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Post-War Materiality and Modernist Strategies of Evasion in Ford Madox Ford's *Last Post*

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In the last novel of Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End* (1924–1928), *Last Post*, the protagonist Christopher Tietjens has survived the tumultuous years of the First World War and settled in a remote cottage in rural South East England. Often considered Ford's masterpiece and one of the most significant novelistic renditions of the First World War, *Parade's End* provides, not just a depiction of the horrors of warfare, but a multifaceted rendition of the broader social and cultural transformations of the pre- to post-war period in Britain. The tetralogy centres on the experiences of Tietjens, the youngest son of a Yorkshire landowning family who is a brilliant mathematician and public servant. Tietjens serves as a soldier in France during the war and retires to the countryside in its aftermath, struggling with the effects of shellshock. As the final novel in the series, *Last Post* is set entirely after the Armistice, and its rural setting and emphasis on domestic concerns is often seen as modelled on Ford's own post-war life.[1]

However, the choice not to end Tietjens' story at the Armistice and instead provide, what Ford describes in his preface to the novel as "a slice of one of Christopher's later days",[2] has caused *Last Post* to have a somewhat precarious position in the tetralogy. Although *Last Post* is not the only example of Ford's war writing which, at least in part, focuses on the aftermath, another example being *No Enemy: A Tale of Reconstruction* (1929), the novel has been thought to deviate from the subjects and themes of the other novels in the tetralogy. *Last Post* depicts Tietjens' new profession as an old furniture dealer and the material circumstances of his life in a rural cottage which he shares with his partner Valentine Wannop, his older brother Mark, and Mark's wife Marie Léonie. It was this emphasis on Tietjens' domestic life that caused Graham Greene to famously exclude the novel from his Bodley Head edition of the series. In the

introduction Greene argues that *Last Post* attempts, with damaging results, to clear up "valuable ambiguities" by bringing them into "the idyllic sunshine of Christopher's successful escape into the life of a Kentish small-holder".[3] For Greene, the final novel is an anticlimactic continuation of a story whose, as Paul Skinner notes, "only authentic subject" should be the war.[4]

Yet Greene's reading of *Parade's End* as a series which ought to be preoccupied with representations of immediate warfare fails to appreciate Ford's complex and innovative approach to the martial subject, which more often than not focuses on seemingly unrelated issues. In response to Greene's dismissal of *Last Post* as idyllic and unambiguous, I would like to offer a reading which treats Ford's continuation of Tietjens' story through a narrative which focuses on traditionally unconventional themes in war-related literature as intentional and very much in line with the broader thematic concerns of the tetralogy. By focusing on Ford's representation of Tietjens' work as a furniture dealer, and the narrative foregrounding of domestic spaces and furniture, this article will argue that Ford's novel imagines the radical societal transformation in the aftermath of the First World War as a material transformation. *Last Post* responds to a transformation in the production and circulation of furniture as well as a broader transformation of the relationship between the material and the psychosocial. By drawing on Rebecca Walkowitz's concept of "evasion" and Bill Brown's definition of "the thing", I will investigate how Ford uses experimental stylistic strategies to explore how social relations are produced and sustained through material objects. Furniture and the domestic become the focal points through which Ford constructs an anti-triumphalist narrative about the war experience which rejects the dominant discourse of progress and resolution and examines the possibility of reconstruction and reconciliation.

Greene's editorial omission of *Last Post* has since the publication of the Bodley Head series held significant critical sway, and the question whether *Parade's End* should be considered a trilogy or tetralogy has been widely debated. Greene argues that Ford intended the series to be a trilogy. He supports this claim by referencing a letter written in 1930 where Ford states that he "never have liked" *Last Post* "and always intended the series to end with *A Man Could Stand Up—*."[5]

This letter has later been proven to be inconclusive evidence, since, as Sara Haslam notes, "Ford does clearly tell us in his annotations that he had returned to his senses about the importance of including *Last Post* in any version of a Tietjens series".[6] However, the novel's move away from modern urban urgency and its emphasis on reconstruction has also often been interpreted as a sign of its difference from the rest of the series. Whereas the first three novels have more or less been set at the centre of things, in London or in the trenches in Rouen – where things happen – *Last Post* is peculiarly removed from the action; it is, as Skinner notes, "a novel of the periphery".[7] This geographical displacement has been interpreted as proof of its failure to "connect with the 'real' world".[8] As an example of this position, Nicholas Brown has argued that "there is not much indication that the nostalgic, soft-focus, Merchant-and-Ivory ending to *Parade's End* is anything other than what it seems".[9] Yet to describe Tietjens' rural cottage as "nostalgic, soft-focus" and thematically transparent is to wilfully ignore what Max Saunders describes as the novel's "highly precarious tone and form".[10] Saunders, who has argued for *Last Post*'s significance to the tetralogy, notes that, rather than offering an idyllic reconciliation, Ford sustains "a rare generic and tonal duality" throughout the novel.[11]

Last Post serves as a continuation of the three previous novels in many ways, not only through its characters and plot but also through its thematic interrogation of the effects of dramatic social and cultural changes, and the relationship between the past and the present. And, as in the previous novels, a domestic focus and particularly a foregrounding of furniture becomes one of the primary modes through which these ideas are explored. Paul Skinner has noted how furniture is one of the "fundamental thematic continuities" in the tetralogy.[12] Tietjens' unparalleled knowledge of old furniture is established already in the first novel, *Some Do Not…*, and the idea that he will retire to the country and work with old furniture is repeatedly mentioned in both *No More Parades* and *A Man Could Stand Up—*. Yet more than a plot point, furniture also continually appears in intimate proximity to the formation of characters' subjectivity, it shapes how they perceive themselves and articulate their desires. And whilst this is present throughout the first three novels, *Last Post* presents the culmination of this dynamic.

In relation to the question of whether the novel offers a conclusive resolution, there is little to suggest that Ford resolves ambiguities and presents an idyllic reconciliation even though *Last Post* has a primarily domestic centred narrative. Regardless of his later feelings towards the novel, there exists sufficient proof to suggest that Ford intended *Last Post*, with its deviation from the war-centred narrative and its increased focus on domestic rural life, to be the lens through which he would render the post-war years and its economic and political transformations.[13] As a whole, the tetralogy narrates what Walkowitz describes as the "entanglement between the public, official, and faraway spaces where men fight and the small, private, enclosed spaces where women think".[14] This narrative duality is according to Walkowitz a central aspect of modernist narratives, especially ones depicting the war, where "conflicts about international action and national culture" are presented "as conflicts about attention".[15] The three first novels, set during the war, adhere to this structure as they attempt to render both Tietjens' life as a soldier and his personal relationships at home. As a result, significant national and international events are only partially narrated, often as the backdrop in the unfolding of a more personal or domestic drama. Yet, this entanglement between global and local, or personal and political, persists even in *Last Post*'s post-war setting.

In his depiction of the English countryside, Ford does not narrate the conclusion, but rather the persistence of the war-experience and its permeation of society, even in what previously had been understood as remote and picturesque spaces. The Tietjens brothers do not escape the war through their relocation, but rather bring it with them. Ford shows the persistent presence of the war already in the early pages of the novel by opening with a description of Tietjens' brother Mark, who, after having suffered a stroke on the Armistice has been rendered immobile and mute. Although the milieu appears idyllic and the hut where Mark is lying is surrounded by grass that is "infinitely green" and "withy binders" and "small oak sapling-trunks",[16] the scene also offers reminders of the war. From the hut, Mark observes "a lanky girl of ten" who is "too long and thin in the legs and ankles", which Mark attributes to "[w]ar-starvation".[17] Whilst the girl serves as the first concrete reminder of the war, much

of the narrative remains preoccupied with its effects. In the parts of the novel narrated from Mark's perspective there is a continuous refusal to provide resolution. Instead, Mark continuously returns to and reflects on the war and the Armistice and laments what he perceives as the decline of social and political order in its aftermath.

This conflict of attention between domestic and wider political and cultural conflicts is furthermore conveyed through the tetralogy's particular stylistic features. Ford renders the events of *Parade's End* through a fragmented and highly subjective narrative. Rather than offering a documentary depiction of the war, the narrative, much of which is based on Ford's own experiences as a soldier, emphasises subjective impressions and provides an account which resists the conventions of war narratives and instead attempts to render the inexplicable trauma and devastation caused by the First World War. Ford's experimental style allows him to foreground the turbulent and disorienting emotional experiences of his subjects. As Eve Sorum has noted, "*Parade's End* frustrates attempts at connection and empathy in order to allow for them, collapsing the easy distinction between categories of orientation and disorientation".[18] Through a consistent use of internal focalisation which moves between different characters, Ford attempts, as he notes in his 1913 essay "On Impressionism", to "render those queer effects of real life",[19] to present life as it is experienced from a particular subject's limited and often skewed perception of the world. Ford's "impressionism" results in a kaleidoscopic narrative where ambiguity and duality of perception is continuously sustained, especially in relation to the representation of traumatic and post-traumatic experiences. In *Last Post*, this ambiguity of tone is realised by abandoning Tietjens' perspective, and instead positioning previously secondary characters like Marie Léonie, Mark Tietjens, Valentine Wannop, and Sylvia Tietjens as the primary narrative consciousness.

The narrative displacement of Tietjens in *Last Post*, and the tetralogy's general refusal to provide a straightforward representation of significant political and historical events, exemplifies what Walkowitz calls a strategy of evasion; a form of stylistic or narrative strategy which seeks to disrupt habits of generalisation in fictional representation. *Parade's End*, like many other modernist texts, explore this con-

cept by "[d]ecentering the first-person point of view, rejecting tones of comfort or confidence, risking indecency".[20] Walkowitz further links the evasive narrative techniques of modernist writers in the 1920s to the critical concept of autonomy in art as developed by Theodor Adorno after the Second World War. Adorno positions autonomy in opposition to "homogenization of writing", a process which he "associates with fascism".[21] Like his modernist predecessors, Adorno is convinced "that social norms are embedded in traditions of literary style and that literary style is embedded in the politics of national culture",[22] thus linking literary form to the production of ideology. As a result, the question for Adorno becomes how a literary work best can critique the ideology of which it forms an intrinsic part.

In order to answer this question, Adorno returns to his much-quoted statement from "Cultural Criticism and Society" that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric".[23] In the essay "Commitment" he reiterates the statement in his discussion on the political potential of art by claiming that "it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature".[24] Adorno's critique of what he describes as committed art grounds itself in the idea that any attempt at explicitly telling the story of suffering or oppression results in a propagation and eventual trivialisation of said suffering: "The so-called artistic representation of sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it".[25] In "Commitment" Adorno pinpoints an issue which modernist writers were grappling with in the years following the First World War: How does one represent catastrophic violence or disruption without trivialising it or supporting the political and cultural mechanisms that caused it? The modernists' answer, like Adorno's, was to look to style. Adorno suggests that meaning can always be co-opted, whether by processes of commodification or by ideology. The only way to resist co-opting is to create what he calls "autonomous works of art" which "firmly negate empirical reality".[26] By using the work of Beckett as an example, Adorno argues that the avant-garde's move towards abstraction is a necessary artistic impulse which offers resistance against market forces of homogenisation and commodification. It is "a reflex response to the abstraction of the law which objectively dominates society".[27]

Ford's rejection of linear or empirical accounts of the First World War and the presence of absences and ambiguities in his narrative in lieu of a more traditional form of realistic documentation, could be seen as a foreshadowing of Adorno's idea of resistance through formal experimentation. Yet Ford's texts do not only negate empirical reality through stylistic abstraction, but also through a more material form of evasion. As a result of the war, writers struggled with the question how, if at all, art could "present sociability or pleasure in the context of international catastrophe".[28] Using Virginia Woolf as an example, Walkowitz argues that post-war modernist texts seek autonomy, not only through stylistic experimentation, but also through spatial displacement of the narrative. By shifting attention away from depictions of the war-front, authors could avoid "explicitness, transparency and heroic action" and evade complicity with the dominant imagery of patriotism and nationalism.[29] In line with this, Ford's reason for prioritising domestic matters over military matters, setting his novel in a rural cottage where the characters seem to be constantly preoccupied with furniture, is not a sign of political escapism, but rather a way to offer a critique not just of the war but of its narratives as well.

Things, Memory, and Loss of Heritage

In *Last Post*, material things, particularly furniture, have a narrative function beyond that of décor. Its thematic centrality becomes increasingly significant as the characters negotiate an overwhelming sense of loss with attempts at reconciliation in the wake of war. The Tietjens brothers' loss of their family estate and material inheritance is the central event of the novel, a process that, in turn, becomes analogous to the societal reorganisation of the late 1910s and decline of what is described in the opening scene of the *Parade's End* tetralogy as "the English public official class".[30] Through the narration of these events, the novel poses the question: What happens to the subject as the material and historical anchor of the subject's sense of self disappears?

To fully understand how this question is examined in *Last Post*, it is important to first understand the context of Tietjens' relationship to furniture and how it is rendered in the tetralogy as a whole.

Tietjens is often commended for his knowledge of furniture. As his wife Sylvia notes in *Some Do Not…*, Tietjens has "a marvellous gift for old furniture".[31] This idea is further reiterated by his friend Vincent Macmaster, who claims that Tietjens is able to tell whether a piece of furniture is "a fake by just cocking an eye at it".[32] However, as a result of the war, Tietjens' suffers from brain damage which affects his ability to know, remember, and recognise things. He loses the "perfect encyclopædia of exact material knowledge"[33] which he has previously had, and as a result loses his job, wealth, and status. And whilst this loss does not seem to affect his knowledge of furniture, it is a loss that is expressed materially.

In the last part of *A Man Could Stand Up—*, as Tietjens' future partner Valentine Wannop visits his once elaborately furnished apartment, she encounters an unfurnished home: "A very great room. All white; again with stains on the walls from which things had been removed".[34] Through Valentine's narration, Ford establishes a clear parallel between Tietjens' deteriorated state and his empty apartment. Valentine interprets the fact that "he had no furniture and did not know the porter" as proof that his mind is "exhausted" as a result of the war.[35] The stains on the walls are not metaphors but materialisations of the transience and precarity of things, both psychological and material. The absence suggested by the stains and the defurnishing of Tietjens' home also become indicative of Tietjens' increasing absence from the narrative in the post-war sections of the narrative, which begins already in the final part of the third novel. The Armistice marks a point in the narrative where Tietjens' perspective disappears. So rather than providing an in-depth examination of Tietjens' internal torment, Ford employs an evasive narrative strategy by introducing Tietjens' experience of post-war society through his material property, or the lack thereof, and furthermore, not from Tietjens' perspective at all, but from Valentine's.

In the scene at Tietjens' apartment, it becomes apparent that Ford's particular way of rendering the interactions between the material and the psychological suggest that physical objects should be understood as more than commodities which can be owned and exchanged. For whilst the relationship to furniture for most of the characters, Tietjens included, has for the majority of the tetralogy been characterised

by ownership, particularly the collecting of valuable antiques, Ford's portrayal of furniture also reveals a more intimate and affective relationship, wherein the subject and object are mutually constitutive. This conditional relationship is heightened towards the end of the tetralogy, particularly in *Last Post*, as the ownership of objects becomes more tenuous, and its previously stable worth and meaning is disrupted as a result of the war.

The kind of relationship between subject and object rendered in Ford's novel, where objects seem to elude objectification and their meaning and function is renegotiated, is akin to what Bill Brown describes as "thingness". Brown's idea of "the thing" is developed from Heidegger's discussion in the essay "The Thing" from *Poetry, Language, Thought*, where he posits that the thing should be thought of as a form of gathering of relations.[36] By adopting Heidegger's idea, Brown suggests that rather than just being a physical presence, an object also signifies a set of relations. The thing describes something more than the material components of the object by emphasising how it exists in relation to the subject: "the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation".[37] A traditional Marxist reading of the subject/object relation would primarily focus on the processes of commodification of an object through "generalizable circuits of exchange and consumption".[38] Yet by adopting a stance influence by Walter Benjamin, who argued that all objects, however ephemeral, contain the "unconscious of the collective",[39] Brown argues that more than just containing "a history of production" an object also contains a "congealed" history of use, the subject's particular "fascination, apprehension, aspiration".[40] The thing thus refers to the "sensuous, aesthetic, semiotic" function of objects.[41] And whilst commodification attempts to suppress these functions, what Brown describes as the "thingness" of an object, can become visible in moments of crisis or destruction: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us".[42]

The First World War could be described as such a moment of crisis or disruption in the circuits of exchange and consumption. The stains on the walls in the shape of paintings and the partially furnished room described by Valentine at the end of *A Man Could Stand Up—* speak of a shift or disruption in the subject/object relation. The stains reveal

the "thingness" of the objects precisely because their presence suggest absence or a loss. The stains are an essential interpretative prism for Valentine; they bear witness to Tietjens' psychological and financial deterioration but also function as symptomatic of a broader destabilisation of the social and economic order of British society in the post-war years, a historical moment which she imagines as "this parting of the ways […] this crack across the table of History".[43] Whilst the valuable art-work and furniture which previously decorated the apartment suggest what Bryony Randall in reference to Brown's theory has described as "the stable, atemporal, reducible" character of the object, the stains reveal instead the "temporal, most likely transitory" character of the thing.[44] They signal use and transformation, but also loss.

The framing of things as transitory is central to the narrative of post-war reconstruction in *Last Post*. After having lost most of his own valuable furniture, through his work as a furniture dealer Tietjens begins collecting other old items. For Tietjens, things appear to function as material links to a lost past, and they become a vehicle through which the past that has been lost as a result of the war could, perhaps, be reconstructed. However, the items that Tietjens collects are not pristine antiques, but rather broken fragments of furniture which he has the local Cabinet-maker Cramp reconstruct into a new whole: "He had to take bits of old wood out of one sort of old truck and fit it into missing bits of other old truck".[45] These items are then collected in Tietjens' cottage, which is described by his sister-in-law as a place housing a collection of "forlorn object" and "debris", "a mere depot for dilapidated objects in rough wood and battered brass".[46] But rather than meaningless, these broken or lost things allow Ford to emphasise the duality of transience and permanence as an inherent requisite for existence, both physical, psychological, and material.

Haslam has noted how the connection between materiality and history and the way things can create links to the past seems to have been a recurring concern for Ford in *Last Post* and can explain "Ford's thematic obsession with furniture in *Parade's End*".[47] Haslam argues that Tietjens' choice to become a furniture dealer derives from a desire to preserve the history of the objects: "Alienated from his birth-right in this respect, he makes do with preserving others' histo-

ries".[48] Tietjens attempts to reconstruct old and dilapidated furniture could be read as an attempt to re-establish historical continuity or at least recuperate a lost past. In this sense the furniture function as Brown's "thing", Ford invests them with a meaning which is not simply symbolic, but historical, social, and affective – showing their use and physicality as well as their function as objects of economic value. Furthermore, there is an argument to be made for the idea that the reconstruction of furniture has a healing or reconciliatory potential. If Tietjens cannot fully reconstruct his mind, then he can at least attempt to reconstruct the shattered material heritage of his country. However, there is a duality to Tietjens' engagement with the old furniture pieces throughout *Last Post* which refuses to let the idea of preservation stand unchallenged. The idea of material reconstruction as a method for preserving cultural memory is undermined by Tietjens' undeniable desire to reject and disperse the material heritage of his class. Haslam notes this duality by observing how, by selling the furniture he becomes "another agent in the disruption of family history", yet she emphasises the importance of the fact that he also manages to preserve "its material existence" through redistribution.[49] And whilst Tietjens undeniably engages with material and historical preservation, the question whether his interaction with objects and the narrative as a whole support this as a viable possibility remains.

In terms of preserving cultural memory, Tietjens seems to be as interested in disruption as preservation. Tietjens' dislike of old furniture is repeatedly mentioned in the previous three novels. As Sylvia Tietjens describes her husband's gift for furniture, she also points out how "he despised it as such".[50] Tietjens himself describes how he "hated these disinterred and waxed relics of the past".[51] For Tietjens, the old furniture function as the materialisation of a society and culture which he loathes and which he seeks to escape. According to his brother Mark, the old furniture business allows Tietjens to resign from the privileges and restraints of his material heritage: "Christopher *wanted* to rid himself of his great possessions […] He wanted to be out of the world".[52] As part of this rejection of society and its material culture, it is important to note that Tietjens voluntarily resigns from his own claim over the family estate Groby. And through his work he gains the ability to displace English furniture,

and as an extension culture, by selling it to wealthy Americans who appear in Europe after the war in search for valuable artefacts. He attempts to undermine the cultural dominance of his country through a form of material evasion. Rather than attempting to recuperate what has been lost and destroyed, he allows the material loss to mirror the personal and psychological loss caused by the war. Through Tietjens' business Ford foregrounds a sense of scepticism rather than triumph at the return of peace, making the move to the countryside appear as anything but the idyllic escape imagined by Greene.

This duality in relation to furniture also extends to their function as "things". For whilst the process of patching together furniture allows for an engagement with material objects which seems to arrest the processes of commodification and invite a more intimate and affective relationship, by nature of their ultimate function as items to be sold, Ford simultaneously undermines this idea, emphasising what Brown describes as the temporary nature of "thingness", which is always threatened by the mechanisms of commodification.

The "House-Place": Provisional Collections and Cultural Commodification

Although focusing on Tietjens' life and profession, the relationship to furniture that is foregrounded in *Last Post*, whether affective or commercial, is not narrated from his perspective, but primarily from that of the women surrounding him. This narrative choice adds an additional layer of ambiguity to the question of whether Tietjens wants to reconstruct or disrupt. But more importantly, it also allows Ford to create a palimpsestic rendering of any subject/object interaction and to emphasise the disjointed and contradictory relationships that emerge between different subjects and particular objects.

This form of layered rendering is exemplified in the contrast between Mark Tietjens' wife Marie Léonie's reflections on the cottage and those of Valentine Wannop. Marie Léonie's narrative is dominated by her concerns regarding their precarious co-habitation with an unmarried couple: Valentine Wannop and Christopher Tietjens. Knowing about Tietjens' interest in old furniture, she expects him to be able to appreciate the valuable collection of furniture that she

has inherited from her family in France, such as an "Second Empire fauteuil" or "overmantel clock that was an exact reproduction in bronze of the Fountain of the Médicis in the gardens of the Luxembourg at Paris".[53] Yet her attempts to decorate with these items are thwarted by Tietjens and Valentine. And whilst she does not expect Valentine to recognise their value, she is surprised that Tietjens, "a man of honour and sensibility",[54] is unable to appreciate them. For Marie Léonie, the collection can demonstrate and support her own superior provenance and familial connections, yet what she fails to see is that the cottage is not a regular home where the furnishings are meant to mirror and complement the inhabitant.

The cottage, more than being the place where they live, serves as a showplace in Tietjens' furniture business. The consequences of living in a space which primarily has a commercial function and the precarity that such a situation entail is explored from Valentine's perspective. She continuously worries about the material well-being of her unborn son, and as the pieces that Tietjens restores are sold, she wonders what furniture will remain when he is born. Valentine understands the benefits of this arrangement: "Obviously if you sold old furniture straight out of use in your own house, it fetched better prices than from a shop".[55] Presenting the furniture in a domestic context provides the customers with an appealing illusion of rural domesticity, yet it also complicates the items' function as commodities. Valentine's emphasis on the benefit of selling "out of use" suggests that, even though the furniture can disappear at any moment, they still function as they would in a regular home: "You would say, too much of the show-place: but you lived into it. You lived yourself into it in spite of the Americans who took, sometimes embarrassed, peeps from the doorway".[56] To alleviate her discomfort at being observed, Valentine ignores the commercial function of their home and imagines a future where her son can sleep in "that bed with the thin fine posts".[57] In this moment of reflection, Valentine seems to identify what Brown describes as the instability inherent in any process of objectification, where the thingness of an object, meaning its "sensuous" or "aesthetic" properties, is brought to the fore as it is invested in a "misuse value", or being used for something contrary to its current purpose.[58] By "liv[ing] into it", Valentine destabilases the

intended function of the furniture and demonstrates its importance, not just financially, but to the subject and its attempts at sustaining connections to the past and imagining potential futures.

Yet Valentine's interjection is momentary and throughout *Last Post* it becomes increasingly clear that whilst Tietjens has the ability to see and understand the history of objects and wants to preserve them, their value to him has become predominantly an economic one.[59] The ambiguous status of the cottage is emphasised through Valentine's description of it as a "house-place",[60] suggesting that it is not really a home, but not really a shop either. Yet the cottage's function as a home is deliberately used for commercial purposes. Whilst giving the appearance of blissful domesticity, Valentine's narration makes it clear that the furniture in the house is an artificially constructed collection of things, designed to conform to the Americans' expectations of rural Englishness. The old furniture has an enhanced value not because of their utility but because of their relation to the inhabitants, their physical context and significantly, history. The transformation of domestic furnishings into valuable artifacts, produced through a process of commodification, but also a homogenisation of culture and history designed to appeal to a particular consumer, appears as an integral feature of Ford's representation of post-war society. The disruption of war and industrial modernity has rendered these things as relics of an unattainable yet simultaneously fetishized past. Valentine's depiction of their living circumstances furthermore undermines the idea that the Tietjens' have managed to escape into an idyllic rural domesticity, an assumption which in the novel is voiced only by the jealous outsider Sylvia Tietjens. By narrating the novel from multiple perspectives, Ford never provides any conclusive or fixed meaning regarding a particular object, event, or relationship.

In relation to Tietjens' furniture business and the family's domestic circumstances, Ford sustains a narrative ambiguity until the very end. Valentine's perspective emphasises the financial precarity of the family's situation. In the only interaction between the couple in the novel she receives news that Tietjens has failed to gain money from a business deal. In response she desperately exclaims: "How are we to live? How are we ever to live?"[61] Here Valentine questions more than the family's ability to survive financially, she also questions the sus-

tainability of their attempts at reconstruction as a whole. This tone of doubt is contrasted by Mark's perspective, who hails his brother's ability to predict the developments of the market and earn an income: "It was still the war then, but Christopher and his partner […] had predicted the American mopping up the world's gold supply and the consequent stripping of European houses of old stuff.… At that you could make a living".[62] A third perspective is added by Sylvia Tietjens, who recognises that Tietjens had correctly "predicted an American invasion" and their desire to buy old furniture, yet she questions his ability to make a living from it by claiming that Tietjens' "American partner had embezzled most of the money" from the business.[63] She, like the other characters, reiterates how the realignment of global economic hegemony in the post-war years is resulting in an increase of American buyers with an unsated obsession with old English furniture. Yet in the absence of any omniscient narrator, it remains inconclusive whether Sylvia's claim about the embezzlement is correct. This sustained ambiguity suggests that although Ford emphasises the financial value of the commodification of material heritage, he continuously undermines the epistemological certainty of that value through the multiple and contradictory narrative perspectives in the novel. Throughout the novel it seems as if Tietjens both hates and desires old furniture, that he uses it to both restore and disrupt historical continuity, and that the Americans are both obsessed with and unwilling to buy the furniture that Tietjens sells.

Critics have noted how the sensory language in Ford's novels evade any sense of narrative stability. Nicholas Brown describes how Ford depicts the chaotic and destabilising landscape of the Western Front through a "jumbled sensory language".[64] Rather than depicting the constant danger, the potential death and destruction that can arrive at any moment in explicit detail, Ford illustrates the vulnerability of the soldiers by emphasising the provisional and transitory status of the surrounding things: "Things are described with reference to a future in which they are blown up".[65] By referencing T.S. Eliot's emblematic image of modernity, Brown argues that Ford's language is a "heap of broken images" which "represents a world that is only provisionally not a heap of broken things".[66] Although the setting of *Last Post* is a far cry from the sensorial chaos of the war novels, the representation

of furniture as provisional, fragile, and constantly disputed by the cacophony of narrative perspectives sustains the narrative's commitment to ambiguity and resistance to conclusive, empirical truths. So, whilst *Last Post*'s depiction of Tietjens' furniture business narrates what Adorno would call the marketing process of homogenisation of culture, Ford utilises stylistic strategies of evasion, to use Walkowitz's striking description of the tenor of modernist style, to resist the same homogenisation in the novel itself.

The failure at re-establishing continuity and offer reconciliation is captured in *Last Post*'s narrative by Sylvia Tietjens' decision to cut down the Groby Tree, a tree at the Groby estate which throughout the tetralogy has appeared as a symbol of the ancestry and material prosperity of the Tietjens family. Tietjens' absence in the novel is due to his attempt to save the tree, and as he eventually returns in the last chapter, he is holding a piece of the tree and explains to his brother that the tree fell and took "[h]alf of Groby wall" with it.[67] Through the cutting down of Groby tree, Ford sustains the idea of provisionality through the concluding novel of the series. As the tree falls and destroys part of the house, Ford shows that objects are transitory and that even steadfast monuments can be torn down.

According to Walkowitz, the modernist strategy of evasion is based on the idea that, as Walter Benjamin would claim, the history of civilization is also the history of barbarism. In order to challenge that history, one must remember differently: "Writing in a time of too many processions, Benjamin proposes […] that looking backward and looking below are principal tactics of anti-triumphalism".[68] *Parade's End*, in its very title seems to align with Benjamin's anti-triumphalist project. By presenting the escape to the idyllic countryside as both an attempt at, and a failure of, reconciliation, and making it the place where Tietjens restores English heritage and puts it up for sale, Ford allows the reader to fully sense both the loss and social disruption experienced in the aftermath of the war, whilst refusing conventional narrative tropes of patriotic commemoration.

In *Last Post*, the entanglement between subject and object is an essential part in the figuration of the narrative consciousness. It becomes a node through which the characters explore the effects of loss, the processes of mourning, and the disruption of social relation and

historical continuity in the early twentieth century. Yet the meaning and future as well as the past of material objects, appear, not as fixed, but in constant negotiation through memory and time, through overlapping and sometimes contradictory interpretations. In the last novel of the *Parade's End* tetralogy, rather than imagining what Greene saw as an unnecessary reconciliation, Ford evades a conclusion and stages reconstruction as the disruption and redistribution of the material remnants of pre-war society.

Noter

1 Ford served as Captain of the Welsch Regiment in France during the war and upon his return to civilian life in 1919, he retired to a cottage in East Sussex together with his partner Stella Bowen.
2 Ford Madox Ford, *Last Post* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2011), 4.
3 Ford Madox Ford, *The Bodley Head Ford Madox Ford: Vol. 3, Parade's End, 1: Some Do Not*, ed. Graham Greene (London: The Bodley Head, 1963), 6.
4 Ford, *Last Post*, lv.
5 Bernard Bergonzi, "Ford and Graham Greene," in *Ford Madox Ford's Literary Contacts*, ed. Paul Skinner (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 213, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204767_021.
6 Although the series appeared with the name *Parade's End* only with the publication of the 1950, Knopf single-volume edition, Sara Haslam shows how Ford suggested that the series would be called *Parades End* (without apostrophe) in a letter to his agent in 1930. Haslam, "Ford Madox Ford's Last Library," 1–23, 17.
7 Ford, *Last Post*, xxxiii.
8 Ford, *Last Post*, lv.
9 Nicholas Brown, "*The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*: Absolute Nostalgia," in *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 103, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400826834.
10 Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life, Vol II: The After-War World* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 253, https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.34-4942 .
11 Saunders, *A Dual Life*, 253.
12 Ford, *Last Post*, lii.
13 Skinner notes that when publishing *A Man Could Stand Up—*, Ford described it as "the third and penultimate" novel in the series, thus demonstrating his intent to include a fourth and final novel. Ford, *Last Post*, liii.
14 Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion: Critical Cosmopolitanism and British Modernism," in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (London: Duke UP, 2006), 131, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jq8v.9.
15 Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion," 123.
16 Ford, *Last Post*, 9.
17 Ford, *Last Post*, 13.
18 Eve Sorum, "Empathy, Trauma, and the Space of War in *Parade's End*," in *War and the Mind: Ford Madox Ford's Parade's End, Modernism, and Psychology*,

ed. Chantler Ashley and Rob Hawkes (Edinburgh: EUP, 2015), 50, https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748694266.003.0004.

19 Ford Madox Ford, *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Frank MacShane (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 41.
20 Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion," 120.
21 Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion," 125.
22 Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion," 125.
23 Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism in Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), 19–34, 34.
24 Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 2007), 188.
25 Adorno, "Commitment,",189.
26 Adorno, "Commitment," 190.
27 Adorno, "Commitment," 190.
28 Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion," 123.
29 Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion," 123.
30 Ford Madox Ford, *Some Do Not…* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2011), 3.
31 Ford, *Some Do Not…*, 188.
32 Ford, *Some Do Not…*, 57.
33 Ford, *Some Do Not…*, 6–7.
34 Ford Madox Ford, *A Man Could Stand Up—* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2011), 189.
35 Ford, *A Man Could Stand Up—*, 32.
36 Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 172.
37 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001), 4, https://doi.org/10.1086/449030.
38 Bill Brown, "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)," *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999), 2 https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.1999.0013.
39 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2002), 4.
40 Bill Brown, "The Matter of Materialism: Literary Mediations," in *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, ed. Tony Bennet and Patrick Joyce (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 63.
41 Brown, "The Secret Life of Things," 3.
42 Brown, "Thing Theory," 4.
43 Ford, *A Man Could Stand Up—*, 17.
44 Bryony Randall, "'Angles and surfaces declared themselves intimately': Intimate Things in Dorothy Richardson's *The Trap*," in *Modernist Intimacies*, ed. Elsa Högberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 78.
45 Ford, *Last Post*, 46.
46 Ford, *Last Post*, 31.
47 Sara Haslam, "From Conversation to Humiliation: '*Parade's End*' and the Eighteenth Century," *International Ford Madox Ford Studies* 13 (2014), 45, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401211055_005.
48 Haslam, "From Conversation to Humiliation," 46.
49 Haslam, "From Conversation to Humiliation," 46.
50 Ford, *Some Do Not…*, 188.

51 Ford, *Some Do Not…*, 57.
52 Ford, *Last Post*, 89.
53 Ford, *Last Post*, 18.
54 Ford, *Last Post*, 19.
55 Ford, *Last Post*, 173.
56 Ford, *Last Post*, 174.
57 Ford, *Last Post*, 173.
58 Brown, "The Secret Life of Things," 3.
59 The financial benefit of selling furniture is explicitly stated, it being Tietjens' only means of securing an income after the war. Ford, *Last Post*, 102.
60 Ford, *Last Post*, 187.
61 Ford, *Last Post*, 203.
62 Ford, *Last Post*, 94.
63 Ford, *Last Post*, 162.
64 Brown, "*The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*," 99.
65 Brown, "*The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*," 100.
66 Brown, "*The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*," 99.
67 Ford, *Last Post*, 203.
68 Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion," 141.