R. A. D. FORD, POET AND DIPLOMAT

A Poetry of Tact

Ann Munton

ROBERT ARTHUR DOUGLAS FORD has lived two lives, one as a poet and one as a diplomat. Twenty-one years of this double life were spent in the Soviet Union, where Ford was Canada's Ambassador from 1964 to 1980. Each of his two careers, moreover, in itself suggests a tension or duplicity. Further, his relation to place, being "in place" or "out of place" in all the paradoxical meanings that Eli Mandel suggests,[1] is ironically similar to the doubleness experienced by poets who are immigrants to this country. Gazing out his window, which is glazed with a winter frost, Ford looks out on a bleak northern landscape. This expanse of snow and cold could be northern Ontario; it could be Siberia. It could be the poet dreaming in metaphors who watches the endless wasteland; it could be the diplomat composing dispatches. This could be his homeland, or it could be the land of the "other."

Born in Ottawa, Ford studied English literature and history at the University of Western Ontario in London, doing graduate work in history at Cornell. He joined the Department of External Affairs in 1940 and retired four decades later. His foreign service career has led him to live in many of this century's foci of violence: South America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Soviet Union. He has witnessed discord, deprivation, and repression, and translated his vision into a bleak and uncompromising poetry. Speaking nine languages, Ford has also translated the visions of other poets and given voice to them in English. Since his first volume of poetry, *A Window on the North* (1956), which won the Governor General's Award, Ford has published six more volumes. As well, he has been a frequent contributor to literary magazines in Canada, and in 1989 he published his memoirs, *Our Man in Moscow, A diplomat's reflections on the Soviet Union.*

FORD'S ROLE AS DOUBLE is nowhere clearer than in these "diplomat's reflections," in which he explains both Eastern and Western perspectives. He is very much the Western diplomat, but equally he is writing from his position within the Soviet Union. First arriving in Moscow in 1946 immediately after the war, he has experienced life in Russia under the various Soviet leaders: Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev. With his historian's training, Ford provides readers with a lesson in Soviet politics and motivation. With his poet's vision, he provides insights into the artistic community. He warns that Gorbachev is the product of his Soviet experience, and that the present is shaped by this distinctive past:

> The present leaders as the heirs of Russian history and traditions and of nearly seven decades of Soviet communism carry with them the same historical, political, and ideological baggage that shaped the actions and reactions of each of their predecessors. (*OMM* x)

Although today, reading the enthusiastic press coverage, one might hope for a more positive evaluation from Ford of Gorbachev's chances for real change, after studying Ford's poetry, one is not surprised by the cautious and even gloomy conclusion. Gorbachev the man, Ford admires, yet the leader cannot, he argues, be separated from history.

Our Man in Miscow is best read as a collection of essays — on detente, human rights, KGB surveillance, Afghanistan, Sino-Soviet relations, etc. — as there is a lot of repetition from one thematic chapter to the next. The book's strengths are its focus on artists and dissidents, often one and the same, and its detailed reporting of conversations with high-ranking Soviet officials, which must be based on extensive journals Ford kept at the time. Some writers whom Ford has translated, like Andrei Voznesensky and Anna Akhmatova, also appear in his memoirs in their roles as dissidents and/or friends.

Ford has a casual way of dropping important names and then quoting conversations to explain otherwise perplexing Soviet positions or the interaction of Westerners and Soviets. Often finding himself in this position of clarifying mediator, Ford reports one conversation in which he tries to explain to a "Soviet official" the importance of human rights issues in the West. The conversation progresses to a critique of Solzhenitsyn by the Soviet, who, after admitting that he has not read *The Gulag Archipelago*, is startled by Ford's offer of his Russian copy. The official, needless to say, refuses. This is a telling incident. It is one of many meticulously recounted in which Ford's access to officials is crucial, as well as his ability to converse fluently in Russian. The linkage of political and artistic matters is Ford's strength, his double vision, and it is what makes the book particularly appealing.

ONE MIGHT EXPECT that the tension created by Ford's seemingly diverse occupations would lead to the creation of two personas: one the reserved, urbane diplomat at home in his official capacity dealing with foreign government dignitaries and composing "the judicious, elegant dispatches that were the envy of his peers" (Abley 40); the other the open, passionate poet equally at home in his more private pursuit of revealing his personal responses with introspective, free-flowing candour. Indeed it is tempting to create such a scenario, but in Ford's case it would largely be false. Although there is certainly a tension created by the doubleness of much of his life, it isn't worked out as neatly or as easily as this paradigm would suggest. Ford the diplomat and Ford the poet are equally reserved and equally worldly. Raw emotion would be as foreign and out-of-place in his poetry as it would be in his diplomatic dispatches. The poetry is considered and formal, and the doubleness reveals itself in complex metaphors reflecting bleak landscapes and the lessons of history and politics.

Significantly, the etymology of *diplomat* suggests both Ford's dilemma and his poetic solution. The word *diplomat* is a "back-formation," in the same manner as *aristocrat* and *democrat*, in this case from the word *diplomatic*, or "having to do with diplomas." In turn, *diploma* originates from the Greek for "folded paper" and "double," "hence official document." The idea of a linguistic "back-formation" is suggestive of Ford's view, that the present is the outgrowth of past years of history and tradition, whether in Canada or the Soviet Union. That doubleness is built in to the very word for his chosen career is a fortuitous recognition of a particular vision. Trained to see two sides of issues or situations, the diplomat and poet both translate the doubleness into language. The constant awareness of "other" is encoded into the texts of translations, of diplomatic dispatches, and of poetic descriptions of northern landscapes. Behind all is a basic desire to explain one to the other, a desire that is played out in the tension built into the poetics Ford creates, a poetics which reflects a state of mind suggestive in turn of the immigrant's dislocation. Ford is a ghostly presence in his own poetry, never wholly realized, often removed behind the distortion of a frosted window. The northern landscapes he describes are arctic wastes which could be either Canadian or Siberian. His position in the Soviet Union is not that of the immigrant, but it is nonetheless "*un-natural*," and he often expresses the classic immigrant burden: "of living simultaneously within the influences of our own and another's culture."[2] Eli Mandel eloquently translates the landscape of "ethnic culture" into a psychological one, focusing on the troubling question of identity, and defines "ethnic writing [as] a literature existing at an interface of two cultures, a form concerned to define itself, its voice, in the dialectic of self and other and the duplicities of self-creation, transformation, and identities" ("Ethnic Voice" 99).

Again, as a type of "back-formation," Ford qualifies here as a kind of ethnic writer, the Canadian living in and transforming his own and Soviet experience. "The Emigrants" suggests Ford's awareness of his dilemma, the Canadian representing his country in a foreign land, having traced in reverse the journey of immigrants to his country. Even his use of "*e*migrants," with its emphasis on the land left behind, rather than "*im*migrants," with its insistence on the new land arrived at, emphasizes Ford's double perspective. He notes the continuum of immigration: "It was not me but someone before me / And maybe someone before that / Who took a ticket on a cattle boat," and he locates himself at once as a Canadian, but one outside Canada. Ford indicates that the answer to the unasked question is affirmative, "Yes." But for the Canadian "immigrant" located in Russia, the former immigrants were "going in the wrong direction." Ford identifies with them: "it is my journey into the unknown," he says, and tells us that he "see[s] them [as] almost part of me." Then he clarifies, "Part now of my country," in a way different from Ford who lives in a kind of exile from his country, but in an important way very similar, both caught between cultures, both caught in the tension between "departure and . . . home-coming" (*HS* 34).

The "dialectic of self and other" is perhaps the paradigm for all of Ford's writing, whether the more obvious dialectic established by translations or interpretations of political interrelations, or the less obvious dialectic of translating oneself into an alien world. The formal solutions range from a poetry of reticence, the gradual simplification over the years as words are measured against a standard of silence ("The spare word is the sword / That guards better than silence" ["The Spare Word," *DWS* 19]), to the naming of self through the naming of others. Ford "seek[s] to eliminate / The unessential" and "savour[s] / The economy of sound / For the maximum of sense" ("Balance," *DOP* 29), while quotations from and allusions to other writers pattern the lines and provide images. In "The Unfamiliar City" Ford begins with an appropriate quotation from Henry James: "'But I have the imagination of disaster and see life as ferocious and sinister'" (*DOP* 19), while Dostoevsky and his works are used as a model in a cycle of Ford's most recent poems. The dialectic between "I" and "you" is ambiguous as well as significant, as Ford reads into the names of others his own name. He acknowledges the power he derives from the dialogue, being "stronger for the word / And brave for what we heard" ("Homage to Fyodor Mihailovich," *DOP* 34).[3]

This dialogue, in turn, suggests the last etymological gloss to the word *diplomat*, "folded paper." In the sense that Roland Barthes uses folding, as a naming or re/naming process, it applies to Ford's poetics. Barthes tells us that to read "is to proceed from name to name, from fold to fold; it is to fold the text according to one name and then to unfold it along the new folds of this name" (*S/Z* 83). Ford directs us in this reading process, hiding himself within the many names of writers and their words, so that we can hear his voice in the dialectic he creates, the folding from one name to the next. At the interface (of names or languages or cultures) the *un*folding takes place.

The stark dualities of Ford's poetry reflect metaphorically the dualities within himself ("I am a schizophrenic in the light") and his century:

Dismemberment — that word I use
To separate the core
Of misery from the decade's rose,
The sick man from the cure. ("Dream 64," *SC* 26)

Ours is "an age of sudden violence" ("Knuckle-Dusters," *SC* 37), Ford tells us. He concentrates on bleak northern landscapes ("the trauma of the north," "The Winter Meadows," *SC* 34) locked in the dark and silence of desperate winters ("One / Tends to repeat," he tells us ["The Inclusive Universal Theme," *SC* 32]), but there are poems that picture equally bleak desert landscapes bleached by sun and heat. The titles of some of Ford's poems over the years give a good idea of his unremitting outlook: "Unheeding in Despair," "The Waste of the World," "Emptiness," "The Losers," "Anguish," "Into the Wilderness," "The Age of Terrorism," "Mystic Terror," "Terrorists," "A Child Dying," "The School of Fear." Poem after poem describes "the northern cold / smothering the world," in which life is "oppressive" before the "immeasurable horizon" ("Twenty Below," *WN* 4). Under a "frightening" sky, "ready for shattering," apocalyptic ends seem likely: "A sudden end seems poised / In the air" ("The Waste of the World," *SC* 35). The barren landscape, "the barrens of the world," matches the lives of "true sadness, the gripping melancholy" ("A Window on the North," *WN* 7). And there is "danger in our northern world," "blunt[ing] the urge to live." Although northerners "are conscious" and "have sensation," Ford tells us, "we / Are dumbed by the world" ("Anoesis," *HS* 58). This dangerous silencing Canada and Russia share:

The whole landscape drifted away to the north,
To Moose Factory, hundreds of miles, to the pole
And beyond, to the Arctic ends of the earth,
Sullen, Siberian, grey, . . . ("Window on the North," *WN* 7)

The Canadian north feels the lash of "The same uninhabited wind, / The same hard drawn sky / As devastates the horizon / Of the Hungry Steppe" ("The Tundra," *HS* 38). Living in the Soviet Union provides a particularity to Ford's bleak images: "Too many check-points are set up / Too many eyes suspiciously / Peer and probe," he laments ("Into the Wilderness," *HS* 43). There is a loneliness, a forsakenness, an emptiness, of both man and landscape, and the poet is "heavy with the melancholy of the day" ("Thaw in January," *WN* 12).

Equilibrium is often lost, whether on the icy surfaces of frozen ponds or within the shifting shadows of the mind. "We never find, of course, / The balance," Ford tells us ("Under the Boat," *DWS* 20), while still "Searching [his] life for / Equilibrium" ("Balance," *DOP* 29). Vertigo is a continual affliction: "The invading emptiness . . . / / Clears the mind vertiginously" ("Emptiness," *HS* 6). In "Roadside Near Moscow," the poet turns his gaze from a "column of prisoners" "profoundly / Occupied with the secret reconstruction / Of their balance," lest he be implicated in the guilt of accused or accusers (*WN* 15). A number of poems contain hunting images, but the hunters are not viewed as valiant and victorious, eking out their existence in a harsh landscape. Rather, the hunters are wounded and silent and seen in the larger context of the century, "in vain / seeking the vengeance of killed men" ("Two Sonnets on a Hunting Theme," *WN* 27). Ford sums up:

> Maybe there is a pill to take
> Against this century
> But I think our conscience is too bad
> For any remedy ("Sleeplessness of our Time," *NE* 21)

Many poems make clear the link between the bleakness of the northern landscape and the bleakness of our times, what Ford calls "the tundra / Of our century" ("Needle in the Eye," *NE* 30). Terrorism becomes a metaphor for our day, with land "mines . . . laid / Haphazardly, the symbol of our age." Ford proposes love as "the only help," but the solution seems largely academic and unbelievable in the face of the mounting terror he details, "The inevitability / Of decay in our precarious age" ("The Coast of Childhood," *NE* 41).

Ford's poetry is full of conceits and obscure, almost impersonal metaphors. It is controlled, formal, detached. At its weakest it suffers from a sterility reflective of the recurrent landscapes:

> This northern wound laid bare
> To the unpractised urgent hand
> Cries in the crystal night
> To the heart and the bludgeoned head. ("Siberia," *NE* 40)

At its best, as in "The Mongols" (*NE* 26) and "For Pasternak" (*HS* 40), a particular object or happening triggers Ford's response: in the first case to Russian history and vulnerability, and in the second, to the great Russian writer. Ford's most recent poetry allows us a glimpse of the aging retiree, still "Listening beside [his] half-open window," and a hint of human frailty creeps in, as he acknowledges that he "ought to close" the window on doctor's orders, "To avoid further complications in my lungs, / Not to mention arthritis and various other / Hinted at malfunctions of an aging body" ("Solitude," *DOP* 53). In "Contemporary Thinking" (*DOP* 63) Ford reviews his diplomatic career from his window post and questions his culpability. Still, in spite of these few poems, Ford the man remains for us largely obscured behind his "slightly glazed" window. There are no poems, for instance, which deal *directly* with the loss of his wife who shared his life's adventures. There are few which deal specifically with his retirement to France, and we get only brief allusions to the crippling disease from which he has long suffered.

HIDING HIMSELF within the lines of poetry, behind the folding names of other writers, Ford seems to epitomize the paradigmatic Canadian predicament that Robert Kroetsch enunciates: that of someone who is "reluctant to venture out of the silence and into the noise. . . . in our very invisibility lies our chance for survival" ("The Canadian Writer" 15). In "Unhiding the Hidden" Kroetsch continues by describing the central paradox of Canadian fiction as "the tension between [the] appearance of being just like someone else and the demands of authenticity" (17). For ethnic writers, of course, this tension is particularly powerful, and for Ford it is manifested in images of dislocation/disjunction/dismemberment. "Ghost-like we cut our bones away, / And walk with severed heads," he says in "Dream 64" (*SC* 26). Ford is mesmerized by the concealing silences of the northern landscape and the resemblance between Canadian and Soviet tundras, but his dilemma remains the one Kroetsch and Mandel outline: the tension between similarity and authenticity. There *are* crucial distinctions. "The innocent snow" that covers both the Russian and Canadian north conceals deeper differences. "Remember[ing] Siberia," Ford says: "The landscape is the same but I know there / Under the virgin snow lie the unjust dead." He concludes, identifying closely with Canada: "Our nature / Now seems less unfair" ("Innocent Snow," *DOP* 47). But such easy identification is not the norm; it only emphasizes Ford's predicament. Two poems, written about twenty years apart, highlight the dilemma "of living simultaneously within the influences of our own and another's culture" ("Ethnic Voice" 91) and the doubleness that such existence entails. In "The Winter Meadows" the "deep silence" and the frozen pines are the same, but the conditional form of the verb indicates the conditional nature of Ford's identification. It is tentative and marks hesitancy. The pines "mark the path I *would have used* / To seek return to what I was" (emphasis added). But the condition of the immigrant, as many Canadian writers have discovered (Michael Ondaatje and Daphne Marlatt among others), is such that one can never "return to what [one] was."

Only the gaps in our experience
The row of empty spaces   the clear
Omissions are the reality
And   like a sacred emptiness
Stretching into the winter steppes
Smother us with their established distances
So that the journey back is no more
Possible than the remembrance
Of an act of love   a show of fear
And the things we did   or think we did
In the landscape of the past   ("The Winter Meadows," *SC* 34)

On an obvious level, Ford builds the "gaps" or "empty spaces" into the lines of his poem. But silences, "gaps," absences are also the clear result of the dialectic between the two worlds which are superficially quite similar, yet in actuality quite different, "with their established distances." The disjunction created by the inability of complete identification one with the other is reflected in Ford's continued fascination with silence,[4] trying to fill in the gaps in understanding, between self and "other."

His recent poem, "A Temporary Destination," also suggests in its very title Ford's predicament. Again the tentative nature of his situation is underscored, and the tension between "temporary" (limited) and "destination" (settled goal) mirrors the continuing tension between belonging and alienation. "Returning from afar," following the route of earlier immigrants to Canada, Ford finds "The land, the lake, while ours, / . . . alien" (*DOP* 14-15). After a long sojourn abroad, Ford finds the cabin in Canada is foreign territory ("terror"tory).

This tension seems to be enfolded within the career-diplomat/poet who has spent more recent years at "home" abroad than at "home" in Canada. The facile title, *Our [Canada's] Man in Moscow*, conceals the troubling questions of identity that continue to concern Ford. Travelling through other lands and other languages, in all his professions Ford translates and records the "dialectic of self and other." As a type of immigrant poet, Ford has been translated from one world to another, and his poetics document this translation. The necessity of inter-lingual translation is, of course, based upon semantic differences, and Ford is adept at this type of translation as well. But "to translate" derives from the Latin "to bear across," and it is in this larger sense of transference that all of Ford's work can be viewed as a form of translation. George Steiner, in *After Babel, Aspects of Language and Translation*, argues for a "totalizing" definition of translation which provides "a theory of language" and by extension a theory of "*all* meaningful exchanges" (279). Ford's concerns about his ability to translate inter-lingually, or even the possibility of translation, are similar to his discomfort when changing one location for another. Kroetsch's and Mandel's troubling "duplicities" arise. Translation confirms that "The world . . . can be other" (Steiner 235). Steiner's discussion of the translator's experience is similar to Mandel's description of the immigrant's experience, and both in turn are similar to Ford's poetics of his own experience. "The craft of the translator is . . . deeply ambivalent: it is exercised in a radical tension between impulses to facsimile and impulses to appropriate recreation" (Steiner 235). Steiner speaks of "duplicity," "conceal[ment]," "unvoiced intent," and "silence" (46) as part of translation and language theory. A translation in Ford's first book of poetry, from the Russian of Sergei Yessenin, captures the doubleness of much of his own later poetry:

> I have returned to my own country.
> Who remembers me? who has forgotten?

I stand sadly, like a hunted stranger —
Now master of my own domain. ("Blue Mist," *WN* 29)

"Autumn in the Bourbonais," in Ford's latest book, describes his present situation "in the geographical / Centre of France." Here the smoke of leaves burning "is the same / As it was along the Ottawa." "It hurts me in the heart," Ford tells us (*DOP* 77). The dialectic continues in the shift of verb tenses from past to present. The smoke of remembrance is in the past, while the pain in his heart is very much in the present. Facing the world, the "other," Ford has spent his life translating, writing himself into understanding; for his readers, his poetry offers a way of participating in this process of transformation.

NOTES

[1] In "Writing West: On the Road to Wood Mountain" Mandel describes the doubleness of the regional writer, while in "Ethnic Voice in Canadian Writing" he describes the doubleness of the ethnic writer. Both essays eloquently describe Mandel's personal experiences as a poet and analyze those of other writers.

[2] "Ethnic Voice," 91. Mandel acknowledges that he is here paraphrasing M. L. Lautt, "Sociology and the Canadian Plains," in Richard Allen, ed., *A Region of the Mind*, Canadian Plains Studies Centre (Regina: Univ. of Saskatchewan, 1973), 138.

[3] Ford shares Dostoyevsky's images of asylums, crimes, guilt, and in particular doubles. Through Dostoyevsky Ford reads his own experiences of Leningrad, Dostoyevsky's St. Petersburg.

[4] Silence is a repeated image in Ford's poetry, continually associated with the northern landscapes he describes and, as in "The Winter Meadows," the disjunction created by the "immigrant" dialectic. In addition, silence is linked to creativity ("A Poem in the Night," *DWS* 39), Ford's poetics (the "spare word" already discussed), and politics. "Words . . . are . . . inadequate" ("The Quiet Wood," *DWS* 25) and silence can sometimes be as guilty of complicity as language: "The absence / Of the necessary word / Can wound well enough" ("Violence," *DWS* 67).

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THIS LAND . . . (CANADATA)

Rudiger Krause

nation lost in
an oversized land
ancient and raw
(materials — perhaps —
for a country)

a broad land
bony and buckling
skyward. eroded by
draining rivers and
seeping national insecurity

stretch-and-sew
mosaic of regions
patched and subsidized
across time-zones and
seasonally adjusted rates

* * *

we are naturalized in this haven
of refugees
where even natives are displaced

we are never just Canadians
dabbling
in identities in our just society

we would freely trade our national
debt
for irresponsible government