MISTER BOSPHORUS AND THE MUSES: HISTORY AND REPRESENTATION IN FORD'S MODERN POEM

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Ford Madox Ford is perhaps best known for not being as well known as he deserves to be. That is certainly the opinion of those who recognize him as among the greatest of twentieth-century novelists in English.

There is a smaller group, of course overlapping with lovers of his fiction, who make claims for Ford's poetry. Though Ford's attention to his poetry was intermittent, seeming to wait upon inspiration, his admirers assert that his poetic accomplishment was valuable in itself and his example useful to poets who came after him. Thus, in an early review (1914), Ezra Pound praises him as 'significant and revolutionary because of his insistence upon clarity and precision, upon the prose tradition; in brief, upon efficient writing – even in verse',[1] and in a 1939 obituary notice Pound recalls that Ford had thrown himself upon the floor and rolled around in dismay at the mannered language of Pound's third book, a roll, Pound says, that 'saved me at least two years, perhaps more'.[2] Another American poet, Kenneth Rexroth, also admired Ford, saying of his last poems, 'They get back into circulation, as far as I know, only when I read them to somebody at home or on the air, and then I am always asked for a copy'.[3]

Although we now have the *Selected Poems* from Carcanet, it is probably true that while Ford the lyric poet is always to be rediscovered, a poet's poet useful to other poets for his example of honesty and craftsmanship, he is not the author of a major body of lyrics that will ever find a permanent place in the anthologies.

And yet. Within the body of Ford's poetry there does stand a dramatic, book-length work (not a lyric), *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses*, which is hardly known at all, not even known for being unknown, but which deserves consideration as an important Modernist poem. It is best appreciated in Ford's own terms. In a 1923

letter to Joseph Conrad principally concerned with business for the *transatlantic review*, Ford mentions that he is having Duckworth, the publisher, send Conrad a copy of *Mister Bosphorus* in hopes it might amuse him. Ford goes on, 'One has always a temptation to write a Dunciad once in one's life and for once I've yielded to the temptation, though I don't suppose the intention will be obvious to the general reader'.[4] Ford's dunces are editors and critics, inferior poets (a few named), the unintelligent general reading public, and the Northern Muse who would (if she could) inspire Bosphorus to write poetry that would sell to stupid readers and be praised by stupid critics. In support of his Romantic-bohemian position that socially and officially approved poetry is stillborn and stultifying and that the true poet will be scorned and starved in his own time, Ford writes a parody history of English poetry, brilliant pastiches of the kind of work that will sell but won't live, and places that within the framework of a popular, unrespectable 'variety entertainment'.

Ford's hero is Poore B. Bosphorus (note the un-English surname). Bosphorus can be described as a combination of the True Poet throughout the ages and Ford himself, or perhaps better as Ford's way of asserting that he himself is the latest embodiment of the True Poet. The long poem takes Bosphorus in four acts from starvation in a garret through life and death in a workhouse (the death occurring far in the future, 1960-odd, when Ford would have been at least 87), then to burial in the last unfilled space in the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, and finally to immortality with the Southern Muse. In a note after the text Ford announces his own move to the south, indicating that he began the work in Sussex and completed it in Tarascon.

Although the work is usually referred to as *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses*, that is in fact only the very beginning of the title, which continues *or a Short History of Poetry in Britain; Variety Entertainment in Four Acts; Words by Ford Madox Ford, Music by Several Popular Composers, with Harlequinade, Transformation Scene, Cinematograph Effects, and Many Other Novelties, as well as Old and Tried Favourites, Decorated with Designs Engraved on Wood by Paul Nash*.[5] That is, the title page is in form an advertisement for an evening in a music hall. It does not seem that *Mister Bosphorus* was ever presented on stage, nor does Ford seem to

have intended that it would be. If there is closet drama, then this is closet music hall, but the form still reinforces the tone of the work, popular and rebellious against official pieties. Directing the reader's attention to the explicit artificiality of the work also emphasizes its Modernist character.

Both scenes of Act I are set in a garret, apparently a rural one since Bosphorus is attempting to keep his eye on his ducks, which are threatened and eventually eaten by a fox, while Bosphorus talks about poetry instead of bringing the ducks in. Bosphorus entertains his Northern Muse, hoping that she will inspire him to write a lyric in Victorian mode, after Tennyson or Patmore, for which an editor may give him ten shillings. However, as a true poet he is not able to maintain the hypocrisy such a production requires of him. The Northern Muse calls his Arthurian episode '*flippant and lecherous'* (*MrB* 28) and insists that it suggests that Queen Victoria flirted with the Duke of Wellington while Prince Albert weekended in Paris (*MrB* 29). She reprimands him that the Victorian poets spoke directly to the Manly (upper-case M), which she defines as '*the child in thought* / *And intellect*' (*MrB* 29), but when Bosphorus tries to write about children as Victorians did, composing a lullaby ("Mousily, mousi-mousily, / One white little lamb's a-bed'), the response he gets is that his dog is sick on the hearthrug (*MrB* 32). At the end of the act the Northern Muse takes away Bosphorus's paper, to be given to nine younger poets she favors, and Bosphorus resigns himself to the workhouse.

In Scene II of Act I, in the midst of brilliant parody and physical comedy and insults to the now-forgotten Victorian poets Lewis Morris and Martin Tupper, Ford makes clear that sentimentality in poetry is not most importantly a matter of style; rather it is a moral issue. The Victorians sentimentalized children in poems while working them to death in mines and factories. The Northern Muse says, '*They whipped the naked nippers into mines*, / *N starvin gels of six to the cotton gins*' (*MrB* 30). While the Earl of Shaftesbury '*went off is nut*' (*MrB* 30) thinking of the suffering of children, the radicals Bright, Roebuck and Mill defended the necessity of child labor. '*Oh, John Stuart Mill,* / *I think you are the wickedest soul in Hell*' (*MrB* 30). And '*chaste Mr Patmore*', who celebrated '*Angels in the House*'

(*MrB* 30), '*whipped is kids arf dead n wrote 'em poems*' (*MrB* 31). Though it is the Northern Muse who speaks, these of her opinions are clearly endorsed by Ford; in Chapter III of his unfinished *A History of Our Times* he repeats these judgements of Shaftesbury, Bright and Roebuck in his own voice.[6]

Act II consists of two scenes set in '*Any Workhouse*' (*MrB* 39), a place, Bosphorus says,

> I often wished for….
> Without any hope at all;
> Without any scope at all
> For any fear at all! (*MrB* 41)

(While I have no proof that T. S. Eliot had read *Mister Bosphorus* before writing *Ash-Wednesday*, its beginning does seem to me to echo these lines.) Ford had made slight use of 'cinematograph effects' in Act I, to project Bosphorus's writing, but he does much more in Act II. As Bosphorus converses with Pauper Bulfin, another inmate, scenes from his early life are projected on the whitewashed workhouse wall behind him. Bosphorus tells the alarmed Bulfin that these are 'a poet's dreamings' (*MrB* 42), projected memories. Later in the scene Bosphorus accompanies himself on a table-transformed-into-a-piano, singing his own verses to the tunes of 'Tipperary' and 'Pack Up Your Troubles'.

At this point Bulfin finds himself turning into a critic, a change he resents since he has lived respectably up to this point in his life (*MrB* 43). When Bulfin finds a quotation from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* familiar, Bosphorus states Ford's complaint about bad contemporary poetry, 'Without a doubt. Verses all heard before / Make up our great tradition of to-day' (*MrB* 44). Bulfin protests that he can't read and write, but Bosphorus says those skills aren't necessary for criticism (*MrB 46*). Bosphorus claims he can impose 'this shameful work' on Bulfin

> By right of the Poet. You exist by me. . . .
> There is no man doth walk upon this earth

> But lives and dies by the poet: sees the grass
> As the poet lets him see it. . . .(*MrB* 47-48)

Ford also attacks the venality of contemporary critics when the verdicts of movie critiques are seen to depend on the presence or absence of paid advertising by the movie studio in the critics' magazines (*MrB* 49-50).

Scene II of Act II, sub-titled 'The Classic Modes', is in effect a history of poetry from classical Greece through the English eighteenth century, including skillful pastiche. Bosphorus is identified by the Female Chorus as the poet who has lived from ancient Greece, where he loved them all, to the present. When they complain of Bosphorus's infidelity, Hercules refuses sympathy: 'Wherefore unhappy? Three *most* poets use! / Great poets three times three to inflame their Muse' (*MrB* 62).

The placing of Acts III and IV in MCMLX odd allows Ford to satirize what he sees as the increasing rationalization and regimentation of British society. The setting of Act II is Utopia, parenthetically specified as '(any Workhouse or Proletariat Hostel)' and its sub-title is 'The Romantic Drama, or the Prose Age' (*MrB* 71). Bosphorus and Bulfin are still in the workhouse, but now by law they must be known only by numbers, not their names, so as to avoid any unfairness of treatment. The Northern Muse, who had appeared on screen in Act II as the young Bosphorus's nurse, now comes to the workhouse as a Duchess, a rejected mistress, accompanied by the Southern Muse. If the latter will inspire him to write a 100-word poem (she is the only one who can), the Northern Muse can realize a vast sum of money from an American collector (perhaps this is a glance at John Quinn), and she promises to see that Bosphorus will be free to escape with his Southern Muse. Bosphorus is preparing (in his sleep) a lecture to be given to the Orthodox Intelligentsia, titled 'The Poetry of the Prose Age'. In the lecture, he complains of the demand for uniformity that made an outcast of Bosphorus (and, Ford presumably believes, of Ford): 'The possession of unusual gifts, whether of the intellect, the imagination, or even of physique, subjected those to whom they were attributed to grave suspicion on the part of the authorities' (*MrB* 72).

Bosphorus tells his audience, the Orthodox Intelligentsia, that poetry cannot be killed. However, in a prose age such as the early twentieth century, poetry will be found in prose. He assures them that, though they are 'Ugly, sordid, little, of imbecile and discreditable ambitions and aims', they are no more so than Euripides's audience and the distillation of them is still poetry; of course they are outraged and demand his death (*MrB* 86). Then, after being recognized by his old dog (thus transforming him into Odysseus, the Northern Muse into Penelope, and the Southern Muse into Circe), he writes a poem (in disappearing ink) and escapes with the Southern Muse.

In Act IV Bosphorus makes good his escape into eternity. The act is set on the road to Elysium, moves to London and the interior of Westminster Abbey, and finally to Elysium, near Parnassus. It contains a harlequinade, a transformation scene and a coda. In three passages Ford pronounces bitter judgement on England and the English as he is leaving.

First, Bosphorus considers England's climate, national characteristics, poetry, and criticism:

> But how is it possible that men hold dear,
> In these lugubrious places,
> This dreary land; the clod-like, inglorious races,
> The befogged, gin sodden faces;
> The lewd, grim prudery; for-ever-protracted chases
> After concealëd lechery; hog-like dull embraces
> Under a grey-flannel sky; unaired and damp
> Like poems a-stink of the lamp:
> And the learned bronchitics that vamp
> Hodden-grey thoughts all to stamp
> Craving tenpence for fourpence
> And more pence and more pence
> And grudging us our pence! (*MrB* 103)

This sounds at least in part like a retrospective prescription for 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*; it is not clear whether Ford had read *The Waste Land* before beginning *Mister Bosphorus*, but he had done so by the time of completing his poem.[7] We can also see that Ford adopts Bosphorus's suggestion. By creating

a four-act drama in the form of a music-hall entertainment, he writes a very English poem to explain his abandonment of England.

In the fourth scene of Act IV, the transformation scene, after Bosphorus's death (he is killed by the bladder of the clown-critic Bulfin, but of course though he is dead on earth he is immortal in Elysium with the Southern Muse), Bosphorus is buried in the last available grave in the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. However, while this may at first seem a defeat for Bulfin and the Orthodox Intelligentsia, Ford has a final twist. For, although Bosphorus's works are 'priced and prized . . . in America' (as Ford hoped his own would be), nothing of his survives in print or even in manuscript in England. And, the Dean of Westminster Abbey goes on to explain, that complete annihilation, rather than any supposed excellence, is the reason for his installation in the Poets' Corner. Since his poetry doesn't exist there, 'not one word . . . lives to call forth / The maiden's blush, in England!' (*MrB* 122). For official, respectable England, non-existence is the only guarantee of purity!

What, then, is being claimed for *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses*? Perhaps I should admit here that I do not place it on a level with what are for me the greatest Modernist long poems in English, *The Waste Land*, *Paterson*, and *Trilogy*. However, there is a long distance between the very first rank and out-of-print oblivion, and if Ford's work is not to be placed with those of Eliot, Williams, and H. D., it does deserve to be considered right after them. As his *Dunciad*, it does the work of all effective literary satire, clearing the ground for its own existence. *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses* makes good wittily on the full title's claim that it provides 'a Short History of Poetry in Britain'; rather than write academic prose about poetry, Ford creates more poetry, including the pastiches, that makes his critical points amusingly but unmistakably. As a Modernist work, it applies some of the techniques of *Ulysses* to poetry. (Joseph Wiesenfarth has said *Mister Bosphorus* 'explores the subject of *A Portrait of the Artist* in the style of *Ulysses*'.[8]) Satirical content and unconventional form combine effectively in attacking the hypocrisy and banality of respectable English poetry and criticism. *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses* should be returned to print and read and

studied as a major achievement of one of the great novelists, editors, and poets of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Ezra Pound, 'The Prose Tradition in Verse', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1954, p. 377.

2. Ezra Pound, 'Ford Madox (Hueffer) Ford; Obit', *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson, New York: New Directions, 1973, pp. 461-3.

3. Kenneth Rexroth, 'Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation', *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, ed. Bradford Morrow, New York: New Directions, 1987, p. 52.

4. Ford to Conrad, 8 November 1923, *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Richard M. Ludwig, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965, p. 157.

5. Ford, *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses*, London: Duckworth, 1923 – henceforth *MrB*.

6. Ford, *A History of Our Own Times*, ed. Solon Beinfeld and Sondra J. Stang, Manchester: Carcanet Press; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 54.

7. Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, vol. 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 154.

8. Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'Fargobawlers: James Joyce and Ford Madox Ford', *Biography* 14 (1991), 110.