



Ford, Charles Henri (1910?-2002), and Parker Tyler (1904-1974)

by Matthew D. Johnson

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Though they are most noted as members of New York's early twentieth-century avant-garde, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler are also the authors of a widely suppressed and largely unread experimental novel of 1930s gay life, *The Young and Evil*. It is a landmark in both gay literature and gay history.

Charles Henri Ford was likely born February 10, 1910 (though some sources claim he may have been born as early as 1908, and he himself claimed a birth year of 1913). He grew up in small towns throughout the South, where his parents ran hotels. By age thirteen, he was editing his first publication.

By his late teens, Ford, working from his home in Columbus, Mississippi, had managed to cultivate the attentions of such noted American poets as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Gertrude Stein, some of whom became contributors to his new journal, *Blues*. Early on, Ford had determined that he would one day be famous; he was already off to a roaring start.

Another contributor to *Blues* was Harrison Parker Tyler. Born March 6, 1904, in New Orleans, the son of an insurance salesman, Tyler shared with Ford a childhood on the move, living in larger cities all over the eastern United States. He completed high school but refused to enter college, determined to continue his education as a poet on the streets of New York, where he arrived in 1924.

By the time he began corresponding with Ford a few years later, Tyler had already published scores of book reviews and hundreds of poems, many of which received their first public hearing in the basement clubs of Greenwich Village, where Tyler lived. Tyler was known in the neighborhood as a dandy, going about in mascara and attired in cast-off clothing from the second-hand shops of the Lower East Side.

Tyler's letters apparently ignited in Ford a similar desire for the bohemian life, and in January 1930 he set out for New York. Tyler was waiting at the pier when Ford disembarked.

Ford had arrived in New York at a curious moment in time. With the stock market crash of 1929 only a few months in the past, the Depression was beginning to deepen. Nobody, it seemed, had any money or prospects, certainly not Ford or Tyler. Prohibition was still in full swing, though it was openly flouted by many, including New York's mayor Jimmy Walker.

Out of Prohibition came speakeasies, illegal quasi-private clubs, a number of which in the Village were sufficiently sheltered from scrutiny to become some of the first specifically gay and lesbian gathering places in North America. The more visible congregation of gay men in public places led to a vogue among New Yorkers for these "strange brothers."

A "pansy craze" had begun to sweep the city by early 1930, with audiences clamoring for outrageous drag performers in Broadway variety entertainments. Hundreds, including straight spectators, gathered for drag balls at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom. Hack writers churned out a spate of pulpy novels about "the third sex." With the crackdowns on homosexuality of the later 1930s still over the horizon, New York must have

seemed a marvel to Ford, barely twenty and fresh off a steamer from Savannah.

Ford did not stay in New York long, however. Six months after his arrival, he was back in Mississippi. In May 1931 he sailed for Paris, where he met Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and the man who became his sometime lover for the next twenty-three years (as well as his eventual illustrator), Pavel Tchelitchew. During the next year, Ford finished crafting his first book: a highly impressionistic *roman à clef* about his short time in New York with Tyler entitled *The Young and Evil*.

The novel (or more accurately, the collection of loosely related episodes involving the same core group of characters) opens with a young man from the South disembarking in New York City. Here he meets a friend, who introduces him to a host of other friends. This queer coterie spend much of their time becoming uproariously drunk at parties, swapping beds and apartments, avoiding the hostile attentions of both the police and the sailors they cruise in the park, eating on the cheap at all-night "coffeepots," generally looking fabulous in make-up and gowns, and occasionally creating art.

What is most remarkable about the book is neither the plot nor the characterization, nor even Ford's richly evocative, if often self-referential and oblique, dialogues. (Many of these dialogues were lifted from Tyler's letters to Ford, which, Ford claimed, is why he assigned partial authorship of *The Young and Evil* to Tyler.)

What is most remarkable is the candid and thoroughly unapologetic manner in which gay characters (nearly every principal character in the story) are presented. There are few precedents in modern literature for this straightforward, if campy, approach. No attempt is made to account for the etiology of the characters' sexual inclinations, as is so often the case in other contemporary works. No effort is made to improve their faults, sanitize their behavior, or plead for the audience's sympathy. Here we see, warts and all, a group of impulsive, reckless, occasionally vicious but always earnest young men, as well as a panorama of the milieu they inhabit.

Needless to say, in 1932 such a book was not warmly welcomed by publishers. The manuscript suffered several rejections in Britain and the United States before finally being optioned by Paris's Obelisk Press, a firm noted for committing to print such famously "unpublishable" works as Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*.

In August 1933 a limited edition of 2500 copies of *The Young and Evil* appeared. Five hundred of these were promptly destroyed by British customs. American customs officials, meanwhile, returned to France all shipments of the book that arrived in the United States. The book received only a single review in its authors' native country (in *The New Republic*, which praised it), and was generally not read by American audiences until its republication in the United States in editions issued in 1960, 1974, and 1988.

Though it is considered a milestone in the history of homosexuality and in homosexual literature, *The Young and Evil* was an early, minor outing for Ford and Tyler at the outset of lengthy and divergent careers.

In 1940, Ford returned to New York and with Tyler collaborated on the magazine *View*, which became an important organ of both the surrealist and the abstract expressionist movements. While Ford went on to make experimental films and publish seventeen volumes of his own verse, Tyler became noted as a film critic.

Tyler's *The Hollywood Hallucination* (1944) was followed by several other books of criticism, including *Screening the Sexes* (1972), an early work on homosexuality in film. Significantly, Gore Vidal made "the great film critic Parker Tyler" the obsession of his heroine Myra Breckenridge in his eponymous 1968 novel. Tyler died in 1974.

Ford continued to write (even spending time in Kathmandu to work on his memoirs) and give interviews to literary and cultural historians into his nineties. He died in New York on September 27, 2002.

A documentary by James Dowell and John Kolomvakis, *Sleep in a Nest of Flames: A Portrait of a Poet, A Portrait of a Century* (2000), looks at avant-garde twentieth-century art and literature through the eyes of Charles Henri Ford.

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