

# The Yale Review

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☛ Ford Madox Ford

Two Unpublished Essays

☛ Kai Erikson Sociological

Prose ☛ Terrence Des Pres

On Poetry and Politics ☛

Sylvain Maréchal A French

Revolutionary Play ☛

Sara Suleri Salman Rushdie

and Blasphemy ☛

Fiction Sondra Spatt Olsen

☛ Poetry Marilyn Hacker,

Daniel Hoffman, Deborah

Larsen, William Logan,

James Richardson, Tom

Sleigh, Mark Strand ☛

Comment Donald Hutter

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VOLUME 78, NUMBER 4

# The Yale Review

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# The Yale Review

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## FORD MADOX FORD War and the Mind

edited by Sondra J. Stang

The first part of “War and the Mind,” edited by Sondra J. Stang, appeared in *Esquire* in 1980 and again in her *Ford Madox Ford Reader*. The second part has only recently surfaced, so the whole essay, its two halves rejoined, appears for the first time here. Both essays were written under the pseudonym Miles Ignotus (“the unknown soldier”).

The new portions of “War and the Mind” as well as the unpublished essay to follow, “Creative History and the Historic Sense,” were brought to our attention by Professor Stang.

---

### 1. A Day of Battle

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. It is no very valuable claim to make for oneself — since ‘visualizing’ is the smallest, the least moving, of the facets of the *table diamant* that art is.

Still, it used to be my *métier* — my little department to myself. I could make you see the court of Henry VIII; the underground at Gower Street; palaces in Cuba; the coronation — anything I had seen, and still better, anything I hadn’t seen. Now I could not make you see Messines, Wijtschate, St Eloi; or La Boisselle, the Bois de Bécourt or de Mametz — although I have sat looking at them for hours, for days, for weeks on end. Today, 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 these, 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: precisely as the left foot stops dead and the right foot comes up to it with a stamp upon the hard asphalt — upon the 'square', after the word of command 'Halt', at Chelsea!

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?

I was reading, the other day, a thoughtful article in one of the more serious weeklies, as to a somewhat similar point — as to why the great books about the psychology of war (such as Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* or even the *Débâcle* of Zola) should have been written by civilians who had never heard a shot fired or drilled a squad. But the reason for that is obvious: it was not Hector of Troy — it wasn't even Helen! — who wrote the *Iliad*: it wasn't Lear who wrote *Lear*; and it was Turgenev, not Bazaroff, who wrote *Fathers and Children*. Lookers-on see most of the Game: but it is carrying the reverse to a queer extreme to say that one of the players should carry away, mentally, nothing of the Game at all.

I am talking of course of the psychological side of warlike operations. I remember standing at an O.P. during the July 'push' on the Somme. It was the O.P. called Max Redoubt on the highest point of the road between Albert and Bécourt Wood. One looked up to the tufted fastness of Martinpuich that the Huns still held: one looked down upon Mametz, upon Tricourt, upon the Ancre, upon Bécourt-Bécordel, upon La Boisselle, upon Pozières. We held all those: or perhaps we did not already hold Pozières. Over High Wood an immense cloud of smoke hung: black and as if earthy. The push was on.

And it came into my head to think that here was the most amazing fact of history. For in the territory beneath the eye, or



not hidden by folds in the ground, there must have been — on the two sides — a million men, moving one against the other and impelled by an invisible moral force into a Hell of fear that surely cannot have had a parallel in this world. It was an extraordinary feeling to have in a wide landscape.

But there it stopped. As for explanation I hadn't any: as for significant or valuable pronouncement of a psychological kind I could not make any — nor any generalization. There we were: those million men, forlorn, upon a raft in space. But as to what had assembled us upon that landscape: I had just to fall back upon the formula: it is the Will of God. Nothing else would take it all in. I myself seemed to have drifted there at the bidding of indifferently written characters on small scraps of paper: W.O. telegram A/R 2572/26: a yellow railway warrant; a white embarkation order; a pink movement order; a check like a cloakroom ticket ordering the C.O. of one's Battalion to receive one. But the Will that had brought me there did not seem to be, much, one's own Will. No doubt what had put in action the rather weary, stiff limbs beneath one's heavy pack had its actual origin in one's own brain. But it didn't feel like it. There is so much — such an eternity of — waiting about in the life of any army on the move or up against the enemy trenches, that one's predominant impression is one of listlessness. The moments when one can feel one's individual will at work limit themselves almost to two types of event — the determination not to fall out upon the march and the determination not to be left behind in 'going over'.

Even work that, on the face of it is individualistic, is too controlled to be anything other than delineated. If you are patrol officer your limits are laid down: if you are Battalion Intelligence Officer upon an Observation Point the class of object that is laid down for your observation is strictly limited in range. And, within the prescribed limits there is so much to which one must pay attention that other sights, sounds, and speculations are very much dismissed. And of course, if you are actually firing a rifle your range of observation is still more limited. Dimly, but very tyrannically, there lurking in your mind are the precepts of the musketry instructors at Splott or at Veryd ranges. The precepts

that the sights must be upright, the tip of the foresight in line with the shutters of the V of the backsight are always there, even when the V of the backsight has assumed its air of being a loophole between yourself and the sun and wind and when the blade of the foresight is like a bar across that loophole. And the dark, smallish, potlike object upon whose 'six o'clock' you must align both bar and loophole has none of the aspects of a man's head. It is just a pot. . . .

In battle—and in the battle zone—the whole world, humanity included, seems to assume the aspect of matter dominated eventually by gravity. Large bits of pot fly about, smash large pieces of flesh: then one and the other fall, to lie in the dust among the immense thistles. That seems to be absolutely all. Hopes, passions, fears do not seem much to exist outside oneself—and only in varying degrees within oneself. On the day on which I was sent to Max Redoubt O.P. to observe something, I was ordered further to proceed to the dump of another Battalion in Bécourt Wood and to make certain preliminary arrangements for taking over the dump.

The preoccupations of my mission absolutely numbed my powers of observation. Of that I am certain. It is, in fact, the sense of responsibility that is really numbing: your 'job' is so infinitely more important than any other human necessity, or the considerations of humanity, pity, or compassion. With your backsight and foresight aligned on that dark object like a pot you are incapable of remembering that pot shelters hopes, fears, aspirations, or has significance for wives, children, fathers and mothers. . . . It is just the 'falling plate' that you bring down on the range. You feel the satisfaction that you feel in making a good shot at golf.

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. On the face of it I am a man who has taken a keen interest in the aspects of humanity—in the turn of an eyelash, an expression of joy, a gesture of despair. In the old days when I saw a man injured in a street accident or in an epileptic fit by the roadside, I felt certain

emotions: I should wonder what would become of him or what I could do for him. Or to put it even nearer home, when by Turnham Green in the Swiss Cottage, in peace time, I have seen dusty 18 pounders, khaki coloured and [illegible], jingling along behind the brave horses, I can remember to have felt emotions—to have felt that the guns looked venomous, dangerous, or as if they had been peering, like blind snakes.

But, stepping out of Max Redoubt into the Bécourt Road, that day, I came right into the middle of ten or a dozen lamentably wounded men, waiting by a loop of the tramline, I suppose for a trolley to take them to a C.C.S. I remember the fact: but of the aspects of these men—nothing! Or so very little. They were in khaki: some of them had white bandages round their heads: they grouped themselves on a bit of a bank: they were just like low, jagged fragments of a brown and white wall ruined by shell fire. And they are as dim in my memory as forgotten trees.

And so with the guns that in peace time I had found interesting or picturesque: they rattled past me there in an endless procession: they crushed slowly into the sandy road behind immense tractor monsters like incredible kitchen stoves. Further down in the wood they were actually at it: a dozen converted naval howitzers like enormous black toads that wheezed, panted out flame, shook the earth, and ran back into shelters of green boughs. The shells went away with long, slow whines. . . .

But it all seemed to signify nothing. One did not think of where the immense shells struck the ground, blowing whole battalions to nothing. One did not think that the R.F.A. guns, hurrying forward, meant that the Push was progressing. Even the enemy shells that whined overhead were not very significant—and the visible signs that, shortly before, these shells had pitched into the new British graveyard, seemed to mean nothing very personal. One *reasoned* that the shells might pitch there again any minute: but one *felt* that they would not. I don't know why. And of course it meant nothing. In moments of great danger I have felt convinced that I was immune: five miles behind the lines I have been appallingly certain of immediate death because an aeroplane was being shelled a mile away. Mainly the reason for

these moods is very commonplace. If one has plenty to do one is not afraid: in one's moments of leisure one may be very frightened indeed. The mere commonplaceness of one's occupation, and of the earth and the grass and the trees and the sky, makes the idea of death or even of wounds, seem exaggerated and out of proportion. One is in a field, writing a message on an ordinary piece of paper with an ordinary pencil — 'from O.C. no. 1 platoon, B. Co. to O.C. anything. . . .' Nothing could be more commonplace. . . .

So the idea of tragedy is just incongruous and death quite inappropriate. No! Reason has very little to do with it. For you may be in a large field — a 40-acre field — and the Huns may be dropping their usual triplet of 4.2's into it. Your reason — if you are not employed for the moment — will tell you that your chances of being hit are 400 to 1 against. But it does not in the least comfort you. On the other hand I have been lifted off my feet and dropped two yards away by the explosion of a shell and felt complete assurance of immunity.

The force of one's sense of responsibility is in fact wonderfully hypnotic and drives one wonderfully in on oneself. I used to think that being out 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. I have gone down to the front line at night, worried, worried, worried beyond belief about happenings at home in a Blighty that I did not much expect to see again — so worried that all sense of personal danger disappeared and I forgot to duck when shells went close overhead. At the same time I have carefully observed angles, compass bearings, landmarks and the loom of duckboards: and I have worried — simultaneously with the other worries — to think that I might have neglected some precaution as to the safety of the men, or that I might not be on time, or that I might get some message wrong — till gradually the feeling of the responsibility eclipsed all other feelings. . . .

Still, as I have said, one's personal feelings do not get blotted out, or one's personal affections. If, for instance, those wounded that I had seen by Max Redoubt had been men of my own Bn.

or another Bn. of the Welch Regiment that was side by side with us, I should have tried to do what I could for them — and I should certainly remember them now. For I do remember all the wounded of my own Bn. that I have seen. The poor men, they come from Prontypridd and Nantgarw and Penarth and Dowlais Works and they have queer, odd, guttural accents like the croaking of ravens, and they call every hill a *mountain* . . . and there is no emotion so terrific and so overwhelming as the feeling that comes over you when your own men are dead. It is a feeling of an anger . . . an anger . . . a deep anger! It shakes you like a force that is beyond all other forces in the world: unimaginable, irresistible. . . .

Yes, I have just one War Picture in my mind: it is a hurrying black cloud, like the dark cloud of the Hun shrapnel. It sweeps down at any moment. Over Mametz Wood: over the Vercy Range, over the grey level of the North Sea; over the parade ground in the sunlight, with the band, and the goat shining like silver and the R.S.M. shouting: 'Right Markers! Stead a.....ye!' A darkness out of which shine — like swiftly obscured fragments of pallid moons — white faces of the little, dark, raven-voiced Evanses, and Lewises, and Joneses and Thomases. . . . Our dead!

That is the most real picture of war that I carry about with me. And that, too, is personal, and borne along with, not observed in spite of, responsibilities. . . .

## 2. The Enemy

No Man's Land and what lay beyond No Man's Land always remains in my mind as blue — a blue-grey mist; a blue-grey muddle of little hills — but fabulous and supernatural. I suppose that one could really call it the territory of Armageddon.

But, of course, I am speaking now of the mind at rest. When it was necessary to be observant one saw the earth, brown, reddish brown, sandy, dusty, veiled by thistles or with the long shadows, at night, from glows of light, hanging in the blackness. Or, from high points like the O.P. on the Albert-Bécourt road, or from Kemmell Hill on the Scarponberg, in Belgium, one saw

Martinpuich on high in bristling and ragged tufts of trees; Pozières with trees torn leafless, big and coloured bits of wall and the white lines of trenches in the balk, below the feet. Wytschaete with the tranquil red roofs and Messines again, grey and rather upstanding, and little white balls would exist, one by one, at intervals of a second or so, appearing to be an inch to the right, or an inch to the left, all the way between Messines and Wytschaete. One thought comfortingly: "Our own shells." Andine said aloud: "Somebody will be ducking, out there!"

But that was the observant—as it were the official observer's mind: say the mind of the Battalion Intelligence Officer. The quiescent mind, that of the Impressionist in letters always returned to the blueness and greyness—to the blue-grey muddle of little hills peopled by blue-grey hobgoblins without features—the Huns in their Anti-Gas masks!

I am fairly confident that I am right in this division of the mind. When I used to ride in from the line to Divisional H.Q. in Albert, for the purpose of copying onto the maps for Battalion use, the alteration of trenches that had been made in the night, I know that the lines that I made with blue, yellow or red pencils, on the map that showed Pozières, Welsh Alley, Bazentine le Petit on Mametz and High Wood . . . those lines which represented Brigade and Divisional boundaries, new trenches, the enemy's new lines, M.G. emplacements and so on, represented nothing visual at all to my intelligence. The mind was too much taken up with the necessity of copying the mark exactly; with seeing that all the squares, from A 1 to D 3 had each their complement of straight blue, zig-zag yellow or curved red lines, Machine Gun emplacements and the like. One sat, at a large drawing board, in a quiet, glass roofed shed, in the large, sunny courtyard of an old French Chateau, with monthly roses climbing up the walls, and one drew fast, changing from pencil to pencil, engrossed and hastening. Then one got on one's horse and hastened back, through the endless lines of slow-moving transport wagons, in the dust, over the shoulder of the hill, to where No Man's Land the Lost Territories were once more visible. (On the Somme, a year ago, when I was there, it was always summer weather, the

sun brilliant and clear over the Sussex-Downs landscape, the sky translucent, punctuated by the brooding sausages, our 'planes always shining in the blueness, dust underfoot and thistles and swallows and partridges.)

No: the mind connected nothing from the maps, except that we hadn't yet — we had eventually — taken Ovilliers La Boisselle and Pozières. For Pozières was a sort of every morning torture. One woke to hear that the Australians had taken Pozières; that the Gordon Highlanders had taken Pozières; that we, the Welsh, had taken Pozières; that one or other of the Anzac battalions had gone clean through the place and got caught between our own barrage and the Huns' barrage. And we rode back to Albert and, from copying the map, one observed that Pozières was not yet taken; and one was impatient, angry; we were all annoyed; puzzled; bitter. . . . Why didn't we take Pozières and go through to Cambrai? After all that we had done! The Staff never took advantage of advances. . . . And so on. But, in the visualising mind, "Pozières" presented no image. . . . And once again the idea of the Lost Territories became a painful thought.

That is precisely what it was — a painful thought! A vexation; a harassing annoyance that one did not talk about. . . . I don't know just why it assumes this aspect always, for me, I don't think it is a purely personal matter . . . or perhaps it is. I never, in France or Belgium, felt immediately worried that France or Belgium had lost those lands; and I did not feel dishonoured — or that we were dishonoured — because we had not yet succeeded in retaking those blue stretches that, when we retook them, became the downlands of France or the marshy plains of Flanders. The loss was the Fortunes of War; we had not yet retaken Martinpuich, Pozières and all the copse downwards to Cambrai.

The Fortunes of War! For, at that stage — and ever since — war has so seemed to be the normal state of Europe that questions of Right and Wrong effaced themselves from the mind. We were just at war — and War, the war of millions, of a whole continent, a whole region of the world, seemed to be something dispassionate and universal — more dispassionate, more universal than the sun or the moon. It existed always, through day and night,

through summer and winter; dispassionate, precisely, and all pervading, like an ether, like atoms—like God Himself. If one hated the Hun it was for specific acts of barbarism; for little things that impressed themselves on the imagination. One did not as a rule hate him for having occupied that stretch of territory—but one did hate him a great deal for what he had done inside that territory or outside—at Scarborough, at Whitby or for the apparently senseless shelling of churches. . . . And one would hoot at the name of the Kaiser—but rather officially than with passion. It was only very occasionally that one thought that one was there, in that misery, in that inconvenience, or those fears, or those physical anguishes—all of us!—because of the ambitions—or call them what you will—of the German Warlords. No: the feeling was that we were just there, normally, in a normal state of things; one was pessimistic; fatalist! One had forgotten: I daresay not one in a hundred thousand of us had ever heard of—those attempts of Sir Edward Grey to avert the cataclysm; or the interview of Sir Edward Goschen with Bethman Hollweg. There did not seem ever to have been a time when British Ministers and German would have met amicably in tall rooms with high mirrors and marble busts and long tables, blotting pads, quill pens. . . . No: it was predestined. . . .

The roads in that part of the world were queer and, again, painful things. They were broad, downland high roads, some bordered with poplars, some without, and they ran onwards with that engrossed air that a high road, to me, always seems to have. They looked just as if they ought to bear farm carts, old carts with tilts, flocks going to market—just like that. But, if one pursued them with the mind—suddenly they ended, in that blue territory.

Of course, actually, they do not end suddenly. It is a gradual process. The road becomes torn with traffic, the pathway makes detours over the edges of fields: little, deep ditches, as if they were cut for drains, begin to run beside the road. Trenches! But a trench is such a natural looking thing! You might imagine it was cut just to receive drain pipes. That is the queer side of war that so many natural objects look so commonplace.



But, where the trenches begin to appear beside the road, the poplar trees will begin to appear to suffer. They will be broken off like pencils: they will be stripped of all leaves: they will have war's nest platforms erected on them; they will lean ever as if, agonised, they were stretching hands in despair, to the skies! And then, in the road, great pockmarks will be there: for twenty yards no road will exist. Then it will begin again: then more pockmarks, some dead mules, bits of cart wheels, old tins, old steel hats—any old rubbish. And then the road will persist, tenacious and obstinate, like a severed nerve. You will come to a light barrier between hedges with, perhaps, a picket of R.M.P. loafing about—and placards: “No wheeled traffic beyond this point.” “No parties stronger than four in number to proceed at less intervals than 150 yards between parties.” Then you know that the road is going into the view of Hun eyes. You halt your signallers, or whatever your party is, order them to break up into parties of four, put on your tin hat—and walk round the hedge onto the down. But the road itself looks singularly normal. It won't be torn up by traffic: traffic is forbidden. It won't be pockmarked by shells because the Germans, as a rule, do not expend shells upon parties of four. No, the road will be quiet, preoccupied, as if dreaming, proceeding upon its affairs. I remember riding, rather sleepily, along such a sleepy road behind the line at Kemmell, in Belgium. I had discharged some errand, I forget what, and was going back to R.E. farm or to Locre. The cornlands sloped down to Kemmell church: B.H.Q.—an old chateau, peeped out of quiet trees. I was about a mile behind our front line: I didn't imagine I was in any danger: indeed I wasn't thinking of danger although I knew that the road was visible from the Hun lines. I was thinking about some place in South Wales, and about Turgenev and that I must tell my servant—25782 Pte. Phillipson, —Welsh—to get some washing done for me. A fair-haired, small, crow-voiced fellow, like most of the lads from the Rhondda Valley, he squatted on his heels all day long and did not get one's washing done automatically but had to be told to get it done—which was a nuisance. . . .

And then: “Zi . . . ipp!” a single rifle bullet as nearly as possible