‘BEAUTIFUL AND INSTRUCTIVE’: FORD MADOX FORD’S ENCOUNTER WITH POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract
This essay begins with an examination of Ford as an improbable flâneur, and moves on to consider his interest in the popular culture of the modern city. It charts the development of English music hall, noting its cross-class appeal, and contrasting official anxieties about its effect on public order and decency, with its attraction to artists like Symons, Sickert, and Ford. The conclusion argues that music hall for Ford not only articulates national culture but provides a yardstick for other artistic forms such as theatre and the novel.

It is difficult to see Ford as a flâneur: the familiar image we have of him as a somewhat portly, very English-looking, tweedy gentleman of the old school is at odds with that. Indeed, his friend Sisley Huddleston describes him as ‘an enormous looking man’ with ‘a giant’s bulk.’1 And yet, as everyone knows, he felt France was his spiritual home, and spent a good part of his life on the boulevards of Paris, the locus classicus of flânerie, as presented in Walter Benjamin’s Das Passagen-Werk, his exploration of the metropolitan experience. Douglas Goldring in South Lodge describes Ford as ‘an established literary Pontiff’2 in Montparnasse, ruling over a coterie of writers as he established the transatlantic review. And Goldring’s account of Ford at that time does suggest something of the flâneur—he has his Stammtisch at a fashionable restaurant, where he holds court to an ever-changing cast of visitors and convenes gatherings of artists and writers in the pre-war tradition. The American writer Morley Callaghan recalled Ford’s perambulations around the city: ‘On the way home, we might pass Ford Madox Ford, the plump and portly president of a whole group of writers, who would be taking the night air all by himself.’3 It was Paris that suggested his concept of the cosmopolis to Ford, the idea of a city vast in its metaphysical reach, going beyond the geographical boundaries. In his introduction to Jean Rhys’s The Left Bank and Other Stories, he complains about trying to get the author to include more descriptions. She resisted, and in fact
cut out the few remaining lexical items that might refer to specific places in her descriptive passages, as Ford, rather curiously since this is an introductory preface by an editor, tells us:

I tried – for I am for ever meddling with the young! – very hard to induce the author of The Left Bank to introduce some sort of topography of that region, bit by bit, into her sketches [….] But would she do it? No! With cold deliberation, once her attention was called to the matter, she eliminated even such two or three words of descriptive matter as had crept into her work. Her business was with passion, hardship, emotions: the locality in which these things are endured is immaterial. So she hands you the Antilles with its sea and sky […] but lets Montparnasse, or London, or Vienna go. She is probably right. Something human should, indeed, be dearer to one than all the topographies of the world….4

Perhaps Rhys’s objection to description is the reason for the lengthy description of Paris Ford gives in lieu of an introduction. Ford describes Paris in these terms:

The Left Bank, for as long as I can remember, has always seemed to me to be one of the vastest regions of the world [….] When I was a boy, the Left Bank was a yellow-purplish haze: today it is a vast, sandy desert, like the Sahara ... but immense. More immense than the world of Europe. (Reader 236-7)

This is, to be sure, a curious and deeply personal assertion, rooted perhaps in Ford’s childhood perceptions of metropolitan Paris. Later, the tantalising prospect of Ford the flâneur, striding languidly around the Parisian streets, emerges:

I should find it less fatiguing to take the train from Paris to Constantinople than, at half past six in the evening, when it is impossible to get a place in a bus, or any other type of conveyance, to have to walk from the Seine, up the rue de Bac and the Boulevard Raspail to anywhere on the Boulevard Montparnasse….I am talking of course of half past six when the spirits are low and the vehicles unprocurable. I have as a matter of fact frequently walked quite buoyantly from the Ile St Louis to the Observatoire at a time of day when taxicabs were plenty …. But the impression of infinitely long walks with the legs feeling as if you dragged each step out of sands …. remains. (Reader 238)

Ford continues in this manner for some time, completely missing the point of Rhys’s stories and the manner of her narration, as Deborah Parsons points out in Streetwalking the Metropolis. Ford’s perception of the Parisian ambience was very much that of the outsider, his English sensibilities perhaps counteracting Rhys’s more sharply aware