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THEATRICAL GESTURES AND SPEECHES IN RICHARD FORD'S *A MULTITUDE OF SINS*

Something happened between the publication of Richard Ford's first two collections of short stories—*Rock Springs* (1987) and *Women with Men* (1997)—and his third collection, entitled *A Multitude of Sins*, which came out in 2001. True, common themes run through all three works—themes like adultery, taking the consequences of one's own actions, the resistance to the idea of commitment, the “chanciness” (*Rock Springs* 187) of the major events in one's life, and the difficulty of believing that your life is for real, that it has really started, or that it will not necessarily get any better than this. This last theme—what is real, or realer, in life—is even something of an obsession with many of Ford's characters, its most striking manifestation certainly being a passage in “Occidentals.” In that story, Charley Matthews, an American estranged from his wife, experiences the angst of feeling foreign, out of place, and entirely lost on the streets of Paris, to the point of imagining that the people around him are actors pretending to be French. The passage reads as follows:

Possibly the American embassy itself was nearby, since there were a lot of Americans on the street, trying to act as if they spoke the language—his grad school French was too poor to even try. Though the French, he thought, seemed like *they* were acting too. They were like amateur actors playing French people but trying too hard. There was nothing natural to the whole enterprise. (*Women with Men* 179)

The uncanny situation in which Matthews has placed himself is here conveyed through the use of negatively connoted references to theatricality, more precisely to amateur actors who sound unnatural. Likewise, the narrator of a different story about another confused American staying in the City of Light explains that

Martin Austin, the already married protagonist of “The Womanizer” refrains from holding one more time the hand of a Frenchwoman he has met and taken a fancy to because “[t]hat became playacting the second time you did it, and he had already touched her that way plenty of times” (*Women with Men* 23).

Apart from these two references and a half-dozen others, however, theatrical references are kept to a minimum in both *Rock Springs* and *Women with Men* while they form a conspicuous network of intratextual echoes in *A Multitude of Sins*, as if at some point in the writing of his third collection Ford had made the conscious decision¹ to use the world of the theater and its most common manifestations as metaphors for the human condition. Indeed, critic Ineke Bockting states that she was “immediately struck” by the theatricality of those stories, and that, in fact, “one can say that there is something theatrical about almost every story: the characters act as if they were on a stage, and the words *as if* are not at all innocent as the characters have all maneuvered themselves into a situation that is, to say the least, unrealistic” (71).² Ford’s seemingly deliberate (but actually unconscious?) use of the semantic field of theatricality was even taken to task in a book review published in the *New York Times* of 4 February 2002. Indeed, in that generally unflattering assessment of *A Multitude of Sins*, Michiko Kakutani states that she remains unconvinced both by the “generic” quality of Ford’s characters and by the “stage-managed quality” of the events that engulf them:

Certainly alarming things have happened before in Mr. Ford’s fiction, but there is a stage-managed quality to the melodramatic events in *A Multitude of Sins*. The people in these stories—with the exception of the narrator of “Calling,” the strongest tale in this volume—feel oddly synthetic as well, as though they were somehow representative types: generic adulterers, generic sufferers of midlife crises.

Taking the opposite view, I will argue that, far from awkwardly weighing down his stories, it is precisely the powerful paradigm of theatricality that allows Ford’s collection to make the essential point (for him) that men and women become untrue to themselves and each other when they commit the “multitude of sins” referred to in the title, that is when they let weaknesses and foibles of all kinds take control over them. To that effect, I will first study some of the

1. In 2007, during a “Study Day” devoted to *A Multitude of Sins* in the presence of the writer, an event organized by the University of Rennes, France, and held at the city’s Fine Arts Museum, Ford was surprised when a student mentioned the recurrence of such references in the collection. On second thought he was able to remember *a few* such instances, making it clear that theatricality was not a theme he had intentionally instilled into that work.

2. Bockting first notes the theatrical references in the collection, then focuses on the relation that it establishes between “elevation” and “revelation.” More than their thematic import, her article makes use of those references to highlight their links with the dramatic structure of the stories, via German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag’s “pyramid,” as initially expounded in his 1863 *Das Technik des Dramas*.

settings mentioned in the ten stories³ in *A Multitude of Sins* to show that Ford theatricalizes space in order to make his characters' gestures and speeches stand out. I will then try to show that role playing and the theatricality of these same gestures and speeches lie at the basis of Ford's representation of human life and interaction. Finally, because of their peculiar or unnatural aura, theatrical gestures and speeches stand out to such a degree that they seemingly take on hidden meanings or gesture toward secret intents, which only the fragmenting and the reordering of their constitutive parts allow Ford's characters to uncover, in a world without clear or trustworthy landmarks.

THEATRICALIZING SPACE TO SET OFF THE CHARACTERS' GESTURES AND SPEECHES

The negative connotation of the theater-related examples quoted above aptly illustrates Anne Larue's definition of one aspect of theatricality: its being *une chose honteuse*, in other words "a shameful thing" (3). A "theatrical" gesture or speech is thought to belong to the deceptive world of the stage, defined here as metaphorical exaggeration, or as an unnatural representation of life, as opposed to a reference to the (allegedly) reliable world of actuality. Another meaning of the term, though, allows the concept of theatricality to expand and free itself from the constraining limits of the stage. In that second sense theatricality does not necessarily require a performer to act in a showy way: it simply amounts to the idea that any viewer that frames a part of the world before him or her instills arbitrary meaning into whatever that frame may contain, however unwilling the persons or commonplace the objects thus framed might be. To put it differently, theatricality, like beauty in the well-known saying, is in the eye of the beholder, not in the person or space under scrutiny. That second sense is actually confirmed by etymology, given that in ancient Greece, the *theatron*, or place that is seen or from which one sees, was the part of the theater where *the spectators* would sit, while the word *opsis*—which comes from *optis*, or "sight"—designates a spectacle (Amey 70).

Consequently, any narrator's focalization or any character's viewpoint makes the advent of theatricality possible, including *outside* the theater, thanks to a highly dynamic process. As Josette Féral puts it, "[s]pace seems fundamental to theatricality, for the passage from the literary to the theatrical is first and foremost completed through a spatial realization of the text" (96). Any spatial frame imposed on the world—or rather any spatial *framing* of the world, a gerund being more suitable to underline the dynamic operation at

3. Those ten stories are: "Privacy," "Quality Time," "Calling," "Reunion," "Puppy," "Crèche," "Under the Radar," "Dominion," "Charity," and "Abyss."

stake—can confer a theatrical effect on everyday occurrences or phenomena, a process largely at work in all of Ford’s short stories.

A case in point is “Privacy,” not only the opening story in *A Multitude of Sins* but also the first that Ford wrote for that collection. The vast empty space in which the narrator and his wife reside bears all the marks of a stage or an opera box: it is a space whose corners are dark, whose walls are painted black, and from which riser seats were never removed after the former tenant, a “famous avant-garde theater director” (3), quit the premises, leaving behind him not only the memory of the “nihilistic plays” he put on there, but also a pair of silver opera glasses (5)—with which the narrator starts spying on a female neighbor. In contrast, that woman is secluded from the dark world outside by the bright light in her apartment.

From the outset, Ford thus creates a visually striking scene, complete with three framings: the narrator’s tall apartment window, the neighbor’s own window, and the lenses of the opera glasses focusing across vacant space. As Brigitte Zaugg underlines, “the narrator pointedly uses the plural, “seen through the windows,” to emphasize “the distance and the doubling of the windowpanes,” thus creating a showcase which “also evokes a peepshow booth” (189).⁴ Under those circumstances, the woman’s gestures—though she appears to be only practicing *tai chi chuan*, the Chinese system of slow meditative exercises designed for relaxation and balance—are seen as “stylized, slightly unreal, like the movements of a silhouette” (4-5), and interpreted as a “ritual dance or a pattern of possibly theatrical movements” (5-6).

Such an opening finds an echo in all of the other stories in the sense that, in one way or another, windows always end up playing a part in them. Readers might remember the young couple in “Under the Radar” who sit in their car and look through the windshield at a raccoon coming to an untimely death; or the naked figure of Nancy Marshall of “Charity,” at her window at one o’clock in the morning, staring through the night at the lighted L.L. Bean outlet across the street, “shining like a new opera house” (181). Or they may have in mind the image of Madeleine, studiously positioned at the window of the Queen Elizabeth II Hotel room that she and Henry are about to leave in “Dominion,” the narrator placing special emphasis on Henry’s perception that his tantalizingly “unreadable” lover always appears different from what she actually is (157). Moreover, a direct link is created between the first and last stories in the collection in the sense that both play on the ideas of chasm and

4. Zaugg also contrasts the “black box” that the narrator inhabits with the female neighbor’s “white cube.” She defines the two concepts as follows: “In her paper on two prominent American artists of that period, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, Dawna Schuld explains that ‘the “white cube” [is] the pristine, even antiseptic, space of the high modern gallery,’ while the black box is a completely insulated place meant to absorb input (light and sound, for instance), its ultimate version being the anechoic chamber. The two concepts are linked to the notion of human consciousness and to perception, and explore the limits of neutrality” (184).

observation, the climactic passage in “Abyss” being the moment when Howard looks through the viewfinder of his lover’s cheap Pentax in desperate search of its owner, before fearing that tourists will sound the alarm if they happen to see her body through their telescopes (279).

These references to theatrically framed vignettes of tourists, foreigners and places seen from various vantage points stress the amount of time that characters in Ford’s fiction spend solitarily watching the world around them, instead of interacting with it. This leads them to wonder what the show before their eyes means, leaving them with a frustrating impression of mystery—even when their guesses are not totally off the mark. In that sense, theatricality is the means Ford finds to make manifest one of his key themes: by connecting his characters visually, by placing them in situations where they find themselves like “two poles connected by my line of vision” (5), to quote one narrator, he tentatively establishes the link that he feels to be missing between individuals. That link Ford tried to define more clearly in a *Salon* interview with Sophie Majeski on 18 April 1996:

it really has less to do with seduction than with wanting to be close to somebody, with wanting to do whatever you can to narrow that space Emerson calls the infinite remoteness that separates people. And maybe that’s as close to describing the thing as I can get. The need to be able to touch somebody. And not even physically. (*Conversations* 120)

On a personal level, Ford seems to have been able to turn the “predicament” of the Emersonian concept of *infinite remoteness* into “a seminal one” (*Conversations* 143) thanks to fiction writing. Indeed, as he tersely puts it: “If loneliness is the disease, then the story is the cure” (*Conversations* 143). Nevertheless, as far as his characters are concerned, the urge to abolish the remoteness that space creates between two fictional beings, and their simultaneous longing to establish instead a form of (possibly non-sexual) intimacy, are frequently quelled by the very locales in which the fictional lovers meet briefly—a list of such places including hotel rooms, airports, car-parks, hotel lobbies, taxi stands, and bus stops, according to the narrator of “Dominion” (153). Accordingly, those locales are marked by the first kind of theatricality indicated previously, namely the theatricality of fake places, like the imitation Cape Cod restaurant where Wales and Jena have their first dinner in “Quality Time” (12), or the lobby of the Queen Elizabeth II in “Dominion,” with its showcase windows, its “inauthentic holiday-festive feel,” and its general air of being “like a stage lighted for a musical before the principals came on” (167).

Sensing in some obscure way that adulterous affairs are no match for the “real” thing—in other words, married life—the characters confine themselves to closed, artificial spaces that both tranquilize and taunt them. An absence of boundaries is felt by them to be a threat to their physical integrity—as indeed

the Grand Canyon proves to be for Frances in “Abyss”—but on the other hand they secretly resent having to demean themselves in such a fashion, hiding away in the wings of the great show of life, constantly on the move and being made to “feel foreign in [their] own country” (193). As Brian Duffy argues, laying stress on the characters’ conflicting attitudes to the moral framework that limits and assesses their actions,

[n]either of them is able to deal with the freedom, or absence of framework, that their affair allows, although both had marvelled in it at the beginning. Both of them end up regretting the loss of the structure of protection and guidance conferred by their normal lives as married and working people. . . . The increasing estrangement from the moral framework represented by their normal, married lives causes a crisis of identity in both of them. (305)

Such a crisis of identity is perfectly illustrated in that concluding story: it is indeed quite perceptive of Frances to compare her affair with Howard to a game of “Etch-a-Sketch” (268), a.k.a. the Magic Screen, in the sense that this drawing game, shaped like a frame or a red TV screen with two white knobs on the front to allow the player to draw figures by moving a cursor horizontally and vertically, only allows for the creation of crude, rather low-quality images that vanish the second you shake up the frame. Consequently, the lovers’ conversation, “driven uniquely by the pulsations of sexual desire, becomes an exercise in dissimulation, as truth-telling becomes the first victim of their desire” (Duffy 294). The problem is, the personality hidden by such mechanical acts of dissimulation does not necessarily come through in the end, as in the case of “Calling,” about whose male characters the same critic flatly remarks: “Lift away the layers of public performance to reach the heart and soul of these men, and one discovers an absence, a well-rehearsed impersonation. There is nothing to be found behind the self-protective screen of flattery and charm” (247).

ROLE PLAYING AND THE THEATRICALITY OF GESTURES AND SPEECHES

In the context of this theatricalization of space through framing, relationships between human beings take on added meaning, so that gestures, speeches, or behavior of any kind likewise tend to become theatrical. A striking fact in most of the stories is the tiny part actually occupied by sexual activity, as if adulterous affairs were based on something else besides sex. Counterexamples to this general rule can be found, as in “Abyss” where Howard is clearly after no more than a roll in the hay. Yet, as Ford himself said in an interview with Robert

Birnbaum, his writing is “not about the ether of sex,” a remark confirmed by a book review in *The Guardian*, according to which “Ford writes far more with his heart than with his penis” (Myerson). Seeing that his male characters never sincerely confess—to themselves or to others—that they engage in extramarital affairs on account of their sexual component, one is forced to analyze the other reasons given or suggested, and to notice the amount of insincerity and theatricality involved in each case.

Not simply taking one’s pleasure but bringing some satisfaction to one’s lover is one of the motives put forward by the narratives. This is the view taken for instance by Wales in his complex relationship with Jena in the following passage: “He realized he was letting her play the interesting part in this. It was a form of generosity. What was real to her, after all, were the things she wanted” (18). The same idea prevails as concerns Howard, who thinks he simply lets Frances “employ him” and regards himself as an “implement for what she wanted fixed” (260). Such relationships thus morph into exercises in a form of role playing where the partners (allegedly) seek or grant protection, respect, and self-fulfillment, the problem being that the players’ masks soon come apart at the seams. In “Quality Time,” for instance, Wales is aware that Jena only “acted uncertain of herself at the beginning,” that she needed to “seem uncertain” in order to become daring, and that she also “needed him to seem in control” (17).

Another reason given is those characters’ need to redefine their personality, give a new meaning to intimacy, or else bring more contentment to their lives, but as they nearly always fail to pinpoint any clear defect in their spouses, their experiments end up reading like immature or artificial attempts that pale beside the solidity and durability of married life. In “Charity,” though, we sense that Ford distributed “sinful” attitudes more evenly among his characters: Nancy Marshall’s psychological limitations are unmistakably involved in the growing rift in her couple, seeing that she is content to stand on the sidelines, like a mere onlooker, refusing to acknowledge her active part in the couple’s estrangement. At least, that is, until the epiphanic moment when she finally stands revealed, holding a kite, no more a spectator but a part of her own show: “Nancy felt embarrassed. Seen. It was shocking. The spacious blue bay spread away from her down the hill, and off of it arose a freshened breeze” (222).

In stories like these, where self-revelation plays a vital role, the explanation for so much glum soul-searching is simply that those characters are actors that constantly lie to themselves. The uncomfortable feeling taunting them all along is no more than guilt, or the knowledge that they will need to face the moral consequences of their actions. In such a context, the theatricality of their extramarital affairs, or of their personal vision of the world, acts as a distorted image that mirrors their own insincerity, or a form of punishment that spoils their pleasures. In “Dominion,” for instance, just after his phone conversation with Madeleine’s alleged husband, Henry thinks to himself that

the way his lover pats her cheeks softly looks theatrical (162). Also, Jena's lovemaking becomes "exactly as if it was all unscripted" soon after it has felt "vaguely theatrical, practiced" (23). Theatricality also rears its ugly head in the perversity of the female characters who dream up the most provocative scenarios in order to push their lovers right to their limits, asking them if they would consider killing their husband or how they would react if they (their mistresses) suddenly died on the spot...

By refusing to close their eyes to the Salingerian phoniness of their situation those female characters excel at giving moral slaps in the face. This is perfectly illustrated when Nancy makes fun of Tom's speech on their need for a moment of "readjustment" ("[a] period of *readjustment*.' She made the word sound idiotic. 'Are you a complete stupe?'" [202]), or when she reacts to Tom's complacent speech on the trauma caused by the death of his former partner on the police force, Pat La Blonde (of all names). On that second occasion, Nancy's reaction is presented as follows:

Nancy carefully removed her hand from the warm small of his back and put both her hands behind her in a protective way. Something about Tom's declaration had just then begun to feel like a prologue to something that might, in fact, spoil a lovely day, and refashion everything. Possibly he had planned it this way. (212)

Liars of the worst sort (downright "bullshit" experts, in Nancy's opinion in "Under the Radar" [202]), those cheating men and women end up sounding too melodramatic at the worst of moments, which "spoils" scenes of pseudo-intimacy and "refashions" their partners' vision of them. They are no more than poor versions of the movie actors whose names turn up here and there in the stories—like Liv Ullman, Elliott Gould, Lon Chaney, Jr., to quote a few—because they never own up to being fake, not even to themselves. Like McKendall in "Calling," they all look out of place wherever they go, smile exaggeratedly, wear tuxedos and "spectator" shoes, as they are called, in the middle of a marsh, and clear their throats in stagy ways before resuming their "high-falutin'" talk (38). Their spells of introspection, just like their bouts of confusion or pessimism, therefore strike the reader as islands of painful self-revelation in the ocean of insincerity in which their lives are engulfed, as if dramatic insights suddenly found a way through the travesty of life that they have chosen for themselves.

Putting it differently, it could be said that the job of theatricality is to bring to the fore an additional element of comedy, or even ridicule, in order to negate the serious soul-searching in which these characters are sometimes supposedly engaged. For instance, when Henry confronts the actor who tries too hard to pose as Madeleine's husband, a number of details set off the ridicule of the situation: the actor's exaggeratedly vulgar speech, unsuited to his age; the wrong props he is using (like his yellow aviator glasses); and something about his gait ("It was all too ridiculous. More theatricality" [168]). Unsurprisingly,

when Henry regains his room he hears muffled noises coming from a TV somewhere in another room: the sound of “a studio audience laughing” (173), the exact equivalent of an omniscient narrator telling us that his protagonist has just made a fool of himself. A similar narratorial commentary is also to be found in “Reunion,” though in a subtler way. Indeed, that other story is narrated in the first person, when readers do not necessarily expect an I-narrator to intersperse with symbolic details or telltale snippets of characterization in the very sections of the narrative where the I-character plays an active part. This is rather what *third*-person narrators do, Ford himself having called earlier stories of his that use that narratorial mode not only “much more morally stringent’ than his other ones, which produces, particularly in the case of ‘Quality Time’ and ‘Abyss,’ characters with whom it is difficult to empathize,” but also “less personable,’ noting that their ‘principal characters . . . are not admirable—even to me” (Ford qtd. in Duffy 241). Nevertheless, it is indeed the *first*-person narrator of “Reunion” who tells us his own voice is drowned by the “theatrically nasal male voice announcing the arrival from Poughkeepsie” (the scene is set in Grand Central station), while Mack Bolger’s “unfortunate” speech impediment deprives him of “a small measure of gravity” (72-73). Added to the ridicule attached to the characters, the artificial note that so unexpectedly surrounds their meeting prevents the narrator from actually focusing on their exchange. The reconciliation of sorts that he had in mind with the man he cuckolded a year and a half before thus disappointingly yields nothing but detachment and final leave-taking.

FINDING HIDDEN MEANING OR INTENT IN THEATRICAL GESTURES AND SPEECHES

What theatricality does in these stories, therefore, is create a chasm between the characters’ avowed pursuits and the ethical points made by the narrators, in a framework that other writers could easily have turned into religious propaganda. After all, the title of this collection is a phrase lifted from the Bible (James 5:20 and 1 Peter 4:8) and a story like “Abyss,” which Ford described as “a falling into a kind of spiritual inanition” (“One on One”), does bear a resemblance to some of Flannery O’Connor’s stories, for instance, in which the characters’ spiritual blindness is mocked and severely punished. Yet, one marked divergence between these two authors’ works lies in Ford’s characters finally getting the sympathy they claim for their mistakes or for their tendency to delude themselves. Ford’s is undoubtedly a humanist’s view, and his wish to write stories “meant to ennoble and make more poignant the lives you may not have noticed” (“Errors of Omission”) unflinchingly comes through.

One way Ford ennobles his characters is by having them witness events charged with a meaning that they try to uncover but consistently fail to fully grasp. The Asian woman's theatrical movements in "Privacy" naturally come to mind, but this is only the first instance in a long list of phenomena that the reader is forced to construe as signs left along the way to enlighten the characters. Interestingly, all things Asian in these stories can be viewed as signs—like the ancient, "Asiatic-looking" cedar tree that kills Frances in "Abyss" (278), or the Japanese tourists exiting the L.L. Bean store in the thick of the night (181), or the smiling oriental face painted on the kite in "Charity" (216), for example—in the same way as Native American characters often play the role of spiritual guides. Likewise, the various road accidents detailed in the narratives catch the protagonists in a time warp out of which new meaning emerges, whether one thinks of the woman hit by a car in Chicago, at the junction of Sheridan (the playwright?) and Ardmore (the Irish film studios?) Roads, of the raccoon incident in "Under the Radar," or of the rabbit killed in "Abyss." In all of those cases the characters are made to reflect upon disturbing aspects of their own condition, not only their own physical frailty or the finitude of human life, but more importantly the absurdity of life or death, and the appalling blindness and inevitability of Fate.

The protagonists' reactions are theatrical because they fight back against chance by semiotizing the world around them, that is to say by endeavoring to turn space and time into networks of signs designed to warn them against any bodily or mental harm that could be done to them. In so doing, they behave like spectators in great need of reassurance, who insist on convincing themselves that the props which litter the stage must be symbolically calling out to them. Because they know so little about themselves or other human beings—"we know only a laughably insignificant fraction about any of it," the narrator asserts in "Puppy" (107)—they feel the need to focus on whatever show the world has to offer.

Another way Ford ensures his characters get the compassion they ask for is by placing them in situations that soon get totally out of control. The moral distance or physical rejection which the reader might feel at first on seeing a character err inevitably turns into empathy when the offending party has to face the harsh outcome of his actions, all the more so if he stops pitying himself and starts analyzing his fate in terms of causes and consequences.

Interestingly, Ford's characters battle with the concept of causes and consequences in their own personal ways, even if they usually end up more puzzled than enlightened by the end of that process. Their instinctive reaction is to fragment any movement or logical sequence of events into a myriad of smaller units so as to make more sense of their lives, and maybe improve it. In "Quality Time," the question asked is whether living life in slow motion could prevent one from making mistakes, while in "Puppy" Sallie wonders if changing one detail, like her taste in paintings, would have made a substantial change in her life. In "Reunion," Johnny decides to impose himself on Beth's husband

when the fancy takes him that “the linkage of moments” (76) can be changed, that what was preliminary, as he puts it, can become primary, as though the final connection between the two men, which matters more to Johnny than his brief moments of intimacy with Beth, became its own justification.

In that sense Ford’s characters themselves become semiotized when he uses them as symptoms of the various shortcomings or failures he chooses to portray. A case in point is the moment in “Crèche” when Faith stands paralyzed on her skis, unable to turn around properly or find the skiing term (“telemark”) that she is looking for:

“I’m just going to turn around,” Faith says, and very unsteadily begins to move her long left ski up out of its track, and then, leaning on her poles, her right ski up and out of its track. It is dizzying, and her calves ache, and it is complicated not to cross her ski tips. But it is essential to remain standing. To fall would mean surrender. What is the skiing expression? Tele... Tele-something. She wishes she could tele-something. Tele-something the hell away from here. (134-35)

The visual or cinematic dimension of the scene, compounded by the growing closeness of the focalization that veers from zero (“very unsteadily begins to move her long left ski”) to internal (“But it is essential to remain standing. To fall would mean surrender”), makes it theatrical in the highest degree, especially when remembering that both characters are apt to envisage themselves and others in terms of types: Faith thinks of herself as “Hollywood. A fortress” (127) and ironically sums up her brother-in-law under the phrase “A class act The Roger” (125). In return, “The big lawyer” is how Roger encapsulates her (134).

In *A Multitude of Sins*, Ford even makes frequent use of a kind of theatricality that is transgressive or taboo on the stage. Pushing the idea of fragmentation to its limits he often dismembers the bodies of his characters, as in “Quality Time” where the old woman becomes “a collection of assorted remnants on a frozen pavement” (11) or a friend of Wales’s got “shot to pieces covering a skirmish in East Africa” (11). Readers may also remember the bodily remains of Frances, “all jumbled about her in a crazy way, as if her face had been dropped first, and then the rest of her,” one of her arms being “intact but separated from her body” (278).

As Féral argues in the previously quoted article, no onstage mutilation of any kind can be considered theatrical because time and events must be reversible in the world of the theater. She further explains that:

[a]ctivities that violate the “law of reversibility” are forbidden. In the theater, this law guarantees the reversibility of time and event. As such, it opposes any act in which the subject is mutilated or executed. For example, barred from the stage are certain practices of the 1960s in which bodies were mutilated or animals killed for the supposed pleasure of representation. (104)

Seeing that fictional characters are not made of flesh and blood, though, the theatricality of fiction naturally differs from that of the stage. The symbolic or semiotic meaning associated with them does not suffer in the least from the ruthless treatment which the short story writer may decide to mete out to them. On the contrary, to see Frances Bilandic die a horrifying death, in spite of her budding spiritual inclinations and of the meaningful anchor painted on the front of her blouse, adds to the irony of the scene without spoiling the reader's (slightly sadistic) enjoyment of its irreversible and morally charged ending.



The many theatrical gestures, speeches, and attitudes found in *A Multitude of Sins* perfectly underscore the mostly binary dimension of human experience as Ford sees it. Indeed, the two principal effects of theatricality, artificiality and semiotization, find a direct echo in his fictional world, made up of both fakeness and sincerity, comedy and drama, general confusion and the desperate need for guidance felt by most men or women. In that sense, framing, arranging, and appraising the world around us—making sense of it all—is precisely a writer's job in Ford's opinion:

Ruskin said composition (artistic composition) is the arrangement of unequal things. And really, for me, that's what I'm doing. I'm arranging unequal things, and saying that this is unequal to that, or that's superior to this, this is different from that. That's really what I'm doing. Connecting and appraising. . . . So art tries to say, "No, we'll put this frame around it, we'll bring things into better focus, we'll say that this is more important to that, and this is accomplished by that, and this is the agent to that," and in so doing meaning is made.⁵ (Ford qtd. in Duffy 351)

Being a moralist as well as a humanist, Ford writes fiction in which characters are both gently mocked for their limitations or self-delusions and ennobled on account of their occasional moments of epiphany or attempts at bettering themselves. Grappling with (sexual) desire and with a world that they do not fully comprehend, they look about them for approval, long for answers to their questionings, endeavor to decipher the meaningful signs that they believe surround them, and mostly proceed by trial and error.

In that respect theatricality helps Ford's fiction highlight the scarcity of a few human qualities which he holds in high esteem, like selflessness,

5. Robert N. Funk picks up a previous occurrence of the same idea in his analysis of Ford's second novel, *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), when detailing the sense that all characters in this fiction are "foreigners navigating through a strange land" (69). It is Rae who explains to her boyfriend Harry Quinn, a disenfranchised Vietnam veteran, that "You lack a frame of reference that allows you to take the right mental picture" (qtd. in Funk 69).

consideration, tolerance, openness. This makes Ford's outlook quite similar to that of a character thought up by a fellow humanist novelist, one who, in a novel published in 1852-53, poked fun at the bullying and condescending philanthropy of a Mrs. Pardiggle, the better to underscore the considerate humaneness of young Esther Summerson, the narrator of the following passage:

At first I tried to excuse myself for the present on the general ground of having occupations to attend to which I must not neglect. But as this was an ineffectual protest, I then said, more particularly, that I was not sure of my qualifications. That I was inexperienced in the art of adapting my mind to minds very differently situated, and addressing them from suitable points of view. That I had not that delicate knowledge of the heart which must be essential to such a work. That I had much to learn, myself, before I could teach others, and that I could not confide in my good intentions alone.

Like Ford's short stories, which foreground one writer's take on human "sins"—or more simply, their failings—this passage underlines the necessity to "adapt [one's] mind to minds very differently situated," to acquire "that delicate knowledge of the heart which must be essential to such a work," and to learn before teaching others. This does not mean that writers need to abandon the moral high ground from which they may choose to view the world around them. On the contrary, Ford has always held on fast to the conviction that "[s]tories should point toward what's important in life, and our utterances always mean something. Our utterances are almost always things that we have to take responsibility for, even if we think we don't. Our impulses can be understood by what we say" (*Conversations* 99). That being said, rendering the spectacle of humanity's "sins" also requires both a clear vision and an empathetic heart, if only to do justice to the full palette of human potentiality, as suggested in Esther Summerson's answer to Mrs. Pardiggle by the young woman's sense of her own limitations and her plea for benevolence. As for that earlier quote, it is excerpted from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*—more precisely, from Chapter VIII, entitled "Covering a Multitude of Sins."

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6. This article is the expanded version of a paper presented at the Rennes Fine Arts Museum on 22 November 2007.

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This article explores the theme of theatricality and its negative connotations in the ten stories in Richard Ford's collection *A Multitude of Sins*. First, spatial framing is emphasized, highlighting recurring motifs like characters observing the world through glass panes and the connection between theatrical framing and solitude. Ford's stories are then depicted as extramarital affairs whose participants meet in closed, artificial spaces, reflecting a conflict between the desire for interaction or intimacy and societal constraints. Finally, the article concludes by connecting those affairs to the characters' crisis of identity and loss of moral framework. Overall, the analysis emphasizes the artificiality and insincerity in characters' attempts to redefine themselves and find contentment, leading to an atmosphere of detachment or absurdity. Nevertheless, Ford's humanist approach ensures empathy for characters facing the consequences of their actions, thus creating a rich and complex narrative texture.

Cet article explore le thème de la théâtralité et de ses connotations négatives dans les dix nouvelles du recueil A Multitude of Sins (Péchés innombrables) de Richard Ford. Tout d'abord, l'accent est mis sur le cadrage spatial, en soulignant divers motifs récurrents, tels que l'observation du monde à travers des vitrages, et le lien entre cadrage théâtral et solitude. Ces nouvelles sont ensuite dépeintes comme des aventures extraconjugales dont les participants se rencontrent dans des espaces fermés et artificiels, reflétant un conflit entre désir d'interaction ou d'intimité et contraintes sociétales. Enfin, l'article se conclut en reliant ces aventures à la crise d'identité des personnages et à leur perte de cadre moral. L'analyse tout entière met l'accent sur l'artificialité et le manque de sincérité des personnages dans leurs tentatives d'auto-redéfinition et de contentement, ce qui conduit à une atmosphère de détachement ou d'absurdité. Néanmoins, l'approche humaniste de Ford garantit une certaine empathie de ces récits envers des personnages confrontés aux conséquences de leurs actes, créant ainsi une texture narrative riche et complexe.