

Ford's Training

This chapter is called 'Ford's Training' not simply because Ford was fascinated by the transport revolution that surrounded him. He was also fascinated by the impressionist possibilities such matters presented to him in his role as novelist. In addition comes Ford's apprehension of his literary training, often bound together with images of the train: one oft-repeated memory of his collaborations with Conrad takes place as they journey by rail to London. As Conrad, in deep and sole concentration, corrects the proofs of *Romance* Ford interrupts him. He is rewarded by an instinctive spring at his throat. 1 Max Saunders has interpreted the 'scene in the train' as exposing 'Ford's suppressed doubts about what Conrad really thought about him',² and, presumably, his writing. More confident in the analysis of his training, is an autobiographical passage from *Return to Yesterday* in which he explains his youthful, and continuing, understanding of the reflexive relationship between reading and writing. Ford remembers reading Kipling:

More plainly than the long curtains of the room in which I am writing I see now the browning bowl of my pipe, the singularly brown grey ashes, the bright placards as the train runs into the old-fashioned station. 3

With the sight of Kipling's train, in the memory of it as he writes, comes the balance and control of older and younger, literally differentiated selves. In the sight Ford achieves access to an older self: he travels, by 'joining' a train less traumatic than that used to signify a facet of collaboration. Historian Llewellyn Woodward tells us that the 'building of the railways was the greatest physical achievement carried out by the human race within a comparatively short space of time.' He indicates that a work of this kind was likely to touch almost every aspect of the national life, and centres his argument on the way in which the railways broke down what he calls the 'caste system and isolation' of rural England.⁴ Ford attends to the sociologically fragmentative effects of the train, believing that with 'the ease of locomotion came the habit of flux'.⁵ Such flux related to the relentless succession of new sights from a railway window as much as to where people could now work or send their children to school. This is an important and historically obvious factor, but it does not quite explain the extent and variation of the symbolic power of the train in this period. It is only one of many reasons why the image of the train, in Ford and in many writers beside Ford, became a totem. The train signified the death-knell to the old world: it was sounded as such with noticeable regularity.

In Francois Truffaut's "Belle Epoque", set in Paris in 1918, the vision of a train, surging screaming through the countryside, begins the action. Aboard, the inventor of the moving walk-way hears the attempted murder of a woman by her mentally ill husband. He rescues her and they fall in love. The themes of entrained psychological dysfunction, violence and sex are later joined by that of politics as an anarchist, whose threat to the status quo has been realized in an assassination, is arrested in spectacular style on a train. Trains too appear perfectly 'on time' when there is trauma to be found in Ford's writing. The opening scenes of the Wellsian tale of time-travel, *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes*,

depict Sorrell's sense of decorum under attack. He is violently rescued from the social solecisms of an intensely demanding woman - there is an added implication of sexual intimidation - when the train on which they are travelling crashes. The movement of the train has served in Sorrell's mind as a mirror to his growing unease. Describing it provides him with a critical language, explaining his unrest as his ontological security is further assaulted: 'The smooth running of the train had changed into a fantastic, hard jabbing'.⁶ Over this he has no control. In Dowell, narrator of *The Good Soldier*, the lack of ability to control the running of trains, and the 'frenzy' into which this drives him, is a thinly disguised parallel to the fact that he can neither understand nor harness twentieth-century sexual demands and existence. The extremity of this reading is supported by a passage from a turn of the century work, *The Soul of London*, in which the railway is said to 'crash through' the world, 'boring straight ways into the heart of it with a fine contempt for natural obstacles'.⁷ Obstacles such as, metaphorically speaking, the ignorance, modesty and fear of Dowell. The following revelation, acute in its resonances, occurs after Leonora's desperate outburst at the secessionist shrine of the tower, where the might of two women, flanked by the armies of Catholicism and Protestantism, has collided. Dowell provides us with his idiosyncratic comparison:

I have been exceedingly impatient at missing trains. The Belgian state railway has a trick of letting the French trains miss their connections at Brussels. That has always infuriated me. I have written about it letters to the Times that the Times never printed; those that I wrote to the Paris edition of the New York Herald were always printed, but they never seemed to satisfy me when I saw them. Well, that was a sort of frenzy with me. ⁸

Satisfaction would be denied. Dowell's slightly paranoid response indicates his impotent and incomplete grasp of the existential fight between the women. His subconscious has translated the typically opaque boundary between knowledge and ignorance into a language he can understand. He cannot control trains, such a fact provides the language. The modern age, modern knowledge, push on without him and he is shown as emasculated by this experience.

Ford displays similar irritation at the unpredictability of train services. His own feelings of impotence are thus invoked.⁹ In *The Marsden Case*, Jessop's disillusionment with the army and its persistent undermining of himself and his battalion comes to a climactic head at Hazebrouck station in February, 1917. He notices a dusty, bedraggled translation of one of his own books at the station bookstall, symptomatic of the fact, he surmises, that 'no human soul ... would ever think of me again'. His train moves out of the station, and it is immediately bombed by the Germans. He loses consciousness, perhaps gratefully. His sense of himself is both epitomized and justified in this definitively situated response to his psychological flailing, for after the 'great crash', opines the later Jessop, 'I have nothing personal to record, and indeed after that I was not much good'.¹⁰ The war-laboured Ford undertook just such a journey in 1917. He stopped at Hazebrouck and spied one of his works. The bombing of his train meant Ford had to wait in the carriage, without doors and windows, for the night. Such lack of control, the endless waiting, sign-posted by encounters with trains,

informs a state of mind. It drove Dowell into a 'frenzy', it made Jessop generally miserable, it helped to rupture Ford's sense of himself.

Freud was anxious about train travel. He 'confesses' this new addition to his self-analyzed neurotic make-up in a letter to Fleiss in August, 1897. The reason he gives is his identity as a parent assailed by 'daily reports of train accidents'.¹¹ Another reason, I would contend, is revealed in a letter to Fleiss six weeks later, at the beginning of October, when Freud is uncovering the awakening of his arousal towards 'matrem'. The occasion for this awakening was a train journey from Leipzig to Vienna, during which, he writes, he and his mother 'spent a night together' and he must have seen her naked, or 'nudam'.¹² As this memory was surfacing, though still repressed, Freud discovered 'new' anxieties, bred of Martha's excitement at the coming August holiday.

The work of a nineteenth-century surgeon provides a more widely applicable analysis of this phenomenon. John Erichsen is the doctor most associated with the terms 'railway-spine' and 'railway brain' - used to describe nervous disorders incurred nominally, though not exclusively, as a result of train crashes. He relates his interest firstly to the increase in railway traffic, and thus such injuries of the nervous system, but, perhaps more significantly, also to the 'insidious character of the early symptoms'. *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System* was published in 1866, to remedy, as Erichsen states in the preface, the woeful lack of attention devoted by the medical profession in general to such an important subject. He wrestles with an inherited ignorance of the psychological ramifications of the trauma, but simultaneously compounds the problem:

In those cases in which a man advanced in life, of energetic business habits, of great mental ability and vigour, in no way subject to gusty fits of emotion, or to local nervous disquietudes of any kind, - a man, in fact, active in mind, accustomed to self-control, addicted to business, and healthy in body, suddenly, and for the first time in his life, after the infliction of a severe shock to the system, finds himself affected by a train of symptoms indicative of serious and deep-seated injury to the nervous system, - is it reasonable to say that such a man has suddenly become 'hysterical', like a love-sick girl? ¹³

Erichsen betrays the reluctance to accept what this kind of trauma could do to men. In the cultural ideology of the time, he was being asked to accept that it turned men into women. Although, in a re-edition in 1875, Erichsen was able to admit the qualified existence of hysteria in men - it would only occur as a result of a railway accident¹⁴ - Freud writes in 1886 of the 'lively opposition' of the German authorities to 'regard neuroses arising from trauma', to men, as hysteria.¹⁵

1 Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1989), p. 166.

2 Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life (I)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 195.

3 Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday: Reminiscences 1894-1914* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1931), p. 4.

4 Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 41-2. Eric Hobsbawm states that although the initially explosive train revolution had passed by 1880, as many miles of railroad were constructed in the years from 1880 - 1913 as in the original 'railway age', *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), p. 52.

5 Ford Madox Ford, *The English Novel: From the Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1930), p. 9.

6 Ford Madox Ford, *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes* (London: Constable & Co., 1931), p. 26.

7 Ford Madox Ford, *The Soul of London* (London: Alston Rivers, 1905), p. 57.

8 Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), ed. Martin Stannard, pp. 38-9.

9 Ford writes in *The Spirit of the People* that

were the national spirit at all easy to raise, we should insist that our railway officials should search among the inventors until some system were devised by which all trains at all times could be worked by blindfolded men. Yet we suffer our bodies to be wearied, our trade to be harassed, our time to be lost [...] at hurried seasons of the year. [...] I have suffered much, and shall probably continue to suffer much, from the erratic train services of several lines without attempting to cure them with my pen.

Ford Madox Ford, *The Spirit of the People: An Analysis of the English Mind* (London: Alston Rivers, 1907), pp. 141-144.

Perhaps Ford means that he has not attempted to cure these ills in the direct fashion of Dowell, though Dowell has had very obviously limited success in regulating international train travel.

10 Ford Madox Ford, *The Marsden Case* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1923), pp. 302-4.

11 Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psycho - Analysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fleiss, Drafts and Notes, 1887-1902* (London: Imago, 1954), ed. Bonaparte et al; letter from 18 August, 1897.

The anxiety is not without substance; there were very serious rail accidents all over Europe and parts of America in the preceding years. In 1885, smaller, domestic accidents increased with the introduction of continuous brakes, as drivers tended to over-rely on power braking, and leave it too late. Charles Meacher, *Quite By Accident* (Worcestershire: Square One Publications, 1994), pp. 23, 108.

12 Letter from 3 October, 1897.

13 John Erichsen, *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System* (London: Walton & Maberly, 1866), p. 126.

14 This edition contained the original six lectures included in 1866, as well as eight others. It was re-titled, *On Concussion of the Spine, Nervous Shock, and Other Obscure Injuries of the Nervous System* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1875), p. 196.

15 Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. Strachey et al (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), Vol. 1; report from Salpêtrière and work with Charcot in 1886; p. 12. In Vol. 10, p. 84 onward, in discussion of the case of Little Hans, much of the patient's phobia is seen to relate to the railway.