

Men Without Countries and Countries Without Men: National Identity in Ford Madox Ford's

"Antwerp"

Selin Elyay

As an English novelist of German descent Ford Madox Ford's relationship with national identity was at once complex and deeply troubled. Describing his military experience in his memoir *It Was the Nightingale* Ford writes: "I suddenly realised what had been my proudest consideration of that part of me that was English. For whilst I had worn His Majesty's uniform I had been, not merely politically, but to the mental backbone, as English as it was possible to be" (85). For Ford, national identity was not a fixed concept but a kind of "changeable ideal" and acutely dependent on the language used to shape it. Of more than seventy published works Ford wrote in his lifetime including poetry and literary reviews today he is mostly known by his novels *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*, the latter often praised as one of the best examples of war literature in the English language. "Antwerp," on the other hand, written only a year into the First World War, praises Belgian perseverance and bravery in the face of invading German forces during the Siege of Antwerp. Stylistically, the poem is notable for its division into six fragmented sections as well as the fragmented, often intrusive, voice of its speaker. One theme that is of particular importance to the poem, and indeed, to Europe as a whole during the years of the Great War, is that of national identity. The Oxford Dictionary defines national identity as "a sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, and language" ("National Identity"). In his treatment of British and Belgian identities in "Antwerp" Ford attempts to reflect this loss of cohesion in national identity in the early years of the First World War, as well as question its impact on society as a whole.

In “Missing in Action: Belgian Civilians and the First World War” Tammy Proctor describes Belgium as a unique case in First World War historiography partly in its inability to fit into the home front / battle front narrative that continues to shape memory and commemoration of the war in much of Europe. “Caught between images of soldiers in the mud of Passchendaele and propaganda about the atrocities of the German invasion” Proctor writes, “Belgium's wartime experiences have been overshadowed” (547). Indeed, this overshadowing would start early on in the war, for though the siege was to be known as an atrocity by the British public in the years to come, its fallout in the form of refugees remained largely ignored, with academic discussion around the Belgian war experience at home and abroad still largely incomplete in present day (Proctor 562). As one of the first conflicts of the First World War, the siege of Antwerp was crucial in shaping the entire war experience from one of open conflict to the trench warfare it is now remembered for (Beckett 21). The siege began in September of 1914 after German forces began the bombardment of the city’s fortifications with the aim to take the French capital by way of neutral Belgium. Despite its large garrison as well as several successful tactics of deterring the German forces from reaching France by means of flooding, Antwerp quickly followed the cities of Namen and Liège in falling victim to the German heavy artillery (Beckett 24). With the siege intensifying and fearing that the loss of Antwerp would pave the way for invasion across the Channel, Britain decided to send in reinforcements in the form of the British 7th Division and 3rd Cavalry Division. The delay in these reinforcements as well as the German forces fast closing in would force the Belgian commanders to abandon the city, instead transferring to Ostend to continue the fight in open terrain. Following the surrender of Antwerp on October 10, 1914 German forces would occupy the city for the remainder of the war (Beckett 27).

The impact of the siege was astronomical, with recent accounts estimating close to 250 000 Belgians fled to Britain in the wake of the invasion—the largest number of refugees Britain has ever handled at one time (Winterman). Sympathetic to the plight of “plucky little Belgium,” these refugees were at first warmly received by the British public with support provided in the form of purpose-built villages and employment, though this enthusiasm would eventually cool after a few months as public opinion towards the cause shifted from one of patriotic hospitality to resentment towards what was now seen as a burden on the government’s diminishing resources (Winterman). With more pressing concern around the returned soldiers at the end of the war as well as the mass departure of most of the Belgian refugees—up to 90% are estimated to have returned to their home country in response to pressure by the British government—the Belgian refugees soon became forgotten to history (Winterman).

One element that is most significant about “Antwerp” in classifying it as an early example of modernist poetry is intertextuality. In “Antwerp” intertextuality functions to create an overall fragmentary experience by challenging pre-war literary and historiographical conceptions of the glory and beauty that is to be found fighting for one’s country. These conceptions are referenced heavily throughout the poem, as in lines 38-41 when the speaker turns to comparing the present war experience—as represented by “an uncomely man with a smoking gun”—with those that came before:

Well there have been scars

Won in many wars ...

Punic,

Lacedæmonian, wars of Napoleon, wars for faith, wars for honor, for love,

for possession. (Ford, “Antwerp” 38-41)

This hyper-awareness in the speaker of his place amongst the infamous battles of history is indicative of a greater self-consciousness regarding national identity and how it has evolved through time. The meanings behind these past conflicts are apparent—they were fought “for faith...for honor...for love...for possession” and the scars they left behind are hardly scars at all, but depicted in the same terms as medals to be won. This reflection is continued in the next section:

For the white-limbed heroes of Hellas ride by upon their horses

Forever through our brains.

The heroes of Cressy ride by upon their stallions;

And battalions and battalions and battalions—

The Old Guard, the Young Guard, the men of Minden and of Waterloo,

Pass, for ever staunch,

Stand, for ever true. (Ford, “Antwerp” 50-56)

With this emphasis on imagery in the form of heroes upon stallions as well as repetition (“And battalions and battalions and battalions”) the speaker taps into a glorified and dynamic vision of war where soldiers are not so much men but eternal symbols of national honour—an idea developed through the allusions to famous English battles of the past, including the victorious Battle of “Cressy,” (notably anglicized from the French “Crécy”) as well as Minden and the more recent Battle of Waterloo. The speaker’s identification with the group being addressed is further evident in the claim that these images are present “forever through *our* brains” (italics mine). The phenomenon of the gentleman soldier, the officer who arrived at the trenches with his Eton education knowing nothing of real war but the glorified battles of the classical world was a serious problem in the First World War, and one recruitment officers did not hesitate in

perpetuating to their advantage (Berberich 23). In *Ford Madox Ford and Englishness* Riede articulates Ford's impression of Englishness in its larger definition as something "understood but unspoken, a notion of nationality as a presumably closed and finished system" (213). In "Antwerp" Ford's patriotic vision of Englishness appears to be inviolable as it passes "forever through our brains" and yet it is precisely this claim that calls attention to it as a product of the collectivist imagination. This constructed nature of the heroic soldier is perhaps best challenged with the image of the Belgian soldier presented in section II who with his "ugly tunic, / His ugly round cap" is described to be "shooting on, in a sort of obsession" (Ford, "Antwerp" 42-43). "Obsession" in this case is particularly revealing, for it denotes a preoccupation with combat that goes beyond that of duty, beyond even the allure of glory, transforming instead into mental illness. This image is repeated in the next section, once again following the familiar image of the heroic soldier:

And the small man with the large paunch,
 And the gray coat, and the large hat, and the hands behind the back,
 Watches them pass
 In our minds for ever....
 But that clutter of sodden corses
 On the sodden Belgian grass—
 That is a strange new beauty. (Ford, "Antwerp" 57-63)

Here the Belgian soldier is depicted as a spectator to the display of English heroism, having no share in glory himself. On the other hand, the speaker once again affirms his Englishness by stating that the national narrative of heroism will be "in our minds for ever..." This, however, is immediately interrupted by the new image of the dead Belgian soldiers, the fragmentary nature

of which is emphasized in the abrupt transition: “*But* that clutter of sodden corpses / On the sodden Belgian grass—” (italics mine). Furthermore, by claiming these soldiers possess a “strange new beauty” a vision of new warfare is presented—fragmentary by nature of its incoherence to the national narrative—in which the random and mechanized slaughter of men is no longer horrifying and despicable but the new norm, and the old national narrative is no more than an illusion confined to the mind.

In evaluating this narrative, it is imperative to more closely examine the voice of the speaker used to tell it. Like much of his contemporaries, Ford follows from the tradition of Georgian poetry. Popularized by Rupert Brooke and Edward Marsh in 1912, this movement was defined by its dreamy, often pastoral reflections of English life as well as by its imprecise diction and facile rhythm that reflected its mass appeal (Reeves xv). The poetic voice present in “Antwerp,” however, differs from this in its early employment of poetic techniques that would be characteristic of modernist poetry, notably that of narrative intrusion. The interjection of “GLOOM!” the poem starts off with is repeated throughout the poem, alongside “doom.” Besides developing an oppressive atmosphere these interjections disrupt the flow of narration—emphasized by the fact most are expressed as stand-alone lines. But perhaps what is most noteworthy is the extremely personal nature of these intrusions. Upon reflection of the Belgian resistance to German invasion the speaker asks:

And what in the world did they bear it for?

I don’t know.

And what in the world did they dare it for?

Perhaps that is not for the likes of me to understand. (Ford, “Antwerp” 82-85)

This blunt depiction of anxieties serves to paint an ambiguous picture of the speaker's own English identity—one that is made more evident as the speaker goes on to question why the Belgians resisted in the first place:

I don't understand.

Was it just love of their land?

Oh, poor dears!

Can any man so love his land?

Give them a thousand thousand pities

And rivers and rivers of tears

To wash off the blood from the cities of Flanders. (Ford, "Antwerp" 91-97).

Questioning how "*just* the love of their land" can inspire men to defend their nation against foreign threat reveals the speaker's alienation from the English nationalism especially rampant in the first few years of the war, even in spite of his participation in the national heroic narrative. Moreover, by placing the human and the city as the focal point even within nature—with rivers not the idyllic sites of repose but merely repositories to be redirected to cities, the speaker shows a detachment from the pastoral British tradition vital to previous poetic generations in which nature was sacrosanct, a "dwelling place" that could be visited by the human mind only through close spiritual communion. With this also comes an increased self-consciousness about not only British identity as it relates to the war effort but also the poetic form itself and its role in its promotion. The speaker claims that the "strange new beauty" of the Belgian soldier

Shall eat itself into your brain:

And you will say of all heroes, "They fought like the Belgians!"

And you will say, "He wrought like a Belgian his fate out of gloom."

And you will say, “He bought like a Belgian his doom.

And that shall be an honourable name. (Ford, “Antwerp” 73-75)

It is important to note Ford’s representation of multiplicity in his treatment of British responses to the Belgian siege, focusing not only on the singular narrative of the small nation fighting for the Allied cause despite all costs but exploring the true meaning of such a resistance, unadulterated by the extraneous meanings that populist propaganda attempted to tie to it. The Belgian resistance may in fact be recalled as honourable to some—something to be praised just the same as English heroism—but to others there is no glory, only what one makes of the doom and gloom that one is dealt. But most importantly, with this anticipatory voice the speaker acknowledges the constructed nature of memory and history. Belgian “*shall* be an honourable name” at some indeterminate point in the future, even if for now it brings with it only the memory of loss (italics mine). The role of the national voice in shaping remembrance is similarly explored in section I:

And it is not for us to make them an anthem.

If we found words there would come no wind that would fan them

To a tune that the trumpets might blow it,

Shrill through the heaven that’s ours or yet Allah’s,

Or the wide halls of any Valhallas.

We can make no such anthem.

So that all that is ours

For inditing in sonnets, pantoums, elegiacs, or lays

Is this:

“In the name of God, how could they do it?” (Ford, “Antwerp” 20-28)

Once again the speaker's self-consciousness is made apparent by a recollection of the means used to shape cultural narratives as well as an alignment with the audience: "it is not for *us* to make them an anthem" (*italics mine*). However, in rejecting these means of remembrance the speaker not only expresses their insufficiency but also an underlying cultural incoherence that makes their use impossible. Heaven itself is no longer cohesive—the "English heaven" of the Georgians' vision—but has been shattered into many divisions unable to be owned by a single party alone. What's more, the words of remembrance and glory that once resounded through this heaven are gone, along with the wind used to carry them. The result is a new reality fundamentally disconnected from its history, in which even that which could once have been memorialized in "sonnets, pantoums, elegiacs, or lays" is no more than a fragmented question.

The war's fragmentary power is not only limited to English identity, however, and section VI of the poem offers a closer representation of the Belgian war experience with its depiction of refugees. The section opens in Charing Cross, with the speaker observing the flux of Belgian refugees as they wait for their loved ones on the platform: "There is a great crowd / And no light / A great crowd, all black that hardly whispers aloud" (Ford, "Antwerp" 100-103). The fragmentary nature of this waiting is suggested through the imagery of the crowd, but more specifically its silence, for in spite of its collective nature and the common identity of its members its lack of communication remains striking. This imagery is distilled by focusing on a single person within the crowd:

Surely, that is a dead woman—a dead mother!

She has a dead face;

She is dressed all in black;

She wanders to the book-stall and back,

At the back of the crowd;
And back again and again back,
She sways and wanders. (Ford, "Antwerp" 103-109)

The woman's swaying and wandering can be interpreted as restlessness as she waits for her husband to return, but it can also be interpreted as grief, as is further evinced by her black clothing. This sense of restlessness can be attributed to a greater preoccupation with time present in this section—substantiated not only with the actual passage of time from midnight to past one o'clock but also repetition:

These are the women of Flanders.
They await the lost.
They await the lost that shall never leave the dock;
They await the lost that shall never again come by the train
To the embraces of all these women with dead faces;
They await the lost who lie dead in trench and barrier and fosse,
In the dark of the night. (Ford, "Antwerp" 121-127)

The light / dark symbolism is significant here in creating a tone of despair. The darkness of the station is hardly dissolved with the passage of time, and even at "past one of the clock" we are told there is "very little light." This symbolism is further tied to the symbolism of silence: "There is still a great cloud, and very little light; / Immense shafts of shadows over the black crowd / That hardly whispers aloud..." (Ford, "Antwerp" 112-114) The result is not only an oppressive atmosphere of shadow and silence but also one of overwhelming loss. The waiting of the women of Flanders may in fact be for their dead husbands but it may also be a more symbolic waiting for the return of men they once knew but who have now been rendered unrecognizable by the

war, in which case the silence itself becomes representative of not only fear but of everything that cannot be spoken aloud. Even the children, we find out, cannot escape from the weight of this uncertainty:

And little children, all in black,
 All with dead faces, waiting in all the waiting-places,
 Wandering from the doors of the waiting-room
 In the dim gloom. (Ford, “Antwerp” 115-120)

Rhythm is once again used to create a shifting sense of duration, and some lines are noticeably longer and slower to read than others (“All with dead faces, waiting in all the waiting-places.”) Moreover, by shifting the focus away from the Belgian soldiers to their families Ford challenges the typical war narrative by moving the casualties of war to the home front—it is not the men themselves who are dead but the women and children they leave behind, not the fallen heroes of war they are mourning in their black clothing but the Belgian nation itself. The repetition of “This is Charing Cross”—unfailing alongside an announcement of the time—can then be thought of as an anxiety to contextualize and assert the significance of the present moment as it relates to the fate of the Belgian nation—an anxiety made all the more potent by the liminal setting of the train station.

The speaker’s position in this scene is significant in that he embodies the fragmentation he observes. Throughout the poem the speaker expresses sympathy with the Belgian war effort with his attempts at elevating the common soldier to the rank of hero as well as with frequent interjections of “Oh, poor dears!” And yet when he is confronted with the refugees in person he does not, or perhaps cannot, do anything but observe the scenario as it unfolds before him, only expressing his sympathy with a stand-alone line: “There is so much pain” (Ford, “Antwerp”

130). Though this final failure at communication is ironic with respect to the disdain for empty rhetoric that the poem has hitherto suggested, it is also particularly significant in that it is demonstrative of the human damage of the First World War, as well as predictive of a more extreme post-war fragmentation that would be seen on every scale from the personal to the international.

In conclusion, with its depiction of national narratives, voice, as well as multinational experiences, Ford Madox Ford's "Antwerp" both reflects and challenges British and Belgian identity at the time of the Great War. In his rejection of the British heroic narrative of war and sympathy towards the war experience as it was seen and felt by those of other nations the speaker exemplifies a transitional English identity—neither wholly loyal to the institutions of his nation's past nor wholly disillusioned with the state of its present. Nationhood, as it is depicted in "Antwerp," is thus ultimately one of mutual dislocation, with each nation condemned to its own waiting-room of history stripped of the familiar cultural artifacts and narratives used to make sense of the new reality. Ford presents a vision of nationhood as it attempts and ultimately fails at negotiating its past and future, its citizens and non-citizens, at a period of history just as much fragmented as it was inconclusive.

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“Antwerp”

Ford Madox Ford

I

GLOOM!
 An October like November;
 August a hundred thousand hours,
 And all September, 5
 A hundred thousand, dragging sunlit days,
 And half October like a thousand years ...
 And doom!
 That then was Antwerp ...
 In the name of God, 10
 How could they do it?
 Those souls that usually dived
 Into the dirty caverns of mines;
 Who usually hived
 In whitened hovels; under ragged poplars;
 Who dragged muddy shovels, over the grassy mud, 15
 Lumbering to work over the greasy sods ...
 Those men there, with the appearance of clods
 Were the bravest men that a usually listless priest of God
 Ever shrived ...
 And it is not for us to make them an anthem. 20
 If we found words there would come no wind that would fan them
 To a tune that the trumpets might blow it,
 Shrill through the heaven that's ours or yet Allah's,
 Or the wide halls of any Valhallas.
 We can make no such anthem. So that all that is ours 25
 For inditing in sonnets, pantoums, elegiacs, or lays
 Is this:
 “In the name of God, how could they do it?”

II

For there is no new thing under the sun, 30
 Only this uncomely man with a smoking gun
 In the gloom....
 What the devil will he gain by it?
 Digging a hole in the mud and standing all day in the rain by it
 Waiting his doom;
 The sharp blow, the swift outpouring of the blood 35
 Till the trench of gray mud
 Is turned to a brown purple drain by it.

Well, there have been scars
 Won in many wars, 40
 Punic,
 Lacedæmonian, wars of Napoleon, wars for faith, wars for honor, for love, for possession,
 But this Belgian man in his ugly tunic,
 His ugly round cap, shooting on, in a sort of obsession,
 Overspreading his miserable land,
 Standing with his wet gun in his hand.... 45
 Doom!
 He finds that in a sudden scrimmage,
 And lies, an unsightly lump on the sodden grass ...
 An image that shall take long to pass!

III

50

For the white-limbed heroes of Hellas ride by upon their horses
 Forever through our brains.
 The heroes of Cressy ride by upon their stallions;
 And battalions and battalions and battalions—
 The Old Guard, the Young Guard, the men of Minden and of Waterloo,
 Pass, for ever staunch, 55
 Stand, for ever true;
 And the small man with the large paunch,
 And the gray coat, and the large hat, and the hands behind the back,
 Watches them pass
 In our minds for ever.... 60
 But that clutter of sodden corses
 On the sodden Belgian grass—
 That is a strange new beauty.

IV

With no especial legends of matchings or triumphs or duty,
 Assuredly that is the way of it, 65
 The way of beauty....
 And that is the highest word you can find to say of it.
 For you cannot praise it with words
 Compounded of lyres and swords,
 But the thought of the gloom and the rain 70
 And the ugly coated figure, standing beside a drain,
 Shall eat itself into your brain:
 And you will say of all heroes, "They fought like the Belgians!"
 And you will say, "He wrought like a Belgian his fate out of gloom."
 And you will say, "He bought like a Belgian 75
 His doom."
 And that shall be an honorable name;
 "Belgian" shall be an honorable word;
 As honorable as the fame of the sword,

As honorable as the mention of the many-chorded lyre, 80
 And his old coat shall seem as beautiful as the fabrics woven in Tyre.

V

And what in the world did they bear it for?
 I don't know.
 And what in the world did they dare it for?
 Perhaps that is not for the likes of me to understand. 85
 They could very well have watched a hundred legions go
 Over their fields and between their cities
 Down into more southerly regions.
 They could very well have let the legions pass through their woods,
 And have kept their lives and their wives and their children and cattle and goods. 90
 I don't understand.
 Was it just love of their land?
 Oh, poor dears!
 Can any man so love his land?
 Give them a thousand thousand pities 95
 And rivers and rivers of tears
 To wash off the blood from the cities of Flanders.

VI

This is Charing Cross;
 It is midnight;
 There is a great crowd 100
 And no light—
 A great crowd, all black, that hardly whispers aloud.
 Surely, that is a dead woman—a dead mother!
 She has a dead face;
 She is dressed all in black; 105
 She wanders to the book-stall and back,
 At the back of the crowd;
 And back again and again back,
 She sways and wanders.

This is Charing Cross; 110
 It is one o'clock.
 There is still a great cloud, and very little light;
 Immense shafts of shadows over the black crowd
 That hardly whispers aloud....
 And now!... That is another dead mother, 115
 And there is another and another and another....
 And little children, all in black,
 All with dead faces, waiting in all the waiting-places,
 Wandering from the doors of the waiting-room
 In the dim gloom. 120

These are the women of Flanders:
 They await the lost.
 They await the lost that shall never leave the dock;
 They await the lost that shall never again come by the train
 To the embraces of all these women with dead faces; 125
 They await the lost who lie dead in trench and barrier and fosse,
 In the dark of the night.
 This is Charing Cross; it is past one of the clock;
 There is very little light.

There is so much pain. 130

L'Envoi:

And it was for this that they endured this gloom;
 This October like November,
 That August like a hundred thousand hours,
 And that September,
 A hundred thousand dragging sunlit days 135
 And half October like a thousand years....
 Oh, poor dears!