



Article

Humility and Perspective-Taking: Ford's Ethics and Aesthetics of War Writing

Eve Sorum

Department of English, University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA 02125, USA; eve.sorum@umb.edu

Abstract: In an essay written sometime in 1917 or 1918, unpublished during his lifetime and only discovered in 1980, Ford Madox Ford reflects on what his war experience in France taught him: “above all things—humility”. This article argues that Ford’s writing about humility and perspective-taking in his wartime essays, which he connects to unstinting attentiveness to the particularities of place and people, can be read through an ecocritical lens that sees an ecological humility as central to reorienting human relationships within the natural world. In reflecting on both the lessons of war and the causes of such conflicts, Ford highlights humility in terms of perspective-taking and, in a related move, foregrounds the necessity for the precise use of language—both he sees as key to representing and preventing war. In so doing, I argue, Ford calls for an aesthetics and an ethics of war writing. Such literature must realize the impossibility and hubris of the bird’s-eye view, instead rooting itself in the ground, both literally and linguistically, while using a precise language that emerges from a clear awareness of this limited perspective.

Keywords: Ford Madox Ford; humility; ecology; war writing; First World War

Or perhaps it is that one has learnt out in France, above all things—humility. There, one is like a grain of sand, drifting here and there, downwards as the sands run out of an hour glass”

(Ford 1999, p. 63)

Humility might not be the first word that comes to mind when thinking about Ford Madox Ford, who is so often described as a notorious embellisher of stories and quoted for lines like this one in a 1920 letter to Herbert Read, where he claims, “England learned all it knows of Literature from me” (Ford 1965, p. 127). Yet, as the subtitle—“A Dual Life”—of Max Saunders’s meticulous and generative biography of Ford suggests, Ford’s stance is never simply one thing or another; he is both hubristic and humble, and his characters and narrative situations are never understandable from singular and unchanging perspectives. We must always take into account, Saunders notes, “Ford’s genius at showing two sides of an affair,” since “As so often in Ford, the double picture is itself something of a double: both a picture of dual mental processes, and also a picture of the doubleness of the act of imagining” (Saunders 1996, pp. 12, 35). Indeed, when we look at Ford’s writing about aesthetics and language in essays written during the First World War, we can see how Ford’s essential and strong argument in favor of humility emerges alongside and despite the simultaneous perspective-limiting experience of war trauma.

The form of humility that I examine here is one that Ford links with the experience of war and with perspective-taking. To do so, I read essays Ford wrote while on the Western Front that reveal a perhaps counterintuitive connection between attention to granular detail—a commitment to precision in perspective—and humility, which might be otherwise seen as arising from a more open or expansive vision. The fact that the experience of war precipitated this focus on humility is something that Ford notes directly in a draft of an essay written sometime in 1917 or 1918, unpublished during his lifetime and only discovered in 1980, where he reflects on what his war experience in France has taught



Citation: Sorum, Eve. 2024. Humility and Perspective-Taking: Ford’s Ethics and Aesthetics of War Writing.

Humanities 13: 78. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13030078>

Received: 1 February 2024

Revised: 16 April 2024

Accepted: 16 May 2024

Published: 22 May 2024



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him: “above all things—humility” (Ford 1999, p. 63). This education in humility arises from what Saunders describes as Ford’s understanding of “war’s transformation of values” (Saunders 1996, p. 223), which happens, Ford writes, because “Bluff has got its death blow” (qtd. in Saunders 1996, p. 224). “Bluff,” in this case, involves the stirring, but ultimately deceptive terms—Ford mentions “Heroism” and “Patriotism” as examples (ibid.)—that the war revealed as fundamentally “alibis for imperialism” (Saunders 1996, p. 224). War has exposed the bluff of England’s pretensions in the world and, even if it may not have rendered the irrepressible Ford exactly humble, he sees that it has led to the need for an aesthetic form and a granular language that brings us back down to the ground, in both literal and metaphoric ways.

Connected to this idea of grounding, I also argue here that Ford’s writing about humility and perspective-taking in his wartime essays, including in the above draft and in essays like “France, 1915” and “War and the Mind,” anticipates a contemporary turn in ecocriticism towards an “ecological humility” (J. Weinstein 2015). Critic Josh Weinstein describes this humility as emerging from that term’s etymological link to the earth—the humus—that grounds and centers our perspective. Weinstein writes that “ecological humility is a humility that *recognizes the simultaneous smallness of any one being in relation to the whole*” (J. Weinstein 2015, p. 771). Such smallness mirrors Ford’s sense of being a grain of sand “drifting here and there,” quoted in the epigraph above, but Weinstein clarifies this further, drawing out the inverse implication: such recognition of one’s smallness in relation to the whole is countered by an awareness of “*the impossibility of the whole without its constituent parts*. . . . What is most important here is the recognition of multiple perspectives, which exist without the need for a grand hierarchy” (p. 771). Weinstein thereby helps us see how humility is in fact *dependent* on states of contradiction in which the subject holds seemingly irreconcilable positions at the same time. Thus, you are aware of your smallness, your sense of being a grain of sand, indistinguishable and aimless, and at the same time, you are aware of your role as part of a greater whole, a greater plan. The individual perspective loses its pre-eminence, but it is a loss that does not lead to a sense of self-abnegation.

Reading humility as fundamentally about the reorientation of human relationships to the world allows me to connect it to Ford’s aesthetic theory of impressionism, as well as to his sense of the role of the self in writing, both of which become important in his discussion of silences and ellipses, as well as in his attention to precise and concrete description. Working from Weinstein’s theory of ecological humility, I argue that we can see Fordian humility as an eco-humility not because he writes about nature (though he does so at many points), but because he reorients the perceiving subject into a non-hierarchical relationship of perspective-taking and description of the human and non-human world. This form of eco-humility materializes as central to Ford’s connections between aesthetics and ethics, art and education.

1. Humility, Silence, Education

Freighted with religious, moral, and political weight—the usage examples in the Oxford English Dictionary reveal how, from the 12th century onward, humility was connected to a sense of self-abasement both before God and before royalty—the concept of humility seems at odds with what may often seem the experiments of high modernism; the difficulty of the poetry and prose of writers ranging from Gertrude Stein to Ford Madox Ford to James Joyce, as well as the readerly work required when engaging with their texts, suggest hubris, not humility, on the part of their creators (Oxford English Dictionary 2023a, 2023b). As Merve Emre wrote during the 2022 celebrations of *Ulysses* and other modernist monuments in *The New Yorker*, “Seduced and abandoned, the reader makes one connection after another, but they affirm nothing more than Joyce’s appetite for knowledge, a cultural literacy presented as godlike in its extent” (Emre 2022). Yet, this pursuit of a godlike cultural literacy comes from a disciplinary vision that sees knowledge as based upon accumulation and ordering; there are other ways to approach Ford or Joyce’s novels

and difficult texts in general. Jack Halberstam offers a response for academics to this imperative: he argues we must “Resist mastery” by “investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity” (Halberstam 2011, p. 11). By resisting the project of coming into knowledge—a project encoded in the *bildungsroman* and one that modernist narratives upend¹—these texts offer up an alternative humanistic project: they instigate what Elizabeth Freeman describes in disciplinary terms as the “shock to common sense, the estranging move that will always make what we do unintelligible and incalculable and that may release or catalyze enough energy to blow out a few institutional fuses” (qtd. in Halberstam 2011, p. 20).

Ford anticipates this argument seventy years earlier in his discussion of the role of art in the modern state in a 1935 *American Mercury* article titled “Hands off the Arts.” Making an argument that may seem surprising to those who know of Ford’s own propagandistic wartime writings, which include *When Blood is Their Argument: An Analysis of Prussian Culture* (1915) and *Between St. Denis and St. George: A Sketch of Three Civilisations* (1915), Ford takes a different line in this piece written after he had experienced the brutality of war.² In “Hands off the Arts,” he argues against the use of art for propaganda, as well as, more broadly, for the importance of the arts in education, claiming that the arts play an essential educative role in society—“Your only educators are the Arts” (Ford 2004, p. 301). We confuse, Ford notes, instruction with education: while “instruction is a pumping in of records of facts, education consists in the opening of men’s minds to the perception of fitnesses”, which comes from “the consumption, from subjection to the influences, of the arts”, and which in turn makes humans more humane, separating them from “the beast that perishes and causes to perish” (p. 302).

Embedded in this layered description is what we could describe as an ultimately pacifist ethical agenda—an education in the arts will take us away from actions that cause ourselves and others to perish. Yet, this cannot be learned in the traditional way because it is not a project of accumulation or of acts of action and mastery. Indeed, this form of education harkens back to the word’s etymological roots, the Latin *ēducere*, which has, as the Oxford English Dictionary notes, “connotations of a person’s intrinsic qualities being ‘drawn out’”. Such a drawing out involves attentiveness, and Ford goes on to emphasize that one reaches this point through contemplation and silence. Reading or examining a piece of art, Ford writes, “will ensure for yourself a moment of silence and in that your perceptions of human values will become more clear in your subconscious” (Ford 2004, p. 306). While reminiscent, on the one hand, of a Paterian vision of art as the place where humans can attempt, perhaps futilely, to capture a moment in our ever-changing world and reality—“art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass” (Pater 1998, p. 153)—on the other hand, Ford’s vision is deeply focused not just on the aesthetic experience, but also on the ethical implications of this experience—increased insight about the “perceptions of human values” and of, as we will see in his wartime literature, the experiences of the non-human and the spaces of the natural world.

I bring these ideas of art, education, and perception together here because we can begin to see the relationship between an engagement with art (literary or otherwise) and perspective-taking as a simultaneously aesthetic and ethical one. In order to heed Ford’s call to pause and contemplate, one must resist that urge to master and one must remain humble; a state of openness is the bedrock of learning. Humility is, therefore, embedded in successful educational practices, as well as in, as Ford’s formulation suggests, meaningful works of art and engagements with these works. On the one hand, this focus on humility defines many modernist aesthetic projects beyond Ford’s—perhaps, most famously in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, since the reader must reach a state of openness in order to experience the myriad forms and voices on display.³ Yet, Ford’s version of humility and the necessary readerly openness differs from Joyce’s when we consider its origin in the First World War. By 1935, Ford is focusing on the encounter with a work of art that can teach the viewer or reader how to listen and, therefore, engender a humble openness, but he still links this

experience of intellectual and emotional humility specifically with how it takes us out of a warlike frame of mind (we are no longer simply “the beast that perishes and causes to perish”). Not the Joycean epiphany nor the “sudden violent shock” Virginia Woolf describes as central to her identity as a writer,⁴ Ford’s focus on pauses and listening, while deeply embedded in and manifested through language, is less epiphanic or revelatory and more reflective—perhaps more akin to Woolf’s description in her 1926 essay, “On Being Ill,” of how illness transforms both spatial and temporal relations and, therefore, leads to these moments of reflection: for the invalid, trapped in the stasis of the ill body, “the world has changed its shape; the tools of business grown remote. . . while the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea” (Woolf 1975, p. 12). Spatial isolation and the act of reorientation that it produces then leads to an expansion of time: the invalid is “able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky” (p. 14).

The connection that Woolf makes between illness and the observational pause proves useful for understanding the generative potential of Ford’s turn to humility in his fiction, and how such a turn might lead to a more granular and attentive form of writing, particularly because of the link between the aporia of illness and the gaps caused by shell shock.⁵ In “On Being Ill,” Woolf reveals how a seemingly traumatic (or, at the least, inconvenient) event—the experience of illness—creates a space from which the invalid can fully, expansively *look*. Here, illness creates both a displacement and a pause—a spatial *and* a temporal jolt—and, therefore, highlights the interconnection of the spatial and the temporal. In coming to a halt, we are taken out of our normal sphere and resituated; this displacement allows us to look more intently and with renewed attention at the textures of the world around us. And this carries over into language: illness reveals the sounds and experience of words because the reasoning mind lets down its guard, “the words give out their scent and distil their flavour” (Woolf 1975, p. 19), *before* one then starts to parse the meaning. Rather than being immediately caught up in the active diachronic experience of making meaning and charting narrative progression, there is a pause in which the senses respond first, hearing the sounds or seeing the shapes before the reader engages in analysis and interpretation. Displacement, therefore, can be linked with, on the level of the line, ellipses and dashes, and, on the level of a narrative, interludes and narrative breaks. This is not just about the pace of the line or text but also about the way that unexpected movements (movements from place to place) require a different kind of looking or reading; we see differently when we are jolted into a different space.

In Ford’s war tetralogy, *Parade’s End*, and with his shell-shocked protagonist, Christopher Tietjens, the aesthetic and ethical import of noticing, along with the narrative experiments with pauses, reaches an apotheosis. Elsewhere, I have written about how ellipses function in the tetralogy to represent the erasures caused by war trauma, perforating the minds of characters when they are immersed in moments of war violence, and simultaneously calling attention to the movements between different perspectives and the possibility of empathetic engagement with others (Sorum 2019). As Saunders discusses in his introduction to *Some Do Not . . .* (where ellipses infiltrate even the title), and Sara Haslam in the introduction to *A Man Could Stand Up*—(which ends with a similarly elliptical dash), the Fordian ellipses in the novel serve as pauses in which “characters let their minds race around and beyond the words they have heard or said or are about to say” (Saunders 2010, p. xxxvi). Even as they signify “suppression, repression, doubt, hesitation, nervousness, or expectation,” they also contain “another level of running, unspoken dialogue” (Haslam 2011a, pp. xxxvi, xxxvii).⁶ Indeed, the most complete understanding between characters—for example, as Saunders describes, in the love scene between Tietjens and his unexpected love interest, Valentine Wannop—occurs in “broken, choking fragments” that are perforated with ellipses. After this scene, Tietjens and Valentine are finally “able to recognize and act upon their love” (Saunders 2010, pp. xlv, xlvi). Equally momentous is the unspoken dialogue that occurs in the interstices of the conversation between Tietjens and General Campion, his commanding officer and old family friend, in the final pages of

No More Parades. After shielding his wife's affair from everyone for years, instead allowing them to assume that he had been the transgressor, Tietjens lets slip, in a moment of extreme stress, a statement that reveals she had been in the wrong: "As a matter of fact, Sylvia and my father were not on any sort of terms. I don't believe they exchanged two words for the last five years of my father's life" (Ford [1925] 2011, p. 244). Upon hearing this, both men become silent: "The general's eyes were fixed with an extreme hardness on Tietjens'. He watched Tietjens' face, beginning with the edges around the nostrils, go chalk white. [...] In the silence the voices of the men talking over the game of House came as a murmur to them" (pp. 244–45). This moment of silence is important not because it reveals Campion's realization of Tietjens' extreme honor and self-sacrifice (indeed, he had already suspected, though he had not guessed the extent of the effects of Sylvia's indiscretions), but because it is a moment of *shared* understanding ("He knows he's given his wife away!... Good God!" (p. 245)), which continues over the narrative time of a page: "He and Tietjens continued to look at each other. It was as if they were hypnotized" (p. 245). The silence is finally broken by Campion's careful choice of a question that signals to Tietjens that they can return to their normal relationship—a signal that the silence, during which we see how Campion's mind works through past events and realizes the extent of the trauma faced by Tietjens and the pain that his wife has caused, has led to a compassionate understanding of Tietjens' sacrifices. These conversational ellipses, in which the characters stop talking, while the narrative traces Campion's growing understanding of Tietjens' situation, make clear how Ford's war novels use silences, gaps, and ellipses to emphasize the sort of pauses that must occur in order to listen. Ellipses, in this way, become a marker of a silence that prepares the way for a thoughtful engagement with the world around and with others, which in turn will be the basis for Ford's granular, observational humility.

2. Precise Language, Humility, Nature

The humility that I am charting here is not about self-abasement, therefore, but rather a form of listening or a pause that allows for an attentiveness to the world outside the self—the surrounding non-human, as well as human ecology—thereby negating the idea of the self as the all-important, all-defining source of meaning and perception, and instead moving towards a recognition of the multi-perspectival nature of existence.⁷ This is a stance that demands both a clear and generous vision and a passion for precision with language—"precision" because, if the observing and narrating perspectives are attentive, the most minute details will emerge under their gaze. Such precision connects to the modernist urge to bend language, to adopt T. E. Hulme's metaphor, so that it can try to reach some sort of more scrupulous connection with reality: "The great aim is accurate, precise and definite description," Hulme writes, and "It is only by a concentrated effort of the mind that you can hold it fixed to your own purpose" (Hulme 1936, p. 132). Since "each man sees a little differently, and to get out clearly and exactly what he does see, he must have a terrific struggle with language"—only this will lead to "sincerity" in expression (pp. 132, 133). Such precision develops from a sense of rootedness in language: what Hulme describes as "a pedestrian taking you over the ground" (p. 134), and Ford calls an "extreme concreteness of mentality" (Ford 2004, p. 171). The concentrated mind does not have to be a narrow mind if the concentration is on that which is outside the self.

There are clear aesthetic ramifications to these beliefs in a concrete mentality and sincerity of expression, and they point us towards the ideas of an eco-humility that surface in Ford's writing from both before and during the war period. We can see this turn, for example, in Ford's review of Robert Frost's *North of Boston* (1914), which was published in the *Outlook* on 27 June 1914, just a little over a month before the outbreak of the First World War. In this review, Ford notes and praises the "very real sense of his meadows and woods and rocks and berries, and of night and of showers and of wildernesses and dangers" (Ford 2004, p. 169) in Frost's poetry, which Ford describes as penned in a verse that "is much finer, much more near the ground and much more national, in the true sense, than anything that Whitman gave the world" (p. 169). Ford's connection between what is

“near the ground” and “more national” hints at how these aesthetic questions are bound for him with questions of language and nation; the entanglement of the aesthetic and the political become crucial from the vantage point of France in 1915.

Such groundedness carries over into Ford’s war writing, yet this is not the peacetime “meadows and woods” of Frost’s poetry but the perforated and bloodied territory of the Western Front. The perspective here, therefore, takes on an ethical, as well as an aesthetic, import. Reflecting on both the lessons of war and the causes of the conflict in an essay written a year later, titled “France, 1915,” Ford highlights humility in perspective-taking and the precision of language as key to representing *and* preventing war. In so doing, Ford calls for both an aesthetics and an ethics of war writing: such literature must realize the impossibility and hubris of the bird’s-eye view, instead rooting itself in the ground, both literally (narrating from the perspective of the soldiers in the trenches) and linguistically, using language with a precision that comes out of a clear awareness of this limited perspective.⁸ Language, for Ford, determines both aesthetic and ethical positions: “it has never been sufficiently recognized in this country [England] how language holds sway over character, over action, and over all the attributes of humanity” (Ford 2004, p. 170). The concrete mentality that he attributes to the French appears in their precision of speech; attempts to achieve such precision, Ford argues, are particularly crucial because the world “drifted into the greatest of catastrophes for want of plain-speaking” (p. 171). He argues, therefore, that

one might think that sanity would lead the populations of this country and the world to see the desirability of cultivating the exact use of speech. We are at war today very largely because of the imbecilely figurative language that prevails in German ministries and Chancelleries, and of the imbecilely phrased reservations that characterize the diplomatic language of the rest of the world. (p. 171)

The ethical and political merge with the aesthetic for Ford: precision in the use of language becomes not simply desirable for reasons of style, beauty, and clarity of thought, but because words lead to actions as profound as war, and “if similar blunders of diplomacy are to be avoided in the future it is important that clarity of phrase and exactness of thought should be cultivated. And here at once the question of aesthetics comes in” (Ford 2004, p. 172). Ford’s argument stands in a compelling, if unexpectedly, direct relationship to his pre-war writings about literary impressionism, as I will discuss below, and exhibits again his (unabashedly confident!) belief in concrete and precise language as key to avoiding war. Both national and literary humility involve eschewing the generalizations that a bird’s-eye view allows (those terms the war had exposed as “bluff”) and instead cultivating precise description. The existence of this seemingly contradictory stance—a call for attention to detail in the face of world catastrophe—will prove, in fact, deeply connected to eco-humility.

The aesthetic question, therefore, depends, for Ford, on language being rooted in the place from which it emerges and in the experiences of everyday life. Unsurprisingly, after this claim about aesthetics, Ford first turns to the example of the farmer to illustrate what he means: the “farmer who can instruct his hind in the fewest and most exact words how deep to plough a field, how low to cut a hedge” will be “doing a greater service to humanity” because his work will yield a larger return (Ford 2004, p. 172). This argument—that precise language results in more productive citizens—is not simply an economic one for Ford; it bleeds over into ethical action, connections to nature, and relationships between humans: “it is only by exactitude of expression between man and man that honesty and decency in human contacts can be attained to” (p. 173). The stakes of aesthetic expression and precision in language are high in 1915: “we shall only make a decent thing of peace when we can see human issues clearly, and we shall only see human issues clearly when we have learnt to effect their just expression” (p. 173).⁹

This vision of attentiveness to “just expression” requires a perspective based in a form of humility best defined by British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch as a “selfless respect for reality” (Murdoch 2001, p. 93). In “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,” Murdoch writes that beauty provides the occasion for “unselfing”—experiences that can “alter consciousness in the direction of unselfishness” (p. 82). Murdoch’s identification of both nature and art as the arenas in which we can encounter this beauty illuminates and supports Ford’s connections between precise description and attentiveness to both the human and the natural world—for Murdoch, beauty is “the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share” (p. 82). Beauty can take oneself out of a self-obsessed state in order to, or with the unintended result of being able to, “clear our minds of selfish care” (p. 82). This is where the perceptive, the aesthetic, and the ethical experiences align, and Murdoch’s language eerily mirrors Ford’s from his essay on art in the 1935 *American Mercury*; Murdoch argues that since the “only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it [art] all clearly and respond to it justly which is inseparable from virtue” (p. 85), and, therefore, art “is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen” (p. 85).

Art’s impact depends here on attentiveness to the outside world—a focus on what Murdoch describes as the project of great artists: to “reveal the detail of the world” (Murdoch 2001, p. 94). Such vision requires absenting the self from the picture, and humility, Murdoch notes, is “one of the most difficult and central of all virtues”; it is “rather like having an inaudible voice, it is a selfless respect for reality” (p. 93). Revealing the details, having “respect for reality”—again, defying expectations of the narcissistic artist, Murdoch’s argument is that the artist—to be a good one—must in fact work towards “the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self” (p. 101). Such clarity of vision can result in a kind of artistic revisioning: “The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are” (p. 101). This form of seeing *through* oneself—“through,” in the sense that the self is still there but it acts as a lens rather than the focus—suggests that Murdoch’s artist perceives in ways reminiscent of Ford’s impressionist writer, whose “selfless respect for reality” comes out in what Saunders describes as key to Ford’s theory of impressionism, the layering of multiple perspectives to create a “rendering without moralizing” (Saunders 2004, p. 436).

Such clarity of vision seems difficult to attain in a place like the Western Front; the sense of humility most clearly present is one’s own insignificance in the face of the clear expendability of all the bodies there in service of a political struggle—a view that Ford’s character Tietjens expounds upon in *A Man Could Stand Up*—: “They might very well be hoping that our losses through the counter-demonstration would be so heavy that the country would cry out for the evacuation of the Western Front. . . If they could get half a million of us killed perhaps the country might. . .” (Ford [1926] 2011, pp. 84–5). As Ford’s essay, “Arms and the Mind,” written while he was serving in Ypres in September 1916, attests, trauma and a sense of one’s smallness in the face of mass tragedy do not necessarily lead to a humility that allows for clear vision: Ford describes how being in war in fact drove him more deeply “in on oneself. I used to think that being in France would be like being in a magic ring that would cut me off from all private troubles: but nothing is further from the truth” (Ford 1999, p. 41). Far from instigating the kind of “unselfing” that leads to attention to detail and great art, the trauma of war mires one in the weeds of personal emotion alongside the intensity of the frontline experience. The boundaries of perception are narrowed down to the view allowed from your position as a patrol officer or Battalion Intelligence Officer: “the class of object that is laid down for your observation is strictly limited in range” (p. 38) and even the idea of humanity dissolves as it “is all just matter—all humanity, just matter; one with the trees, the shells by the roadside, the limbered wagons, the howitzers and the few upstanding housewalls” (p. 39).

This is a possible, if difficult, route to humility—to recognize all as “just matter,” and to level the relationships between individuals, nature, and even human-made objects. Yet the experience of the war seems to stop thought, to even stop visualization: “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.” (Ford 1999, p. 36). The brain, Ford says, can picture these places and events but, “as for putting them—into words! No: the mind stops dead, and something in the brain stops and shuts down” (p. 37). In this moment, Ford reveals the fineness of the line between a silence that forecloses meaning-making and one that enables it. And yet, in another unpublished piece, “Epilogue,” written sometime between 1917 and 1919, we can begin to see how Ford goes from the wordlessness of his earlier essay to a practice in which humility can arise from this experience of war in such a way that then enables, rather than disables, attentiveness to detail. Soon after describing the humility acquired in France with that metaphor of the hour glass quoted in the epigraph to this essay—“one has learnt out in France, above all things—humility. There, one is like a grain of sand, drifting here and there, downwards as the sands run out of an hour glass” (Ford 1999, p. 63)—Ford notes:

But, indeed, one couldn’t ever really theorise worth twopence. Just as every human face differs, if just by the hair’s breadth turn of a nostril, from every other human face, so every human life differs from every other human life if only by a little dimple on the stream of it. And the hair’s breadth turn of the nostril—the hair’s breadth dimple on the stream of life when they come in contact with the lives of others just make all the difference—all the huge difference in the fates of men and women. (p. 63)

This is the insight that humility brings: attentiveness to the granular details of others’ lives and beings. Here, Ford evocatively describes it as those minuscule differences—between just the “turn of a nostril” or the “dimple on the stream of life”—that can have such far-reaching implications. The artist must be attentive to these details, as Murdoch has reminded us, and we see the connection here again to the way that one must be grounded. The problem with theorizing is, for Ford, that it takes one away from the intricate detail; Ford muses, “I don’t see upon what hill they can stand in order to get their bird’s eye views,” since “if you stand aloof from humanity how can you know about us poor people?” (Ford 1999, pp. 62–3). While the trauma of war shuts down the ability to create, at least in the short term, the humility that one learns might provide the redemptive alternative side of the coin by foreclosing the idea of a remote and overarching view and instead insisting upon the importance of the tiny detail.

While Ford focuses on faces and small acts, it is worth noting that his metaphors about attentiveness to details develop from questions of perspective-taking—the helplessness that he feels in the face of the battle experience is one that is like being ungrounded: “There we were: those million men, forlorn, upon a raft in space” (Ford 1999, p. 38). The horror of this image is in the lack of connection, direction, and specification: they are an undifferentiated mass, untethered from the world, and floating aimlessly in the unknown. Such a focus on the alienation instigated by the war brings me back to Josh Weinstein’s vision of ecological humility, which he characterizes in terms of relationships between parts and the whole. Weinstein’s vision of this humility is ecological in its insistence on the interconnectedness of matter and a radical democracy of perspectives—that awareness of “*the impossibility of the whole without its constituent parts*” (J. Weinstein 2015, p. 771). This brings us back to Ford’s argument in “Arms and the Mind” that war allows and enforces a leveling of perspectives not just between humans, but in a broader ecological system as well; it reveals that it is “all just matter—all humanity, just matter; one with the trees” (Ford 1999, p. 39). Rather than unrelenting sameness, we can see this as connected to a humility that has resonances with Ford’s most famous aesthetic theory on impressionism in literature. Impressionism might first seem antithetical to humility since, as Ford writes, “the Impressionist gives you, as a rule, the fruits of his own observations and the fruits of his observations alone” (Ford [1914] 1995, p. 260). Yet, as eco-critic Jeffrey Mathes

McCarthy notes, impressionism is a tool that the “green modernists,” like Ford, “use to emplace consciousness” (McCarthy 2016, p. 23). Writing about Ford’s tetralogy, *Parade’s End*, McCarthy argues that Ford presents a “material awareness unfolding across life during wartime” (p. 24) and shows how “consciousness negotiates the profound actualities of physical existence” (p. 25). McCarthy’s discussion of the emplaced consciousness clarifies beautifully Ford’s description of what the impressionist tries to do: “render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass—through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on the surface, it reflects the face of a person behind you” (Ford [1914] 1995, p. 263). The perceiving consciousness is both visible and invisible, and the landscape is both backdrop and primary object of examination.

Thus, Ford’s turn in the final paragraphs of his essay on impressionism to the issue of humility makes sense in this context: although the impressionist can only relay his own impressions, Ford says, this is not because of a hubristic belief in the infallibility of his own way of seeing the world. Instead, the artist embodies a form of eco-humility, with a seemingly contradictory set of stances about the self in the world: “the artist must always be humble and humble and again humble, since before the greatness of his task he himself is nothing. He must again be outrageous, since the greatness of his task calls for enormous excesses by means of which he may recoup his energies” (Ford [1914] 1995, p. 274). Ford’s statements here bring us back to Saunders’ insights about the irrepressibly dual nature of Ford’s engagement with the world, but they also foreground why humility is both an aesthetic and an ethical stance for him—writing on the eve of the next world war in his polemical piece defending the arts, Ford bemoans the use of artists for propaganda because “There was never a time when humanity so needed the inculcation of the gift of sympathetic insight” (Ford 2004, p. 303).

What does this sympathetic insight, this humility in the face of the world and, in particular, the war world look like in Ford’s writing, then? In part, Ford answers this in one of his letters to Joseph Conrad written while at the front in France on 9 July 1916. Describing the unrelenting noise of the war, Ford writes, “I wonder if it is just vanity that in these cataclysmic moments makes one desire to record. I hope it is, rather, the annalist’s wish to help the historian—or, in a humble sort of way, my desire to help you, cher maître!—if you ever wanted to do anything in ‘this line’” (Ford 1965, p. 75). The precision of language, which means an attentiveness to the experience and a desire to put the details down as carefully as possible, goes here hand in hand with a sense of the historicity of the moment and the particularities of the space of the war.

We can see this play out in scenes in *Parade’s End*, where Tietjens reflects on the loss of the self in the face of bombardment, and yet in that reflection, manages to paint a deeply evocative vision of eco-humility—that “simultaneous smallness of any one being in relation to the whole” (J. Weinstein 2015) next to the essential nature of each small part for the whole to exist. At one memorable moment in *A Man Could Stand Up*—, which has the most extended scenes of battle and trench life in the tetralogy, Tietjens is almost hit by a flying skylark as he peers over the edge of the trench. As he recovers and listens to his Sergeant talk animatedly about the “Won’erful trust in yumanity! Won’erful hinstinck set in the fethered brest by the Halmighty! For oo was goin’ to ‘it a skylark on a battlefield!” (Ford [1926] 2011, p. 63), Tietjens turns to one of his favorite writers, “Gilbert White of Selborne” (p. 64), to think through the role of the lark. This is an overt turn to an ecological vision of the world; as Haslam’s note to this passage indicates, White is “often referred to as the founding father of the ecology movement” (p. 64, note). And Tietjens takes this moment of fear on the battlefield to reflect on the relationship between the bird and the human: “as for trust in humanity, the Sergeant might take it that larks never gave us a thought. We were part of the landscape and if what destroyed their nests whilst they sat on them was a bit of H.E. shell or the coulter of a plow it was all one to them” (p. 64). Not a callous dismissal, but rather a reminder of the smallness of humans in the face of the multiplicity of perspectives, Tietjens’s comment evinces the kind of eco-humility that reads

humans as simply one (overly destructive) element of the landscape—an idea that we find echoed today in definitions, like that of Jedidiah Purdy, of the ecological imagination as fundamentally about interconnection—“all natural systems, including the bodies of living things, are linked and interpermeable” (Purdy 2015, p. 200). Faced on the Western Front with this resilient skylark, Ford shows us here how Tietjens embodies habits of perception and humility in the face of multiplicity, revealing a truly ecological vision of the world.

The aesthetics of Ford’s ecological vision in his First World War tetralogy is, therefore, based in both precise description and in an impressionistic awareness of the landscape *alongside* the perceiving viewers. His attentiveness to the presence of experiences of the world other than that of the human connects Ford’s modernist impressionism to an eco-aesthetics that reorients the readers and the characters in a world of complex and often competing perspectives, both human and non-human.¹⁰ Yet, we might also return to Hulme’s dry and hard description; Hulme clarifies that such description is made so because “The classical poet never forgets this finiteness, this limit of man. He remembers always that he is mixed up with earth” (Hulme 1936, p. 120). The earthy roots of modernism become dampened when we enter the muddy terrain of the Western Front, but Ford retains that modernist call for precise description as part of his aesthetic and ethical imperative for a “selfless respect for reality” (Murdoch 2001, p. 93), as well as for a corresponding humility in the face of writing about the First World War.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to the editors of this Special Issue, the anonymous reviewers, and to my colleague Matt Brown for his thoughtful and always helpful feedback on this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See Philip Weinstein (2005) for a discussion of modernism’s inversion of the narrative of progress embedded in the form of the *bildungsroman*.
- ² For a thorough discussion of Ford’s wartime propagandistic writing, the role of Wellington House as the British propaganda machine, and the changing definitions of propaganda, see Fiona Houston’s dissertation on the First World War propaganda written by Ford and John Buchan (Houston 2020).
- ³ Humility is also foregrounded in the characters. Bloom, for example, springs forth from the page as a deeply and often surprisingly ethical being, most strikingly characterized by his humility and generosity in the face of others and of the world. Such humility turns out to be a thread running through the book; as Mr. Deasy, Stephen’s employer at the school, rather pompously pronounces, “To learn one must be humble. But life is the great teacher” (Joyce 1986, p. 29). The alchemy that occurs in this double-sided process of being both receptive and attentive encourages and, perhaps, even requires a kind of readerly humility in the face of the teachings of the life of the novel, as we navigate the episodes that each pose their own distinctive interpretive set of demands on the reader, who, alongside Bloom, tries to navigate the trajectory between sensation and language.
- ⁴ It differs from the Joycean epiphany that involves, as Joyce writes in a famous passage in *Stephen Hero*, a “sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (Joyce 1963, p. 211). Critic Sangam MacDuff has recently argued that these epiphanic instigators are fundamentally “linguistic phenomena,” and “not a revelation of God, nature, or the mind but of the human spirit embodied in language” (MacDuff 2020, pp. 1, 2). And yet, they are defined by revelation, or the “sudden violent shock” of an encounter, like what Virginia Woolf describes in her memoir, “A Sketch of the Past,” as central to her ability to create: “I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer” (Woolf 1985, pp. 71, 72).
- ⁵ Woolf performs this sort of pause in much of her fiction (from the observational aporia of the narrator gazing at the dark spot in “The Mark on the Wall,” to the interludes of *The Waves*, where the reader must observe the changes in light on the ocean).
- ⁶ Ford’s erratic and changing punctuation in the typescript to *A Man Could Stand Up*—is meticulously detailed by Haslam in “A Note on the Text of *A Man Could Stand Up*—”. She writes, “The minimum number of suspension dots in what is unquestionably

Ford's favorite kind of punctuation, for example, is three, but the maximum is eight" (Haslam 2011b, p. lxxii). The notes to the text also detail the instances where there are differences between the number of ellipses given in the typescript and in the US or UK editions of the novel; those instances are many.

- 7 See Haslam's "From Conversation to Humiliation" for a discussion of the concept of humiliation in *Parade's End*. While Haslam is examining humiliation in a piece about Tietjens's deep ties to the 18th century, her argument that humiliation for Tietjens "has very little to do with private practices or individual feeling" (p. 48) connects to my own argument that humility in Ford is not about an abnegation of the self but rather an attentiveness to the world around (Haslam 2014).
- 8 The limits on the warfront perspectives are not what Ford suggests are preferable; as the title of his third volume of *Parade's End*, *A Man Could Stand Up*—suggests, perhaps more than anything, a need or desire for some kind of expansive vision. As Haslam notes in the introduction to that volume, "it is this related writerly aim of being able to see the subject clearly, without fear or flinching, that is perhaps most important in the initial approach to the book" (Haslam 2011a, p. xviii).
- 9 See also Ford's later travel book, *Provence* (1935), in which he spends a significant portion of time in the chapter on "Nature" extolling the relationship to the land experienced by the Provençal citizen. The relationship is defined by close attention to the most minute details of the terrain (as well as interest in working the land). He writes, "For the Provençal. . . Nature is a matter of little squares in the orange, sun-baked earth. [. . .] with a tiny knife before the dawn is up you remove an infinitely tiny but superfluous leaf from a tiny pan; between clods the countenance of every one of which is as familiar to you as the face of your child" (Ford 1935, p. 110).
- 10 We can see this orientation in modernist poets like Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens. See, for example, Bonnie Costello's discussion of Moore's humility and awareness of perspective-taking; she writes, "Like Stevens, she knows her eccentricity and suspects a perspective that claims the center" (Costello 2003, p. 86).

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