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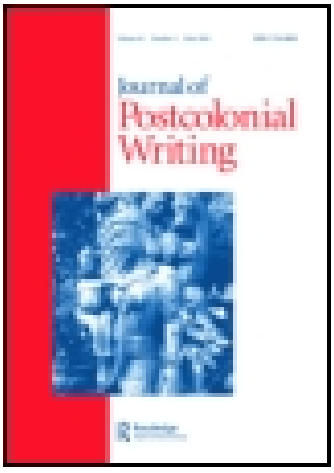

Journal of Postcolonial Writing
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjpw20

Compromise and resistance in postcolonial writing: E.M. Forster's legacy

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Published online: 28 Jul 2015.

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To cite this article: Hedley Twidle (2015): Compromise and resistance in postcolonial writing: E.M. Forster's legacy, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2015.1067949

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1067949

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Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 2015

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REVIEW

Compromise and resistance in postcolonial writing: E.M. Forster's legacy, by Alberto Fernández Carbajal, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 264 pp., £58.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 1372 8892 9

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In Zadie Smith's 2008 essay on Forster, one novelist considers the difficulty of placing another within literary history: Forster is not an Edwardian but not quite a Modernist either; not reactionary but hardly a radical; in fact, Smith implies, it is far easier to say what he is *not* than what he is. She goes on to suggest the divergent inflections that can be given to his "middling line":

> At times – when defending his liberal humanism against fundamentalists of the right and left – that middle line was, in its quiet, Forsterish way, the most radical place to be. At other times – in the laissez-faire cosiness of his literary ideas – it seemed merely the most comfortable. (Smith 2008, 8)

The passage is used as an epigraph to Alberto Carbajal's wide-ranging and textured account of Forster's afterlives within the work of various 20th-century writers. I found the choice of Smith's essay interesting not just for its content, but also its playful, public voice: a non-academic response that at one point calls its subject a "tricky bugger" (Smith, 2008, 8); that risks (like Forster's own literary criticism) the danger of being "middlebrow", but which might also be able to say (within a few undisciplined lines) more than whole articles of more accredited scholarship.

Even as Carbajal's account more carefully and methodically assesses the charges against Forster's liberal humanism – principally that the novelist's creed of personal relations leads to political evasiveness, infantilism and ideological muddle – *E.M. Forster's Legacy* seems to remain in broad sympathy with Smith's reading. It challenges reductionist accounts of Forster's work, and tries to show how various postcolonial writers (among them Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai and Michael Ondaatje) articulate his legacies "with more generosity and nuance than those postcolonial critics who categorically label Forster as philosophically naïve, formally adventurous or ideologically and discursively bound to colonialism" (4).

As such, Carbajal sets aside the "compulsory counterpoint" (5) that has dominated theoretical models of how postcolonial texts engage imperial predecessors for a less tendentious, more multidirectional and worldly account. His account is able to take in not just explicit references to Forster (Salman Rushdie's secular Dr Aadam Aziz in *Midnight's Children*, for example, or Smith's own updating of *Howards End* for the email age in *On Beauty*), but also more subtle, ghostly and even unconscious returns of his forms, figurations and fictional sensibilities – "the manifold and spectral lessons of the dissenting text of late colonialism" (206). In one example, a more indirect debt of Nadine Gordimer to Forster is traced through a spatial reading of her 1953 debut *The Lying Days*. Carbajal draws out how Forster's meditations on a liberal education

become an important touchstone for Gordimer, even as the latter comes to view it as an untenable institution in the changed historical situation that she writes from.

Each of the case studies is finely done – the sections on Rushdie are particularly detailed, even drawing out how the spectre of Mrs Moore from *A Passage to India* may be playing across the textual surface of *The Moor's Last Sigh.* This is read here as a disenchanted sequel to *Midnight's Children*; its depictions of communalist violence in India are retrospectively linked to the moments in which Forster's work (most famously the end of *Passage*) seem to have been posing the longer, post-anti-colonial question of what it means for radically different sociocultural groupings to inhabit shared national space in the postcolony.

Carbajal's scholarly monograph comes up against the difficulty that Smith can side-step: that is, the difficulty of having to argue that literary works are more supple responses than postcolonial theory while nonetheless being required to use the language of the latter. As such, the work occasionally falls into some of the academic reflexes that a 21st-century Forster might have gently satirized: there is a rather laboured analysis of pillow talk within *The English Patient*; an inevitable deference to Derrida; and also the creeping suggestion toward the end (how well I remember it from my own PhD) that rewriting a minor chapter in literary history might just help save the world.

Nonetheless, the work closes with important reflections – via Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Neil Lazarus – on what a renovated, renewed or (in Carbajal's term) cosmopolitan humanism might look like: a humanism extended to all of humanity. Finally, it is worth noting that the South African author Damon Galgut's recent reimagining of Forster's life (unaccountably passed over for the Man Booker Prize this year) confirms Carbajal's sense that imaginative writers in the postcolony remain drawn to this "middling" novelist. Galgut's *Arctic Summer* (2014) – in part an account of the genesis of *A Passage to India* – is further confirmation of how Forster's humanistic vision persists. Carbajal's work asks us to reconsider an elusive, semi-comic fictional grammar in which the lack of explicit political reference might sustain a political half-life that is all the more serious and enduring.

Reference

Smith, Zadie. 2008, August 14. "E.M. Forster: Middle Manager." *New York Review of Books* LV (13): 8–12.

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