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FORD MADOX FORD: A PROVENCE OF HIS OWN

When I get back to Provence the world will be astonishingly visible. I shall write little crisp sentences like silver fish jumping out of streams.¹

1. *The Arts and the Troubadours*

It is the *idea* of Provence, rather than the physical description of the region, that emerges from Ford's book *Provence*. And it is the *idea* of the Troubadours, rather than the real historical figures, that appealed to Ford. Indeed, these *ideas* struck his imagination with such intensity that he could hardly resist employing them in his writings. This would be in line with what he had done with so many characters – borrowing them from other writers' stories and ending up thinking they were some of his own acquaintances whom he "liked very much"². Ford would re-construct and re-arrange situations, characters and historical periods, using materials drawn from his own as well as other people's experience, and then dressing his stories in such a way that the full understanding of the 'affair' often escapes the reader.

In the eyes of Ford, Provence and the old feudalism constitute a rare political system in a golden historical period that is in stark opposition to contemporary systems³. Indeed, when

¹ FORD MADOX FORD, *Provence. From Minstrels to the Machine*, (Philadelphia and London: Lippincot 1935) 139. All subsequent references to this text will be made parenthetically.

² FORD MADOX FORD, *Henry James. A Critical Study* (1913) (New York: Octagon Books 1980) 91. "And so I considered myself perfectly justified in lifting his figure, with such adornments and changes as should suit my own purpose, into one of my own novels."

³ "[...] the old feudalism and the old union of Christendom beneath a spiritual headship may in the end be infinitely better than anything that was ever devised by the Mother of Parliaments in England, the Constituent

faced with the inhabitants of thirteenth-century Provence who embodied the ideal society developed by the Albigenses and the Troubadours, today's humanity stands "naked to the wind and blind to the sunlight"⁴.

Provence is not only a political heaven but the cradle of all refined arts as well: from the elegant architectural style⁵ to the poetry of the Troubadours, which "was, almost more than any other manifestation of the Arts, governed by a very definable technique" (*Provence* 171).

Arts were part of everyday life, both the feudal lord and the peasant were engaged in artistic occupations. The peasants would actually be inspired by the sight of their lords' poetical or pictorial production and would be seized by the same artistic passion so that in Provence "there arose and continued the tradition that occupation with one art or the other is a proper thing for sound men" (*Provence* 227-228).

In praising the life of old Provence Ford maintains that "to sit in companies out of doors and speculate aloud or think" is the condition "without which arts and civilisation are impossible" (*Provence* 227), and that the reason the churches in Provence are filled with "thousands of little votive paintings that have had so great an influence on the living art of today" (*Provence* 227) is that "almost all of life passes and has always passed in the *open air*" (*Provence* 227, italics mine). What Ford is actually doing is re-evaluating the past in terms of his own time, that is discussing Impressionism.

Ford's personal story is entangled with external history and he praises Provençal artists for what he thought was their similarity to himself. In his novels, in fact, he uses the impressionistic technique as a means to recreate a more personal and evocative reality; when praising Provençal artists for their being and working most of the time "in the open air", Ford praises

Assemblies in France, or all the Rules of the Constitution of the United States". *Henry James* 47.

⁴ *Henry James* 47.

⁵ "[...] in the cathedrals of Provence you will see almost no leering gargoyles and almost no vomiting peasants, copulating apes and be-pitch-forked fiends such as make horrible the misererestalls and architectural intimacies of the Northern Gothic fanes ... It is indeed one of the chief joys of that sweet land that the Gothic there has practically no existence. And the grotesque as a characteristic is as absent from the lives of the Provençaux as from their arts. They had instead traditions of beauty, discipline, frugality and artistic patience." *Provence* 170.

his own skills: As Thomas C. Moser points out, "Provence's visual art recalls Ford's own hallucinated imagination" ⁶.

However Ford's affinity to the Provençal artist is not limited to the Provençal painter. Ford's admiration for the poetry of the Troubadours draws him closer to the figure of the minstrel. The Troubadours, having virtually no readers, dedicated their poetry to "hearers" – who derived as much pleasure from "the skilful accomplishment or circumvention of a technical point of rhyme or metre, as they got from the actual content of the work to which they listened" (*Provence* 171). Ford's definition of the Troubadours' poetry as one "governed by a very definable technique" (*Provence* 171) comes close to describing Ford's own style, that very personal fusion of Form and Content so unique in all his novels.

Ford's knowledge of the Troubadours' art and language is not surprising if we consider his domestic environment. His father, Francis Hueffer, was a music critic and scholar of Medieval Provençal culture; his mother, Catherine Brown, was the daughter of the pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown; one of his uncles was Dante Gabriel Rossetti; and William Morris was a family friend. Ford's pre-Raphaelite youth is portrayed in *Ancient Lights* (1911) and although, like most of Ford's memories, his childhood recollections must be read as 'impressions' rather than authentic, true-to-life reports, they give a faithful portrait of his time ⁷. The passion for Provence

⁶ THOMAS C. MOSER, *The Life in the Fiction of Ford Madox Ford*, (Princeton: Princeton UP 1980) 286.

⁷ "Just a word to make plain the actual nature of this book: it consists of impressions. When some parts of it appeared in serial form, a distinguished critic fell foul of one of stories I told. My impression was and remains that I heard Thomas Carlyle tell how at Weimar he borrowed an apron from a waiter and served tea to Goethe and Schiller, who were sitting in eighteenth-century court-dress beneath a tree. The distinguished critic of a distinguished paper commented upon this story, saying that Carlyle never was in Weimar, and that Schiller died when Carlyle was aged five. I did not write to this distinguished critic, because I do not like writing to the papers, but I did write to a third party. [...] In my letter to my critic's friend I said that [...] [the anecdote] was intended to show the state of mind of a child of seven brought into contact with a Victorian great figure. When I wrote the anecdote I was perfectly aware that Carlyle never was in Weimar while Schiller was alive, or that Schiller and Goethe would not be likely to drink tea, [...]. But as a boy I had that pretty and romantic impression, and so I presented it to the world — for what it was worth." "The Nature of the Beast" from *Ancient Lights* in *Your Mirror to My Times. The Selected*

was passed on to the young Fordie by his father, though Ford himself cannot say "how [his] father did it" (*Provence* 52). According to Ford's recollection his father was "the greatest authority upon the Troubadours and the Romance languages, and wrote original poems in modern Provençal"⁸.

Ford's vision of the Troubadours and the "Courts of Love" (*Provence* 138-162) derives directly from his father's book *The Troubadours*⁹, just as does his admiration for their language, which he learnt as a child and acquired such high level of proficiency that at age eleven he could translate one of Guillem de Cabestanh's poems. Francis Hueffer describes Provence as a sort of fairy land where "poetic feeling" was encouraged to grow:

The political autonomy of the south of France which secured it from the international and national troubles of its northern neighbour, greatly favoured peaceful progress and enjoyment of life. Moreover, the rich, bountiful soil, and the prosperity and natural gaiety of the inhabitants, were conducive to the early growth of poetic feeling; and it may be assumed that long before the time of the Troubadours, rustic lays, accompanied by the sound of the viola, used to enliven the harvest homes of Provençal villages¹⁰.

To find a suitable occupation for their knights between a meal and the "practises of Love" (*Provence* 185), the Provençal courts resorted to the "invention of the Troubadours" (*Provence* 185), whom Ford compares to Hollywood stars (though they, according to Ford, should not only be good performers but also "skilful authors and composers of their pieces"):

Autobiographies and Impressions of Ford Madox Ford. Michael Killigrew (ed.) (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1971) 6.

⁸ "My father was a man of an encyclopedic knowledge and had a great respect for the attainments of the distinguished. [...] He had a memory that was positively extraordinary, and a gift of languages no less great." "My Father", from *Ancient Lights*, in *Your Mirror to My Times*. 35.

⁹ FRANCIS HUEFFER, *The Troubadours*, (New York: AMS Press 1977). [Reprint of the 1878 edn. published by Chatto & Windus, London].

¹⁰ *The Troubadours* 5-6 (italics mine).

What follows is Ford's own idea of the Troubadours:

"I imagined them shining in the sun before a castle keep." *Provence* 53

"And the whole social cosmogony was salutarily latitudinarian, the knights being without discipline, the rural thinkers without prejudices as without puritanism." *Provence* 125.

You should, in fact, regard the recitals or contests of the Troubadours as stage performances in which the aristocracy of literary skill took part [...]. (*Provence* 185)

To Ford, the greatest of all Troubadours is Peire Vidal, whom he discovered in his father's book. Francis Hueffer reports Vidal's life using an old biography, and describes him as "one of the most versatile and manysided amongst the troubadours"¹¹. Thus Peire Vidal becomes "*the* Troubadour" (*Provence* 138), an archetype of all Troubadours and an expatriate as well – like Henry James or even Ford himself.

Peire Vidal went abroad only once – to Palestine, on a Crusade – but the theme of the exile is recurrent in his verses. Following his 'impressionistic method,' Ford compares him to Henry James and Christina Rossetti, and makes the three of them share a longing for Provence – though he knew quite well that Christina had never been to Provence, and didn't know "what, exactly, [was Henry James's] connection with Provence." (*Provence* 142)¹².

The life of Peire Vidal, as reported by Francis Hueffer, is definitely more romanticized than in other reports of Troubadours' lives. In Hueffer's book Peire Vidal takes on the aspect of a romantic, tragic figure: the expatriate poet, the unfortunate lover and the great composer and singer. This report, with its emphasis on romance and sentiment, could not but stir Ford's imagination and compel him to use Peire Vidal's story in *The Good Soldier*.

2. Provence: from History to Prophecy

The two travel books, *Provence* (1935) and *The Great Trade Route* (1937), are Ford's testament; they are "free flowing, discursive combinations of memories, travel, history and social philosophy"¹³. *Provence* is a homage to a place Ford had

¹¹ *The Troubadours* 169.

¹² However, after discussing a poem by Christina Rossetti, Ford admits that maybe the tie between Christina and Peire Vidal is not so much the feeling of exile but rather that of "a blood descendant. For Christina is the hundred-times great, grandchild of Dante who was the son of all writers of Provence" *Provence* 141-142.

¹³ MICHAEL KILLIGREW, "Introduction", *Your Mirror to My Times*. xvii.

longed for all his life, a place he turned to in his last years, as if destined to end up there from the beginning: "And I am hardly exaggerating when I say that all my travelling has always been one long planning to return" (*Provence* 57).

In 1933 Ford had declared that he wanted the Novelist "to appear in his really proud position as historian of his own time"¹⁴. In 1935 the Novelist became a moralizer and a prophet:

This is to be a book of travel and moralizing – on the Great Trade Route which, thousands of years before our day, ran from Cathay to the Cassiterides. Along the Mediterranean shores it went and up through Provence. It bore civilization backwards and forwards along its tides ... And this may turn out to be in part a book of prophecies – (*Provence* 13)

Indeed, to talk about a place that was not "a country nor the home of a race, but a frame of mind" (*Provence* 64) he needed to combine his role of a historian with that of a prophet who would divine

what may and mayn't happen to us according as we re-adopt, or go even further from, the frame of mind that is Provence and the civilising influences that were carried backwards and forwards in those days. (*Provence* 13)

Page after page Ford sheds his historian's robes to fully accept those of the prophet who can envision what the world would become "if it does not take Provence of the XIII century for its model" (*Provence* 255). However, although rejecting – or pretending to reject – his role as a "proud historian of his own time" and assuming the one of a prophet of the new civilization and admirer of thirteenth-century Provençal life, Ford actually narrates the history of the contemporary age by means of comparison. Ford the moralizer and prophet is not so different from the author of *Return to Yesterday* or *It Was the Nightingale*, or even *Henry James*. In those books he vividly rendered impressions and reminiscences in a conversational style, distorting reality and setting events in wrong times and places in order to give us his version of "those queer effects of

¹⁴ FORD MADOX FORD, *It Was the Nightingale*, (New York: The Ecco Press 1980) 199.

real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass" ¹⁵. *Provence*, too, is a book of impressions, of reminiscences, felt rather than lived: a flowing stream of associations:

In the middle of some reflections on the meeting, on East Forty-second Street, of the spheres of influences of Mrs Patrick Campbell [...] and Mrs Aimée Macpherson [...] I may introduce some directions as to the real, right and only best way to make bouillabaisse... That will be because I am capable of anything in the furtherance of a just cause and not because I suffer from a senile impotence to marshal my thoughts. (*Provence* 20)

It is of course Ford's familiar style, the very same used in *The Good Soldier*, where Dowell talks about Peire Vidal, the valley that leads into Provence and the "immense mistral":

And I shall go on talking, in a low voice while the sea sounds in the distance and overhead the great black flood of wind polishes the bright stars. From time to time we shall get up and go to the door and look out at the great moon and say: 'Why, it is nearly as bright as in Provence!' ¹⁶

Thus Provence has always been there, Ford's own Provence, his dream, the place where he had "lived for nearly all [his] spiritual as for a great part of [his] physical life" (*Provence* 138).

In his novels Ford portrayed a devastating image of his own time, a time of timeworn codes and forgotten values, a time where faith, courage and religion had lost their earlier fundamental meaning. His way of conveying this sense of nothingness in a decaying world was – rather than expressing his judgment or opinion openly – mainly by employing a skilfull narrative technique. The moral dissolution and the tragedy of a whole class is then exposed without any suggestion how to repair the damage caused by the destructive drive of contemporary civilization. The only clear remedy, then, is Provence (*Provence* 255).

In his travel book Ford shows the way back in time and space to "the manner of the Great Trade Route with the sa-

¹⁵ FORD MADOX FORD (Hueffer), "On Impressionism", *Poetry and Drama*, II (June-Dec. 1914): 174.

¹⁶ FORD MADOX FORD, *The Good Soldier* (1915), Penguin Books 1977, 19.

cred and honest merchants travelling with their wares from tabu ground to ground ... and civilisations flowing backwards and forwards from China to Peru..." (*Provence* 353). The Great Trade Route – the actual route merchants travelled along from China to South America through the Near East and Southern Europe – and of which Provence is the hub – becomes the route to Ford's own imaginative 'Land of Hope and Glory'. It is thus the "great population of highly civilised and reflective beings [who] evolved the civilisation and poetry of the Troubadours" (*Provence* 123) which will stand as an alternative to the mad world of today.

Ford's literary production can then be viewed as an enormous *corpus* made by questions and answers: the novels posing the problems, his travel books formulating the solution.

3. *The Novels: From Prophecy to History*

Ford's imagination paints everything it touches with new colours. Accordingly the Courts of Love's prime function becomes that of condemning ignoble husbands (*Provence* 53), and everything related to Provence is imbued with a romantic aura. However, there is a difference between the way he portrays Provence and the Troubadours in his books of reminiscences and the way he uses Provence and the Troubadours in his novels: the romantic atmosphere is tinged with dark shadows and distorted with a grotesque twist.

In his book-essay *England and the English* Ford developed a theory of four psychological ages and four dominant psychological types derived from "the Hegelian legacy itself"¹⁷. The first of these ages is the feudal period – the pre-Tudor age – from the end of the Anglo-Saxon period to the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. The second age, according to Ford, was the Tudor-Stuart age, which began following a period of chaotic adjustment in the 1530s and lasted until the Revolution of 1688 and the coronation of William of Orange. This period would evolve into the "modern" age, from the beginning of the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. The fourth is the age of uncertainty and empty values, without any code of hon-

¹⁷ H. ROBERT HUNTLEY, *The Alien Protagonist of Ford Madox Ford*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1970) 37.

our, but also full of new possibilities yet to be defined.

Following this division into psychological ages, Ford often places his heroes in periods of transition; and considering their inner makeup, tragedy is inevitable when they find themselves caught between a disintegrating world and a newly emerging society.

In *The Tudor Trilogy* (1909), for instance, the most marked difference is between the Catholic characters and the Tudor Machiavelian types. Katherine Howard is the pure medieval type, capable of violent actions while at the same time deeply devout and religious. The opposition between the two worlds is highlighted by Ford's impressionism. As in the later *Parade's End* (1924-1928)¹⁸, this opposition is demonstrated by associating light with Provence and the Middle Ages and darkness with the Tudors:

Images of light invariably symbolize the sunny fields of medievalism, now in threatened eclipse and unable to penetrate the darkened corridors and fog-shrouded alley-ways of a Tudor London¹⁹.

Katherine is a tragic figure, misplaced and unable to adapt to a new world and to accept the evolution from one system to another. In this she is very much like Edward Ashburnham. The difference is that Katherine's tragedy lies in her inability to adjust and in the inadequacy of the Tudor world to fulfil the needs of a medieval character, while the gap between Edward's feudalism and the modern age is widened by the greater dislocation in time which makes him not just a tragic figure but the very impersonation of Tragedy.

Francis Hueffer's book on the Troubadours had both inspired in young Fordie a love for Provence and for the figure of the medieval minstrel, and offered the more mature Ford much of the material used for the writing of *The Good Soldier*. Edward, a faithful follower of old chivalrous codes, is easily defined as "a feudal gentleman"²⁰, and the whole story of the "minuet" is reminiscent of the Provençal verse novel *Flamenca*,

¹⁸ MICHELA A. CALDERARO, *A Silent New World. Ford Madox's Ford Parade's End*, (Bologna: CLUEB 1993).

¹⁹ *The Alien Protagonist* 83.

²⁰ ELLIOT B. GOOSE Jr., "The Strange Irregular Rhythm: An Analysis of *The Good Soldier*", *PMLA*, LXXXII (1957): 497.

discussed by Francis Hueffer in the chapter devoted to "The Artistic Epic":

Flamenca [...] provided Ford with much of humor and intrigue of *The Good Soldier*. By holding up to the earlier story one can see the perversion of chivalric and courtly love codes in contemporary English society²¹.

The similarities between characters and situations are striking: Flamenca, like Florence, feigns illness; Flamenca's husband Archimbaut, in a scene that again reminds us of Dowell and Florence, "keeps watch before the door of the bath-room, with the key in his pocket"²² while behind the door, carefully bolted from inside, Flamenca enjoys her lover's embraces. However, while Florence well deserves the reader's contempt, Flamenca is a virtuous and lovely lady, wrongly kept prisoner in a tower, victim of Archimbaut's "monstrous vice"²³. In Hueffer's book the episode of the bath-room is reported in a manner that is far from being critical of Flamenca as the "just and inevitable punishment [...] according to the doctrine of the Troubadours"²⁴ for husbands' "jealous atrocities"²⁵.

In turning a virtuous character into a deceptive wife Ford does what he has always done and always declared he would do, that is lift characters and situations "with such adornments and changes as should suit"²⁶ his own purpose. The main difference between Flamenca and Florence lies in the distortions, the exaggerations with which Ford usually loads his models in order to transform them into his own creatures.

The seemingly obvious comparisons of Ashburnham to the medieval nobleman and of Dowell to Peire Vidal are to be viewed as further examples of Ford's twisting and distorting technique. The description of Edward's behaviour and character leads to the exposure of the vacuity of his vision of himself; and as for Dowell's description of himself as a troubadour, Francis Hueffer's report on Peire Vidal unveils another of Ford's tricks:

²¹ MARY COHEN, "The Good Soldier: Outworn Codes", *Studies in the Novel*, 5, 3 (1973): 285.

²² *The Troubadours* 24.

²³ *The Troubadours* 18.

²⁴ *The Troubadours* 24.

²⁵ *The Troubadours* 20.

²⁶ Henry James 91.

While he was yet the professed admirer of Azalais, the poet had admired more or less fervently several other ladies [...] Whilst he was engaged in these and other love affairs the poet was also married [...] ²⁷.

It offers a nice comment on Dowell's forced chastity during his marriage; in his profligacy Peire Vidal is closer to Edward than to Dowell.

But Peire Vidal is much more than a model for or a double of Dowell or Ashburham.

Francis Hueffer described Peire Vidal as "one of the most versatile and manysided" ²⁸ Troubadours, and Ford called him the greatest "writer and performer" (*Provence* 187). But Ford too was often described by his contemporaries as "a great performer and a magnificent storyteller" ²⁹. Peire Vidal – a historical figure reinterpreted – is another of Ford's tricks, his deceptive device for back-door re-entry into a text he boasted he would handle with impersonality; it is the means for the Author to be once again 'the God of creation'.

²⁷ *The Troubadours* 176-177.

²⁸ *The Troubadours* 169.

²⁹ From a personal conversation with the late Dr. Joseph Brewster, former director at Olivett College during Ford's permanence there.

ABSTRACT

The article illustrates the way Ford Madox Ford used material from his own life and experience in his fiction. The main focus is on the travel book *Provence*. Ford wrote two travel books, *Provence* (1935) and *The Great Trade Route* (1937), which can be read as his testament; they are "free flowing, discursive combinations of memories, travel, history and social philosophy". *Provence* is a homage to a place Ford had longed for all his life, a place he turned to in his last years, as if destined to end up there from the beginning: "And I am hardly exaggerating when I say that all my travelling has always been one long planning to return".

It is the *idea* of Provence, rather than the physical description of the region, that emerges from Ford's book *Provence*. And it is the *idea* of the Troubadours, rather than the real historical figures, that appealed to Ford. Indeed, these *ideas* struck his imagination with such intensity that he could hardly resist employing them in his writings. This would be in line with what he had done with so many characters – borrowing them from other writers' stories and ending up thinking they were some of his own acquaintances whom he "liked very much". Ford would re-construct and rearrange situations, characters and historical periods, using materials drawn from his own as well as other people's experience, and then dressing his stories in such a way that the full understanding of the 'affair' often escapes the reader.

KEY WORDS

Ford, Ford Madox. *Provence*. Troubadours. *The Good Soldier*. Travel books.