Mapping Ford Madox Ford’s Provence in *Provence*

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Very early in his life Ford Madox Ford became familiar with Provence through his father’s work, *The Troubadours*, and his grandfather’s paintings (Wiesenfarth 2005, 131), and later, through his own repeated travels to the South of France where he finally settled down at the end of his life. Ford Madox Ford alluded to Provence in several of his works, adopted it as a backcloth, especially in *The Rash Act* and finally, in 1935, devoted a travel narrative to it, entitled *Provence. From Minstrels to the Machine*.

Writing about Provence was something his collaborator, Joseph Conrad had done in *The Rover* while Ford’s other friend, Ezra Pound, had, like him, a close interest in the Troubadours’ poetry.¹ However, when we read Ford’s *Provence*, it is not Conrad or Pound who come to mind but, strangely enough, Clive Bell, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry, the very Bloomsbury artists Ford disliked for their elitism. Indeed, Provence is for Ford comparable with Periclean Athens,² the very Athens Clive Bell revered in his 1928 essay *Civilisation* and Leonard Woolf – although somewhat differently – in his 1935 political essays *Quack, Quack*. Unlike the Victorian Matthew Arnold who held that if Greece was a model of perfection, England embodied that perfection (Arnold 2006), the Bloomsbury artists no longer believed that England could rival such a model of perfection, as Virginia

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¹ But Ford asserts in *Provence*: “I differ from Mr Pound [...], except for the matter of the Troubadour literature, I differ from him as to everything else” ([1935] 2009, 184).

² Ford writes: “Provence [...] if we except that of Periclean Athens, has been the only real civilization that the world has yet seen” ([1935] 2009, 164).
Woolf ironically pointed out in her short story, *A Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus*. And Ford himself clearly chooses to pit the new Athens, Provence, against England. Sunny Provence is pitted against grey, foggy London; the South is opposed to the North, Catholicism to Protestantism, freedom of expression to the English repression of feelings. So much so that one may wonder whether Provence is not a pretext for denouncing the blemishes of England and Englishness. Is not the opposition Ford makes too blunt and simplistic as well as too conventional? Does it not amount to an idealization of Provence that is somewhat suspect, recalling as it does the fascist promotion of all that is Latin? Is Ford’s Provence the token of a reactionary mind? Only a close scrutiny of the text and the way Provence is represented can provide answers to these questions.

**PROVENCE AS A GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL TERRITORY**

For Ford, Provence is first of all a geographical territory, clearly circumscribed by the Alps, the river Rhône and the Mediterranean:

> If you wrote a capital V upside down and divided the space between its arms by a descending straight line which would be the Rhone, the triangle on the right of the dividing line would be the true Provence with which we are concerned. That on the left of the line would be the sort of quasi-Provence that contains Montpellier, Béziers, Carcassonne and Perpignan and that finally merges into a sort of Catalan-Spanish territory. (Ford [1935] 2009, 93)

Such delineation enables him to take into account the role of the Mistral (the northern wind that blows down the Rhodanian valley), as a defining element of the territory and thus avoid the stereotypical representation of Provence as a warm, sunny place. The Mistral is, Ford writes, one of the three scourges of Provence – the other two being the floods of the Durance and Aix’s Parliament.¹ Ford’s ‘true’ Provence is barred on one side by the long impassable Alpine barrier and on the others by the Rhône and the Mediterranean which have always permitted goods and art to circulate and have always been part of “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 civilisation backwards and forwards along its tides” ([1935] 2009, 13). Set at the centre of a trading

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network Provence is therefore presented as a crossroads, the very opposite of the island Great Britain which breeds, according to the author, “claustrophobia” ([1935] 2009, 289).

But the geography of Provence can only be apprehended in the context of its history, and the geographical territory of Provence soon becomes a chronotope where space and time merge into each other as the author tells us about the many invasions Provence has suffered throughout the ages: “There fought their battles [...] not merely Romans, Celts, Franks, Teutons, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, and Celtiberians, but Africans, Asians, Arabs, Moors and Levantines who became generally known as Saracens” (Ford ([1935] 2009, 113). The complex history of Provence, little known at the time, is reconstructed by Ford both with great accuracy and great freedom. He looks at the Albigenses and shows how their faith was used instrumentally both by Catholics and Protestants when this “doctrine, which spread like fire [from Albi] through all Provence” (Ford [1935] 2009, 128), was strictly speaking, neither one nor the other, and he confesses his “affectionate admiration” for these “Catharists” (Ford [1935] 2009, 129). Ford displays a clear desire to retrieve what has been silenced by various invaders, the French especially. But rather than underlining what these invaders have destroyed, he chooses to emphasise what they brought in their wake, the encounter between various peoples and cultures. Provence is therefore depicted not simply as a martyred country but as a fertilized one, a space of hybridisation. By foregrounding such impurity and claiming it as an asset in 1935, at a time when the Nazis were promoting theories of racial purity, Ford, who was himself of Anglo-German origin, is clearly committing himself and sending a political message. We could even say that he echoes Virginia Woolf who in 1933 published Flush which can be read as a eulogy of impurity and mongrelisation, since Flush, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog, is never so happy as among the mongrels of Italy. Presented as a cosmopolitan territory, Provence becomes a political ideal, the very antithesis of what the Barbarians – to use Leonard Woolf’s terms – were trying to construct.

Provence also displays, according to Ford, an ideal economy. While most European countries are suffering from the Great Depression, Provence is faring well since it is based on a rural, agricultural economy. In Provence, Ford writes, there is “neither mass production nor the worship of mass-production” (Ford [1935] 2009, 66), there are no machines. The Provençaux lead a simple, frugal life; they like gardening and cooking. The simplicity of this rural world is worthy of the pastoral tradition. Provence,

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4 “Provence,” Ford writes, “is the one country in the world of which no history has ever been written” ([1935] 2009, 164).

5 Leonard Woolf published Barbarians at the Gate in 1939.
in a way, reads as a transposition of pre-Victorian, pre-modernist\textsuperscript{6} England. Provence also seems to match a Marxist ideal, as the words ‘mass production’ suggest, and to owe something to William Morris’s utopia in \textit{News from Nowhere}. It also reads in some ways as a denunciation of the Futurists’ dehumanised, mechanistic ideal, as defended especially by Marinetti, and which, in pre-war times, had appealed to Ford, as witnessed in his essay ‘On Impressionism’.\textsuperscript{7}

Most of all, Provence is characterised by its beauty and its sensuality; as such it is the very opposite of England and Germany where, Ford laments, sensuality is repressed. In Provence,

\begin{quote}
[with a tiny knife before the dawn is up you remove an infinitely tiny but superfluous leaf from a tiny plant; between clods the countenance of every one of which is as familiar to you as the face of your child […], you lead with your hoe threads of water to the base of every plant that is as familiar to you as the clods” (Ford [1935] 2009, 110).
\end{quote}

With these words and the beauty of the images he summons up, Ford renews what might have been a cliché and the authenticity of his experience of Provence is conveyed.

Provence in the end is a way of life and is best summarized by the art it has developed with great success: the art of conversation, the art that is practiced every day in the cafés all over Provence: “[a] café is a serious place where serious people discussing serious subjects mould civilizations – and if the Moralist frequented such places his occupation would be gone” (Ford [1935] 2009, 58). The Greek ideal of conversation\textsuperscript{8} is retrieved and turned into an art of living.

Ford’s Provence hovers between reality and utopia, authenticity and fictionalization and reads as contradictory, or at least ambivalent, if we look at it as a geographical and historical territory. But Ford’s Provence exceeds such a territory. Provence is indeed further compared to an art museum, both reduced to a museum and enlarged to one, a move which may also seem paradoxical except if we understand this territory as a new ethical one.

\textsuperscript{6} The word is taken here in its technical sense.

\textsuperscript{7} Ford writes: “And, indeed, those Futurists are only trying to render on canvas what Impressionists tel que moi have been trying to render for many years” (Ford [1915] 1995, 264).

\textsuperscript{8} At least, Bell praises this art of conversation in \textit{Civilisation} as being typically Greek and refers more particularly to Plato’s \textit{Symposium} as illustrating it (Bell [1928] 1947, 8).
PROVENCE AS A MUSEUM

Comparing Provence to a museum may first appear as a move towards the reduction of Provence to the size of a museum, and the static function of a museum, that would consist in celebrating the glory of the past – a museum as monument. But Ford’s museum is different. Turning Provence into a museum amounts for him to enlarging it and enlarging its significance. Provence is, indeed, seen as a place where painting and the plastic arts developed in the 14th and 15th centuries with the atelier d’Avignon: “[n]ot only did Avignon export pictures and altar-pieces all over France and Burgundy but [...] painters came from all over the western world, except perhaps from England, to supply those masterpieces” (Ford [1935] 2009, 221). The author also refers to Petrarch’s poetry, written in Fontaine-de-Vaucluse; and what he writes about it provides a synthesis of his conception of Provence:

So it was in that Provençal valley that the language of Modern Italy was formed. That is only another instance of the backward and forward trend of civilization – backwards and forwards through Provence – but always with that country as its halting place, its shelter and its nourishment (Ford [1935] 2009, 156).

This is certainly true of the Troubadours – Peire Vidal, especially, whom Ford holds high – and their courts of love who have been influent both in and out of Provence, especially in the 13th century but also beyond it, one of the proofs being that English and American writers still read them, some with success, like Ezra Pound – “the greatest living authority [...] on the Troubadours” (Ford [1935] 2009, 169) –, others with more difficulty, like Walter Pater and Henry James who, Ford reminds us, tend to be shocked by “the wantonness” of their poetry (143). As a centre for the arts, Provence attracted artists while wielding its influence all over Europe and creating works of art that were born of a “cosmopolitan spirit” (Ford [1935] 2009, 225); it is “a centre radiating the loveliness that in the end civilisation should be” (Ford [1935] 2009, 98).9

Provence is also depicted as a place where high and low art thrive side by side: if one can see Quarton’s Pietà in the museum of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon,10 Simone Martini’s fresco in “the porch of the Cathedral of the Popes in Avignon” (Ford [1935] 2009, 221) or Nicolas Froment’s Burning Bush

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9 Ford actually uses the phrase to describe London, the only town in England that can, according to him, compare with Provence, and adds: “In that Provence much resembles London” (Ford [1935] 2009, 98).

10 It is now in the Musée du Louvre.
in the cathedral of Aix-en-Provence – “the matchless Fromentin (sic) at Aix-en-Provence with the two wings, shewing as donors the Good King René in his cap of vair and his Queen in her steeple-crowned hat” (Ford [1935] 2009, 235), one can also see countless anonymous votive pictures in various churches11 and buy santons, those miniature red clay figures representing “every condition of man and every craft” (229).12 By indirectly defining Provençal art as being, like the Troubadours’ own art, both “aristocratic and democratic” (Ford [1935] 2009, 172), by including among artists not only famous ones but also unknown, anonymous ones, Ford opens up the definition of art and the space of art. The whole territory of Provence becomes a museum, a new type of museum, open to all and open to all forms of art – an art redefined so as to include humble art within its sphere. Such a move is reminiscent of Mistral, “the poet of little, unassuming people” (Ford [1935] 2009, 161), in Ford’s own words, and in some ways, of William Morris and his aesthetics of the everyday.13 Alongside canonical works of art, unsigned art enters his open museum, just as it had entered Roger Fry’s Omega workshop a few years before.14 Welcoming the domestic art of votive pictures,15 anonymous paintings and sculptures (such as the santons), that is, what is usually regarded as crafts,16 Ford redefines the museum and art itself as an open space where works of art belonging to the canon can enter into a dialogue with works of art that do not belong to it.

Through Ford’s re-definition of art as encompassing signed and unsigned art, famous and humble art, native and foreign art, Provence comes

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11 Ford describes at length votive pictures – “the pictures having that air of superreality that marionettes have. A man is knocked down by a carriage and six; a child is hauled head-downwards out of a fountain basin” ([1935] 2009, 230-31).
12 Ford writes that “peasants will be offering for sale saintons (sic) such as their ancestors have made in these parts ever since the first Attic-Beotian colonists came to these parts from the Oropos three thousand years ago” ([1935] 2009, 228).
13 Although Ford does not connect utility with art, as Morris does, he defends, like Morris, a society without standardisation and mass-production, a society the Provence of King René embodied in the 13th century, according to him ([1935] 2009, 257-58). Morris was connected with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which was also familiar to Ford through his grandfather, Ford Madox Brown, and his ideas gave rise to the Arts and Crafts Movement.
14 Fry’s Omega Workshop, in which such artists as Vanessa Bell and Wyndham Lewis worked for a while, did not sign the works of art it produced. But beyond their belief in unsigned art, Fry’s project and Ford’s vision of the museum are not exactly the same. Ford, indeed, further defines ideal art as an art which is, as he writes, “produced by small people” ([1935] 2009, 227) but also by all social classes, “the product of peasant-proprietors –and not of peasant-proprietors only. The sons of not too rich newspaper proprietors paint pictures; those of millionaire tanners write epics; naval officers paint water-colours from Cap Sète to Annam” ([1935] 2009, 230).
16 See Ford’s essay ‘On Impressionism’ and my own analysis of the artist as craftsman (Reynier 2009).
out not only as a shelter to the arts of the past but as a place where traditional arts and crafts are kept alive thanks to outside influence and hybridisation: in other words, Provence is gradually turned into a living museum. Such an opening of the territory of the arts and of the museum derives both from a democratic and an ethical impulse, a desire to welcome the others. In the end, Provence is prized not so much for its sunny weather and its privileged geographical situation as for its simplicity, impurity, conversational qualities and openness, i.e. mainly for its ethical values. Provence, according to Ford, is not so much a country as a “frame of mind” (Ford [1935] 2009, 64 and passim).

FROM ETHICS TO AESTHETICS

In order to capture this frame of mind, Ford devises a series of tableaux that focus on various topics – the weather, the Troubadours, Provençal history, art of living, cuisine, values, etc. – and make up a ‘psychogeography’ of Provence rather than a conventional travel narrative. Provence is seen now from London, now from Provence itself. The various vignettes, which adopt different perspectives, match, complement or even contradict each other and the reader is left in the end with a highly intimate and subjective portrayal of Provence: “I am giving you my Provence,” Ford writes ([1935] 2009, 138).

His fragmented narrative indulges in a plethora of information and subjective judgments; it reads now as a history book, now as a sociological treatise; it is interspersed with numerous humorous and delightful anecdotes and resembles, in Ford’s own words, an opera ([1935] 2009, 67). Provence comes out as multi-faceted – just as the Provençal is said to be “many-sided” (42) – complex and ambivalent, difficult to understand, challenging and most lovable. Ford shares his intimate knowledge of Provence and shows how deeply he empathises with it.

Such a position is best understood when compared with the position adopted by other travel writers of the time, especially Lady Fortescue who published at about the same time Perfume from Provence (1933). Fortescue’s book, unlike Ford’s, met with great success when it came out and was reprinted in 1992, in the wake of Peter Mayle’s A Year in Provence (1989). Lady Fortescue discovered Provence when she bought a mas there. Discovery, for her, rhymes with property. And the Provençaux are, for her, the workers, builders, gardeners and cooks she employs. She portrays workmen as ready to stop

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17 This term was first used by Guy Debord to refer to the way in which geographical place acts on people’s emotions. See “Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine”, in Les Lèvres nues, n°6, Bruxelles, 1955. It is used here in a looser way to refer to the ‘frame of mind’ or ‘psychology’ of a place.
working when she is not around, the maids as kind but wanting in cleanliness and politeness. On the whole, the Provençal is depicted as a sort of child badly in need of education. Even if she is eager to discover the codes of this new culture, her tone is mainly condescending. Her attitude is reminiscent of the coloniser’s, as is her rhetoric which takes the superiority of her own culture and values for granted (Sharp 1999, 200-48). In her representation of Provence as a land of plenty, where flowers and plants grow of their own, we can read the Imperialist’s nostalgia for a lost world. Fortescue’s position is emblematic of the popular travel-writing of the time. Ford’s is totally different.

Ford is not interested in buying the land but in observing ‘the small people’, in sharing their conversation in café, in helping Provence to retrieve its silenced history. Far from being paternalistic, he favours a humorous or provocative tone. Far from judging Provence and the Provençaux, he displays a form of empathy towards them. He comments upon the Troubadours’ poems, makes us read Mistral’s poetry in its original version, shares his pleasure in leading an ordinary life in Provence. The only form of appropriation he may be guilty of is an appropriation of the land through the senses, which may give a measure of the repression of sensuality in England at the time. His attitude and his rhetoric are not those of the coloniser but of the historian, at times, the anthropologist, and more often, the poet, the inheritor (in granting such importance to the senses) of Walter Pater and Joseph Conrad. While portraying Provence, Ford adopts a disposition in keeping with what he values most in it: its openness to alterity.

Such an ethical position is further enacted throughout the space of the book which Ford chooses to share with Janice Biala, his partner, who is responsible for the illustrations of the volume. At times, Biala simply enables the reader to visualise Ford’s explanations (as in her map of Provence); sometimes she chooses to underline what is of paramount importance in his discourse (as in her drawing of the café in Tarascon, the locus of conversation); sometimes she selects one of the works of art Ford is describing (one votive picture, for example), bringing out the naiveté and amateurish quality of such a work as well as its ability to convey both a synchronic and diachronic form of representation, which challenges the conventional mode of viewing a picture just as Ford challenges the conventional artistic codes; at other times, Biala conveys the gist of Ford’s words in such drawings as the Boulangerie, a place which is not described in the text: with a few lines, she depicts a shop nestling in the protective shade of the trees, the refreshing presence of the fountain and through the heart shape in the foreground, she presents the whole as a sort of cake in which the viewer inevitably feels like biting; the whole sensuality of Ford’s text comes out beautifully in that drawing. She can also make Ford’s anxiety palpable through the dark thick lines of a drawing like ‘The Great View into Italy from Provence’, evoking
Mussolini’s Italy. In other words, the dialogue between text and image, between Ford and Biala, enacts the conversational ideal of Provence: ethics and aesthetics come together. In the end, mapping Provence reads as a way for Ford to map his own writing and his own aesthetic principles. *Provence* becomes an *ars poetica*. A travel narrative, a humble literary genre about a humble place, is thus put on the map of literary creation, which is in keeping with Ford’s belief in the influence of place and climate on writing, somewhat reminiscent of Montesquieu’s climate theory.18

Provence, which, as Lynn Withey explains, had long been side-stepped by the English travellers who headed straight for Italy in quest of a glorious past and authentic art objects, is at the centre of Ford’s book and is valued for its very humble character. It is certainly idealised in some ways and Ford’s discourse is not devoid of contradictions, his blunt attacks on Anglo-Saxon culture19 jarring with the ethical disposition he is trying to defend. However, the political situation of the 1930s in many ways justifies his provocative tone and *Provence* finally reads mainly as a homage paid to the values that were then being threatened.

Most of all, *Provence* is a hymn to art and the essential function of art. Ford indeed, towards the end of his book, makes a reference to Haydn’s so-called ‘Farewell’ Symphony (No. 45 in F-sharp minor), interpreting it not as a protest against Haydn’s patron, as it is known to be, but as a warning against the coming of a dark age. He writes:

Do you happen to know Haydn’s symphony?... It is a piece that begins with a full orchestra, each player having beside him a candle to light his score. They play that delicate cheerful-regretful music of an eighteenth century that was already certain of its doom... As they play on the contrabassist takes his candle and on tiptoe steals out of the orchestra; then the flautist takes his candle and steals away...The music goes on – and the drum is gone, and the bassoon... and the hautbois, and the second...violin... Then they are all gone and it is dark.... (Ford [1935] 2009, 255).

The musicians who retreat one by one and the concert room which is gradually engulfed in darkness read here as an allegory of the 1935 political situation and sound as a warning. However, the very existence of Ford’s book is a sign of the power of art to fight back and to endure.

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18 Ford underlines the influence on writing of the place in which one writes. According to him, Christina Rossetti’s writing is cruel because she writes in London ([1935] 2009, 140-41). As for Montesquieu, he showed how climate can influence man’s character.

19 Such ‘strong dichotomies’ between England and the Mediterranean countries were quite common at the time among travel writers who, like D.H. Lawrence, Christopher Isherwood or Lawrence Durrell, left England. See Fussell (1980, 15-23): “I hate it here.”
References