Two Good Soldiers: Ford Madox Ford and May Sinclair

Rebecca Bowler

Ford Madox Ford’s *Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections: Being the Memories of a Young Man* was published in 1911. It is an impressionistic account of the pre-Raphaelite circles in which Ford spent much of his childhood. The dedication, famously, relays the hostile reaction of a reader of an early instalment to a Fordian impression that could not, according to dates and circumstance, be factually true. In this dedication, Ford maintains that the critic has missed the point: “This book, in short, is full of inaccuracies as to facts, but its accuracy as to impressions is absolute.” Instead of facts, he says, “I try to give you what I see to be the spirit of an age, or a town, of a movement.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

In 1915, May Sinclair published her *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, a kind of war diary relaying her abortive adventures with an ambulance unit in Belgium during the First World War. The *Journal* has interesting stylistic similarities with Ford’s *Ancient Lights*. Sinclair certainly read sections of Ford’s impressionist memoir as it was published in *The English Review*, to which she was a contributor and subscriber, and it seems very likely she read the whole volume, complete with prefatory dedication, on its publication. Her own *A Journal* plays throughout with impressionistic narrative uncertainty, as she notes in the introduction to this volume, in an uncanny echo of Ford’s “dedication”: “This is a ‘Journal of Impressions,’ and it is nothing more. It will not satisfy people who want accurate and substantial information about Belgium, or about the War, or about Field Ambulances and Hospital Work”; “For many of these impressions I can claim only a psychological accuracy; some were insubstantial to the last degree, and very few were actually set down there and then, on the spot.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Both books were serialised in *The English Review*; both were ultimately published by Hutchinson.[[3]](#endnote-3) The narrative of *A Journal*, like that of *Ancient Lights*, slips between present and past tense, belying the patchwork of immediate diary entry and later editing. And, as is the case in *Ancient Lights*,the impressions *A Journal* conveys are partial, fragmentary, subjective, leaving the reader in a position of interpretive uncertainty—or even bewilderment.

In both her war diary and her fiction Sinclair experiments with Fordian impressionism. She exploits the single point of view, and explores the spaces between perception, fully-formed impression, and later memory. In *A Journal* *of Impressions in Belgium* her use of impressionism is relatively close to Ford’s own, claiming “psychological accuracy” but with no guarantees as to accuracy of facts and circumstance; in her fiction she moves the technique on. This article will focus primarily on her novel *Tasker Jevons: A Life*, which was written in part as a response to Ford’s *The Good Soldier*. Where Ford creates layers of uncertainty and then deliberately leaves all possibilities in play, Sinclair’s *Tasker Jevons*, while maintaining the single point of view, layers in a plurality of impressions, both the narrator’s own and in the form of corrections to the narrator’s version of events from his friend and his wife, who see more clearly. Sinclair’s impressionist response to Ford’s impressionism posits that, behind all the confusion and misinterpretation, there *is* an “accurate”, single, real version of events, which the hapless male narrator can fumble his way towards if only he listens to the women in his life. Her narrator, struggling as he is with multiple impressions of his own, as well as those he receives from others, eventually builds up a picture complex enough to capture something true; something certain.

On 3 April 1915, Sinclair wrote to Ford, telling him, “I’ve been so rushed trying to finish my Journal in time for American copyright.” She wrote, despite her busyness, in order to praise *The Good Soldier*, a copy of which had been sent to her by Allen Lane of John Lane publishing house. Sinclair tells Ford, in superlative terms, that the novel is “extraordinarily fine”; “a far finer book than I even thought it was going to be:”

I think – if I may say so – that the method is simply triumphant. You remember the lady Williams James quotes as maintaining that there are “only two Philosophies, the Thick & the Thin”? Well, you seem to me to have got a thickness in this way that you couldn’t have got in any other. I don’t recommend the plan to other authors, but you’ve certainly got what you wanted out of it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The method she refers to is the infamously unreliable narrative of the novel’s central character, John Dowell, whose seemingly innocuous visit with his wife to a spa resort in Nauheim, Germany ends in suicide and heartbreak. At the beginning of the novel Dowell is at the end of events. He sits down to write “the saddest story” of what has transpired, telling himself – and the reader – that he will tell it from the beginning but really allowing himself to skip ahead in the narrative from time to time, and to interject when most emotionally heated with lamentations about how things have turned out; never entirely giving away how things have gone, exactly, but giving enough information to make the reader aware that the primary narrative is not all there is to the story.[[5]](#endnote-5)

When Sinclair reads *The Good Soldier*, she is seduced by the possibilities of the single point of view and the gradual letting out of the story, as exemplified by Dowell’s ponderous preamble to his tale:

I don’t know how it is best to put this thing down – whether it would be better to try and tell the story from the beginning, as if it were a story, or whether to tell it from the distance of time, as it reached me from the lips of Leonora or from those of Edward himself.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In her enthusiasm, evident in her letter, Sinclair then sat down to begin to write her next novel, *Tasker Jevons: The Real Story*, which was published in 1916, meaning that she was reading *The Good Soldier* during or just before she began working on her own impressionist story. There are some remarkable similarities, again, between Ford’s novel and Sinclair’s, both in terms of “method” (the dualistic literary impressionism of a narrator unable to reconcile his immediate perception and his later processing of that perception) and content (war, honour, reputation, psychological motivation). *Tasker Jevons* is too, as Leslie de Bont notes, the only of Sinclair’s novels narrated in the first person.[[7]](#endnote-7) Sinclair’s account of the complicated interpersonal relationships she narrates is just as hesitant and uncertain as Dowell’s story of his friends, and contains deliberate echoes. While Dowell lets out, of Florence and Edward, that “the two of them are actually dead”, *Tasker Jevons* begins: “Of course this story can’t be published as it stands just yet. Not—if I’m to be decent—for another generation, because, thank Heaven, they’re still alive.”[[8]](#endnote-8) There follows, in Sinclair’s novel, a brief and digressive account of the fallout from events, and then the narrator reprimands himself: “I must get away from the end, right back to the beginning”. This, he assures his readers, “is the real telling” (4).

Sinclair’s narrator is as unreliable and prone to narrative lapses as Ford’s Dowell. If Sinclair’s *Journal* was her attempt, under the influence of *Ancient Lights*, to write non-fiction through an impressionistic and unreliable frame, then *The Good Soldier* provided the impetus for a similar experiment in fiction. Sinclair’s modernist experimental method was frequently indebted to her reading of her contemporaries, and she often tries on narrative models in order to find a way of representing multiple and conflicting versions of personal and subjective history – her novella *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922) is influenced by the brevity of imagist poems and her stream of consciousness novel *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) by Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* – each borrowing elements of the precursor’s style but creating, ultimately, something distinctly Sinclairean.[[9]](#endnote-9) In this novel she “tries on” literary impressionism, but she does so in a way that blends an autobiographical account of her experience of the war, one telling of which she had already published in non-fictional impressionist form, with Ford’s first-person impressionist fictional method, and again with her own narrative penchant for drama and adventure. The novel is a work of autobiografiction, with a fictional biographer and fictional subject as well a version of her own experiences. In this she plays, as Max Saunders suggests many modernist writers do, with both “fictional authorship, fictionally authored texts” and “the forms of auto/biography”; the experiment is “not only with the *forms* of life-writing, but the *writing* of those forms.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

The subtitle of Sinclair’s novel – *The Real Story* – implies, before the reader has even opened the volume, a complicated relationship with objectivity. Again, this is comparable with *The Good Soldier*,in which Dowell fictionalises in order to better approach psychological realism: “I console myself with thinking that this is a real story and that, after all, real stories are probably best told in the way a person telling the story would tell them. Then they will seem most real” (120). It becomes apparent, very quickly, that the narrator Walter Furnival is telling his story of Jevons belatedly: “When I say that I can’t publish this story yet as it stands, I’m not forgetting that I *have* published the end of it already” but then “What I wrote then doesn’t count. I had to tell what I saw just after I had seen it. I had to take it as I saw it, a fragment snapped off from the rest of him, and dated October 11th, 1914, as if it didn’t belong to him” (4). On the next page we are told, hesitantly: “I first met him in nineteen-six—no, nineteen-five it must have been” (5). The perceptive reader then knows that the story begins in 1905 and ends with the action of the First World War. An even more perceptive reader might intuit that Jevons makes some kind of heroic figure in the War, the specificity of the date pointing to a memorable dramatic event. We know that Jevons is still alive, as the present tense of the narration implies, but we don’t know what his big moment in October 1914 consists of. The original telling, which we do not see, is dismissed as merely a fragment: both because of the shock of the wartime event (one individual’s heroism presented as typical of the heroism of a nation) and because in the moment the narrator does not see clearly, or does not see *all around*. The similarities between this prevarication and the early hesitancies of *The Good Soldier* are compelling: not only do both narrators wrestle with the question of “how it is best to put this thing down”; they also make their struggle to find the right way to tell their story a focal point of their respective narratives.

Literary impressionism, particularly as developed by Ford, was not only concerned with the difficulty of knowing and the limitations of the single point of view, it frequently made the drama of misunderstanding a part of the narrative. Sinclair engages with this tendency as thoroughly as Ford himself, but she also develops, in her own very characteristic way, a theory of what Jesse Matz calls “perceptual totality” – impressions may be partial, but multiple impressions, even if seemingly contradictory, might together be read as total; multiplicity then approaches truth.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Throughout Sinclair’s novel, Furnival is confronted with the difficulties of seeing both his initial impressions as they appeared in the moment, and his more complex and therefore more truthful final impressions:

But it is impossible to write about this singular adventure as it must have appeared to me at the time. I am saturated with Jevons’s point of view. I have had to live so long with his innocence and I have forgiven him so thoroughly any wrong he ever did to me. All this is bound to colour my record and confuse me. I have impression upon impression of Jevons piled in my memory; I cannot dig down deep enough to recover the original; I cannot get back to that anger of mine, that passion of violent integrity, that simple abhorrence of Jevons that I must have felt. (65)

This lament makes explicit a sense of the impossibility of retrieving original impressions, untainted by later mediation, as well as a belief that now, in the “real telling”, Furnival finally has the key to Jevons’s character (4). He thinks he is aligned with Jevons’s own point of view, although Jevons himself might disagree – “‘Jolly lot you know,’ he said, ‘about my point of view’” – and he has multiple and competing impressions of the man’s character, which combined make up a composite image; truthful, he believes, because complex (269). Jevons is, as Furnival sees him, a coarse and common kind of man, who drops his ’aitches when under pressure, and who works his way from nothing, through a successful journalistic career, to become a bestselling novelist; he is a coward who is afraid of going out to the war and he is also a war hero, who saves hundreds of lives by driving his beloved car into dangerous parts of shell-hit Belgium. He is not respectable but he has real honour. He is all of these things, and he is shown in the novel in all of these guises, each subsequent image not replacing the last but complicating it.

Dowell, by contrast, does not believe he has the full measure of Edward Ashburnham even as he sits down to write his story:

I don’t want you to think that I am writing Teddy Ashburnham down a brute. I don’t believe he was. God knows, perhaps all men are like that. For as I’ve said what do I know even of the smoking-room? Fellows come in and tell the most extraordinarily gross stories—so gross that they will positively give you a pain. […] Then, if they so delight in the narration, how is it possible that they can be offended—and properly offended at the suggestion that they might make attempts on your wife’s honour? Or again: Edward Ashburnham was the cleanest looking sort of chap;—an excellent magistrate, a first rate soldier, one of the best landlords, so they said, in Hampshire, England. (14)

Unlike Jevons, Ashburnham is on the surface the epitome of respectability. He is a gentleman, but he is also a liar and an adulterer. At times he acts honourably, at others he doesn’t – and it’s not always clear when he does and when he doesn’t. Each character appears, in different lights, differently shaped; contradictory and bewildering. As de Bont points out, the relation of the narrators of both books to their subject is “strangely symmetrical”: each pursues the truth about a particular man, at once threatening and alluring, “as desirable doubles, as literary *repoussoirs* [foils] and as open-ended sources of questioning and mystery”.[[12]](#endnote-12) Each presents their difficulty in so doing *as* difficulty:

Through Dowell’s and Furnival’s diverging unreliability and perplexing limitations, both novels explore alterity differently and even point at the alterity within. The other, which at times includes the narrators themselves, is a never-ending source of fantasy and knowledge, but also of jealousy and mystery that challenges the self’s identity, language and representations. As they witness and experiment with fusion, absolute distance, and infinite double-games, both narrators are confronted with a whole range of interactions and relations that they often fail to understand (or pretend to misunderstand).[[13]](#endnote-13)

As Saunders notes, this anxiety was prevalent in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth: “The act of expression, of utterance, of narration, of writing, expresses not you but something other, or at least something that may or may not be you—you can no longer be sure.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Each fictional narrator begins with the stated aim of telling the story of their encounters with a particular other, and in the process of narration becomes confused as to where the boundaries of their own self and that of the subject are; what they think and what they know, and whose story they are telling. In *Tasker Jevons*, as in *The Good Soldier*, “the insistence on artlessness only draws attention to the artfulness of the impersonation.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Jesse Matz, writing about Ford’s essay “On Impressionism” (1913), characterises Ford’s use of impressions as an extended investigation into “what is lost and gained” by an emphasis on subjectivity over objective narrative, even as this emphasis might develop “a conflict between appearance and reality”; “his fiction dramatizes worst-case scenarios in which appearances at once captivate and mislead.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Both novels engage in creative play with what Matz calls the “many patterns of sequence, contradiction, and paradox; of irony, dialectic, and performance” of the double impression:

The many versions of its duality make the impression a dynamic engine of explication, so dynamic that it provokes different, often competing stories at once. To determine the relations in its oppositions is to try and try again to grasp the narrative that would relate them, with results we might understand in terms of antinarrative composition.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The drama of appearances is key to the plot of both novels, but where Ford’s narrator maintains his sense of uncertainty throughout the narrative, Sinclair’s seems, by the end, to have reached a conclusion. He does this, not through his own internal struggle with the multiplicity of his individual impressions, but through the external perspectives of two of the women in his life. As de Bont points out, “Furnival’s ambiguous attempt at telling Jevons’s ‘Real Story’ is a failure, because the narrator lacks the necessary skills, or the ‘impersonal kindness’ that Sinclair has advocated elsewhere”.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Despite his limitations, Furnival is helped to a fuller understanding of his subject through Viola, who loves Jevons – “‘Things, Furny, always are different to what you think them. At least they’re never half so nasty’” – and her sister Norah, whom he marries (275). Just before Jevons goes to the war, Furnival is given a dressing down by Viola, who tells him that he has been wrong all along, about her own motivations and about Jevons’s: “‘But why on earth you should keep it up like this! What can it matter to you *now* whether I’m nice or horrid’” (277). Furnival is shocked, and feels this as a revelation: “for nine years I had been living behind a screen”; “I wasn’t prepared to find myself morally undressed” (277). After this, his attitude to Jevons has shifted, and he believes that he sees him, this screen having fallen, entirely clearly. Norah, however, thinks perhaps he still doesn’t, not entirely:

Norah has been reading what I’ve just written, and she tells me that there’s a great deal about Jimmy’s “joy” and his “adventure” and all that; and not one word about his duty and devotion and self-sacrifice. She says I don’t give a serious impression of him. He might have gone out to the war just for fun, and that isn’t fair to him.

I don’t know whether it’s fair or not. I write as he compels me to write. I find that I cannot separate his joy and his adventure from his duty and devotion and self-sacrifice; he didn’t separate them himself. I don’t even know that self-sacrifice is really the word for it; and the impression he gave me is just that—of going out for fun. It was the wild humour of his devotion that made it the spectacle it was.

(She has told me that it’s all right, so long as I recognize that it *was* devotion.) (318)

The key to Jevons’s personality lies in the hands of the women who see him clearly, rather than in Furnival, whose eyes are clouded by class-snobbery and jealousy. The duality of the impression here, its contradictions and complexities, is split between multiple agents: Furnival thinks he has a complete, if ambiguous, vision of Jevons, and Viola thinks *she* does. Then Furnival is made to see more clearly, after Viola’s diatribe, and thinks again he has a clear vision of the man’s character, but Norah gently adds her clarifications to even that vision, which version doesn’t differ substantially, but has a different emphasis. Whereas Dowell, to the very end, falls back on a helpless sense of unknowability – “I don’t know. I leave it to you” (156) – Furnival’s community, each woman with their separate insight, alleviates the restriction of the single point of view, and Sinclair’s method diverges from Ford’s.

Quite apart from the similarities between the two novels, there are clear cross-currents of fact and circumstance between Sinclair’s *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* and her novel, which indicate, firstly, that she was writing the fiction not only under the influence of Ford, but also as an extension of her non-fiction writings about her time with a Belgian ambulance unit and the confusing impressions she took away from it. Tasker Jevons’s war experience is very similar to Sinclair’s own. He has difficulty getting to the front: first because he has a “leaky valve in his heart”, is “too old”, and can’t enlist (260); then because his plans to buy and staff his own “Red Cross Motor Field Ambulance” go awry when it becomes clear he isn’t wanted as part of an ambulance unit: “What they *did* want was his subscriptions and his powerful pen to support their schemes” (263). He eventually gets away through sheer stubbornness, worrying “the Belgian Minister into a state of nervous prostration” and then, in turn, “the President of the Belgian Red Cross Society at Ghent” (266). He visits, in Ghent, the Couvent de Saint Pierre, where one of Viola’s cousins lies very ill in a nun’s cell. He motors out towards where the German army is advancing from to save wounded men and take them back to safety.

Sinclair herself went to Belgium as part of an Ambulance Motor Corps, largely financed by herself, and run by Hector Munro of the Medico-Psychological Clinic. The Corps were refused official backing by “the War Office, the Admiralty, and the British, American, and French Red Cross”, but “finally secured the support of the Belgian legation”.[[19]](#endnote-19) Her inclusion in the unit seems to be primarily due to her financing of the operation, but she was also required to write articles about the Motor Corps in the field, to raise awareness (by virtue of her “powerful pen”) and to generate further funds for the endeavour. This role does not sit easily with her, however:

[This] wretched Reporter nourishes an insane ambition—not to become a Special Correspondent; not to career under massive headlines in the columns of the *Daily Mail*; not to steal a march on other War Correspondents and secure the one glorious “scoop” of the campaign. Not any of these sickly and insignificant things. But—in defiance of Tom, the chauffeur—to go out with the Field Ambulance as an *ambulancière*, and hunt for wounded men, and in the intervals of hunting to observe the orbit of a shell and the manner of shrapnel in descending.[[20]](#endnote-20)

She has a few trips out with the ambulance unit, does encounter some shellfire, but nothing too close or too perilous, nurses a wounded man, pays a visit to the Couvent Saint-Pierre – “Everything is as happy and peaceful here as if Ghent were not on the eve of an invasion” – and eventually flees Ghent, with the Belgian Army, as the Germans advance on the town.[[21]](#endnote-21) She stayed for only two weeks, and then was unceremoniously sent home. As Suzanne Raitt wryly notes: “Only money could buy her the proximity to war that she craved, but money could not buy her youth or expertise.”[[22]](#endnote-22) She had not managed to accomplish any noble feats of bravery and was considered by the other women members of the ambulance unit as “superfluous,” and even as a hindrance to the effort. She acknowledges that she is inexperienced, and old, but she also reads her exclusion as gendered:

For I know I haven’t any business to be here, and if Belgium had a Kitchener I shouldn’t be here. However you look at me, I am here on false pretences. In the eyes of Mr. L. I would have no more right to be a War Correspondent (if I were one) than I have to be on a field ambulance. It is with the game of war as it was with the game of football I used to play with my big brothers in the garden. The women may play it if they’re fit enough, up to a certain point, very much as I played football in the garden. The big brothers let their little sister kick off; they let her run away with the ball; they stood back and let her make goal after goal; but when it came to the scrimmage they took hold of her and gently but firmly moved her to one side. If she persisted she became an infernal nuisance.[[23]](#endnote-23)

It’s problematic, here, that war is figured as just a more serious version of a childhood game, but this is not a unique viewpoint to Sinclair. Nor is the idea that women have no business joining ambulance units and putting themselves in danger. This latter idea Sinclair again explores in her impressionist novel. Tasker Jevons, trying to ensure his wife Viola doesn’t follow him to Belgium, inhabits the same point of view that Sinclair imagines Mr. L. to hold: “You’ve got to stop her if she tries to get out. They’re *all* trying. You should just see the bitches—tumbling, and wriggling and scrabbling with their claws and crawling on their stomachs to get to the front—tearing each other’s eyes out to get there first” (270). There is a kind of triumph in the fact that Sinclair made it to Belgium at all, but it is clear, all through *A Journal*, that she feels her position is tenuous, and that her usefulness is in question.

In *A Journal of Impressions*, Sinclair has a dream, while she is thinking of going to the war, in which her doubts about the wisdom of joining the ambulance unit are presented to her subconscious mind with dramatic imagery:

And for five weeks, ever since I knew that I must certainly go out with the expedition, I had been living in black funk; in shameful and appalling terror. Every night before I went to sleep I saw an interminable spectacle of horrors: trunks without heads, heads without trunks, limbs tangled in intestines, corpses by every roadside, murders, mutilations, my friends shot dead before my eyes. Nothing I shall ever see will be more ghastly than the things I have seen.[[24]](#endnote-24)

She goes on to say that, once in Belgium, and out with the ambulance unit, her fear recedes. Instead she feels a calm and an exaltation in the presence of danger that allows her, briefly, to play the part of a brave and useful aid.

Jevons has a similar trajectory – even to the extent that it takes him, as it did Sinclair, five weeks to get out to the war – and his “funk,” or cowardice, as he anticipates going to Belgium, is relayed in similar terms:

“It wasn’t any ordinary funk, mind you, the little creepy feeling in your waist, and your tummy tumbling down, and your heart sort of fluttering over the place where it used to be. I believe you can get over *that*. […] It was something much worse. It—it was in my head—in my brain. A sort of madness. And it never let me alone. It was worse at night, and after I got up and began to go about in the morning—when my brain woke and remembered, but it was there all the time.

“I saw things—horrors. And I heard them. I saw and heard the whole war. All the blessed time—all those infernal five weeks before I got out to it, I kept seeing horrors and hearing them. There was a lot of detail—realism wasn’t in it—and it was all correct; because I verified it afterwards.” (333-4)

Jevons is out trying to get close to danger and seeking opportunities for heroism; Furnival is out as a War Correspondent. Sinclair herself was in fact sometimes out for danger and occasionally trying to act as War correspondent, but not quite managing either role. Jevons’s missions tread the same ground as Sinclair’s missions – Ghent, Melle, Zele and Baerlaer – and both are ultimately successful in overcoming their “funk” once actually in the way of shellfire.

This, we eventually find out, is the significance of the date given to us at the very beginning of the novel. Jevons has been in Belgium for three weeks by October 11th, 1914, and he has saved many lives already, driving his car quickly into very dangerous situations and carrying wounded men out of harm’s way. On Sunday 11th, all the characters are in Melle as the town is bombarded. One shell hits the Town Hall, and the building is ablaze: despite advice from a retreating Belgian officer, Jevons runs in three times, and brings out each time a wounded man. The third time the man he rescues is Reggie Thesinger, Viola’s brother, and a man who has previously made no secret of his dislike for Jevons. In so doing, as a third shell hits, Jevons is horribly wounded, losing his right hand: “You saw a khaki cuff, horribly stained. A red rag hung from it, a fringe that dripped”.[[25]](#endnote-25) At the Couvent, there is not enough anaesthetic for both men, and Jevons forgoes his – his hand is amputated – so Reggie can have the last. The dramatic moment, where Jevons’s character is proved once and for all to be honourable, is almost melodrama: lurid, shocking, unambiguous. While Sinclair’s own attempts to experience war-time adventure had come to nothing, Jevons achieves real heroism.

*Tasker Jevons* is not Sinclair’s only war novel, moreover. The characters in *The Tree of Heaven* (1917), *The Romantic* (1920), and *Anne Severn and the Fieldings* (1922) experience their cowardice and their eventual bravery, in similar ways.It is tempting to see these repetitions as a compulsive working-through of psychological distress, which distress Sinclair specifically refers to in the description of her dream as “shameful.” If Jevons begins his adventure with the same horrific dreams, and premonitions of wholesale slaughter, he at least ends his story with unambiguous triumph. As she used the technique, or at least the framework, of *Ancient Lights* for her non-fictional but highly impressionist *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, then, Sinclair uses the technique of *The Good Soldier* to render aspects of her war experience in *Tasker Jevons*, as experienced by a man both like and unlike herself and seen through the eyes of another man both like and unlike herself. In this intertextual hybridisation she blends impressionistic non-fiction, both of the war and of a writerly, civilian life, as well as aspects of style from Fordian impressionism with the ironic realism of her own tradition. In this attempt to explore her feelings of shame and guilt about her cowardice, it is striking that the two characters she sends to Belgium as ciphers for herself are both male. Furnival is reluctant to go because he has a wife and child at home, and because he feels himself less than useful to the effort; Jevons goes because he has something to prove, both to his wife’s family and to himself. Jevons’s success in this endeavour would not be possible if he was a woman. As he says to Viola, “‘*Your* chivalry is to keep back and not make yourself a danger and a nuisance’” (317). There’s an element of wish-fulfilment here, as Sinclair imagines a figure who can perform the heroic feats she herself couldn’t – or was prevented from – but there’s also a complex rewriting of her reputation, from *A Journal*, through *Tasker Jevons* as not only the coward with the grotesque dreams of body parts, but the potential hero, misunderstood. If Furnival can misunderstand Jevons so completely as to miss his glorious nature – his ability, if not keenness, to sacrifice himself to save others – then Sinclair’s own potential heroism may not be fully appreciated.

The interweaving of autobiography, adventure story, fictional biography – autobiografiction – and autobiography here allows Sinclair to explore not only the ways in which impressions, both in the moment and even upon reflection, are partial, but also to think creatively through the ways reputations are built and maintained. In her letter to Ford she mentions William James’s reference to a lady whose philosophy, humorously, divided everything in the world into two categories: the “thick” and the “thin”. This observation comes from James’s “Hibbert Lectures”, which were published in 1909 as *A Pluralistic Universe*:

Among the philosophic cranks of my acquaintance in the past was a lady all the tenets of whose system I have forgotten except one. Had she been born in the Ionian Archipelago some three thousand years ago, that one doctrine would probably have made her name sure of a place in every university curriculum and examination paper. The world, she said, is composed of only two elements, the Thick, namely, and the Thin. No one can deny the truth of this analysis, as far as it goes (though in the light of our contemporary knowledge of nature it has itself a rather “thin” sound), and it is nowhere truer than in that part of the world called philosophy.[[26]](#endnote-26)

James uses these two terms, for the next few pages, to criticise the philosophers he believes have not sufficiently grasped their material as “thin”, by implication claiming “thickness” for his own pragmatist pluralism.

In 1915 Sinclair was rereading James’s lectures in preparation for writing her own first book of philosophy, *A Defence of Idealism*, which was published in 1917. In this volume, it is clear that she ruefully enjoys James’s use of these terms: “To call Monism the philosophy of the ‘Thin’ and Pluralism the philosophy of the ‘Thick’ is fair enough controversial practice.”[[27]](#endnote-27) However, as she goes on to point out, to then call Monists “Tender-minded” and imply that only Pluralists are “Tough-minded,” as James does, is a rhetorical gesture too far: “You might as well call your opponent a fat-head at once and have done with it.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Thickness, then, is not just density of experience, layers of impressions, quantity. It is also moral seriousness, weightiness, truthfulness. This is what she sees as the great advantage of Ford’s method in *The Good Soldier*, which she partially and creatively appropriates for *Tasker Jevons*, and it is also why she plays with the Fordian phrases “true story” and “real story” so explicitly. Sinclair’s careful arrangement of a multiplicity of impressions across time – so that a first, partial, prejudiced impression is mediated by a later, more reflective one – produces a psychologically realist effect, which is both reflective of people’s limitations in first seeing and offers a redemptive possibility. If impressions, notoriously fragmentary and misleading, can be considered together – and if other people’s viewpoints can be taken into account – perhaps it is possible to get at the truth of a person. For Sinclair, this undertaking is not just one of narrative form, but has a personal significance: her character is perceived as common, cowardly, foolish; she feels she herself could be misrepresented as all these things. Despite the playfulness of Sinclair’s experiments with Ford’s method, this is then a serious attempt to give a psychologically “accurate” account of an individual in all their complexity, in a movement towards “perceptual totality”. As the modernist anxiety about subjectivity approaches its zenith in the late nineteen-teens, Sinclair, counterintuitively, borrows impressionism—that most uncertain and unreliable method of narration—and uses it to feel her way narrative and autobiografictional certainty. Sinclair’s “thick” impressionism is perhaps then both more optimistic and more ideological than Ford’s: the flickering, unstable impressionist subject becomes stable when impressions are layered sufficiently thickly.

1. Ford Madox Ford, *Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections: Being the Memories of a Young Man*, (London: Hutchinson, 1911), xv. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. May Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (London: Hutchinson, 1915), np. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. May Sinclair, ‘From a Journal’, *English Review*, 20 (May-July 1915), 168-83; 303-14; 468-76). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. May Sinclair to Ford Madox Ford, 3 April 195. Ford Madox Ford Collection, #4605. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. I’d like to express my gratitude to Max Saunders for generously sharing this letter with me. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, ed. by Martin Stannard (New York and London: Norton Critical Editions, 1995), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Leslie De Bont, ‘“I am so near to all these people”: Narrative Alterity in Ford’s *The Good Soldier* and Sinclair’s *Tasker Jevons*’, in *Homo Duplex: Ford Madox Ford’s Experience and Aesthetics of Alterity*, ed. by Isabelle Brasme (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de le Méditerranée, 2020), 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ford, *The Good Soldier*, 12; May Sinclair, *Tasker Jevons: The Real Story* (London: Hutchinson, 1916), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Rebecca Bowler, “May Sinclair’s Dialogic Tesserae”, in *May Sinclair in her Time: Reappraising May Sinclair’s Role in Early-20th-Century Literature and Philosophy*, ed. by Isabelle Brasme, Leslie de Bont and Florence Marie (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de le Méditerranée, forthcoming 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. de Bont, 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Saunders, 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 139. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Jesse Matz, *Lasting Impressions: The Legacies of Impressionism in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. de Bont, 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Sinclair, *A Journal*, 90-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid, 226; 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Raitt, 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Sinclair, *A Journal*, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Sinclair, *A Journal*, 7-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid, 325. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (New York, London, Bombay and Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 135-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. May Sinclair, A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions (London and New York: Macmillan, 1917), xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. James, 33; *Defence*, xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)