

FORD MADOX FORD  
AND VISUAL CULTURE

# International Ford Madox Ford Studies Volume 8

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For information about the Ford Madox Ford Society,  
please see the website at:  
<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/fordmadoxford-society/>

Or contact:

Dr Sara Haslam [S.J.Haslam@open.ac.uk](mailto:S.J.Haslam@open.ac.uk)  
Department of Literature, Open University,  
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK

Or:

[max.saunders@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:max.saunders@kcl.ac.uk)

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# FORD MADOX FORD AND VISUAL CULTURE

Edited by  
Laura Colombino



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The Ford Madox Ford Society

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**FORD, MATISSE AND THE *BOOK OF THE DEAD*:  
THE (IN)VISIBLE OBJECTS OF  
*THE RASH ACT* AND *HENRY FOR HUGH***

**Laura Colombino**

***Luxe, Calme et Volupté***

In his 'Introduction' to *The Rash Act*, C. H. Sisson aptly describes the novel as 'a piece of contemplation under the guise of fiction; excellent as fiction but recording, as it were, a long look in the Mediterranean sunlight [. . .] A roll of silk, a red sail, the glitter of the sea, these are the absolutes'.<sup>1</sup> Provence produces in Ford a calm, meditative, and aesthetic mood somehow associated with French culture, its art, and even cuisine:

Below Valence, in the south, we lie in the shade of cypress screens, scratching with our toes the soil and dropping in the seed that shall produce teeming crops of young vegetables. That you call 'going native'. . . . But we shall meditatively digest an ortolan, a few green peas, a handful of grapes, and let our thoughts wander in quiet scepticisms to the measure of an albade by Arnaut Daniel. We shall need neither the negroid jerkings of jazz nor the sadic satisfactions of butchering a thousand driven pheasants to give our poor souls peace. Neither shall we need the aesthetic re-creations of 'delicacy' to show our penitence. We can look with equanimity at pink cliffs, a blaze of purple bougainvilleas, beneath an ultramarine sky, above a vivid emerald sea shot with myriads of scarlet fishes and bottomed with forests of magenta seaweeds.... And see nothing to be ashamed of....<sup>2</sup>

These patches of bright, violent colour recall those found in Matisse's canvases after his encounter, at the beginning of the century, with the dazzling light of the Mediterranean. The 'Fine Arts' chapter of *Provence: From Minstrels to the Machine* is replete with references to the Fauves, Friesz and 'Matisse amongst the obese odalisques'; along with Cézanne, of course, who 'was no doubt the father of those fellows' (*Provence* 245). In Ford's quoted description of the landscape below Valence, the detail of the 'scarlet fishes', a frequent motif in Matisse, may well be itself an echo of the French painter. The goldfish found in Matisse comes from China and Japan and represents a peaceful, meditative life. Ford's beloved *foie gras* (*Provence* 34) also

comes from far away: the Greeks brought it to France and with its long digestion it too entails the idea of a peaceful, unhurried mood. Both the goldfish and *foie gras* stand for a profound concept: the luxurious life of a peaceful middle class in the country which gave birth to the very idea of the modern bourgeoisie with all its pictorial expressions, including Impressionism.

The last ditch of Impressionism was a water-lily pond repeatedly depicted by Monet between 1914 and 1918, when liberal Europe had definitely put an end to itself in the First World War.<sup>3</sup> Cézanne had already been an extraordinary interpreter of this absolute aestheticism. After his childhood and youth had been associated with the most politically committed of all, Émile Zola, in the years preceding the Dreyfus affair, the mature Cézanne devoted himself almost entirely to Mont Sainte-Victoire and to his bathers. Even Van Gogh, the most social and moralist of all, discovered, when coming to France, the equilibrium of Japan and the absolute aestheticism of light. Art became an end in itself; which would also be one of the fundamental parameters of twentieth century art. For all these painters, matter tended to substitute thought and commitment: their world was the first to be defined as a world of *désengagés*. It is no accident that the Dadaists, Surrealists and Abstractionists of the early 1920s accused Matisse of being flat and ‘lacking in visual or metaphysical depth’.<sup>4</sup>

The most remarkable aspect of the arresting, intensely visual overture of *The Rash Act* (1933) – which sets the theme and tone of this Provençal novel and of its follow-up *Henry for Hugh* (1934)<sup>5</sup> – is its being bathed in the very same aestheticism of light. While contemplating the quasi-abstract picture of a boat suspended in the blue of the sea and the sky, Henry muses on the fact that ‘There was nothing to think of but visible objects’.<sup>6</sup> This statement is central to the theme of the book and deserves close scrutiny. It certainly entails a question of knowledge. As such, it might signal an impossibility: that of penetrating the visual surface, investigating hidden meanings beyond the flat substance of visual appearances and, along with this impossibility, somehow a contentment with this condition of pure aestheticism. It is as if a Platonic dissociation were at stake: that between on the one hand poetry, art, as sheer representation of the visible, phenomenal world, and on the other hand thought, rationality, the witting contemplation of the intellect. According to what Aby Warburg diagnosed as the schizophrenia of Western culture, our



conscience would be hopelessly split between an ecstatic, inspired pole and a rational, conscious one: poetry and art would possess their object without knowing it while philosophy would know it without possessing it.<sup>7</sup> But Ford's sentence might also mean the impossibility of conceiving the invisible beyond the screen of the visible; a noumenal, metaphysical, or spiritual reality beyond the phenomenal world of appearances. Or it might mean precisely the opposite: everything meaningful – life, death, final truths – is already inscribed within and accessible through that very visibility. It is precisely this third hypothesis which I shall explore: 'A man that looks on glasse, / On it may stay his eye; / Or if he pleaseth, through it passe, / And then the heav'n espie!', writes George Herbert in the poem *The Elixir*, quoted in *Henry for Hugh*.<sup>8</sup> 'That meant', remarks Henry, the protagonist, 'that you looked through the surface to find the real truth'.<sup>9</sup>

But let us return to Matisse. Like any young artist, at the beginning of his career he was uncertain about the direction he should take besides the defence of the *intimisme* which was proper to his background.<sup>10</sup> He certainly learnt Seurat's pointillist technique, then he played with Fauve colours; or else with minimal, faded colours, especially his doleful, anxious pinks. But his true nature was the mood of *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* perfectly announced by his painting in 1904-5: the complete peacefulness of a dying *belle époque*. This note will become predominant in the 1920s and, especially, the 1930s in the 'so-called period of "relaxation"' (Néret 101) just as the international scene was threatened by totalitarian regimes. In this historical context, the celebration of a lazy life of enjoyment might appear as an irresponsible statement of disengagement. Similarly, the fat French *douanier* drawn by Janice Biala in *The Great View from Italy into Provence* (plate 37) as an illustration to Ford's *Provence* (335) with his relaxed manner and insouciance about passport control may seem an idealist, inadequate response to the aggressiveness of the Fascists represented in the counterpart illustration: *The Great View into Italy from Provence* (plate 38).<sup>11</sup> Yet this philosophy of relaxation and enjoyment was, for some artists and intellectuals of the time, a profoundly meditated response to contemporary threats and evils. It was, for example, the very cure for social and political aggressiveness authoritatively prescribed by the engaged Bloomsbury intellectual Bertrand Russell in his 1935 essay entitled *In Praise of Idleness*. The road to happiness and prosperity, he argued, lies in an organised

diminution of work. ‘Ordinary men and women, having the opportunity of a happy life, will become more kindly and less persecuting and less inclined to view others with suspicion’.<sup>12</sup> In other words, also less prone to war. In a somewhat similar vein, Paul Valéry lamented in *La crise de l’esprit* (1919):

the great virtues of the German peoples have begotten more evils, than idleness ever bred vices. With our own eyes, we have seen conscientious labor, the most solid learning, the most serious discipline and application adapted to appalling ends.<sup>13</sup>

In aesthetic, rather than sociological or historical terms, this idleness pervades Matisse’s early canvasses along with the sense of calm and voluptuousness. Then comes the discovery of the absolute peacefulness of Nice and the infinite midday demon with the air coming from the sea, far away, into the room: quiet afternoons are spent behind closed shutters with the omnipresent, only truly lifelike, profound and penetrating presence of the bunch of flowers and the vague contemplation of the book or the goldfish bowl. In this meditative world, the only real movement comes from the goldfish, quiet creatures as red as Matisse’s dancers, their anthropomorphic version. He depicts a well-born mild ennui surrounded by arabesques and with domestic odalisques – always Moorish, sometimes with a dreamy look, winking and available but serious and statuesque when they become part of the tapestry (plate 39).

Ford’s Matissian character par excellence is Jeanne Becquerel: ‘[s]he was like a tea-rose. On a long stem and always half-asleep’.<sup>14</sup> If Matisse liked to pose his models, dressing them up in fancy costumes with quasi-oriental props, Ford makes Jeanne appear to Henry for the first time lying on the floor ‘among parti-coloured fragments [. . .] Parti-coloured herself too. In a Cochin-Chinese bathrobe. . . . Batik they called the colouring. She was flattened into his floor in a way that only the dead have’ (*RA* 238). ‘Her Eastern dresses were hung round the walls so that the room appeared to be tapestried irregularly with oriental stuff’ (*HH* 233):

And Jeanne Becquerel would sit motionless for hours. If he sometimes asked her what she thought about she declared that she had no thoughts; only her eyes worked things into patterns. Without her willing it.

At times she would get up and move slowly about the garden. He would see her stand for minutes on end looking at a flower. (*HH* 121)

Henry suggests that she might be entrapped in a mirror cage:

If you looked at Jeanne Becquerel, for instance, you saw a glad figure from a Greek frieze moving lightly before the sea of Ulysses under Hellenic skies.

But if you looked through her as through glass, you saw ... What? A tall bird in a cage? [...] There are people who keep birds in cages.... And hang the cages with mirrors and bits of tinsel and bright ribbons and leaves. And the birds flutter about and twitter. (*HH* 156)

Here Ford is adding a touch of philosophical reflection to the pure aestheticism of the surface; a note akin to the one found in the painting by Matisse *Woman before an Aquarium* (plate 40): 'What is this woman thinking of', wonders Gilles Néret, 'as she stares dreamily at the goldfish swimming in a bowl? Of her fate? Is she, like them, an unwitting prisoner? [...] As for the apparent simplicity of the scene', he adds, 'is it not there to send the viewer into a daydream?' (113).

Matisse was born in the north but chose the south. Perhaps because he was following Baudelaire's suggestion, since Matisse's south has to do with half-lit rooms, with the light in which Nice is bathed and which he generally lets in through the shutters (Néret 125). It is an absolutely Bachelardian intimate space of quietude and *bonheur* enriched by Oriental voluptuousness;<sup>15</sup> a space reminiscent of Baudelaire's lines:

Des meubles luisants,  
Polis par les ans,  
Décoreraient notre chambre;  
Les plus rares fleurs  
Mêlant leurs odeurs  
Aux vagues senteurs de l'ambre,  
Les riches plafonds,  
Les miroirs profonds,  
La splendeur orientale  
Tout y parlerait  
À l'âme en secret  
Sa douce langue natale.

Là tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,  
Luxe, calme et volupté.<sup>16</sup>

(Gleaming furniture, polished by years passing, would ornament our bedroom; rarest flowers, their odors vaguely mixed with amber; rich ceilings; deep mirrors; an Oriental splendor – everything there would address our souls, privately, in their sweet native tongue.

There, there's only order, beauty: abundant, calm, voluptuous.)<sup>17</sup>

So writes Baudelaire in his 1857 'Invitation au Voyage'. We are ready for Matisse's odalisques but also for the couch where Apollinaire will spend so many hours in profound poetic meditation. In this domestic atmosphere, the French bourgeois world is celebrated: a peaceful world suited to meditation and poetry. But also fundamentally therapeutic against spleen: an antidote to depression. The same depression plaguing Henry and from which he finds shelter in the *luxe, calme et volupté* of Hugh's villa. This theme is important and I shall return to it below.

But before this I need to dwell on Matisse a little longer to say that, in actual fact, his domestic, bright, peaceful world has to do more with the kingdom of the mind than with the realm of phenomenal appearances. As Matisse explains:

The various lights which I have tasted have made me more demanding in imagining the spiritual light of which I speak, born from all the light which I have ever absorbed [ . . . ] It was not until I had revelled in sunlight for a long time that I tried to express myself through the light of the mind... A cosmic space in which one can feel the walls as little as does a fish in the sea. (Néret 125)

This, of course, calls to mind what Bachelard defines as a daydream or *reverie*:<sup>18</sup> when the natural object is expressed in the poetic image, it transcends itself and is released from the sordidness (*souillure*) to attain a dimension of purity. In so doing, it enters what Bachelard calls the 'metaphysics of the imagination',<sup>19</sup> where conscience is in tune with the whole cosmos. But here Matisse was also following, I think, Baudelaire who thought that life can be fully experienced only in the intimate space of a room or when seen through a window:

Looking from outside into an open window one never sees as much as when one looks through a closed window. There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more pregnant, more insidious, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle. What one can see out in the sunlight is always less interesting than what goes on behind a window pane. In that black or luminous square life lives, life dreams, life suffers.<sup>20</sup>

Bachelard emphasises the 'infinity of intimate space' in Baudelaire, adding that 'immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one

of the characteristics of quiet daydreaming'. In Baudelaire's own words:

[I] succeeded in recapturing the extraordinary *voluptuousness* that pervades *high places*. Involuntarily I pictured to myself the delightful state of a man in the grip of a long daydream, in absolute solitude, but a solitude with an *immense horizon* and widely diffused light; in other words, immensity with no other setting than itself.<sup>21</sup>

In his dim room at Villa Niké, Henry too is prone to reveries about this spiritual, cosmic light which he associates with the imagined journey to the mythic 'Islands of the Blest' (*HH* 102). I have already discussed elsewhere the connection between these mythic islands and Gauguin's South Seas.<sup>22</sup> But in these highly kaleidoscopic novels, the Islands of the Blest have also another, even stronger connotation as an image, a daydream of afterlife: 'whoever of men', Plato writes in *Gorgias*, 'had gone through his life justly and piously, when he should die, would go to the islands of the divinely blessed and live in complete happiness apart from evils'.<sup>23</sup> In Ford's novels, the reverie of the Islands of the Blest is a version of the Matissian *luxe, calme et volupté* motif, as suggested by Ford's remarks that Henry 'had always luxuriated in that sort of brightness. He imagined that heaven would be all sunlight and little bright', precious, 'objects' (*RA* 193): objects that if you sailed to the Islands of the Blest 'you would have to have around you, objects that braced you up' (*HH* 72). Henry, as Hugh before him, wants 'to sail away towards endless bliss and idleness' (*RA* 41), in his yacht with the museum pieces and the voluptuous Gloria.

### **Beyond the Visible**

These luxurious objects belong to Hugh's extraordinary collection including nothing less than the 'Nuremberg Bible.... And a Psalter from Mount Athos... And a quite good Second Folio [. . .] And an Ibsen manuscript'. But also 'some jewels of jolly old Tutankhamen and a tiara of Empress Eugenie' (*RA* 91), 'the Pheidias Venus, the Roman tombal [*sic*] portrait' (*HH* 88). Hugh's collection is as stunning as it is patently unreal: the product of his reverie of a blissful, luxurious (after)life. It is also, as quite usual with collections, extremely heterogeneous. Significantly, Hugh desires that everything should be left to the South Kensington Museum, which is described as extremely 'amorphous': '[a]s far as he could remember it exhibited

everything imaginable from rudimentary locomotives to pictures by Titian and stuffed owls'.<sup>24</sup>

To understand what the most varied objects of a collection have in common, in *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux* Krzysztof Pomian has taken as a starting point funeral offerings. In his intriguing interpretation, collected items would have the function of connecting the visible and the invisible, life and afterlife, the profane and the sacred. Isolated in the space of the tomb or the collection, these objects signify what is hidden or absent.<sup>25</sup> It is significant, in this connection, that Ford should often refer to Egyptian treasures as featuring among the collection pieces. But then again, evidence of Ford's admiration for Egyptian art are also contained in the 'Fine Arts' chapter of *Provence from Minstrels to the Machine*. Referring to the British Museum, Ford writes:

It was in front of the Egyptian Rooms. I nevertheless, I think, succeeded in persuading my patient friend that, except for Luxor – which was relatively inaccessible – behind that barrier were such specimens of the art that, by way of the Fauves in Provence, had revolutionized the vision of the modern world. (250)

As testified by the first pages of *The March of Literature*, Ford was a connoisseur of Egyptian history and literature as well as of recent books on the subject.<sup>26</sup> One of the most significant contemporary studies, which Ford perhaps knew, was *A Century of Excavation in the Land of the Pharaohs* (1924), where James Baikie recounts the amazing resurrections of the Theban Pharaohs from 1881 onwards – culminating with the discovery of the most splendid of all royal burials in the tomb of Tutankhamun, the news of which flashed across the world on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1922. Baikie describes the findings:

amulets and ushabtis, which guarded the mummy of the dead king [. . .] The whole room was crowded with objects of all sorts, coffers and boxes of splendid material and workmanship, model boats for the king's use in the Elysian Fields.<sup>27</sup>

Hugh's 'strong room' bears a close resemblance to Egyptian tombs: in it 'treasures lay about' (*HH* 70) and, amongst them, '[t]he ravishing Egyptian things' (*HH* 185). Tellingly, Henry also suggests that '[t]here was perhaps even an Egyptian Book of the Dead amongst those packing cases' (*RA* 228). This illustrated book contains a long and complicated spell and is essentially a statement of religious

doctrines relating to the sun-god Ra. It is certainly not the only Egyptian book devoted to the subject which was known at the time, but Ford mentions this one because it was exhibited at the British Museum and still belongs to its collections.<sup>28</sup>

Generally speaking, the leading conception is that the dead king, accompanied by the sun-god or identified with him, sails in a bark of Ra through the Underworld, bringing light as he passes. On his voyage he is accompanied by all manner of spirits and genii, which ward off the enemies of the soul from the divine boat.<sup>29</sup>

The main spirit is the *benu*, the phoenix-like bird and soul of the sun-god Ra.<sup>30</sup> Given the similarities between the Egyptian Islands of the Blest and the ones described by Ford, I think we are not wide of the mark if we say that Hugh, who is often referred to as the 'solar myth', may, in fact, represent the sun-god Ra<sup>31</sup> while Henry, in his second life as Hugh, could be the dead king accompanied or identified with him. And – to stretch a point – Gloria, who was meant to accompany Hugh on his voyage, might be the divine bird, which would explain Hugh's otherwise cryptic remark that she is 'the symbol of the soul' (*RA* 145). All this might seem a little far-fetched were it not for the other revealing suggestion that Henry 'felt as if he had been mummified for a thousand years in a haunt of ancient peace' (*HH* 242). The hypothesis of Ford's identification of Gloria with the *benu* is further reinforced by the fact that Pound himself uses the same woman-soul image (the Lady of Life) in the poem 'De Ægypto', whose first lines are taken from Budge's 1895 translation of the *Book of the Dead*.<sup>32</sup>

Henry's new life as Hugh has certainly to do with the uncanny return of the dead; a feeling which often accompanied the experience of the archaeologists who discovered Egyptian mummies: Theodor M. Davis, for example, reported that 'as one looked down into their quiet faces there was almost the feeling that they would presently open their eyes and blink at the light'.<sup>33</sup> Henry experiences something similar while watching Jeanne Becquerel sleep (sleep is death's brother, Hugh states in Hamlet-like terms; *RA* 145):

His mind had for some time been having the uneasy impression that Jeanne Becquerel's eyes were open and looking straight at him [. . .] Of course she was asleep. You could not see any motion of breathing in all her nacreous figure. But the eyes were like the eyes in the handkerchief of St. Veronica. At

one moment they seemed open and looking straight at you: at the next the lids were down.... (HH 168)

Death is also unexpectedly combined by Ford with the theme of *joie de vivre*: in the British Museum, Ford sees ‘the Etruscan ladies and their husbands reclining jocularly on their tombs’ (*Provence* 251). In a similar vein, after his excavation in 1881, Maspero, whom is mentioned by Ford in *The March of Literature*, reported that ‘the amiable Queen Nefertari seemed to smile upon [him] like an old acquaintance’ and ‘a calm and gentle smile still played over the mouth’ of Seti I.<sup>34</sup> In Ford, death or death-provoking figures are also smiling or voluptuous and alluring: mermaids, in particular, who are so often mentioned as symbols of his Provencal landscape (or mindscape). Enticing and sardonic, this landscape is invariably deadly attractive. ‘Aimer et mourir / au pays qui te ressemble!’ (‘love and die in that land that resembles you!’), writes Baudelaire in *Invitation au voyage*.<sup>35</sup>

But this combination can have a drawback for Ford’s protagonist and lead him to depression or a gloomy sense of death-in-life. ‘The Egyptians’, Henry muses, ‘used to have a mummy case at their feasts. To remind them that one day they would die! The Romans called that *memento mori*’ (*RA* 227). In ancient Rome, the image of the dead emperor was often used to represent him as still alive: for seven days after the death of Septimius Severus, the wax effigy of the emperor lying on golden blankets was visited by doctors who established that the patient was getting worse. Carlo Ginzburg suggests that this rite, just like mummification, functioned as a work of mourning and was used to control the passage from the dead body – an unstable and threatening object par excellence – to the afterlife.<sup>36</sup> Is Henry-the-mummy too living in a ceremonial interregnum?

But even more striking is the fact that the very same art objects representing the state of bliss and idleness which I have described should elsewhere be referred to as lying in the room-tomb like ‘a mournful mound’ (*RA* 145). According to Derrida, mourning ‘consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead’.<sup>37</sup> This proves all but impossible for Henry’s disquieted mind after his exchange with Hugh. Not only in the sense that he is more and more entangled in his identification with the deceased man, but also because symptomatically, no matter how hard he tries, he cannot



visualise Hugh's dead body. 'Even now he knew that his mind would not conjure up the image of the dead man. His mind said in words: "The body was lying on pine needles..." But the mind's eye saw only the gun and the passport' (*HH* 51). Death becomes an image – in Bachelardian terms – an object of the imagination, when it points to the condition of *repos* of the afterlife; but when it is conceived in physical terms its visualisation ('identifying' and 'localizing the dead', in Derrida's words) becomes highly problematic. As suggested in *Specters of Marx*:

*One has to know it. One has to have knowledge [Il faut le savoir]. Now, to know is to know who and where, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies – for it must stay in its place. In a safe place. Hamlet does not ask merely to whom the skull belonged [ . . . ] He demands to know to whom the grave belongs ('Whose grave's this, sir?'). Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt.<sup>38</sup>*

Whose body is the one found near the Monckton car? Whose grave is the 'dim room' where the packing cases and grips, brimming with art objects, lie like 'a mournful mound' (*RA* 145) and Hugh's photograph is 'perpetually visible' like that of 'a patron saint' (*HH* 33)? Is it Hugh's? Is it Henry's?

After the exchange with Hugh, Henry's confusion as to his own identity, the feeling of being somehow possessed by Hugh's spirit, leads him to bewildered musings as to his condition where life, death and afterlife flow into each other and where the mind, sinking deep in *ennui*, can yield to a condition of sluggishness and stupefaction which paralyses action: 'What did he consider himself?', wonders Henry, 'Hamlet the irresolute?' (*HH* 60).<sup>39</sup> This state of vague depression leads to the aimless wondering of the mind, which engages in an ever-changing, bemusing play of identifications, where women of his present and past life (such as Gloria and Wanda) are also involved.<sup>40</sup>

He had an extraordinary sense of Hugh Monckton. He was standing astride his case. Smiling: a high-featured melancholy smile. Like an actor playing Hamlet astride Ophelia's grave. He was holding a skull. No, it was a leather case containing a hundred grand. He was just about to say:

'Here, old bean...'

Instead of:

'I did love thee once, Ophelia.'

But it was Ophelia who had got him. Hugh Monckton ought to be floating down a brook holding poppies or whatever it was.... But he was otherwise engaged! [...] But it was a tangle. Hugh Monckton could not play Ophelia. It was

Wanda... No, Gloria who was Ophelia. She was Danish. Or something Scandinavian? So had Wanda been.... (RA 228-9)

The *evagatio mentis*, the restless moving from one fantasy to the next, is the negative counterpart of the Bachelardian reverie, a symptom of the spleen, depression and anxiety of which, as we said, that reverie is the cure. The Fathers of the Church, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, called it the 'midday demon'. In the sixteenth century, Pieter Bruegel the Elder represented it in his allegory of sloth where, in the top left hand corner, an enormous watch face appears with a human hand pointing to 'circa meridiem' (around noon) – when the heat and light, like the dazzling light of Provence, are at their most intense.<sup>41</sup> It is no accident that Jeanne Becquerel seems to Henry 'most typical in hours after lunch, as if she were really fitted to be a denizon [*sic*] of a land where it is always afternoon'.<sup>42</sup>

#### **Cultural Ghosts and Conclusion**

The return of the dead often comes under the guise of spectres. In *The Rash Act* and *Henry for Hugh*, the present is replete with uncanny presences from the recent or ancient past and cultures. In a few years' time Ford would be engaged in the sweeping project of *The March of Literature* (1938) and the two novels are certainly an anticipation of his interest in broad cultural perspectives. Yet, I think, this prominent presence of cultural ghosts has also to do with the 'ripeness' which, as Sisson suggests in his 'Introduction' to *The Rash Act*, characterises the two novels (3). They are a biographical meditation on approaching death – on the time when spectres come back from Ford's past (or, in a way, from his future, because spectres announce, anticipate death) to visit him.

'You have started us on this voyage', says Eudoxie, 'You will have to continue it until you set us ashore.... Perhaps there will be no shore. Then you must continue it forever.... You will have to learn the navigation' (HH 60). Henry will have to learn it indeed and learn how to ward off the evils and spectres that besiege his boat: 'You will have to know who Claude is, and Clotilde and Eustace and Bill and Jago' (HH 60). Tellingly, Henry's existence is haunted by spectres of fictional as well as real people. Are not, for example, the lesbian art collector Mrs Percival and the equally homosexual Alice the shadows of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas? And Docteur Grouault, the 'magisterial, grey-goateed, shining-spectacled little doctor who was

almost as famous as a collector as a nerve-specialist' (*HH* 119), is he not the returned phantom of Van Gogh's Docteur Paul Gachet? But even more to the point, Henry's ghosts are of a cultural nature: the Winged Victory, the Psalter of Mount Athos, and all the other items epitomise a Mediterranean and European heritage Ford may have felt as about to perish in a new world conflict and, therefore, in need of being collected and saved. Wars, past or impending, naturally call forth the need for an exploration of the cultural field, the summoning of all the positive strengths of the intellect to counteract the powers of dissolution: 'Everything has not been lost', writes Valéry, 'but everything has sensed that it might perish'. From his aerial perspective, he surveys the hecatomb of European culture in the aftermath of the First World War:

Standing, now, on an immense sort of terrace of Elsinore that stretches from Basel to Cologne, bordered by the sands of Nieuport, the marshes of the Somme, the limestones of Champagne, the granites of Alsace ... our Hamlet of Europe is watching millions of ghosts.

But he is an intellectual Hamlet, meditating on the life and death of truths [. . .] Every skull he picks up is an illustrious skull. *Whose was it?* This one was *Leonardo* [. . .] And that other skull was *Leibnitz*, who dreamed of universal peace. And this was *Kant* ... and *Kant* begat *Hegel*, and *Hegel* begat *Marx*, and *Marx* begat....

Hamlet hardly knows what to make of so many skulls. But suppose he forgets them! Will he still be himself?<sup>43</sup>

If Valéry sensed that 'a civilization has the same fragility as a life', Ford may have shared this intuition and felt an irresistible drive to collect – which is, at the same time, an attempt to save – the quintessence of our culture.<sup>44</sup> But he probably also felt the strong, complementary feeling of this culture as doomed and spectral: 'beautiful talents are the desperate need of these sad months and years when we tremble on the verge of a return to barbarism. . . .'<sup>45</sup>

Henry's collected items are intrinsically dual. They certainly represent the promise of an afterlife, the object or image experienced as luxurious reverie, the invisible inscribed within the visible. But, tellingly, they are also a 'mournful mound' which haunts Henry's conscience and of which he is willing to get rid as quickly as possible, by consigning it to the museum-tomb of South Kensington. Symptomatically, the art and cultural objects of Hugh's collection are never physically present in the novel but relegated to a strong room which Henry refuses to visit. They do not encourage physical, direct

appropriation; their status is obviously different and primarily imaginary. Their existence is metaphysical, burning with the gem-like flame of a voluptuous, cosmic light, but also spectral, unstable and threatening.

## NOTES

- 1 Ford Madox Ford, *The Rash Act*, Manchester: Carcanet, 1996 – henceforth *RA*; p. 5.
- 2 Ford, *Provence: From Minstrels to the Machine*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938 – henceforth *Provence*; p. 230.
- 3 A first group of water-lily canvases was produced by Monet between 1899 and 1904.
- 4 Gilles Néret, *Matisse*, Köln, London: Taschen, 2002 – henceforth ‘Néret’; p. 99.
- 5 The ‘ideal novel’, writes Ford, ‘must begin [...] with a note that should suggest the whole book’. *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, London: Duckworth, 1924, p. 171.
- 6 ‘A boat, anchored beyond, brooded, motionless. On the translucent water it seemed to be suspended in the air. It became vivid – a melon slice of incandescent white, a curved stripe of scarlet. Another, parallel below, was of azure’ (*RA* 9). It is moving to find the same motif reproduced in later paintings by Biala, notably in the canvases *Lagune: Venise Blanc* (1976), *Canal à Venise* (1976), *Bateau sur la Seine* (1980), *Arbre et la Mer* (1983) and *Notre Dame* (1985). These works are reproduced in the catalogue *Biala. I belong where my easel is...* issued by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York in 2008. The rapport between Ford and Biala, as Jason Andrew suggests in this volume, was indeed ‘A Long Passionate Dialogue’.
- 7 See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*, Torino: Einaudi, 1977, pp. xiii-xiv.
- 8 *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 184.
- 9 Ford, *Henry for Hugh*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1934 – henceforth *HH*; p. 156. Ford’s quotation from Herbert is on the same page.
- 10 ‘Intimism’ was a variety of late nineteenth and early twentieth century painting that made an intense exploration of the domestic interior as subject matter, conveying the sense of its warmth, comfort, and quiet isolation. It was practiced principally by Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, the two most distinguished members of the Nabis. Stella Bowen’s association with this group of artists is discussed by Joseph Wiesenfarth in this volume. For a comparison between Vuillard and Ford see Laura Colombino, *Ford Madox Ford. Vision, Visuality and Writing*, Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 117-18.
- 11 *Provence* 334. The picture of the view into France is also reproduced on the book cover.
- 12 Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 14-15.

- 13 Paul Valéry, 'The Crisis of the Mind', in *History and Politics*, tr. Denise Folliot and Jackson Mathews, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1962, p. 24.
- 14 For comparisons between Ford and Matisse other than those found in this essay see Colombino, *Ford Madox Ford*, pp. 187-8. *HH* 76.
- 15 Baudelaire is mentioned in *HH*, p. 107.
- 16 Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Tournai: Renaissance du Livre, 2002, p. 74.
- 17 Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006, p. 71.
- 18 See Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de la rêverie*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961.
- 19 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, tr. Maria Jolas, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, p. xviii.
- 20 Charles Baudelaire, 'Les Fenêtres', in *Paris Spleen*, New York: New Directions, 1970, p. 77.
- 21 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 190, 184; Baudelaire qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 195.
- 22 See Colombino, *Ford Madox Ford*, pp. 200-4.
- 23 Plato, *Gorgias*, eds. James A. Arieti and Roger M. Barrus, Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007, 523a, p. 163.
- 24 The South Kensington Museum had already been renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899. *RA* 226.
- 25 Krzysztow Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris, Venise: XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1987; see in particular 'Entre l'invisible et le visible: la collection', pp. 15-59.
- 26 'Thus refreshing my memory as to Ancient Egypt, I might say: The literature of the subject includes Budge's (Wallis) *The Mummy*, Weigall's *The Treasury of Ancient Egypt*, Burrows' *Discoveries in Crete*, Maspero's *Contes Populaires*, Torr's *Memphis and Crete*. And I might continue with a long list of learned works devoted to the subject'. Ford, *The March of Literature. From Confucius to Modern Times*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1947, p. 14.
- 27 James Baikie, *A Century of Excavation in the Land of the Pharaohs*, London: the Religious Tract Society, [circa 1925], pp. 185-6.
- 28 Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, from 1893 to 1924, was Sir Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, the prolific writer and Egyptologist. Ford told Elizabeth Cheatham: 'All through the war I carried a talisman given me by Dr Wallis Budge of the British Museum': Ford to Cheatham, 9 Mar. 1929. See Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, two volumes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, vol 2, p. 342. '[S]ome of [Budge's] books had a considerable influence on English and American literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Joyce, Aiken, and Zukofsky might also be mentioned – though his standards were not always those of contemporary scholarship, let alone modern Egyptology. Pound seems to have been aware of the fact, when he wrote, in an article published in the first issue of Eliot's *Criterion*: "Budge's translation of *The Book of the Dead* is highly distressing to the opposite school of Egyptologists". Gerd Schmidt, 'Voices from Ancient Egypt? Persona, Text, and Context in "De Ægypto" and "The Tomb at Akr Çaar"', in *Ezra Pound, Language and Persona*, ed. Massimo Bacigalupo and William Pratt, *Quaderni di Palazzo Serra*, 15 (2008), 56-64 (p. 57).
- 29 Baikie, *A Century of Excavation*, p. 150.

- 30 In the *Book of the Dead*, there are formulae to transform the deceased into the Great Benu, the soul of Ra.
- 31 It is also, of course, the sun god 'Apollo', but the two identifications are not mutually exclusive (*HH* 31). A similar juxtaposition of Egyptian beliefs and Greek mythology can be found in Pound's 'The Tomb at Akh-Çaar'. See Schmidt, 'Voices from Ancient Egypt?', pp. 61-2.
- 32 Schmidt argues that Pound misunderstood or ignored – which might also be true of Ford – that the divine bird's human head is a man's, not a woman's. His *Lady of Life* was influenced by 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who in one of his stories tells us that the painter Chiaro dell'Erma once had a vision of his soul in the shape of a beautiful woman' (*ibid.* 59).
- 33 Baikie, *A Century of Excavation*, p. 170.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 163.
- 35 *Les Fleurs du Mal*, p. 74; *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 71.
- 36 See Carlo Ginzburg, *Occhiacci di legno*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1998, pp. 84-7.
- 37 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, tr. Peggy Kamuf, New York and London: Routledge, 1994, p. 9.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 39 His long convalescence reinforces, on a physical level, the idea of a mental paralysis.
- 40 Of course, it should be added that depression is also what leads Henry to attempt suicide right before the identity-switch.
- 41 On Bruegel see Agamben, 'Il demone meridiano', in *Stanze*, pp. 5-14.
- 42 *HH* 119. The allusion is to Tennyson's 'The Lotos-Eaters', which confirms Ford's idea of the Mediterranean as hypnotic: 'In the afternoon they came unto a land / In which it seemed always afternoon'. *Tennyson: Selected Poetry*, London: Penguin, 1985, p. 36.
- 43 Valéry, 'The Crisis of the Mind', pp. 24, 28-9.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 45 Ford, *Thus to Revisit*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1921, p. 15.