



# Theatrical Gestures and Speeches in Richard Ford's *A Multitude of Sins*

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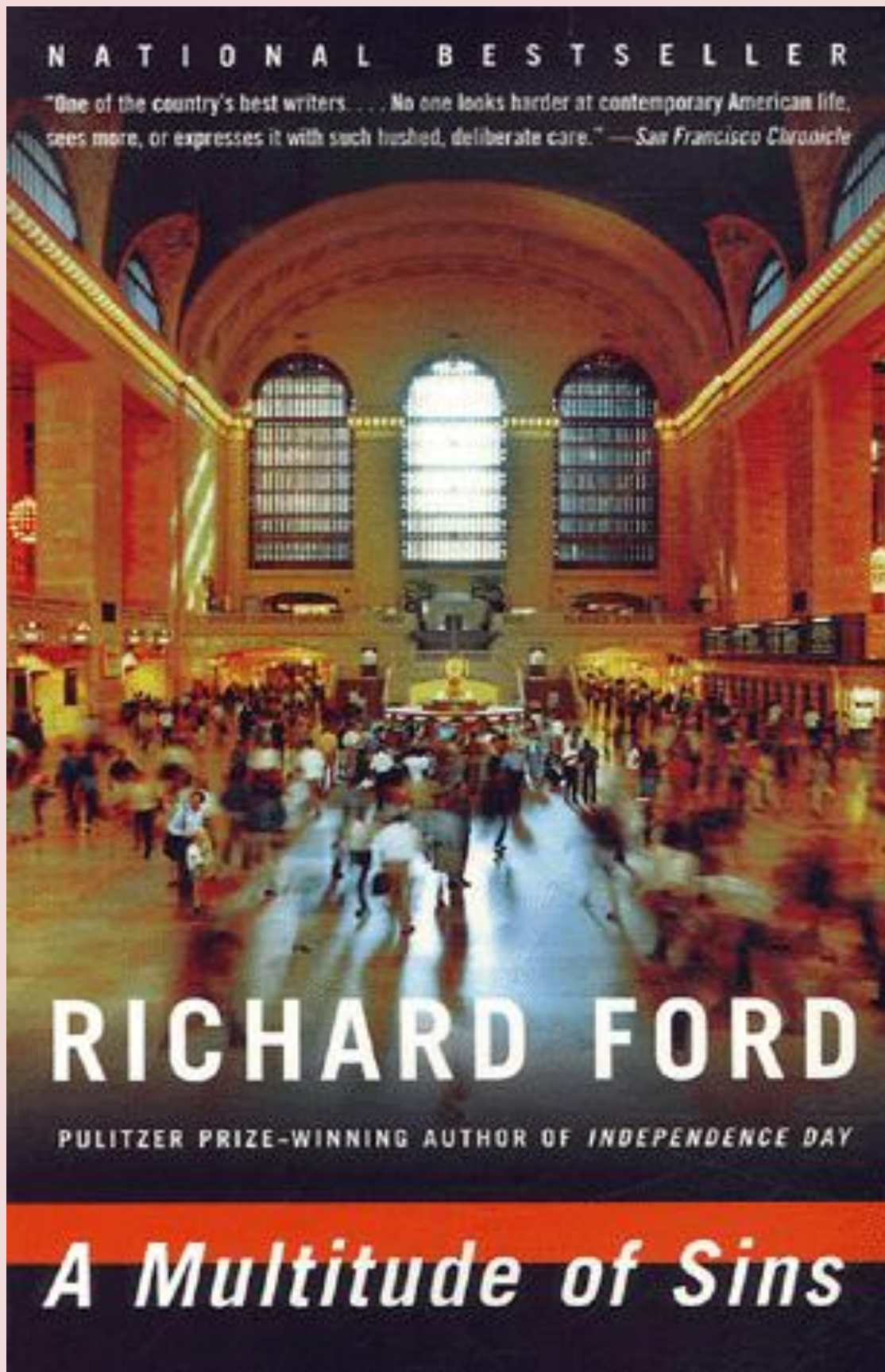
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**“Theatrical Gestures and Speeches in Richard Ford’s *A Multitude of Sins*”**

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Something happened between the first two collections of short stories which Richard Ford published in 1987 and 1997 (*Rock Springs* and *Women and Men*<sup>1</sup>), and the next collection, *A Multitude of Sins*<sup>2</sup>, which came out in 2001.

True, one finds common themes running through all three works — themes like adultery, taking the consequences of one’s own acts, the resistance to the idea of commitment, the “chanciness” of the major events which mark one’s life (as one narrator puts it in *Rock*, 187), and the difficulty of believing that one’s life is for real, or that one’s real life has started, and that it will not necessarily get any better than this. This last theme — what is real, or realer, or realest in their lives — is something of an obsession with many of Ford’s characters, one of its most striking manifestations being a passage in a story called “Occidentals,” in which Charley Matthews, an American who is estranged from his wife, feels lost on the streets of Paris, and experiences the angst of feeling foreign and out of place, 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*, 179)

Through the use of negatively connoted theatrical references (amateur actors who sound unnatural), the uncomfortable consequence of the situation in which Matthews has placed himself is here conveyed. In just the same way the narrator of a different story about another confused American staying in the City of Light explains that the protagonist, Martin Austin, a married man, refrains from holding one more time the hands of a Frenchwoman he has met and taken a fancy for because “[t]hat became playacting the second time you did it, and he had already touched her that way plenty of times” (“The Womanizer,” *Women*, 23).

But apart from these two references and about a half-dozen other ones, theatrical references are conspicuously absent from both *Rock* and *Women* while they form a strong network of echoes in *Multitude*, as if at some point Ford consciously decided<sup>3</sup> to make metaphorical use of the world of the theater and its most common manifestations.

Such a seemingly deliberate undertaking was taken to task in a book review published by the *New York Times* on 4 February 2002. Indeed, in this generally unflattering assessment of *Multitude*, signed by Michiko Kakutani, one reads:

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 in this paper that, in this third collection of stories, far from awkwardly weighing down his stories, it is precisely the powerful paradigm of theatricality which allows Ford 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 settings mentioned in the ten stories in *Multitude* to show that Ford literally sets his scenes in a theatrical way — in other words, that he often **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 we will see that, because of their peculiar or unnatural aura, theatrical gestures and speeches stand out to such a degree that they seem to **hide a meaning or intent of some sort**, which only the fragmentation and reordering of their constitutive parts allow Ford's characters to uncover, in a world without sufficient landmarks.

## PART 1: Theatricalizing space to set off the characters' gestures and speeches.

The negative connotation of the few theater-related examples quoted just now perfectly illustrates Anne Larue's definition of one aspect of theatricality as "une chose honteuse" (a shameful thing<sup>4</sup>). A theatrical gesture or speech is thought to belong to the world of the theater, defined here as a metaphorical exaggeration or as an unnatural representation of life, rather than a reference to the world of actuality.

Another acception of the term, though, allows the concept of theatricality to expand and exit the constraining limits of the stage. In this second sense theatricality does not necessarily require a performer to act in a striking way: it is enough that a viewer frames a part of the world that is before him, instilling meaning into what he sees, however unwilling or meaningless the persons or objects thus framed might be. In other words theatricality, like beauty in the well-known saying, is in the eye of the beholder, as etymology attests. Indeed, 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<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, any narrator's or character's focalization or viewpoint makes the advent of theatricality possible outside the theater thanks to a highly dynamic process<sup>6</sup>. Any spatial frame imposed on the world, or rather any spatial *framing* of the world, to account for this dynamic process, can confer a theatrical effect to everyday occurrences or phenomena, a process which we see largely at work in all of Ford's short stories.

"Privacy," the first story in the collection — and the first that Ford wrote chronologically — is a case in point. The vast empty space in which the narrator and his wife live 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, an "avant-garde theater director" (3), quit the premises, leaving behind him both the memory of the "nihilistic plays" he put on there, and a pair of silver opera glasses (5) with which the narrator starts spying on a female neighbor.

From the outset, Ford thus creates a visually striking scene, complete with three framings: the narrator's tall apartment window, the neighbor's window, and the lenses of the opera glasses focusing across vacant space. 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), and interpreted as a "ritual dance or a pattern of possibly theatrical movements" (5).

This opening finds an echo in all of the following stories in the sense that, in one way or another, windows always end up playing a part in them. One might remember the young couple 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 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" (179). Or we may have in mind the image of Madeleine, *studiously* positioned at the window of the Queen Elizabeth II Hotel room that Henry and she are about to leave, with the narrator placing special emphasis on Henry's perception that his lover is tantalizingly "unreadable" and always appears different from what she actually is (155).

To finish with this shortened list of occurrences, a direct link exists between the first and last stories in the collection in the sense that both stories play on the ideas of chasm and 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 (276).

These references to theatrically framed vignettes of tourists, foreigners, and places seen from various vantage points show how much time 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 might mean, leaving them with a frustrating sense of mystery even when their guesses are not totally off the mark. For that reason one can argue that theatricality is a means found by Ford to make manifest one of his key themes. By connecting people visually, by placing them in situations where they are, to paraphrase one narrator, like "two poles connected by my line of vision" (5), Ford tentatively establishes the link that he feels to be missing between individuals, a link which he tried to define more clearly in an interview with Sophie Majeski on 18 April 1996. As he put it then:

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<sup>7</sup>.

The urge to establish a different and sincere kind of intimacy, however, is frequently negated by the very locales in which the lovers in the stories 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" (151). Indeed, those locales are marked by the first kind of theatricality I alluded to previously, namely

the theatricality of fake places, like the imitation Cape Cod restaurant where Wales and Jena have their first dinner (12), or the lobby of the Queen Elizabeth II 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.” (165)

Feeling in some obscure way that adulterous affairs are not worth the real thing, that is married life, the characters confine themselves in closed, artificial spaces that both tranquilize and taunt them because, on the one hand, they perceive any absence of boundaries as a threat to their physical integrity (152), as the Grand Canyon episode proves to be for Frances in “Abyss,” while on the other hand they secretly resent having to demean themselves in this fashion, hiding away in the wings of the great show of life, moving constantly, and being made to “feel foreign in [their] own country” (191).

In the concluding story it is therefore quite perceptive of Frances to compare her affair with Howard to a game of Etch-a-Sketch (266), 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, corresponds to nothing more than the creation of crude, rather low-quality images which vanish the second you shake up the frame.



## **PART 2: 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 tend to become theatrical.

A striking fact in most of these stories is the tiny part occupied by sexual activity, as if adulterous affairs were based on something other than simply sex. Counterexamples to this general rule can be found, as in “Abyss” where Howard is clearly after nothing more than a roll in the hay. But as Ford himself said in an interview with Robert Birnbaum, “[i]t’s 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<sup>8</sup>.” Seeing that the male characters never sincerely confess, to themselves or to others, that they engage in extramarital affairs for the sexual part of it, one is forced to analyze the other reasons given, and to notice the amount of insincerity and theatricality involved in each case.

Not taking one’s pleasure but bringing something to one’s lover is one of the motives put forward by the texts. 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.” (17) The same idea prevails in the case of Howard who thinks he simply lets Frances “employ him,” and who regards himself as an “implement for what she wanted fixed” (258). Such relationships thus become exercises in role playing, in which the partners allegedly seek or grant protection, respect, or self-fulfillment, the problem being that the players’ masks uniformly 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 the need for those characters to redefine their personality, find a new meaning for intimacy or improve something in their lives. The trouble is they are hardly ever able to pinpoint any defect in their spouses, so that their experiments actually read like attempts that are less mature and real than married life. In “Charity,” though, we sense that Ford distributed sins more evenly, and that Nancy Marshall’s limitations are also involved, in the sense that she is too content to be a mere onlooker, standing on the sidelines, refusing to acknowledge the growing rift in her couple. At least until the final epiphanic moment when she stands revealed, holding a kite, no more a spectator but a part of the 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.” (219)

Since self-revelation plays an important role in these stories, one might argue that the main reason for so much glum soul-searching is simply that those characters lie to themselves. There is obviously a case here for the idea that the uncomfortable feeling taunting them all along is nothing more than guilt or the knowledge that they will need to take the moral consequences of their acts. In this case the theatricality of their on-the-side affairs, or of the world around them as they see it, acts as a form of punishment which spoils their pleasure, or as a distorted image which mirrors their own insincerity. For instance, in “Dominion,” just after his phone conversation with Madeleine’s alleged husband, Henry thinks to himself that the way she pats her cheeks softly looks theatrical (160). Or again, we are told that Jena’s love-making becomes “exactly as if it was all unscripted” soon after it has felt “vaguely theatrical, practiced” (23). To finish there is also theatricality in the perversity of the female characters who dream up the most provocative scenarios in order to push their lovers right to their limits, like asking them if they would kill their husband or what they would do if they suddenly died on the spot.

By refusing to close their eyes on the phoniness of their situation those female characters thus excel at giving moral slaps in the face. Two good illustrations of this are given 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?,”” 200), 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). 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. (209-10)

Liars of the worst sort ("bullshitters" as Nancy opines), those cheating men and women are nothing more than poorer versions of the movie actors and actresses whose names turn up here and there in the stories (e.g., Liv Ullman, Elliott Gould, Lon Chaney, Jr.) because they never own up to being fake, not even to themselves. So that in a way, like McKendall in "Calling," they all look out of place wherever they go, they all smile in an exaggerated way, all wear tuxedos and spectator shoes, as they are called, in the middle of a marsh, and clear their throats in a stagy way before resuming their high-falutin' talk (35-6). Their moments of painful introspection, confusion or pessimism therefore strike the reader as dramatic pauses in the ocean of insincerity which engulfs their lives, as if drama suddenly found a way of rearing its ugly head in the travesty of life they have chosen for themselves.

Putting it differently, one could say that the job of theatricality is to bring an additional element of comedy, or even ridicule, to the fore in order to negate the serious soul-searching that these characters are sometimes supposedly engaged in. 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 exaggeratingly vulgar speech, which does not match his age, the wrong props he is using (like his yellow aviator glasses), and something about his gait<sup>9</sup>. Not surprisingly when Henry regains his room he hears muffled noises coming from a TV somewhere in another room: the sound of "a studio audience laughing" (170), the exact equivalent of an omniscient narrator telling us that his protagonist has made a fool of himself. This narratorial comment is also felt in "Reunion," though in a more subtle way in the sense that this is a first-person narrative, which means that the reader does not necessarily expect the I-narrator to intersperse with symbolic details the part of the narrative in which the I-character is involved, as third-person narrators frequently do. This is exactly what happens here, though, the narrator telling us that his own voice is drowned by the "theatrically nasal male voice announcing the arrival from Poughkeepsie" (the scene is set in Grand Central), while Mack Bolger's "unfortunate" speech impediment deprives him of "a small measure of gravity" (71), thereby preventing the narrator from

focusing on their exchange. The reconciliation of sorts which 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.

### **PART 3: Finding hidden meaning or intent in theatrical gestures and speeches.**

What theatricality therefore does in these stories is establish a gap between the characters' avowed pursuits and the ethical points which the narrators make, in a framework which other writers could easily turn or 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<sup>10</sup>," does bear similitude to some Flannery O'Connor stories, for instance, in which the characters' spiritual blindness is mocked. Yet the *extremely* marked divergence between those two authors' works underlines the fact that Ford's characters always get 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<sup>11</sup>" certainly comes through.

One way Ford ennobles his characters is by having them witness events which seem to be charged with a meaning that they do not fully understand but which they feel they should try and discover. 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 which the reader is forced to interpret as signs left along the way to enlighten the characters. (Be it said in passing, basically anything Asian in these stories can be construed as a sign: the ancient, little, Asian-looking cedar tree which kills Frances (200), the smiling oriental face painted on the kite in "Charity" (214), the Japanese tourists exiting the L.L. Bean store in the thick of the night, for example — in the same way as native American characters often play the role of spiritual guides, even though they are aware of it.)

The same goes for the various road accidents detailed in the various narratives: the woman who is hit by a car in Chicago at the junction of Sheridan (the playwright?) and Ardmore (the Irish film studios?) Roads, the raccoon incident in "Under the Radar," or the rabbit killed in "Abyss." In all of those cases the characters are made to reflect on disturbing elements in their own human condition, like being finite, physical frailty, the absurdity of both life and death, and the appalling blindness or inevitability of Fate.

Now their 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 supposed to

warn them against any harm, bodily or mental, that could be done to them. In so doing they behave like spectators who are convinced that the props onstage must be symbolically calling out to them. Because they know so little about themselves and others — “only a laughably insignificant fraction,” one narrator asserts —, they feel the need to focus on whatever show the world has to offer.

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

Now it is interesting to notice that most of Ford’s characters battle with the concept of causes and consequences in their own personal way, even if they usually end up being more puzzled than enlightened at the end of the process. Their reaction, this time, is to fragment any movement or logical sequence of events into a myriad of smaller units so as to make more sense of, and maybe improve, their lives. In “Quality Time,” the question that is put is whether living life in slow motion could prevent one from making mistakes, while in “Puppy” Sallie wonders if changing one small part in her life, like her taste in paintings, would have made a substantial change in her life. In “Reunion,” one remembers that Johnny decides to impose himself on Beth’s husband when the fancy takes him that “the linkage of moments” 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 the brief moments of intimacy with Beth, became its own justification (74).

In this sense all these characters themselves are semiotized because Ford uses them as symptoms for 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 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. (132)

The visual or even cinematic dimension of the scene, added to the closeness of the focalization used here, makes it theatrical in the highest degree, especially when one remembers that both characters are

apt to envisage themselves and others in terms of types: Faith thinks of herself as “Hollywood. A fortress,” and ironically sums up her brother-in-law under the phrase: “A class act The Roger.” In return, “The Lawyer” is how Roger sees her (125, 123, and 132, respectively).

In *Multitude*, 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,” or when we read that a friend of Wales’s got “shot to pieces covering a skirmish in East Africa” (11). One also naturally remembers the bodily remains of Frances which “were 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” (176).

Now as Josette Féral argues in an article on “La théâtralité: Recherche sur la spécificité du langage théâtral,” no onstage mutilation of any kind can be considered theatrical because time and events must be reversible in the world of the theater<sup>12</sup>. But the theatricality of fiction naturally differs from the theatricality of the theater because fictional characters are not made of flesh and blood, so that the symbolism or semiotic meaning associated with them does not suffer in the least from any ruthless treatment which the short story writer decides to visit on them. On the contrary, to see Frances Bilandic die a horrifying death, despite her budding spiritual inclinations and the meaningful anchor painted on the front of her blouse, adds to the irony of the scene without spoiling the reader’s enjoyment.

The many theatrical gestures, speeches, and attitudes that one finds in these stories perfectly underscore the mostly binary dimension of human experience as Ford seems to see it. Indeed, the two effects of theatricality, exaggeration and semiotisation to put it briefly, find a direct echo in a fictional world made up of both fakeness and sincerity, confusion and the need for guidance, comedy and drama.

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

In that respect theatricality helps Ford’s fiction underline the scarcity of a few human qualities that he seems to hold in high esteem, like selflessness, consideration, tolerance, openness — which makes his outlook similar to that of another author in the following passage:

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.

Now this passage is excerpted from Chapter 8 of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, entitled "Covering a Multitude of Sins."



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<sup>1</sup> *Rock Springs: Stories*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987, 235 p.; *Women with Men*, London: Vintage, 2003, 255 p.

<sup>2</sup> For *A Multitude of Sins*, I'll be using the 286-page Vintage edition of 2002.

<sup>3</sup> During the symposium, Ford was surprised when a student remarked on the recurrence of such references in *Multitude*. On second thoughts he was able to remember *a few* such instances. It is therefore clear that theatricality is not a theme he *deliberately* decided to instill into this collection.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Larue, "Avant-propos," *Théâtralité et genres littéraires*, Poitiers: La Licorne, 1996, 3-17, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> See Claude Amey, "Théâtralité/Littéralité: théâtre, arts plastiques," *Théâtre*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 206 p.

<sup>6</sup> In "La théâtralité: Recherche sur la spécificité du langage théâtral," Josette Féral writes: "Le passage du littéraire au théâtral est toujours, et prioritairement, un travail spatial." See *Poétique*, No. 73, Sept. 1988, 347-61, p. 349.

<sup>7</sup> This interview is available online at: <http://www.salon.com/weekly/interview960708.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Go to <http://www.identitytheory.com/people/birnbaum37.html> for this interview. For Julie Myerson's book review of 13 October 2001, go to <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,568384,00.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "It was all too ridiculous. More theatricality." (166)

<sup>10</sup> In an interview with Dave Weich on 28 February 2002. See "One on One with Richard Ford," at: <http://www.powells.com/authors/ford.html>.

<sup>11</sup> In an interview with Ellen Kanner in February 2002. See: [http://www.bookpage.com/0202bp/richard\\_ford.html](http://www.bookpage.com/0202bp/richard_ford.html).

<sup>12</sup> Féral writes: "Parmi ces interdits, il en est un que nous pourrions appeler la *loi d'exclusion du non-retour*. Cette loi impose à la scène une réversibilité du temps et des événements qui s'oppose à toute mutilation ou mise à mort du sujet. Sont refusées ainsi comme n'appartenant plus au théâtre des scènes de morcellement de corps auquel certaines performances des années soixante firent appel : mutilation véritable sur la scène, tout comme la mise à mort théâtralisée d'animaux sacrifiés pour le plaisir de la représentation." (357-8)