DISSOLVING VIEWS,
OR, THE LIVES OF ‘BAD, MAD BOSPHERUS’

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Abstract
Ford’s *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses* (1923), a ‘Variety Entertainment in Four Acts’, is a carnival of modes and media, unstageable yet, in its aural qualities and its playful breaking of frames, eminently theatrical. It mingles dream, ekphrastic cinema, polemical history, pantomime, songs, parody, satire, the technique of the ‘dissolving view’, and wood engravings by Paul Nash. While Ford’s satirical targets are English people and English institutions, his cultural affiliations are much broader. Nourished by the plays of Aristophanes, Provençal and German lyrics, *commedia dell’arte* and twentieth-century European cabaret as well as the history of English poetry and the comedy and pathos of the music halls, it is rural and metropolitan, literary and demotic, English and cosmopolitan. Yet to speak of history misleads. *Mister Bosphorus* is always on the move through time and space. Flux is of its essence, collision frequent, and metamorphosis a constant. To do it justice requires not so much a sense of influences given or taken as a sense of affinities with other experiments in identity and form, preceding or to come: among others, *Orlando*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *Ulysses*.

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Rather than read Ford’s extraordinary saturnalia of modes and media as the outpourings of a troubled spirit (which they may well be), I want to celebrate the heterogeneity of *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses*, its satirical energy and its sheer outrageousness.¹ In the sense of being unstageable, like so many plays by poets, it might be called a closet drama, closet in the old sense of private place or study, the retreat of writer and reader both. Yet the word *unstageable* covers a multitude of sins and secrets, from technical incompetence to a case of wooden ear (Wordsworth’s *The Borderers*, rejected by the Covent Garden management, probably on both grounds), from sexual provocation (the Earl of Rochester’s *Sodom*) to dangerous politics (Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve*). The unstageability of Ford’s ‘Variety Entertainment in Four Acts’ is neither blundered-into nor forced by circumstances (though force of circumstance is a major presence). Ford knew enough about theatricality to
lace his script with green-room jokes, to change dramatic mode, mood and medium in mid-air, to insist, unflaggingly and wittily, on demanding the impossible. *Mr Bosphorus* may be unstageable, but it is certainly performable, a treat for implied listeners as well as readers. Stage directions and all, it would make a marvellous radio play; it is one of Ford’s funniest and most experimental works, yet far from the least poignant. Playing with theatrical conventions gave him a notable freedom to do whatever he wanted. The Vorticists proclaimed ‘We have no Verbotens’, and, not as a maker of manifestos but as a dramatist and cinematographer of the imaginary, Ford wrote in a Vorticist spirit. The closet is packed with surprises, and enormous.

The modes of this dramatic poem include ever-shifting combinations of prose, verse, satire in the styles of Aristophanes and Pope, pastiche, parody, dream play, aubade, apologia for poetry, complaint (as in a poet’s complaint to his purse), the dystopian, the paradisiacal, and, in strictly homeopathic doses, the autobiographical. Songs are played by military bands and barrel organs, their lyrics evoking hymns, ballads, pantomime, music hall and cabaret. Films appear, projectors wobble, lenses blur, routines from the *commedia dell’arte* intrude upon scenes of pathos from the silent cinema. Few of Ford’s English-speaking contemporaries, Joyce always excepted, did as much with popular culture. We shall probably never know if Ford and Conrad discussed *Cosmopolis*, the extraordinary international journal where the latter’s ‘An Outpost of Progress’ appeared in the issues of June and July 1897. In any case, the journal’s title (at the time almost a neologism), denoted the idea not of one world centre of culture but of many, each committed to high artistic seriousness and human betterment. A volatile blend of town and country, hilarity and passion, the literary and the demotic, Ford’s cosmopolitanism is altogether more raucous. In his groundbreaking essay on *Mister Bosphorus*, Robert E. McDonough calls attention to the paradox of Ford’s writing ‘a very English poem to explain his abandonment of England’. Very English it is, but also very international.

At the heart of it all are the poet Poore B. Bosphorus and his rival muses, the Northern and the Southern. In one version of his origins, he comes from Clerkenwell, a down-at-heel quarter of London where his father was an undertaker; in another, he used to revel with the gods of Greece. His name is resonant. To an ex-serviceman of the 1920s, his initials would suggest a link to the Poor Bloomin’ (or Bloody) Infantry, or alternatively Poor Bugger Bosphorus. To lighten