

**CITY BURLESQUE:
THE PLEASURES OF PARANOIA IN FORD'S
*MISTER BOSPHORUS AND THE MUSES*¹**

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Christopher Tietjens takes his opportunities to play at being God when on active service in the trenches. In *No More Parades*, he had already shown an uncanny ability to spot the detail of things – supplies, food, tents, or else the individual needs of the men with their ‘unliterary hands’ presenting their ‘slow, ungainly’ bodies, with their papers, for inspection.² It is when the *strafe* begins, in *A Man Could Stand Up* –, that he is seen to take on a more active role, as Saviour.

If Christopher’s superhuman traits are apt to annoy more people than his wife, Sylvia, Christopher’s own self-image is infected – blessedly – with a sense of comic detachment, and this ironic, distancing quality may redeem him for many readers. For example, this passage is taken from just before the *strafe*:

He reclined, on his right shoulder, feeling like some immense and absurd statue: a collection of meal-sacks done in mud, with grotesque shorts revealing his muddy knees. . . . The figure on one of Michael Angelo’s Medici tombs. (*PE* 636)

Very soon, however, his role in the collapsed trenches is to bring Lance-Corporal Duckett out of an early grave (his ‘face [...] black, but asleep.... As if Valentine Wannop had been reposing in an ash-bin’; *PE* 642). This is only one of several premonitions for the reader that Valentine and he will meet again. Tietjens is unable to stop himself ‘willing her to submit to his will’ (*PE* 636).

The experience of the war is one both of paranoia and of a kind of *Amor Fati* in Tietjens: both of these emotions are discovered from a world of responsibilities in which he feels deeply, physically immersed. One slip of his pen can be an immense mischance for a certain Private 197394, Thomas Johnson (*PE* 332). Or, indeed, for Tietjens himself.

But on the whole, Christopher doesn’t leave too much to chance. Until Sylvia arrives in person, France may be said to help him

to build up in his mind the kind of ‘parallel universe’ that has recently been diagnosed by David Trotter, inside the minds of a number of Ford and his contemporaries’ heroes – only some of whom use this device so as to be godlike! Essentially, these are fictional universes of escape, or ways of coping by means of a new form of ‘paranoid modernism’: ‘In this parallel universe, neither wealth, nor status, nor nationality, nor gender has any meaning *in itself*. Instead, paranoid symmetry adjusts the degree of fantasized grandeur to the degree of fantasized persecution’.³

Certainly, there is a highly theatrical construction of grandeur and professional esteem in the relationships of Captain Tietjens and the ‘Other Ranks’, as they await ‘the *strafe* that Brigade reported to be coming in.... Twenty-seven minutes, by now!’ (PE 565). Although ‘completely mysterious’ to each other in the mass, they will, however, give a ‘glimpse of a passionate desire’ now and then (PE 570). Depersonalisation and uncanny intimacy are both part of the paranoid universe of the trenches: ‘. . . you knew that they watched you eternally and knew the minutest gestures of your sleep – you got some sort of indication as to how they regarded you: “You are a law unto yourself!”’ (PE 570).

If, as David Trotter argues, our sense of the inner worth of professionalism is occasionally confirmed by our coming into proximity with the slovenliness of its very opposite (one thinks of the role played by the shell-shocked McKechnie, gazing ‘into Tietjens’ eyes like a forlorn mistress fit to do a murder, with a sort of wistful incredulity of despair’; PE 574), there is – as I shall hope to demonstrate – an allied but quite contrary coexistence of paranoia with pleasure itself, in Ford’s writing of the 1920s.⁴

The flip-side, as it were, to paranoia and disgust arrives, in *Parade’s End*, in the form of another set of theatrical gestures: cockney gestures which are near to city comedy, but which I will here call ‘City Burlesque’.

When Tietjens grants his men a future holiday – promising to ‘give every man of you a ticket for Drury Lane next Boxing Day’ – the *camaraderie* and the dramatic resonance of that personal gesture are felt through to the end of *A Man Could Stand Up* –; especially through Valentine’s eyes during the tumultuous *finale* at Lincoln’s Inn, the celebration of Armistice (PE 572). Ford choreographs the sequence without losing Valentine’s sense of its grotesque ingredients (she even thinks that Aranjuez’s eyes are ‘soft, like a deer’s’ before

she notices that one of them is missing; *PE* 671). For all that, this is a moment where Valentine's barriers against public participation, including her awareness of being seen as 'Tietjens' mistress' and 'Friend of friend Hun's', are overcome: 'All around them the world was roaring' (*PE* 672). It is highly significant that the two lovers are treated as, in some sense, being public property, to the point of having almost pantomime roles assigned to them, and that their reunion is made a part of a quite vulgarly unceremonious celebration:

No one like Fat Man Tietjens. He lounged at the door; easy; benevolent. In uniform now. That was better. An officer, yelling like an enraged Redskin, dealt him an immense blow behind the shoulder blades. He staggered, smiling into the centre of the room. An officer gently pushed her into the centre of the room. She was against him. Khaki encircled them. They began to yell and to prance, most joining hands. Others waved the bottles and smashed underfoot the glasses. (*PE* 673)

Ford was, later, to write that the time of his departure from England (a home-leaving that was to become permanent) and arrival in post-War France in late 1922 was the moment in which his thoughts of writing about the War – 'on an immense scale' – really germinated.⁵ Written in both countries, between October 1922 and June 1923, *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses* might be viewed as a text which looks backwards: Ford's 'Last of England', rather than a text opening new perspectives. I want to argue that the atmosphere of City spaces, and songs, which dominate both early and late sections of its text, allows Ford to exhibit the Janus-face which Max Saunders has diagnosed throughout Ford's writing, within the medium of some bold and extraordinary theatrical devices.⁶ Ford adopts an unusually public set of idioms in which to ventilate his more private anxieties. At nearly all points, *Mister Bosphorus* embraces an historical set of perspectives: the modernism of the 'Cinematograph Effects, and Many Other Novelties' in its sub-title is clearly offset by its quaint description as a 'Variety Entertainment'. In several respects, *Mister Bosphorus* is both of, and about, the City culture that its writer's paranoid imposture wishes to dramatise. Yet, partly by its very theatricality, Ford puts the distance between himself and that culture into a spin. It is a giddy vortex of pleasure and distaste that is to be produced: one in which the 'City' mindset is renounced, whilst simultaneously being claimed, as his own.

The series of dissolving – at times overlapping – scenarios which Bosphorus, the dreamer at the centre of this long stage-poem,

constructs, offers suggestive parallels with Tietjens' 'Rag-Time Army' and the comic-paranoid entanglements and escapes which beset him, particularly in the trenches (*PE* 571). Centrally, it is the demotic language of the City, the world of London's popular entertainment – specifically, its use of the songs and repartee of the Music Halls – that I shall be focusing on: moreover, it is the common ground of spoken utterance – impromptu, unliterary, slang – held between the dreamer and 'his' worlds, which allows the hero both to be 'of' those worlds, and also – uncannily – bigger than them.

Certainly, *Mister Bosphorus* presents scenes in which everything except for our eponymous hero himself regularly changes shape. Whereas he will change only his clothes – slipping from the 'workhouse uniform' (used for the Utopia of Act the Third, for example), into an unlikely 'bedraggled white-satin costume as of a Watteau shepherd' for Act the Fourth – his fellow actors actually effect bold shifts in their stage *personae* (*MrB* 71, 95). His Southern and Northern Muses only belatedly identify themselves as such in Act the Third, having posed as aristocratic sponsors and rivals for Bosphorus's affections. Northern Muse ('Duchess' or 'Lady Claris de Beevil') figures as the dark, and colder, side of a warmer, more promiscuous, Southern Muse (Clarissa), but this does not stop them, at this mid-point in the 'variety entertainment', from quarrelling:

DUCHESS: [...] poets are a fickle race, indiscriminating in their amours
[. . .] No, it is not unusual, that poets should turn from the great to the apparently inattractive.

CLARISSA: A ... h ... em!

DUCHESS: As the dog to his vomit, my dear Clarissa!

CLARISSA: *Touchée, Madame.* (*MrB* 78)

Bosphorus seems to figure as passive instigator and object of other characters' personal and aesthetic differences, and is rarely given much of a chance to assert himself in the present moment. Ordered, in Act the Third, to lecture to the Orthodox Intelligentsia, by the Keeper of the Utopian State, he is immediately relegated to the back of the stage. He is always defiant, but – alas! – barely heard: 'LABOUR MASTER: ... whilst the State exists, I, its servant, am its loyal servant. I therefore do my best to have all lecturers – and in particular this 34241 – interrupted to the point of inaudibility' (*MrB* 79). Clad in his 'workhouse uniform' and reduced to the label 'voice 34241' for this ironic-Utopian portion of his odyssey, it is not as if

Bosphorus is lacking in good reasons to be paranoid. The Labour Master even goes so far as to order his troops of Orthodox-Intelligentsia-Censors to 'seize and bind' their lecturer, for he is to be 'shot at dawn'! (*MrB* 82). Bosphorus, however, is immune to the 'little experiment' of this militant age of prose (*MrB* 82). He will give his lecture (and so Act the Third begins) in his sleep, if necessary: – it is as if he is oblivious to the jump/cut of his transposition out of Act the Second, where he had acted in a more exalted role as Odyssean poet-sage.

Still, if it is the lot of the poet to fall upon hard times in this lapsed age of prose, he appears to be aware that he is the carrier of symbolic capital.⁷ Poetry may have taken 'refuge in prose' (and indeed he recognises that the 'punishment of all poets is death') and yet Bosphorus's vision is stoical and insists on the survival of values deeper than those borne by the shape-changing Muses who quarrel over him upon the Forestage (*MrB* 86). His lecture isn't to be completely drowned out, and indeed it is clearly the audience which is being addressed when Bosphorus speaks with the passion of poet-legislator:

VOICE of 34241: Ugly, sordid, little, of imbecile and discreditable ambitions and aims! Who amongst you has a thought he would not blush to own! But yet, humanity! And the distillation of you – as the distillation from a mash of crushed grapes is wine – the distillation of you is poetry. (*MrB* 86)

The stage device of a 'cinematograph curtain', used to represent certain institutional or authority-structures from which Bosphorus himself is excluded, is made somewhat clearer to the reader by the beautiful woodcut designs of Paul Nash which accompany the text (*MrB* 39). In Act II, Scene 1, it had been the square edifice (the 'packing case'; *MrB* 24) of the British Museum which loomed over Bosphorus, as if to demarcate the zone of High Culture from which the indigent Bosphorus (sitting on a workhouse bench) was, as it were, cast out.⁸ And although, in II.2, a naked Female Chorus ('impersonations of Athis') at first seemed to offer Bosphorus the sort of homecoming that any wayfaring poet might dream about, the first half of the poem is decidedly about loss (*MrB* 54). As the Act III stage directions indicate, the sign on the arbour through which he is to make his next 'escape' makes clear that Bosphorus isn't nearly home yet: the place belongs to 'Master and Officials only ... Beware of Dog!'

(*MrB* 53). Even Cerberus (the dog) understands its limitations in this respect.

Poignantly, the position of the dreaming Bosphorus is to ‘own’ the territory – and the actors in it – but without actually being recognized as Godlike. In Act II, Hercules himself may be impressed by Bosphorus’s prowess with the ninefold chorus, but he still can’t help it that ‘Poor, great Bosphorus ... [has] ... fallen on evil days’ (*MrB* 63). It would appear that the ‘classic modes’ of II.2 represent only a portion of the great march of Bosphorus, inexorably downhill towards the Prose Age.

The longer trajectory of the four-act piece is – avowedly – to attempt to restore Bosphorus to his Southern Muse. However, the first phase of the action runs distinctly on the theme of losses and pains. All too briefly, and to the annoyance of the (ninefold) Male Chorus, Bosphorus allows himself to linger upon the different physical manifestations of his teeming (and ‘Classic’) Muse. Yet the wistful subtext which pursues Bosphorus’s megalomaniac dance across literary culture, in Act II, is that he and his muses are both subject to mortality:

BOSPHORUS: From Athis’ lips my vagrant Muse disporting
 Led me to Glaucis. Then from Glaucis’ lips
 I sipped the nectar; marvelled at her hips;
 Her wheat-hued hair; her chiton’s snowy hues;
 And Glaucis had the tribute of my Muse! (*MrB* 58)

Along with sexual desire, pain, loss and mortality are indeed prominent *motifs* in the discussions between Bosphorus and his seductive Southern Muse. By the time these two lovers do make their final dream-flight to the golden sands of the timeless Mediterranean, Bosphorus has not only been through spectacular stage-rites of ageing (in a white night-gown, he is to become the *commedia dell’arte* figure of absurdity and second-childhood, Pantaloon) but also has to ‘participate’ in the solemn rites of his own interment in Westminster Abbey, having been ‘stage-flattened’ by a Rolls Royce! His night-garments now become a shroud. Amongst his mourners, we find: ‘*Publican, Pawnbroker, Seedy Individuals; Errand-boys, Prostitutes from Leicester Square attracted by minute gun-fire; Members of Middle-class ...*’ (*MrB* 117).

With his use of an ‘Harlequinade’ and ‘Transformation’ scene in Act IV, it is as if Ford’s artistic *antennae* are picking up some of the

very newest ingredients of modernist dance-styles, to put alongside his use of 'variety entertainment'. 1920s Paris is grafted upon the stage/cinematographic backdrop, representing the 'London Fog Humour'. Some of this newness is arguably nearer to 1916 (nearer to the 'Ballet Réaliste' of Jean Cocteau, Diaghilev and Stravinsky) but there is, possibly, a foreshadowing of the sort of cinematic delirium shortly to be offered by René Clair, and others in the post-War group of *Surréalistes*.⁹

But what underscores all of this experimental engagement with the New, from Act I to the final stages of the piece, is the language and the stage iconography of the City of London itself: specifically, popular Variety entertainment and the Music Hall tradition. Here is the 'City Burlesque': forms of art that are apt to inspire shuddering embarrassment as well as uncanny recognition and desire. None of these emotions is to be disdained by the would-be (or has-been) hero, Bosphorus. Rather, 'City Burlesque' becomes the natural concomitant of his 'godlike' quest.

From his 'workhouse bench', in Act II, the poet-dreamer Bosphorus identifies himself with the culture of popular entertainment. The image of the British Museum on the back 'cinematograph curtain' is soon replaced by an erratic silent-screen inscription from a proletarian hand:

How
Poets Live
FEAT
Uring Mr. BOSPHORUS and
MUSA POORE
(Rotten Films Ltd.) (*MrB* 40)

Our hero is not abashed by this: neither is he shocked by the New, nor even cross with the 'preliminary stutterings' of the screen image (*MrB* 43). He is, indeed, seated with his back to the audience, so that, looking (as it were) over his shoulder, we realise that we are 'seeing' projections from his unconscious mind. The seated Bosphorus will shortly, however, enter into his screened dream, a kind of cradle-to-grave mock-epic of his own life. The stage directions for the film *scenario* are as follows:

A London street in an obviously poor quarter. Old, small houses. Shops beneath. Two shops shown, preternaturally large. One is a pawnbroker's, the three golden balls protruding; the other an undertaker's, coffin-lids standing

capital, and we are about to witness the scene of his humiliation, when they don't sell....

Using the kind of *tableau* so central to the art of the Victorian stage, it would seem that Ford is playing with – even celebrating – the idea of a stylistic hybridity. More than this, he constructs a world without a settled register of class consensus, in use of language and manners. Arguably, he allows a combination of stage gesture and stuttering film-sequence to drain away from the piece the idea of there being either a settled context to, or a settled audience participating in, Bosphorus's dream-universe. It's as if the artist – in forgetting to use the professional rules – is using his Widow-Muse so as to achieve a sort of enjoyably tawdry pathos. Bosphorus is allowed to bask in a misty atmosphere of stunned pleasure, tantalised by the fake grandeur of his own screen-humiliation: '*Legend again: HIS AUTOGRAPH POEM SCORNED*' (*MrB* 46). Meanwhile, from his workhouse bench, Bosphorus's film-commentary has shuttled, unevenly, sonorously, between the idioms of Tennyson and Patmore, and 'the seamier sides of spacious times':

My cradle came from the pawnshop; my obsequies
Perforce will be inexpensive; public-houses
I never entered much; at times; at times!
My mother used to get my pre-natal Stout
From that establishment, which lends it interest. (*MrB* 43)

Along with the drip-drip effect of mild, and heavy, bathos, the text is punctuated with little gestures (particularly via the stage directions) in the stolid manner of professional incompetence and forgetfulness: '(*The screen* performs another Close-up or whatever is the technical term. ...)' (*MrB* 44) – even as Bosphorus attempts to smooth over any deficiencies by his 'vamping' at the piano and the 'throaty' accompaniment of his singing:

Poets who cannot sell their manuscripts
Must Hope! Hope! Hope!
Poisons are costly and to hang yourself
Needs rope! Expensive rope!
Summer's flow'rs are coming and for rhyme they give
much scope!
So! If there's no money in sham Tennyson
Try Pope! Pope! Pope! (*MrB* 46)

(The above is, of course, to be delivered with immaculate ‘throatiness’, to the staccato strains of ‘Pack up your troubles’!)

What, then, is the real purpose of all this *burllesque* extravagance? And with what deeper purpose, and artistic intent, is it that Ford – as Max Saunders has argued – turns ‘his near-paranoid anxiety about an orchestrated obliteration of his reputation into a celebratory fantasy of escape and regeneration’ (Saunders, vol. 2, 124)...? No-one can miss the touches of autobiography: Bosphorus’s ill-fortune at the pawnbroker’s is surely a rueful, comic re-casting of the rejection of Ford’s *The Marsden Case* – by Knopf, Brentano’s, Holt, Scribner’s, and Dodd Mead – before Duckworth took it, as Ford and his family left for France, in November, 1922 (Saunders, vol. 2, 124). We might, indeed, start to ask whether the figure of Bosphorus can be taken as an incarnation of the ‘joker’ in Ford himself. Such a figure is, I believe, to be met with, occasionally, in Ford’s own letters.

There is, for example, the delightful teasing of the celebrated agent Pinker, to whom Ford once failed to sell the literal (and no doubt symbolic) capital of his own country Utopia, his smallholding:

My famous pedigree pigs ANNA and ANITA, 344702 and 344704 in the herd book of the Large Black Pig Society cost a deuce of a lot to keep; but when, as they certainly will, they take prizes at the Lincoln Show I will stand you a champagne dinner. I could supply you with February hatched ducks at 96/- the dozen. You never seem to reply with any enthusiasm to my offers of farm produce. Why is this?¹⁰

Similarly – from 1921 – we can see a shadow of Bosphorus in the way in which Ford writes to a friend (Flint) about his costume-changes for dining at Coopers Cottage, in Sussex: ‘Bring an old dinner jacket with you if it’s not too much of a bore. I go about in filth all day & put on a cricket shirt & very old dress things at night – not for swank but because I have only one other respectable suit...’.¹¹

And yet, I believe there is a *gravitas* held within the various costume-changes and stage-impersonations of our Mister Bosphorus, which make him quite other than simply a mouthpiece for some of Ford’s real-life views and attitudes. We can’t assume that *Mister Bosphorus* was written specifically, and only, in order to register Ford’s personal musings about leaving England, even if the work did come to be influenced by Ford’s plans to travel, with Stella Bowen and daughter Julie, to a climate less inhospitable. Retrospect makes it all too tempting, thus, to see Ford’s life’s events alone as dictating the

victory of the Southern Muse over the colder Northern-Muse-Duchess. It can't be that simple.

Rather, there is a more interesting, internal dream-logic to be discovered in the way in which sluggish, lecherous Bosphorus is allowed to dictate the course of the poem's events. His slumberous inattention, or at least his air of *désinvolture* in the face of the pantomime-like escalation of events, is in fact too suggestive of the mannerisms adopted by Tietjens during the interval before and during bombardment in the trenches, for the coincidence not to become noticeable:

He did not know what to do, what he ought to do by the book. He knew what he would do. He would stroll about along those deep trenches. Stroll. With his hands in his pockets [. . .] He would say contemplative things as the time dragged on.... A rather abominable sort of Time, really. . . . But that would introduce into the Battalion a spirit of calm [. . .] (PE 576)

It is a manner of unperturbed aloofness which Tietjens has had time to practise, in the company of Sylvia. A slumberousness of this sort can be a successful antidote to paranoia, as David Trotter has finely argued.¹² Tietjens acts, like Bosphorus, as if he owns the territory, but his 'Other Ranks' are convinced by the act, and do find him Godlike. In *Mister Bosphorus*, the condition is exploited with a similarly calculated air of duality, as if the dreaming protagonist is both participant and outsider in the chain of events transforming the London of Act II into the condition of carnival (which it achieves in Act IV). Both Tietjens and Bosphorus risk imminent death of a sort, and indeed both of them inhabit an atmosphere of rapt romanticism and absolute prosaicness. Similar to the contemplative Tietjens who feels like 'some immense and absurd statue', Bosphorus can't easily stop looking back at his complicated sentimental self, and the vivid, particular city-scape in which his Northern Muse has dwelled:

Dimly-illuminant shop-windows show through fog; motor head-lights in extreme confusion; sounds of horse-hoofs on granite setts; Ford horns; whistles; fog-signals; ex-servicemen's cornets; London fog – humour; the constant exclamation: MOVE ON THERE; WHERE YER SHUVVIN'; a lugubrious and ancient barrel-organ plays [. . .]

VOICE OF BOSPHORUS:

This, this is what they offer us
To versify.

VOICE OF SOUTHERN MUSE: My Bosphorus,

From the dull confines of this drooping North
Now we go forth. (*MrB* 101)

Let us be clear: taken away from its immediately theatrical context, this is no ‘Unreal city’. The noises, sights and voices of this London are registered with a specific order of poetry, one that is quite unlike the contemporaneous achievement of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*.¹³ As Hugh Kenner once pointed out, in an article on ‘The Poetics of Speech’, Ford can be enlisted amongst the poets who write inside a ‘documentary tradition’.¹⁴ The deeper motives inspiring Ford’s use of a cockney ‘Rehelisum’ in this strange *Fantasia* should be related to the critical attitudes he had developed before the War: to his insights into a growing loss of proximity between the literary world and the parallel realities of the city street (*MrB* 17). And there is a sense in which *Mister Bosphorus* is written to protest against that loss.

When Bosphorus says: ‘This, this is what they offer us to versify’, he does not then proceed to refuse the task (*MrB* 101). He does not put distance – poetically – between himself and his fellow Londoners. More precisely: he manages the trick of speaking from within that city world as well as holding himself apart from it, the bearer (as it were) of a ‘critical attitude’:

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 concealèd lechery; hog-like dull embraces
Under a grey-flannel sky.... (*MrB* 103)

As Kenner suggested, Ford is emphatically not using his Londoners as the poetic vehicle for a ‘profound revelation’.¹⁵ His attempt is, rather, to catch the distinctive and unsung music – the ‘unspectacular idiom’ – of a more documentary approach: a ‘reality’ which requires the tuning of the ear to spoken resonances: to an echo of a more real London.¹⁶

Ford’s use of both literary culture and music hall slang makes for a complex effect: the opposing registers of social class seem to draw attention to, rather than dissolving into, each other. This, avowedly, is not Ford’s most ‘seamless’ piece of writing: indeed, he calls it his ‘Dunciad’.¹⁷ Verbal ungainliness and hybridity are, however, the source of coarser, and yet sophisticated, pleasures.

But it is not a case, I think, of Ford baptising himself in the humour of the London working classes, so as to claim ‘solidarity’ with them. Rather, he is trying to take a look at metropolitan culture – including the sexual *mores* of the English – without either high-mindedness or the use of terms from a more professional discourse. There is little sense of class evasiveness, or ‘politeness’ in the verse quotation given (above).

Indeed, it is as if Ford is trying to open imaginative conduits, here, for the expression of a broader sensibility: his critical attitude is designed so as to leave his writing open to the insights both of the ‘scientific historian’ and the ‘hack writer who assembles salacious details’.¹⁸ Ford is as good, here, as the words he pronounced before the war: ‘The artist is, as it were, the eternal mental prostitute who stands in the market-place....’ (CA 64).

Perhaps the spoken qualities of an anecdote from Douglas Goldring – about Ford’s editing practices – may make the point a little clearer. And perhaps it may also help to give us the flavour of the mind of a Christopher Tietjens (a ‘mind’ which can muse on George Herbert or Shakespeare ... ‘Or Pericles! Or Augustus!’ (PE 566) only seconds before he will be offering his men free tickets to the pantomime at Drury Lane or the Shoreditch Empire):

... it was Ford’s singular practice to attend the ‘second house’ at the local musichall. At least once a week my first task, on arriving at Holland Park Avenue, was to secure a box or two stalls at the Shepherd’s Bush Empire. After dinner I went out and stopped a hansom and editor and ‘sub’ drove down to Shepherd’s Bush with the MSS which had accumulated during the day. During the performance, or rather during the duller turns, Ford made his decisions and I duly recorded them. But when someone really worth listening to – the late Victoria Monks for example, or ‘Little Tich’ or Vesta Victoria – appeared on the stage, the cares of editorship were for the moment laid aside. After the show, we went back to the flat and worked on, sometimes until two in the morning. There must have been a good deal to be said for the Shepherd’s Bush Empire, from Ford’s standpoint. The atmosphere was conducive, there was no one to worry him and he could think undisturbed.¹⁹

The relaxed posture of the literary editor (making his ‘Godlike’ decisions) inside this theatrical context is suggestive in itself. It is as if the demands of professionalism were to be improbably fulfilled in a universe of shared illusion; where, as if by a kind of contagion, one were to acquire, and even lend, Tietjens’s ability to stroll: to step outside of the universe of regulation and discipline.

*

Like Tietjens's ordeals (particularly, his near-death experiences in the trenches, and his riotous celebrations during Armistice day) Mister Bosphorus's ultimate escape to the 'warm sand' and the 'yielding breast' of the Southern Muse is only to be achieved after a series of explosive stage shocks (*MrB* 125). At times – as, when 'Arlequin' is made to turn the handle of a barrel organ – it is as if Ford is trying to dissolve into each other the stage traditions of North and South:

(ARLEQUIN turns handle of barrel-organ. It wheezes:
*Tike me beck, beck, beck to meyome agen,
 Nile th carpet to th flore!
 Theyole broke carch jus stend dahn there
 Jus ware it stood be-fore.
 N. Nah! Mister Lanlord, if I owesyer any rent
 Ile pie yer: don't yer shaht....)*

ARLEQUIN pirouettes up-stage, striking boards with his sword, which, gracefully bending, he allows to remain on ground. The Rolls-Royce hoots and advances until front wheels touch sword. Loud explosion of front tyres. *LABOUR MASTER* is pitched over front-screen in somersault. Alighting on his feet, he is seen to be *POLICEMAN* [. . .] (*MrB* 104)

Indeed the idea of merging his two Muses into one is arguably the unattainable desire towards which *Mister Bosphorus* would wish to move itself: beyond the paranoid condition of making impossible choices, and beyond the idea of needing to 'escape' indeed. *Mister Bosphorus* has much more of this spirit of accommodation and reconciliation about it, finally, than of an idea of 'settling scores'.

In this respect – and importantly – the action plotted for Bulfin the Pauper-Critic is not, finally, to act as Bosphorus's nemesis (or, specifically, the reason his manuscripts won't sell). Rather, he is to be restored to his side, still in the form of 'Nine Young Gentlemen', as if Criticism had become Bosphorus's *doppelgänger*, or at least the travelling companion, of the two refugee lovers. He is given the final lines of the drama, and declares himself: 'content! / We're very well content!' before the curtain falls (*MrB* 126).

And yet, Joseph Conrad's written response to this *burlesque* of the City (having been sent a copy of *Bosphorus*) is a sure, and a precise, response too: '... I had no idea that your versatile genius could master so well the comic spirit / both so grim and so ferociously gay'.²⁰ The note of 'ferocity' is to be detected as much in the stage action, including its violent stage magic, perhaps, as in the verse. Bulfin the Pauper-Critic – notably – is made to 'grovel' after a

'snowstorm' of 'thousand dollar notes' (*MrB* 113). This is one of several climactic *tableaux*, when the London Pawnbroker metamorphoses into the figure of Uncle Sam. It is American money that will 'rescue' Bosphorus's reputation:

PAWNBROKER, *indicating ecstasy, enters shop by door; emerges headlong through window. He now wears red-white-and-blue-striped trousers; a blue tail-coat embroidered with white stars; white high hat, and white goatee. He bears strapped across him a bookmaker's money wallet of enormous proportions. It is lettered P. MORGAN.*

CHAR-LADY, *the NINE* [critics], POLICEMAN, PUBLICAN, *and* CROWD *of seedy individuals and errand-boys all kneel.*
Barrel-organ wheezes:

*My country 'tis of Thee,
Sweet Land of Liberty,
To thee we sing! (MrB 112)*

It is as if Ford is making his City theatrically 'unreal' in order to escape the intensity of its imaginative hold upon his life. But the hybrid stage style in which he achieves this is (as Bosphorus's name might suggest, indeed) about making bridges and connections, not about artistic megalomania. Ford uses this dreaming Bosphorus so as to forge links between two phases of a life; between the two Muses (Northern and Southern); and also between London's two linguistic communities. In this last of his 'bridges', Bosphorus is connecting the world of English Literature, and its *Reviews*, with the parallel universe of popular entertainment. As in the case of Tietjens's experience, this link with 'Other Ranks' was to be an immense resource in Ford's writing. And it was gained, I contend, by allowing himself to respond with pleasure to a wider writing community than the one he found in London's post-War literary circles. Using the idioms and stage devices of that older culture – notably the songs and humour of the rougher and more 'levelling' muse, that Ford had found as Editor, in the City – Ford was also starting to open up new artistic possibilities for himself. 'City Burlesque' – with its abrupt, theatrical, improbable transitions – offered him ways of accommodating the theatre of the professional mind (including its scales of grandeur and abjection) to the more earthy, companionable and shared time-scales that were to be found at pavement-level.

NOTES

- 1 *Mister Bosphorus and the Muses, 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*, London: Duckworth, 1923 – henceforth *MrB*.
- 2 *Parade's End*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1982 – henceforth *PE*; pp. 319, 318.
- 3 David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 210 ('Good Soldiering', pp. 210-19).
- 4 *Ibid.*, ('Good Soldiering'), p. 213: 'Disgust is the only feeling creatures like Bagshawe arouse, and disgust becomes henceforth the source of Dowell's identity [...]'.
5 Ford, *It Was the Nightingale*, London: Heinemann, 1934, p. 180.
- 6 Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 – henceforth 'Saunders'; vol. 2, p. 124: 'Though he was about to leave England, the Ford who had written *A House* and was soon to write *Parade's End* knew how it was that a man could hold England dear'.
- 7 Trotter, *op.cit.*, draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic capital' in his account of Daniel Paul Schreber, 'the most exhaustively documented and debated of all psychotics' (*Paranoid Modernism*, p. 52). The difference between commodities which, for Bourdieu, are 'designated by their rarity as distinguished, those of the fractions richest in both economic and cultural capital', and, on the other hand, those which are 'socially identified as vulgar because they are both easy and common', is poignantly revealed in the *burlesque* stage action surrounding the fate of Bosphorus's manuscripts (Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Taste*, tr. R. Nice, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 176).
- 8 Nash's woodcut (p. 38) represents a square, and rather ungainly, figure of Bosphorus tipping his bowler hat to the elegant figure of one of his muses. On the cinematograph curtain, the 'B.M.' is a combination of a Cecil B. DeMille Hollywood stage set and Bosphorus's own description of it as a 'packing case'.
- 9 This argument about Modernist stage, and film, action, is partly derived from Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau, A Biography*, London: Constable, 1986, p. 162: 'Each performance of *Parade* was to last no more than twenty minutes, but [Cocteau] felt it a privilege to be devoting himself to the details of the then novel "realistic" sights and sounds of which it is composed' (it is subtitled 'Ballet Réaliste'). *Parade* and *MrB* both combined the use of Music Hall and Circus into their scenarios, and both make notable use of typewriters (and, in the case of *MrB*, telegraph keyboards) on stage.
- 10 Ford to Pinker, 17 May 1921: *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Richard Ludwig, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965 – henceforth *LF*; p. 132.
- 11 Ford to F. S. Flint, 12 May 1921: *LF* 131.
- 12 Trotter, *op.cit.* ('Ford Madox Ford and the Quality of Entanglements'), pp. 331-7.

- 13 The argument over Ford's possible debt to Eliot's poem is still an unsettled one. See Saunders, vol. 2, 124: 'Ford's love of music hall [...] his use of peasant speech in his early verse, all point towards his having been able to arrive at the techniques of the poem on his own'.
- 14 *Ford Madox Ford: Modern Judgements*, ed. Richard Cassell, London: Macmillan, 1972, p. 177.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 17 Ford to Conrad, 8 November, 1923; *LF* 157.
- 18 Ford, *The Critical Attitude*, London: Duckworth, 1911 – henceforth *CA*.
- 19 Goldring, *South Lodge*, London: Constable, 1943, p. 32.
- 20 Conrad to Ford, 20 November, 1923. In Saunders, vol. 2, 124.