FORD MADOX FORD: TRAVEL WRITING IN PROVENCE

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Abstract: *Ford Madox Ford is known as a novelist, essayist, poet and literary critic, but very rarely as a travel writer. Yet he did turn to travel writing later in life, producing a mixture of memoir, historical writing and ode to place. This short paper analyzes Ford Madox Ford's description of southern France in his travel book* Provence From Minstrels to the Machine, *first published in 1935.*
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1. Introduction

Ford Madox Ford is known as a novelist, essayist, poet and literary critic, but very rarely as a travel writer. Yet he did turn to travel writing later in life, producing a mixture of memoir, historical writing and ode to place. He was not the first British or American writer to embark on a journey to live and write in France. He had perhaps been inspired by his literary predecessors such as Robert Louis Stevenson, who had recounted his impressions of France in his famous *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes,* published in 1879, or Henry James, whose travel book *A Little Tour of France* was published in 1884. Neither was he alone among his contemporaries to document his discoveries. Edith Wharton had embarked on three automobile tours of the country in 1906 and 1907, while Ezra Pound had traced the footsteps of the troubadours on his walking tour through southern France in 1912. Then in the interwar years, numerous writers took advantage of the new technology, which so facilitated travel and their renewed possibility to discover France. Ford Madox Ford was one of these writers who chose to return regularly to live and write in France, where he had made numerous trips as a child and young adult. This short study analyzes Ford Madox Ford's description of southern France in his travel book entitled *Provence from Minstrels to the Machine*, first published in 1935.

2. Travel writing

Ford approached history, literature, and travel writing as a modernist. His history of Provence is a mixture of legends, descriptions of battles, suppositions, historical facts and eyewitness accounts. Not only does Ford change rapidly between subjective and objective accounts of various places in his description of Provence, but he also alternates between eras, referring in non-chronological order to the arrival of the Greeks and Romans, the Visigoth attacks in the 5th century, Clovis' defeat of the Goths in 507 AD, the 13th century Cathar Crusade, the first World War, etc. And then he realizes that, despite all these different civilizations battling over Provence, coming and going throughout history, Provence just remained Provence, its true identity being related to the Troubadours, the Courts of Love and the heresy of the Albigenses or Cathars. It is this heritage that stimulates the imagination and allows one to travel. Ford (2009: 64) wrote: "Provence is not a country nor the home of a race, but a frame of mind". What he loved in Provence is also that it put him in another frame of mind – one where he could think – go on

tangents without being interrupted – and that is exactly what he does in his travel writing.

In the introduction to his book *Modernist Travel Writing*, David G Farley (2010: 2) comments on Helen Carr's distinction between "travelling writers" and "travel writers" and notes that the travel books written by modernist authors between the two World Wars often "draw as much on a fragmentary interiority as on an objective reality", they became as Carr suggests more "memoir than manual." And this is indeed the case for Ford's *From Minstrels to the Machine*, which is actually what can be called a "bread and butter" book. It was written at a time when Ford's financial situation was dubious and he needed to make a living. Ford used his own personal experiences and observations of Provence to write what he refers to as a "serious book, a moral one" (Ford 2009: 24), because he is going to make the reader aware of paradise on earth – Provence. And that is exactly what he does. Ford's Provence is a world apart. It is a world which continues unchanged despite all the desolation and despair of the modern world which may surround it. Despite wars and book burnings, the olive trees continue to grow and vines still cover the hillsides. It is this sense of earthly paradise – of earthly permanence that attracts Ford.

Ford begins his travel book with a description of London. He and his companion, the American artist Biala – who will serve as his nameless American companion in his travels, allowing him to make countless asides and digressions, always introducing the subjective into a seemingly objective observation - are standing on the steps of the left-hand entrance of the National Gallery, looking across Trafalgar Square and down Whitehall to the spires of Westminster Abbey. Their view is obscured by publicity and suddenly they are aware of the evening song of starlings and Ford's imagination takes him to the nightingales of Tarascon. (Ford 2009: 25). And he embarks on his journey.

Written as a first person non-linear narrative, Ford's travel book is a series of reminiscences as well as projections into the future. He writes of his time spent in Provence, the memories it inspires which are linked to other memories, which are in turn linked to other memories, ad infinitum, and which are at the same time also linked to the present, the time of writing, and the imagination of what the future may hold. Although this technique resembles a sort of stream of consciousness writing, it is in fact very controlled. The chapter entitled "Church and Stage" begins with a very thorough description of all the battles waged in Provence based on religious differences and ends with stories of the London theatre world from his youth. Memory of course makes the association between the stage of battles often springing out of senseless circumstances and the idle chat of fashionable theatre actresses.

2.1. The influence of the past

Among Ford's non sequiturs, there are several leitmotifs which resurface from time to time - his childhood memories of London, the troubadours and the courts of love, the stories of Nicolette and Aucassin and those of Guilhem de Cabestanh dating from the 12th and 13th centuries, food and indigestion, the remarks of his American friend which allow him to express his thoughts, continue on his tangents, and juxtapose his Englishness with a foreign culture.

Childhood memories play an important part in his travel writing. He is constantly reminded of moments in his youth which marked him and inspired his

great interest and love of Provence. As a young boy in a gloomy English schoolroom, he is unhappy and bullied by an older classmate, until he is miraculously transported to sunny Avignon by reading aloud one of Daudet's verses. Although he points out numerous times that he does not like Daudet's writing and that "Lettres de mon Moulin" was not actually written at the mill which had by then become a tourist attraction, the stories do serve as a point of departure to describe St Remy and Arles – and to recall Tarascon and the love story of Nicolette and Aucassin (Ford 2009: 210). Ford was introduced to French literature and culture early in life by his father, who had written a well-known book on the Troubadours. So as a young boy, he was already well-versed in the tales of the wandering minstrels and the courts of love in France. These legendary courts purported to have existed during the time of the troubadours would pass judgment on transgressions of the philosophy of love and the codes of chivalry and courtly love. Composed of married women and widows who were also the objects of the adulation, the courts would rule on the nature of true love, passion and infidelity. Although he writes that he preferred Daniel Arnaud and Bertrand de Born, as did Ezra Pound, he was more versed in the poetry of Guilhem de Cabestanh – his father's specialty. He often refers to the story of Guilhem de Cabestanh, the legendary troubadour who fell in love with and became the lover of Seremonda, the wife of Raimon de Castel. When he discovered the affair, Raimon de Castel had Guilhem de Cabestanh killed and served his heart on a platter to Seremonda. Upon learning that she had dined on her lover's heart, Seremonda threw herself from the top of the castle.

In the chapter "The Courts of Love", Ford actually describes a walking tour of London. Beginning with a commentary on Henry James, he embarks on a description of London streets, one linking to another, on a long walk through memory, much like Pound's walking tour of Provence. And like Pound, Ford's rambles eventually bring him to the memory of the Troubadours. And continuing to follow his thoughts, he jumps forward in time and remembers Frederic Mistral, the very famous 19th century Provencal troubadour-poet – one of the seven founding members of *Le Félibre* – a literary movement promoting the Provencal language and culture.

2.2. Travel through space and time

This technique of mixing actual observations with memories allows Ford to travel through time and space. In the first chapter of Part 3, he and his American friend are on the Sussex train going south to Provence. His thoughts roam to the French Riviera, the memory of a childhood vacation with his uncle, that of himself waiting as a soldier on a train platform to be sent to the front during the war, to those of the best meals he had ever eaten at the time of his writing- and all this within the time it took for the train to arrive at Pulborough station, roughly 60 kilometers away. It is in the same Sussex train riding south that Ford muses that he should not write a history of Provincia Romana, but a survey, describing it as it was at that moment. This survey includes the past, present, and future, because Provence remains as it always has been and always will be – a land of sun, wine and olive trees.

From Minstrels to the Machine is after all a travel book, and includes numerous references to French cuisine – to fine wine and food and where to find the best cafés and restaurants. An 1891 recipe for *bouillabaisse* – the famous fish soup – from the Grand Hôtel du Louvre et de la Paix in Marseilles is given in

detail, an ode to cooking with goose fat in Castelnaudary, references to sauce *à la ravigotte* and *à la poulette*, and a description of menus and prices of two memorable restaurants in Nice and Monte Carlo are woven into the travel narrative. Ford's frequent references to indigestion do not usually refer to French food – but rather to the abuse of it, or the misunderstanding of it. Tea brings on indigestion, underdone roast beef or lamb or any other meat does the same (Ford 2009: 246, 266). When Ford's wealthy American neighbor in Toulon invites him to dinner and uses too much garlic in her cooking, Ford wonders at whether it was done on purpose to please him or to give him indigestion. Ford mocks the average Anglo-Saxon traveler who does not try local beverages and dishes. He describes his American friend's timid choice of a meal on the train going south to Provence:

> By an amiable remains of the Trans-Atlantic barbaric that poor fellow took hors d'oeuvre instead of snails…and admirable the hors d'oeuvres of Dijon are. But you should have seen his faces when he smelt the perfume across the table of my snails… (Ford 2009: 328)

He even attributes his desire to write the book, his inspiration, to the chance encounter with a fellow Englishman in the *Café de Paris*, his favorite café in Tarascon. His compatriot was drinking a lemonade – or "highly diluted sulfuric acid" as Ford described it, and refused to indulge in anything local. Ford's inspiration was born from that "uncivilisedness" and his moral duty to correct it (Ford 2009: 16-17).

Ford appreciates the French, but does not really identify with them. In the editor's preface to the collection of essays, *Ford Madox Ford and Englishness*, Max Saunders (2003:11) remarks that many of the contributors noted that in his later career, when Ford identified himself more as an American or French writer, "he was still contemplating Englishness even while even farther distancing himself from it." He appreciated French writers – in particular Valery Larbaud, as demonstrated by Gil Charbonnier (2011) in his article "Ford Madox Ford and Valery Larbaud: Critical Convergences", published in the collection *Ford Madox Ford, France and Provence* – and doubtlessly learned from them and was influenced by them, but he did not become a French writer. His observations remain very English. He does describe how Anglo-Saxon and Latin people differ – for example their appreciations of nature. The English see the beauty of a park in its untamed wild growth, while for the Mediterranean, the beauty of nature lies in its controlled cultivation. Which ideal of beauty he preferred is unclear, but he did notice and appreciate the difference. It is this awareness of a difference that influenced his perception of the world.

Ford describes the effect reading Mistral's poetry has had on his own perception of London.

> But the authentic note of the great poet is to modify for you the aspect of the world and of your relationship to your world. This Mistral very astonishingly does. I have said that for a great many years I misestimated this great poet. But of late I have been reading him a great deal – notably since I have been in this city…And the curious effect has been to render London infinitely more supportable. (Ford 2009: 161)

3. Double vision

This double vision is also very evident in his travel book, which is not only about Provence, but also about London. Ford uses Provence as a point of

comparison with London - Provence is bright and warm, London is dark and damp – but the comparison obviously goes a little deeper. Provence is permanent, whereas London should be and could be- there is a message of hope in Ford's irony and criticism. It mustn't be forgotten that the book was published in 1935, on the eve of World War II. The genre of travel writing offers Ford an ideal situation to write about cultural differences and changes in perception. He situates himself in a certain place and either observes his actual location or makes observations on another place from a distance. Part I describes London as seen from the narrator in Provence, whereas Part II reveals Provence as he sees it from London. The last chapter in Part II of the travel book, entitled "Fine Arts", is written from a London garret, where Ford's imagination takes him away from the dull grey rain and strong tea back to Provence and the Palace of the Popes in Avignon and the Golden Age of the good King René, and he writes,

> […] There are in this world only two earthly paradises. The one is in Provence with what has survived of the civilizations of the Good King, of the conte-fablists of the Troubadours and of the painters of Avignon of the Popes. The other is the Reading Room of the British Library. (Ford 2009: 215)

Indeed, Ford writes as though he were in a library or a museum, catching sight of different books and paintings, which all evoke different ideas and the possibility of infinite transgressions and journeys of the imagination.

In the last chapter of the book, which has been highly criticized, Ford lauds bullfighting in Provence, comparing it to foxhunting in England, and even suggesting that it is a healthy way to vent man's natural sadism. He describes the violent criticism of Americans, Germans and British of the game as being cultural differences, which leads him on to support an early, very simplified version of globalization – every country should produce what they do best. The English should breed livestock, the French should raise vegetables, the Americans, Argentinians and Russians should grow wheat – and in this idyllic world there would be free trade for all. By extension, everyone would be satisfied, and there would be no more wars.

> And then we should be back again to the manner of the Great Trade Route with the sacred and honest merchants travelling with their wares from tabu ground to ground…and civilizations flowing backwards and forwards from China to Peru. (Ford 2009: 353)

The title of the chapter "Animam non coelum mutare" (**Animum debes mutare, non caelum)** refers to Seneca's famous quote that the soul must be changed, not the climate – and is actually the conclusion to his travel through time and space.

4. Conclusion

Ford has demonstrated that outside influences are superfluous; they can be changed or altered without ever changing the core value of an event, person or place. Provence has weathered invasions and wars over centuries, without ever losing its real character. Provence is and will remain an earthly paradise. Whether the legendary courts of love ever actually existed is a moot question. They definitely existed and still exist in the imagination and literary lore; they have inspired many writers and poets and will continue to do so. Ford's boyhood

memories of the streets of London are as real and alive at the time of his writing as they were before that and will always be. Events happened and have provoked other events without ever changing the basic landscape. The non-linear narrative combining both subjective and objective references to the past, present and future paradoxically reinforces this idea of permanence. True values will survive and will always be rediscovered through tangents of the imagination, which are confined neither to linear time nor geographical location. Ford's mixture of erudite references to historical facts, popular renditions of legendary events, as well as very concrete replications of culinary recipes serves also to confirm this concept of permanency throughout time. He is both a travel writer and a travelling writer, writing a travel book about time, place and permanence.

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