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# From a “Garden of Disorder” to a “Nest of Flames”: Charles Henri Ford’s Surrealist Inflections

Stamatina Dimakopoulou

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- 1 Primarily known as the editor of the New York-based *View* magazine (1940-1947), the main platform for the European Surrealists during the Second World War, and its more short-lived precedent *Blues* (1929-1930) where Ford tentatively brought together new American voices alongside the expatriate generation,<sup>1</sup> Charles Henri Ford’s poetry has received scant critical attention. While the affiliations within Ford’s early poetry are still largely unexplored, *The Young and Evil* (1933) that he co-authored in Paris with Parker Tyler has been revisited as a seminal text in the queer genealogies of American modernism.
- 2 In his study of modernism’s *Libidinal Currents*, Joseph Allen Boone established a parallel between the “subversively avant-garde style and form, as well as its sexually explicit content” that “place it at the margins of official modernist practice,” and “the outcast queer fringe it brazenly presents” (Boone 264). Albeit acknowledging the innovative experimentalism of *The Young and Evil*, Boone saw its radicalism as part and parcel of the authors’ marginality. In Boone’s wake, Juan Antonio Suárez stressed that “emblematic of [...] [the] articulation of queerness are the vexing, unstable relations between modernist textuality and popular practice, between experimentalism and street culture [...] instabilities [that] characterize a queer modernism” (Suárez 181). Drawing a parallel between “Ford’s and Tyler’s position within the American avant-garde” and Jean Cocteau’s (one of Breton’s favourite peeves), “Ford’s and Tyler’s marginality within official modernism,” Suárez goes on, “does not seem to have been particularly traumatic.” As a most telling instance Suárez notes Ford’s “report[ing]” from Paris in a tongue-in-cheek manner that the International Federation of Independent Artists acronym “was FIARI not fairy” (Suárez 194).

- 3 yet, just as the virtual omission of *The Young and Evil* from literary modernist cultures may have had to do with a "queerness" that jarred with high modernist "mythopoeic" paradigms (See 1075), the fact that Ford's poetic work has been overlooked may have to do less with its marked Surrealist influences and/or derivative aspects than with the somewhat unclassifiable and composite texture of his poems. In what follows, Ford's early poetry will be revisited as a space where distinct paradigms become reciprocally defamiliarizing: his queer sensibility assimilates concurrently Surrealist poetics and Djuna Barnes's equally unclassifiable queer modernism with and against Williams's Americanist modernism. From *The Garden of Disorder and Other Poems* of 1938 that William Carlos Williams heralded for being a "dream-like [...] foil" to "the practice of the art [that] tends to be seduced by politics" (Williams, *Tortuous Straightness* 10) to the 1949 *Sleep in A Nest of Flames* that brought together work written during the years of his editorship of *View*, Ford reconfigured Surrealist poetics through his own idiosyncratic affinities.
- 4 In "The Tortuous Straightness of Charles Henri Ford" which introduced the 1938 New Directions volume *The Garden of Disorder and Other Poems*, Williams implicitly acknowledged Ford's Surrealist inflections and hailed Ford for "retaining a firmness of extraordinary word juxtapositions while dealing wholly with a world to which the usual mind is unfamiliar, a counterfoil to the vague and excessively stupid juxtapositions commonly known as 'reality'" (Williams, *Tortuous Straightness* 9). Williams's praise, however, was both appropriative and responsive to Ford's singularity. In words reminiscent of the apostrophe about his own relation to European avant-gardism in *The Great American Novel*,<sup>2</sup> Williams went on to state that the "effect is to revive the senses and force them to re-see, re-hear, re-taste, re-smell, and generally re-value all that it was believed had been seen, heard, smelled, and generally valued" (Williams, *Tortuous Straightness* 9). Incisive and somewhat affectionate as this foreword might have been, Williams foregrounded the "straightness" rather than the "tortuousness" of Ford's poetry: he omitted the question of sexuality and did not explicitly address Ford's marked affinity for Surrealism and Barnes. Instead, he implicitly aligned Ford to his own Americanist grain and concluded by redeeming Ford's uneven poetry for returning "to something he had begun to forget — a fantastic drive out of —, while in the very process of entering the banal" (Williams *Tortuous Straightness*, 11).
- 5 Ford selectively voiced his affinities in the "Pamphlet of Sonnets" which, despite their "small excellences of tenuous but concretely imagined word appositions," Williams dismissed as "thoroughly banal because [the sonnet] is a word in itself whose meaning is definitely fascistic" (Williams, *Tortuous Straightness* 10). The "Pamphlet of Sonnets" was included in the 1938 volume after the long poem which gave the title to the collection. Virtually divested of cultural markers that Williams would identify as "banal" and/or American, the "sonnets" constitute primarily affiliative gestures, while their allegorical and experiential registers mark off a distance from Hemingway's pared down prose and Stein's verbal play that went into the writing of *The Young and Evil*. Certainly dissonant in the poetic climate of the 1930s, Ford's dedications and diction bring together the push and pulls of a yet-unnamed queer modernism, and the rear-guard of neo-romanticism that Stein dwelled on towards the end of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. While Stein famously hailed Ford for being "as young and fresh as his *Blues*" (Stein 241), Surrealism is conspicuously absent from the *Autobiography* with the sole exception of René Crevel who is mentioned together with Duchamp as "the most complete examples of this French charm" (Stein 237), and as "the friend of all these painters," that is, Christian Bérard and

Pavel Tchelitchev.<sup>3</sup> As Ford later on attempted to create bridges between Surrealism, neo-romanticism, and American vernaculars in *View*, his early poetry, albeit in a more coded manner, also comes across as an attempt to express himself through divergent and related modernist idioms.

- 6 Ford's ex-centric poetic idiom emerges in dialogue and in dissonance with Surrealism. The wilful anachronistic diction of the "Sonnets" seems to be gesturing towards Barnes's ironic use of the early modern almanac in *Ladies Almanack* in order to construct, as Carolyn Burke puts it, a "literally ex-centric moral universe" (Burke 73). Dedicated to the Vicomtesse de Noailles, Parker Tyler, Djuna Barnes, and Pavel Tchelitchev,<sup>4</sup> the "sonnets" construct a personal poetic idiom that is more akin to Barnes's aestheticist early overtones, certainly distanced from the explicitness of *The Young and Evil*. Still, Ford pursues the queering of the "surrealist fusion of desire and death" through covert and explicit evocations of homoeroticism (See 1084). Violence and homoerotic desire intersect in the poems, and these themes are introduced in the opening poem "To Christopher Marlowe." Ford's "assassinated poet" is doubly a tribute to Apollinaire and to the queer poet of the English Renaissance who "identified the cruelty of dreams" (*Garden* 23). Here, and in several instances, Ford echoes — or rather incipiently queers — André Breton's notion of poetry as a subversive and transgressive act. Ford's tribute to Marlowe also involves Barnes's penchant for allegory, as the poem is performing a slippage from personal fantasies to writing as a space of dissidence: Marlowe's death, Ford seems to imply, was the realisation of the risk that Ford affectedly projects on the allegory of "Doom" who "combs her hair or hears the door close on a poet's prison / and makes him one of those grave thieves / who go / to pick the lock of Christopher Marlowe" (*Garden* 23).
- 7 In Ford's early poetry, the lessons of Surrealism can be detected in the interest in dreams, incongruous juxtapositions and the abandonment of formal logic, while the figuration of sexuality complicates the treatment of a heteronormative sexuality in Surrealism. Albeit recently revisited, challenged, and nuanced, Rudolf Kuenzli's most unambiguous critique of Surrealism's politics of eroticism still retains some of its validity: "The Surrealists lived in their own masculine world, with their eyes closed, the better to construct the fantasies of the feminine" (Kuenzli 18).<sup>5</sup> Tangential to Surrealism, Ford's early poetry does complicate the question of gender and the extent to which Breton's writings may have offered a valuable critique of the "institutionalized taxonomic discourses [...] centering on homo/heterosexual definition" while sustaining the definition altogether that, as Sedgwick had stressed, "proliferated and crystallized with exceptional rapidity in the decades around the turn of the century" (Sedgwick 2). The "Dreams" for the Vicomtesse de Noailles is a case in point; reminiscent of the fantasy of the "shock-abbreviated" body of a corpse that "lay out listlessly like some small mug / Of beer gone flat" in Barnes's "Suicide" in *The Book of Repulsive Women* (Barnes 49), Ford's "dreams" are quite removed from the accounts of dreams of the Surrealists, yet embrace a dream of liberation. The images of fragmented bodies and/or death are figurations of sexual desire, while the somewhat contrived critique of a repressive "actuality" may also be read as a cry against repressive paradigms of sexuality:

If you could be impersonal as dreams  
which walk away enfolded in the strife  
to bring irresolution's foes to life,  
or dreams that grant a malady the crimes  
committed by the craven of your sleep; [...]

instead of counting on the banal hearse  
of actuality to pass you bed,  
showing the maddest of your dreams as dead,  
you wake confronting habit's agile curse :  
your heart's asylum fuller than before  
and love a lunatic athwart the door. (*Garden* 24)

- 8 Ford's poetry explicitly and covertly reminds us that, as Sedgwick claimed, "the now chronic modern crisis of homo/heterosexual definition has affected our culture through its ineffaceable marking" (Sedgwick 11). Confronted by and confronting this marking, the young poet desists from naming, and voices his feelings through the "impersonality of dreams." Not only voicing homoerotic desire, Ford's "dreams" also involve a generalised uncertainty in the wake of the "'rhythms' of malaise, barrenness, and cultural exhaustion that were gripping American modernists during the build-up to the stock market crash of 1929," as Eric White puts it in his reading of *Blues* (White 188). The early poems, albeit certainly "aesthetically awkward,"<sup>6</sup> may be read as expressions of Ford's being caught not only in-between the disrupted lines of transcontinental modernism and avant-gardism, but also in the midst of a fraught historical and political juncture. The "sonnets" are both a flight away from "actuality" and an expression of frustration before a certain inadequacy to record the "banal" that Williams was persisting in. "The Mist of Sickness," also dedicated to the Vicomtesse de Noailles, is a metaphor that works in a similar manner : "[rising] like a soul [...] in the wake of history negotiates the ruin / begun by building on the rotten bank / your body's delicate tormented mountain." At the end of the poem, this image of decay is transformed into "the deformation grasping at your throat / repeats the rain with which your feet are fraught" (*Garden* 25). A tension between a persistent malaise and expectancy recurs in the sequence of poems for Parker Tyler, where fantasies of sickness, death, disease, and muted violence work as personal and cultural metaphors, as guilt and the anxiety of death are entwined with the emancipatory potential of eroticism. In "The Young Boy," for instance, Ford subverts the vexing associations of homoeroticism with disease and links the "many-seeded bud" of an adolescent homoerotic sexuality to "a shock like danger that is realized" at the moment when the "diseased mouth" is kissed. The poem states a refusal or rather an unlearning of oppression : "refuse to learn / that potency of being equals doom" (*Garden* 26).
- 9 Overall, the metaphorical and allegorical registers of the "sonnets" are certainly more cryptic, although not necessarily more tame, in relation to *The Young and Evil*. The contrived unevenness that displeased Williams in Ford's early poetry is redeemed by the lyrical and allegorical evocations of sexuality that seem to contain echoes of the unsettling images of the female modernists of the New York avant-garde, namely, the distorting perspectives on the body that was recovered in and for its abjection in Barnes's 1914 *Book of Repulsive Women* and in Loy's 1915 *Love Songs*. Ford in this way performs a *détournement* of Surrealism and at the same time responds, as it were, to Williams who had commended "the unusual and more radical work [...] especially poems by Mina Lloyd, [*sic*] the shorter works of Djuna Barnes, something of Robert McAlmon's, the first of Hemingway's short stories" in his note for *Blues* (Williams "For a New Magazine," 31, 32). The sequence for Barnes, for instance, bears more affinities with Barnes's treatment of suffering, trauma, and decay than Williams was inclined to acknowledge. In "The Jeweled Bat," the anxiety of death is mediated through the allegory of a trapped and subsequently liberated body : Ford's vision is reminiscent of Barnes's "Seen from the "L" where a female "nude" is "chain-stitched [...] to her soul for time / Raveling grandly into vice"

(Barnes 49). The metaphor of the "bat", on the other hand, and the blurred line between the human and the animal are akin to Leonora Carrington's dreamscapes where as Natalya Lusty has noted "the operation of desire and fantasy unfolds through a series of lexical, mythological, and narrative substitutions and transformations" (Lusty 50). In Ford's imagery Carrington's "substitutions and transformations" are anticipated in the interchangeability and juxtaposition of abstract and concrete images, of life, death, and animality :

entan- / gled in a sun it cannot see, escape  
 it finds to be the love promised to man  
 by angels : madness ; heaven overripe.  
 So glory, automatic, probable,  
 reveals the hidden corpse of the mammal,  
 thus adding to death's momentary glut,  
 yet harboring the acrid obdurate salt  
 the lovely black bat used to fly across  
 not knowing then the solitude that was. (*Garden* 31)

- 10 Ford here experiments with an important trope of early Surrealism, namely, seeing and obstructed vision: the trapped, "entangled" animal which is either unable to see or ensnared as it were by a sun is a metaphor that speaks both of a fantasy of castration, debilitation and blindness, just as it speaks of a liberation. Freed from the imperative to see what it cannot see, the "body" surrenders to transgressive and ominous fantasies of corrosion –"the acrid obdurate salt." Here too, the push-and-pull, as it were, between fulfilment and a destructive fantasy is at play. This poem potently welds Barnes's covert allusions to homoerotic desire with the shifts between irrationalism and an intimate tonality, concrete images, and imagined symbols in the free associations of the early poetry of Benjamin Péret in the 1928 *Grand Jeu* or in Robert Desnos's 1927 *La Liberté ou l'amour*. Moreover, the semantic slippage between "man" as a universalizing term, and the particularized, gendered subject becomes "paradigmatic" and "short-circuits ideas of normalcy and abnormality," to remember Ross Chambers's return to Sedgwick. Ford's early poems are related to Surrealism at the level of an "ethics of inversion," "[an] ethical move" that "consists of taking what is regarded [...] as minor, secondary, marginal, accidental, or abject [...] and showing it, instead, to be paradigmatic, [...] both an "identity" and a model of the human" (Chambers 171). This shift does not involve homoerotic desire alone but the gendered subject altogether : "The Unhappy Train," unsettles the Surrealist fetishization of the female body in the image of a mother and an infant bearing signs of aging and pain. Beyond the intertextual reference to Max Ernst's 1926 *The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus Before Three Witnesses*, Ford's inflections of pain and deterioration divert Ernst's ironic iconoclasm towards an image of reciprocity that is mediated through "unholy prayers or pious slang / the Magdalenes and Marys make for me" (*Garden* 32). In "Seis Hermanos," the poem that concludes the sequence for Barnes, Ford synthesises Barnes's use of allegory, the Surrealist's dreams of liberation, and homoerotic desire with a playful – even camp – irony :

Oh brothers, is it your boat's ghoul that  
 seems  
 to sail the Milky Way with painted eyes  
 which drop six stars before the pink sunrise  
 arouses fishermen to fish for dreams ?  
 Then you are drowned and I must tell your  
 mother  
 how Fear, Desire, Destruction and Disease,

as well as Gratitude, youngest of these,  
 and lastly, Genius, that strange eldest brother,  
 though scattered far apart in their first blood,  
 are now one will, one engine and one blood. (*Garden* 33)

- 11 What is striking here is the playful incongruity between the campy evocation of the "brothers"'s "painted eyes," an intertextual resonance of the "fairies" of *The Young and Evil*, and the fantasy of the "arousal" of fishermen who "fish," should we say, cruise for dreams, and the evocation of allegories in the second stanza. Is it yet again the transgressive fantasies that he shares with the "brothers," which merit the "drowning" before meriting to become "one will, one engine and one blood." ?
- 12 The fantasies of death are followed by allegories of awakening through a dialectic between anxiety and fulfilment in the poems for Pavel Tchelitchew. The limits of a "fabulous fatigue" that in the third sonnet for Parker Tyler "Man Turning Into Ape," are related to sexual emancipation — "your face against the glass cannot forego / the metamorphosis that cancels woe [...] imagine nothing as corrupt as pleasure" (*Garden* 28), are refracted in the fourth sonnet, entitled "No Tree is Charmed," by "the marvellous, amazed with hopelessness / tree like the one that clamours in your breast, / with tongues waving in the wind of poetry, / had better had a guardian than not" (29). Here again, eroticism and desire are posited as catalysts for individual emancipation, just as they seem to be more intimately intended to connote a more personalised range of affects.
- 13 Ford's poetic voice comes into its own in the four poems of *The Garden of Disorder* that was dedicated to Tchelitchew. The title points to the directions that defined Ford's sensibility: Ford acknowledges Williams's "seminal response to French surrealism" in "The Simplicity of Disorder" where, as Céline Mansanti has argued, Williams counters Surrealism's allegorical poetics with his own hands-on "spontaneity" (Mansanti 2009). Williams also pays a tribute to the Surrealist appropriation of Rimbaud's injunction to systematically derange the senses, and, in a more implicit manner, connects his coded poetics to the "garden of ecstasy" in Barnes's *Ladies Almanack*, possibly also drawing a self-ironic parallel between his involvement in the expatriate community of Paris and his homecoming. These three distinct strands converge in the poems in the wake of the disbanding of the communities that Barnes had playfully allegorized. In these four poems, the historical, medical, and psychoanalytic implications of "disorder" also come into play as Ford envisions "disorder" as a demystifying and liberating principle. Taken together, these four poems build an iconography that blends Williams's inflections of American speech and juxtapositions of incongruous images in the manner of the Surrealists with Barnes's shifts between the lyrical and the bathetic. Overall, the first poem reads as an affirmation of the uncompromising, defamiliarizing, and transformative value of the Surrealist use of language. The poem opens with a series of injunctions in which Ford experiments with the potentiality of the Surrealist image as the meeting ground of distant, rationally unrelated elements :

To lodge your harvest in the lion's  
 mouth,  
 to telescope the bugs that feed flowers  
 to place your aspiration under the microscope,  
 and send no disease to graze in the meadow  
 of hours ;  
 to bisect the raindrop, quarrel with snow [...]  
 pin the two-horned butterfly to the school-  
 book,

fertilize the crook, the thief,  
 and others who till grief ;  
 catalogue the good postmaster  
 and those who hobble after  
 the plough of Christianity, or vanity ;

to gauge the flight of reason  
 according the fuel of unreason ;  
 experiment with the chemicals, music and  
 love,  
 and not leave the weather to the weather-man ; (*Garden* 13)

- 14 We cannot fail to miss the dialogue with Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* in the opening line, "Thus begins this Almanack, which all Ladies should carry about with them, as the Priest his Breviary, as the Cook his Recipes, as the Doctor his Physic, as the Bride her Fears, and as the Lion his Roar !" (Barnes *Ladies Almanack*, 9). Ford begins in an equally playful manner in lines that reiterate the Surrealist interest in visual distortion, with a certain resonance of Williams's attentiveness to the thingness of words, and the ingenuity and muted violence of Joseph Cornell's early collages that Ford will later on publish in *View* in the special issue on Max Ernst. Ford "lodges," as it were, the "harvest" of Surrealism in his idiosyncratic *Garden of Disorder*, which, later on in the poem, generates a reality off its hinges through a parody of fears of deviance to which Ford offsets Surrealist-derived irrationalism :

to return the stare of houses  
 and of the beast that browses  
 this side of delirium,  
 among the meek displeased cattle  
 of Newark of Seattle ;  
 to despise, despise nothing  
 but the mote of shame in your eye ; ...  
 freaks are not mothers, even to freaks :  
 the vine that shrieks is normality's :  
 banality's blister may be pricked after twi-  
 light ;  
 to curtail the snail were not heroic,  
 to become a stoic were to risk the season,  
 and so you may launch like five fishes  
 your five sense in aquatic region  
 of the mind ; though the octopus grow un-  
 acrobatic,  
 hearts will curl in competition (*Garden* 14-15)

- 15 The second poem follows on along Surrealist lines : the dialectic between "reason and "unreason" is taken up by the duality between "the impersonal, and / personal" (15) and the visible and the "unseen," in a series of images staging elements in a state of conflict and/or suspension that are sometimes coupled with a certain moralizing tonality — "is it Peace lashed against War ?" (16). In Ford's "garden," "hail beats, loudest of grain," "the earth yawns" (16), "clouds stammer," and "the trees ride bicycles" (17), as the poet mobilizes both the verbal and the visual inflections of the Surrealist image to simulate the flow of automatic writing. As was the case with the sonnets, the lines rhetorically work against an anxiety that is overcome towards the end of the poem by "Beowulf bellow[ing] across the centuries to bravery's bedfellows" (17).

- 16 The contrived rhetoric of the second poem is followed by a more successful welding of Williams's diction with Surrealism's irrationalism. In the third poem, Ford yet again revolves the labor of poetry, as he starts integrating more American cultural markers and speaks of words as the raw material of poetry in a way that brings to mind in a tongue-in-cheek manner both Williams's seeing words as part of our sensorium and André Breton's notion of words making love in "Les Mots sans rides" (Breton 171). In the excerpt below, Ford is blending animate and inanimate, natural and man-made objects, and personifications :

Perfume the clock, and the cricket will take  
 Care of Aunt Bess,  
 But the poet forgot to put on his odor-proof  
 vest :  
 How staunch the scent of words ?  
 Dilute the sadistic monopoly's  
 whirlpool that twisted  
 the artist out of all recognition :  
 he will trail the secret brook  
 that rush with the fragrance of perdition. (Garden 17-8)

- 17 The last poem begins with what reads as a playful evocation of Dalí's "Six Apparitions of Lenin on a Grand Piano" (1931) and possibly the tense relationship between Breton and Dalí whom Breton subsequently dubbed AVIDA DOLLARS. Expressing a dissidence of a different kind, Ford's intimate and cryptic tonality jarred both with Breton's attempt to link the dream of political revolution with individual emancipation in the 1930s and possibly with Dalí's stock-in-trade images, just as it largely circumvented the social content and the more public idioms of the poetics and the iconography of the Depression.<sup>7</sup> Ford's playful aside about the difficult alliance between Surrealism and Marxist politics in the 1930s is followed by a stream of free associations and semantic play :

Lenin has withdrawn to a dialectic  
 paradise and counts with sociological eyes  
 the biffs of the nightsticks, the devil's police  
 No witch flies out of the window  
 in witchless New England;  
 oh the goblins sleep [...]  
 But how many roofs besides my own  
 leak with remorse  
 at liberty's affliction  
 be the rain fine or coarse? [...]  
 Mutable the oracle [...]  
 of creation who loves those who create,  
 and death who dotes on masturbation;  
 of her lover in the asylum,  
 and your love on the lookout for a maniac;  
 of his morality on the right track,  
 and their abnormality on the wrong island;  
 and of any other wizard reason  
 to convict you of subjective treason,  
 a traitor to the snow-gardens and the equator,  
 to the zodiac masses, the classless solution  
 in May's revolving botany: bouquets of  
 terror  
 from the garden of revolution. (*Gardens* 19, 20)

18 Ford here seems to attempt to express his own idiosyncrasy with a critical eye on both Surrealism and American cultural myths: the playful defamiliarization of a "witchless American past" is reprised in the implied farewell to an "afflicted liberty"<sup>8</sup> that also contains a tribute to Desnos's *La Liberté ou l'amour*. The "affliction" of liberty, Ford seems to suggest, may be overcome by unexpected games and chance, and this may be why for Ford, "the oracle" too is liable to change. The poem's irony unfolds in dream-like images that alter proportions and associations between the objects of perception. Ford's playful irrationalism points both to the incongruity or impossible reconciliation of Surrealist politics and "the classless solution," and maybe to Ford's own ex-centricity — "convict [ed] of subjective treason." The poem nonetheless concludes affirmatively with a gesture towards the "garden of revolution" (20) where, certainly for Ford, as Joanne Winning has put it about H.D., the "figure of writing" also "becomes a coterminous destination" with a gay "identity" (Winning 58): Ford too, like Barnes and H.D. constructs and substantiates difference and divergence in his early poetic work.

19 In Ford's "Late Lyrics" that were also included in the 1938 volume, there is a noticeable shift away from the lyricism and the allegorical registers of the "Sonnets" towards a more explicit inscription of homoeroticism in poems that intermittently integrate cultural content and scenes that are more reminiscent of the American vernacular and the iconography of the Depression. In "Dissatisfaction with Life" such scenes gets entwined with private metaphors:

YOUR son is paralyzed:  
 look both ways through his eyes;  
 your daughter is silent:  
 Go and live on another island  
 where waterfalls harden and slowly explode  
 like the lovers I connote,  
 Inhabitants of a movie-theatre,  
 Deep-sea water animals without water (*Garden* 55)

20 The "paralysed son" seems to be in the vein of Williams's "Proletarian Portrait"; the injunction to look at this distressing scene is reminiscent of Depression photography, while the "movie-theatres" bring to mind Edward Hopper's desolate spaces. Here too, the succession of images is mediated through a more personalised inflection of eroticism — "like the lovers I connote."

21 In the late lyrics, Ford also included a most powerful and unsettling poem where he gives his own twist to the vein of social realism: in "Plaint Before A Mob of 10,000 at Owensboro, KY.," Ford lyrically constructs a dramatic monologue for the black young man, Rainey Betha, addressing the lynch mob poignantly "from the top-branch of race-hatred" (*Garden* 60). As Cary Nelson has noted, "here surrealism is articulated to political outrage and to subtle transformations of the tree image" (Nelson 116). Williams, too, had singled out the poem in his foreword: he praised Ford's indictment of racism for maintaining its cultural and historical specificity, drawing our attention to the "differences of handling of the to-day conventional theme — as one looks at the handling of the Crucifixion — by Bellini, Raphael, and El Greco." For Williams, this was "hard material to handle," since it "tests every resource of a poet to do it well." (Williams, *Tortuous Straightness* 11). The "Late Lyrics" that Williams said he "liked best" (10) combine American vernaculars with the gratuitousness of the Surrealist image, while homoerotic desire yet again diverts the Surrealist eroticization of the gendered female other. In "Commission" Ford invites the addressee to "gather up the eyelashes that have fallen" (

*Garden* 42). In "Color Cold on Your Lips," he speaks of desire through the bracketed image of "(your shirt being / tight across you back)," (43) with a diction that anticipates Frank O'Hara's camp irony in "Personism" and his most markedly occasional poems rather than the more Surrealist-inflected "Easter" or "Second Avenue." The figuring of desire in these poems is at a considerable distance from the disembodied qualities of the desired other in Breton's *Nadja* (1928) or the fetishization of the *objet trouvé* in *L'Amour Fou* (1937). Ford's erotic poems play out a movement between affective investment and a self-aware detachment that not only distances Ford from Surrealism but also queers Surrealism against the grain. In fact, as Ford moves away from allegory to metaphors that become more particularized, his poems seem to return to an irrationalism that is anchored in an intractable thingness that would have pleased Williams. In "The Undersea Disturbance on Times Square," "one" of the "schoolboys fishing in the furtive air of reason [...] had dared put desire on his hook," to end his life however in a "mass suicide" (*Garden* 72). "Dicty Glide in Central Park Menagerie" opens with Ford asking in a tongue-in-cheek manner :

Cowboy, where's you class-con-  
scious horse ? That's what everybody asks.  
Say the child Jesus pulled a toy pistol,  
How far off could you stand  
And your whip's tip mate the muzzle ? (*Garden* 77)

- 22 Possibly an irony on the tail end of the Depression and the exhaustion of a "class-conscious" American iconography, the poem reads like a prescient anticipation of Harold Rosenberg's hailing the new generation of abstract painters in the postwar period as consciously and intently "estranged" from the "American objects" that preoccupied the artists of the previous decade (75).

- 23 During the years of *View's* run, Ford's poems remained aligned with Surrealism: less attuned to the esoteric turn that he mapped in *View*, Ford remained loyal to the Surrealist image as a space of congruence of disparate elements. Like *The Garden of Disorder*, *The Overturned Lake* seems intended as a metaphor for the unconscious mind at work. Appearing shortly after the launching of *View* with a "title-page" drawing by Matta, the collection opens with "The Comedy of Belief" where, at a remove from the distant apocalypse of WWII, Ford discreetly pursues the current of eroticism that informed his earlier work. In what could read like a love poem — "I believe in the day hung between your hands" — Ford playfully and ironically punctures doubt and belief with echoes of the irrationalism of Surrealism's early days :

I believe in the day hung between your hands :  
Shall I bridle the eggs of the evening,  
or break them on the backs of boys,  
or strengthen my night with a thong of shells ? [...]

To tone down language is to tongue-tie the pulse,  
meter of mood, tape-line of longing,  
and so we are boosted by the measureless dream  
and awake to an algebra whose symbols cry havoc. [...]

While eggs bulge, music burns, stars say hello,  
apples stagger, pulses rip, the dream pops open,  
curtains harden, moons dissolve, love lasts often,  
leaves unlock, age clowns, death and the lunatic listen (*Lake* 10, 11, 15)

- 24 The anxiety of death and violence persists in the collection most notably in "The Living Corpse" where an "I" impels a "You, bare as the sky," to "refuse my heart's food, / yet

refuse to die" (25-6). In "Winter Solstice," "the season's tongue continues to stop and start, / thawed and frozen, like the cold and hot heart" (29). In "Night Spent," "sleep" is "like blood on rooster feathers" (35). *The Overturned Lake* is populated by bodies and fetishized body parts that are at times transmuted into uncanny and disturbing dream images and objects. Like the title of the third part of the collection, "A Broom Made of Flesh and Hair," Ford's images bring to mind the psychoanalytic inflections of the women Surrealists that Ford presented in *View*, notably the haunting imagery of Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, and Dorothea Tanning. "Somebody's Gone" and "Song" are certainly among the most powerful poems in this section and constitute a precedent for the uses of Surrealism in O'Hara. Ford's camp attitude conforms certainly to the iconoclastic spirit, if not the letter, of Surrealism and complicates the boundary that, as Suárez argues, separates camp as "a language of communal identification, usually practiced in public spaces" from "experimental modernism" which is predominantly "associated with private spaces, introspection and the portrayal of individual identity" (Suárez 195). Ford's poetry queers both the collective spirit of Surrealism and the subjectivism of modernism: "Somebody's Gone" is one such an instance, as Ford makes eroticism singular, intractably personal, pedestrian, and urgent:

I must say your deportment took a hunk  
out of my peach of a heart  
I ain't insured against torpedoes!  
My turpentine tears would fill a drugstore. [...]  
I'm just a blotter crisscrossed with the ink  
of words that remind me of you. (*Lake* 36)

- 25 Interweaving disparate discourses and cultural registers, Ford's eclecticism is affiliative throughout. The "Song" begins with "eyes obsessed with blues," possibly an ironic and/or nostalgic reminiscence of Ford's own trajectory; "Somebody's Gone" concludes with "grief [...] leaving the body desolate as a staircase," a most explicit looking back on the inaugural moment of the American dialogue with the European avant-garde in the Armory Show, while the image of a "BABY WITH REVOLVER HOLDS HURRICANE AT BAY" (38) is a playful variation of Breton's *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs*, just as it is reminiscent of Williams's use of found language in *Spring and All*. The collection also contains a tongue-in-cheek tribute to Whitman's "hitchhiking inspiration" in "He cut his finger on Eternity" (44), where Ford revisits Whitman's transcendentalist mystical flights over the American continent. By attaching himself as a "libertine" to Whitman, Ford playfully appropriates the "national poet" within his own idiosyncratic queer mythology:

Like libertines we'll plunge frontiers  
romantic as journey, unromantic as a slum,  
wrap up with a river for a spy's disguise,  
and wig you with time, the waterfall. (*Lake* 44)

- 26 The poems for the Surrealist painters and poets are equally affiliative and involve varying degrees of intimacy. The "Serenade to Leonor" (48) is an ekphrastic response of Fini's "Maison de la rue Payenne" of 1933, Ford experiments with the Medusa-like gaze in Fini's painting which unsettles the anthropomorphic paradigms of self-portraiture. "Pastoral for Pavlik" (62-63) is ekphrastically connected to the anatomical anthropomorphism of Tchelitchev's paintings and to the distortions of the figure in Neo-Romanticism. The "Matin pour Matta," an ekphrastic variation on the biomorphism of Matta's imagery, lyrically and affectionately acknowledges the legacy of the Surrealist work on language and the image: "This is what I write / on a page torn from the scalp of night" (53).

- 27 In "An Afternoon with André Breton" that was included in the fourth part of *The Overtaken Lake*, Ford returns to Surrealism affectionately but also in a manner that implies that his gesture was somehow unreciprocated. The opening line may, in fact, contain an in-the-know irony towards Breton, as Dalí's *Rainy Taxi* was the exhibit that visitor encountered on entering the 1938 the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris (it was also reproduced in the 1939 World's Fair in New York):

Let us get in a taxi as if we were going somewhere:  
 The chocolate eggs of Easter hatch no peace-pigeons;  
 schoolgirls grow up, breed objects for war-ribbons.  
 Let us get out of the taxi as if we were there [...]  
 So I showed you the city of a hundred freaks,  
 but you looked around in vain for your friends:  
 they were not disguised enough for you to recognize them,  
 as Hamlet would not have recognized Jocasta. (*Lake* 61)

- 28 In the wake of *View*, Edith Sitwell, in her "Foreword" for the 1949 collection *Sleep in a Nest of Flames*, begins reading Ford from where Williams seems to have left off: she stresses the Surrealist influence in the "beauty" that stems from "the loneliness of a wanderer in the world seeking for something he will not find" (Sitwell 9). Sitwell may be also projecting here, Ford's increasing marginalization in the immediate New York scene, as with the demise of *View*, Ford, who did not embrace the rise of Abstract Expressionism, had no platform for his own affinities. Tellingly, she underscores the singular and unclassifiable texture of poems, that do not "bear a family likeness" to any "poems, past and present" (Sitwell 9). In retrospect, we might say, that Ford's early poetry bears no "family likeness" precisely because it disconcertingly bears too many "likenesses" to remember Frank O'Hara in "In Memory of my Feelings".<sup>10</sup>
- 29 The uneven reception of Ford's work in the immediate postwar period also points to Ford's singularity. Among the poet-critics of the postwar generation, Robert Duncan dismissed Ford's aesthetics and politics altogether in "Reviewing *View*, An Attack" because "in a world of carnage, of horror and insanity, *VIEW* preached the aesthetic of the insane and the sadistic" as "if all the drama of the real political world was played in charade to give excitement to the boredom of the rentiers" (quoted in Faas 327, 326). In the following decade, Kenneth Rexroth bypassed what Duncan saw as Ford's objectionable cultural politics and acknowledged Ford's place in a Surrealist-derived lineage: in his 1958 essay "The Influence of French Poetry on American," he mentions Ford, Parker Tyler, and Lamantia as "the most important" among "a whole new crop of American poets" who started out as disciples of Breton's brand of Surrealism" (Rexroth 167)<sup>11</sup>. Although not mentioning the poets who formed the nucleus of the New York School, in his introduction to *The Young and Evil*, Steven Watson speaks of Ford's book in a manner that brings to mind Frank O'Hara's casualness in "Personism": "Imagine then," Watson writes, "being confronted with a book whose characters take a lover as casually as they take a smoke" (Watson in Ford, *Young and Evil* np)<sup>12</sup>.
- 30 In his return to *Epistemology of the Closet*, Ross Chambers reminds us the interdependence of terms that may mistakenly appear as mutually exclusive: "no straightness without gayness and no gayness without straightness" (Chambers 168). Ford's early poetry operates in a similar manner and complicates the distinctions and divides between dominant and/or minor modernisms, heterosexual, homosexual, and queer. Retrospectively, to remember Williams and to paraphrase Sedgwick's "axiom 6" in *Epistemology*, Ford's relation to Surrealism was and "had best be, tortuous" (Sedgwick 48).

Ford sought to find his own voice with and beyond the homegrown vernaculars that he attempted to map in *Blues* and resume the transcontinental lines of modernism that somehow seemed to have been broken with the demise of *transition*, through an idiosyncratic, if not un/timely, appropriation of Surrealism that Kay Boyle had declared "part of what has already happened" in *Blues* (Boyle 32). An "accompaniment to a life altogether (un)real," to remember Williams, or as Sitwell affectionately wrote, "a case of living without kinship" (Sitwell 9), Ford's poetry is a permeable space that intermittently contains and abstracts itself from the contexts of its elaboration and anticipates the uses of Surrealism in much postwar American poetry.

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## NOTES

1. On *Blues*, see Alexander Howard (Brooker and Thacker 353-361); on Ford's trajectory in *View*, see Catrina Neiman (Ford, 1991 xi-xvi); on *View*, see "View and the Surrealist Exiles in New York" (Tashjian 176-201) and Stamatina Dimakopoulou (Brooker and Thacker 737-758). Alexander Howard's PhD thesis (2011) maps Ford's development and active life-long involvement in the American avant-gardes; this impressively documented work corrects an omission that was, as the author argues, the result of the difficulty to accommodate Ford in established narratives of American modernism.

2. "But can you not see, can you not taste, can you not smell, can you not hear, can you not touch - words? It is words that must progress" (Williams 1923, 7-8).

3. In the last chapter of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "After the War 1919-1923," Stein refers to "a show of pictures at the Gall rie Bonjean" where the work of the Neo-Romantics was exhibited in the late 1920s. She also mention Eugene Berman's visit in Bilignin, to conclude, rather anticlimactically that "though he was a very good painter he was too bad a painter to have been the creator of an idea. So once more the search began" (Stein 229).

4. Pavel Tchelitchew's frontispiece states their affinity: an ink drawing represents Ford seen from the back at a three-quarter angle, his back turned to the viewer, looking into his portrait in an open book; on the wall hangs a drawn painting 'signed' P. Tchelitchew, a variation on Caspar David Friedrich's iconic "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog."

5. A notable recent instance is Amy Lyford's study of the Surrealists' critique of paradigms of masculinity "by creating works that dwelled upon male emasculation or confused ideas about sexual difference, the Surrealists challenged the tenets of national reconstruction that reinforced the differences between the sexes" (Lyford 6); "in their works, they regularly exploited stereotypes of femininity to undermine commonly held beliefs about the links between rationality, progress, and male creativity" (Lyford 17).

6. Alexander Howard considers "Ford's relationship with Surrealism" as an instance of "Ford's awkwardness during the 1940s and 50s" (Howard 134). A "perpetual aesthetic awkwardness," Howard argues, informed Ford's relationship to Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. This may indeed have been the case, yet, as this reading attempts to suggest it was not only "Ford's inquisitive, questioning attitude that condemned him to the margins of Surrealism" (Howard 134) and American modernist poetry, we must add, but also maybe his untimely or irreconcilable affinities.

7. On how Dalí came to represent Surrealism to the American public, see Tashjian (34-65). Ford's relationship with Dalí was bound to remain ambiguous, as Ford later hosted Nicolas Calas's attack on Dalí in the first number of *View*. In a tangentially divergent vein, Alexander Howard notes that "Ford's desire to popularize Surrealism leads to an implicit alignment with the Surrealist agenda of Breton's aesthetic *bête noire*" (Howard, 2011 140n).

8. In retrospect, this reads as an unintended anticipation of the cover that Duchamp designed for the 1946 volume of Breton's translated poems, *Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares* where Breton's face is collaged in the place of the head of the Statue of Liberty.

9. Raymond Spiteri aptly states what Ford had also lucidly, albeit in an untheorized manner, realized: "Although cultural endeavour could have political repercussions under certain conditions, in Surrealism's case those repercussions were not an actuality, and then consequently assumed to form of a series of missed or failed encounters. Surrealism remained stranded beyond art, yet before politics" (Spiteri and Lacoss 72). Ford may have identified with the Surrealists' failed attempt to attach themselves to Party politics, given his own awkward distance from the socially-minded idioms of the Depression. As M. Stone Richards put it: "For many, the example of Surrealism, and not its theory, is what is commendable. What, after all, could a group of intellectuals possibly hope to achieve amidst such political and moral disaster?" (Spiteri and Lacoss 327).

10. My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent / and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets. / He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals (Allen 252).

11. Ford has been included in Jim Elledge's *Masquerade* a book intended, in Elledge's words, "to show for the first time in U.S. literary history the continuum of queer literature that exists in this country."

12. O'Hara playfully quipped that a poem has to be as sexy as a pair of pants "tight enough so that everyone will want to go to bed with you" (Allen 498).

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## ABSTRACTS

Virtually omitted from established narratives of American modernism, yet central in the histories of the reception of European Surrealism in the US, Charles Henri Ford's life and work have been recovered in important queer genealogies within Anglo-American modernism. Yet within this process or recovery, Ford's poetic work is still largely overlooked, and this may have to do less with its marked Surrealist influences and/or derivative aspects than with the somewhat unclassifiable and composite texture of Ford's poems. This article revisits Ford's early poetry as a space of convergence and dialogue between distinct yet interrelated poetics: from the 1938 *A Garden of Disorder* to the 1949, *Sleep in a Nest of Flames*, a queer subjectivity assimilates

concurrently Surrealist poetics and Djuna Barnes's equally unclassifiable queer modernism with and against American poetic modernisms.

Quasiment ignoré par la critique institutionnelle du modernisme américain, Charles Henri Ford, qui joua pourtant un rôle de premier plan dans la réception et la diffusion du surréalisme européen aux Etats-Unis, a été sauvé de l'oubli par les spécialistes anglo-saxons de la théorie *queer*. Malgré cela, son œuvre poétique est à ce jour encore largement méconnue. Ceci tient probablement moins à son goût marqué pour le surréalisme ou à son penchant pour l'humour et le grotesque qu'à la texture composite, quelque peu déroutante, des poèmes de Ford. Cet article examine la façon dont les premiers recueils de poèmes de Ford dessinent un espace où des modes d'écriture distincts (et pourtant indissociables) convergent et entrent en résonance. Ainsi, entre 1938 (*A Garden of Disorder*) et 1949 (*Sleep in a Nest of Flames*), on assiste à la naissance d'une subjectivité poétique *queer* inspirée de la rencontre et de la confrontation des jeux surréalistes, de l'imaginaire (proprement inclassable) de Djuna Barnes et des expérimentations poétiques du modernisme américain.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** queer modernism, American poetry, sexuality, surrealism

**Mots-clés:** modernisme queer, poésie américaine, sexualité, surréalisme

**personnescitees** André Breton, Djuna Barnes, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Charles Henri Ford, Pavel Tchelitchew, William Carlos Williams

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