and eat them. Just as its walls are liminal, blurring the boundary between inedible and edible, building materials and food, so the witch plans to transgress the boundary between treating the children to supper and treating them as supper. Containers can be sanctuaries; they can sometimes be traps.

The domestic violence of my title, that is to say, is not a matter of violence done just *to* houses like the Old Houses of Flanders, but of violence done *in* houses; or even, in a sense, *by* houses, or rather, by households; by the domesticity, the ordering of life in the domestic space. *It Was the Nightingale* is explicit that what the soldier's mind broods on are the treacheries of others and betrayals by his womenfolk (197).

Parade's End repeatedly juxtaposes the violence done outside to that done inside houses or huts. In *Some Do Not* . . .Sylvia throws a plate of food at Tietjens. (In a cancelled version of the ending Ford even had Sylvia striking both his cheekbones as hard as she can with her fists and giving him two black eyes; 415). In *No More Parades*, the dying O Nine Morgan bursts into the hut as McKechnie has been arguing violently with Tietjens. Later, Tietjens faces verbal aggression from General Campion. There are the domestic or quasi-domestic containers in which marital violence erupts; as it does between Tietjens and Sylvia in the hotel room in Rouen; or that which Tietjens fears might erupt between O Nine Morgan and his wife's lover, the prize-fighter (to spare Morgan from which, Tietjens denies his request for the leave which might have saved his life). On the Armistice, in *A Man Could Stand Up—*, it is Edith Ethel Duchemin (now Lady Macmaster) who tries to destroy the relationship between Tietjens and Valentine. *Last Post*, the final volume, is permeated by the fear of what havoc Sylvia might unleash next. One of her acts is to get Groby Great Tree cut down so that it smashes through one of the walls of the Tietjens family's ancestral home.

That is very much the core plot of *Parade's End*: that 'ordered life'—the life of civilised houses—is threatened as much by sexual and social hostilities as by war; and even that war is itself motivated by such sexual aggressions. With a characteristic turn, Ford suggests that the walls of the house are not just the things that should shield us from violence, but that, at some level, they contribute to it. The pun on 'shells' does some of that work: 'men's dwellings were thin shells'. The walls are a shell that you hope will keep at least some of the blast and shrapnel out. But a shell casing keeps the explosive *in*; until it bursts violently out. If a house is that sort of container, the danger comes from within; from us; from the

explosive potential of human aggression and destructiveness; whether the potential of the individual human to disintegrate through terror; or that of humans in relationship to wound each other when they cannot contain their selves. As with shells, the structure designed to contain can also intensify the destructive power.

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Notes

1 (Ford 1999, pp. 36–37).
2 2 vols (Oxford University Press, 1996), vol. 2, pp. 197–98. (Freud 1899) trans. (Strachey 1962).
3 I am indebted here to Michael Mageean, "*The Secret Agent*'s (T)extimacies." in (Kaplan and Simpson 1996).
4 (White 1885), has 'bottomless pit'; 'volcanic' was substituted in later editions.
5 See, for example, (Ford 1939, p. 790).
6 Hulme, 'Cinders', in (Read 1924, vol. xiv, p. 219).
7 (Woolf 1978).
8 Terence MacSwiney was the Lord Mayor of Cork and MP for mid-Cork who had died that morning from hunger strike. The strike referred to at the end of the sentence was of the coal miners.
9 See (Patten 2022, p. 13).
10 See (Saunders 2023).
11 (Woolf 1978, p. 100).
12 Barbusse, *Le Feu*, translated by (Wray 1926).
13 'A House' was published in *Poetry* in March 1921; in October, it was awarded the magazine's prize of $100 for the best poem of the year.
14 *A Dual Life*, II, 89.
15 (Ford 1999, p. 41).
16 Mario Praz, *The Philosophy of Interior Decorating* (1945); translation by (Siegel 2017, pp. 205–6).
17 (Ford 2011a). Compare (Aldington 1929, pp. 345, 429).
18 See Sara Haslam's podcast lecture 'Contested Ground: Alcohol, Attachment and the Hut Habit at War', delivered at University College Dublin in June 2015: available online at https://soundcloud.com/ucd-humanities/sara-haslam-contested-ground-alcohol-attachment-and-the-hut-habit-at-war (accessed on 11 March 2024).
19 (Hueffer 1921), 3. *Selected Poems*, p. 126.
20 (Ford 2011b, p. 30).
21 (Ford 2011b, p. 24).
22 (Ford 1997, pp. 88–89). First published in the War Number of *Blast*, July 1915 (without the third line).
23 (Brown 2003; Bion 1962; Winnicott 1960).
24 (Ford 1934, p. 197).
25 See Paul Skinner, 'Introduction', *No Enemy*, xviii. As Helen Chambers notes, Ford would also have been thinking of Maupassant's story 'Rosalie Prudent': (Chambers 2016, p. 163).

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