

Nothing Extraordinary: E. M. Forster and the English Limit

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A Passage to India is a book I taught to first-year students at the University of Cape Town for a number of years; but I want to reassure you that this won't be a rehashing of old lecture notes, and that there is no danger of me confusing you with that younger audience. At least one of you may actually have read the whole novel before this lecture. For many undergraduates, I have come to realize, the role of the lecturer is to provide a kind of sales pitch: the literary equivalent of a film trailer, coming to a lecture theatre near you.

With this book it was a hard sell. "Absolutely hated *Passage to India*," "A complete drag and the plot was *boring*" – this was the gist of many feedback forms. One student came up to me and complained that this was a novel in which nothing actually *happens*.

I want to take this very seriously today, the idea of nothing actually happening. Because that student was absolutely right, and making a common complaint about Forster. He is a writer of diminuendos and anti-climaxes: narrative pay-offs don't come when they should. "E. M. Forster never gets any further than warming the teapot," said Katherine Mansfield, "He's a rare fine hand at that. Feel this teapot. It is not beautifully warm? Yes, but there ain't going to be no tea."¹

Forster was, famously, embarrassed by the necessity of having to tell a story, weary of the whole vulgar business of plotting. "Yes – oh dear yes – the novel tells a story," he sighed in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), "and I wish

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it was not so, that it could be something different – melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form.” He went on: “For, the more we look at the story (the story that is a story, mind), the more we disentangle it from the finer growths that it supports, the less we shall find to admire. It runs like a backbone – or may I say a tapeworm, for its beginning and end are arbitrary.”² And when we disentangle this particular novel from the finer growths that it supports, we see how stubbornly it resists paraphrase, and how difficult it is to pitch as a movie trailer.

What is it about? The cover of the current Penguin classics edition gives us two women in the mouth of a cave; they are dressed in white and carrying parasols. Taking our cue from this, we can say that *A Passage to India* is about Mrs Moore and Adela Quested. Adela has gone to India to find a husband, taking a passage through Suez on what was unkindly termed “the fishing fleet.” Like her descendants with their backpacks and Lonely Planets, she wants to see the *real* India – a sentiment that produces wry smiles from the old India hands at the British club in Chandrapore. She is chaperoned by Mrs Moore, mother of Magistrate Ronnie Heaslop, the fiancé to be.

But it is not really about that. The marriage plot is derailed and becomes something else. Mistakes are made, false accusations fly. Within the claustrophobic passages of the Marabar Caves, things go disastrously wrong. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, mistakes and social misreadings are cleared up. Having provided the reader with a pleasurable delay, these points of narrative resistance are removed and the plotting moves with stately assurance toward marriage – as it must in the strict literary definition of a comedy. But in *A Passage to India*, the muddle is never really dispelled. It keeps hanging in the air, like the echo of the caves that so haunts Mrs Moore, causing her to melt away from the action and expire, unexpectedly and meaninglessly, on the passage home.

The poster for David Lean’s 1984 film of the novel also gives a clue to what it is not. The production was rightly skewered by Salman Rushdie on charges of colonial nostalgia and Raj revivalism. Professor Godbole, the enigmatic Brahman, is played by Sir Alec Guinness, painted brown. In South Africa we are used to seeing our culture heroes played by foreign actors: Denzel Washington as Steve Biko, Michael Caine as F. W. de Klerk, Idris Elba as Nelson Mandela (forthcoming). But we have yet to endure the spectacle of a Struggle icon played by a Hollywood actor in blackface.³ Lean treats Forster’s novel as a colonial romance, an oh-so English costume drama, when it is anything but. Although (and perhaps this accounts for some of the undergraduate antipathy) it may look like one at first glance.

So what is it? Near the heart of the novel is the intense but prickly friendship between the Muslim doctor Aziz and the liberal schoolmaster

Fielding. And this must be in part a coded, fictionalised account of Forster's life-long (but sexually unrequited) love for a man named Syed Ross Masood, whom he tutored as a young man, and to whom the novel is dedicated. "My own debt to him is incalculable," Forster wrote in an obituary tribute: "He woke me up out of my suburban and academic life" and dispelled the orientalist trappings that the Raj revivalism of the 1980s sought to reintroduce: "Until I met him, India was a vague jumble of rajahs, sahibs, babus and elephants, and I was not interested in such a jumble; who could be?"⁴

The intense, sometimes erotic charge between Fielding and Aziz has often led the novel to be read as a reflection on the possibility of friendship across cultures, or a broader allegory on Anglo-Indian relations during the final phase of British rule. These, though, were interpretations that Forster tried to head off. The book "is not really about politics, though it is the political aspect of it that caught the general public and made it sell."⁵ In a letter to Masood of September 1922, he wrote that he began it as a bridge of sympathy between East and West, "but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable." With a winning frankness (but also a rather annoying tendency to deflate his literary achievements) he continued: "I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits, and I am not interested whether they sympathize with one another or not."⁶

Not a marriage plot, then; not a costume drama. Not any easy allegory about East and West; not a political essay in any simple sense – not that we should ever trust a writer on his own work. We have already begun to stack up the negatives – nots, nevers, nors and nothings – and they continue to multiply in the opening lines of the novel:

Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. There are no bathing-steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river front, and bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest.⁷

At first glance this seems to be a standard establishing shot: a confident third-person narrator pans across the topography, slowly releasing the details that build a credible fictional world. In fact, it is not unlike the prose you might find in the Lonely Planet, delivering its verdict on some

nondescript, north Indian town that a gap-year pilgrim might overnight in on the way to somewhere more mystical.

But from the first word, the confident voice is being troubled by something odd, something awkward in the prose. We begin with an anomaly – “Except for the Marabar Caves” – a special case; but it is an exception to something framed in the negative: a town that presents “nothing extraordinary.” That is: an unspoken subtext or paraphrase would suggest that the Marabar Caves are extraordinary. But the syntax goes out of its way to avoid putting it like this, and so does the rest of the paragraph, the chapter – the entire novel in fact, carrying forward this insistence on negative constructions until the famous last words: “‘No, not yet’ [. . .] ‘No, not there.’”⁸

Why all this negativity and negation? Why the convoluted syntax? Why is *A Passage to India* a work about which it is so much easier to say what it is *not*, than what it *is*?

Such questions take us from the smallest details of grammar to the biggest philosophical questions that the novel puts to itself. Forster’s “negative capability” (to adapt John Keats),⁹ his skill in wielding negative constructions, operates on many levels, and produces many different effects. It also allows us to see why *Passage* is such an uncommon, uncanny text, and one that is hard to place in literary history.

Walter Benjamin wrote that all great works of literature either invent a genre or dissolve one.¹⁰ Literary critics generally pay more attention to the first category: the newness and invention that is embodied in the word ‘novel,’ or the creative ruptures of early twentieth-century Modernism, with its manifestos, avant-garde iconoclasm and rejections of the old. But *A Passage to India*, I think, presents us with the rarer, more delicate case of a genre dissolving, dissolving before our very eyes. The result is a great text as problem text, one that arrives at the limit of ‘the English novel’ and points towards, even if it cannot achieve this itself, ‘the novel in English:’ the proliferation of postcolonial fiction in the second half of the twentieth century.

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To plot a longer literary trajectory, let us return for a moment to Austen, of whom Forster was a keen reader. If we look at Franco Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, we see his mock-serious attempts to map the geography of her novels. “Beginnings,” “Endings” and “Narrative complications” all cluster in a small portion of the British Isles: the south of

England, imagined as a network of country estates, spread across the landscape. Another map shows us the sources of “Colonial wealth in British sentimental novels:” *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park* are suddenly linked to the Caribbean; *Jane Eyre* points to Madeira; India is the source for several largely forgotten melodramas like Amelie Opie’s *Appearance Was Against Her* and Susannah Gunning’s *The Gypsy Countess*.¹¹

A Passage to India uproots and relocates Forster’s early, very English and Austen-like comedies of manners to an entirely different geography and social context. Or perhaps (in light of the second map) it is more accurate to say that it makes explicit the structures of colonial wealth and power that have always underpinned a certain kind of story that southern England liked to tell itself, circa 1800 to 1900.

Austen remarked that only one or two families were necessary to set a novel in motion; and she spoke famously of “the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush.”¹² But *Passage* expands the horizon of novelistic attention and awareness immeasurably: it is a book of landforms and caves. It extends to mud, rivers, the sun, ghosts, animal life, insects and the inorganic world. If the three sections of the book can be taken to signal different religions, they also emerge out of the seasons of the Indian year. After the cool hospitality of “Mosque” and the fractious heat of “Caves,” we have the epilogue, “Temple,” where the prose will try to feel its way into the meanings, and the meaninglessness, of a Hindu ceremony celebrating the birth of Krishna. The rains have arrived and suddenly the text is as flooded as the monsoon landscape all around us:

Some hundreds of miles westward of the Marabar Hills, and two years later in time, Professor Narayan Godbole stands in the presence of God. God is not born yet – that will occur at midnight – but He has also been born centuries ago, nor can He ever be born, because He is the Lord of the Universe, who transcends human processes. He is, was not, is not, was. He and Professor Godbole stood at opposite ends of the same strip of carpet.

‘Tukaram, Tukaram,
Thou art my father and mother and everybody.
Tukaram, Tukaram,
Thou art my father and mother and everybody.
Tukaram, Tukaram,
Thou art my father and mother and everybody.
Tukaram . . .’¹³

In many ways, Forster's inherited literary template simply cannot cope with this flood: it senses its own conceptual horizon, and has found a way to be unusually frank about this. The novel appears shortly after 1922, the great Modernist year of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Wasteland* – which also travels to India's Gangnetic plain in search of spiritual rejuvenation: "Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves / Waited for rain, while the black clouds / Gathered far distant, over Himavant."¹⁴ On the one hand, Forster's work sounds a Modernist note in the way it grapples with the incommunicability of experience – and the personal struggle that it took to finish the novel was immense. It came 14 years after *Howard's End*, and almost never came at all. Between these two utterly different works, Forster worked for the Red Cross in Alexandria during the First World War and visited India twice, beginning the manuscript there in 1912.

When he returned in 1921 as the Private Secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas Senior, he said of the earlier draft pages that they would "wilt and go dead" when confronted with the place they purported to evoke: "The gap between India remembered and India experienced was too wide."¹⁵ Also, if we look at a timeline of Forster's life, we see a rather extraordinary thing: that he lived for almost 50 years after *Passage* and never published another work of fiction in his lifetime – as if he had lost faith in the whole project of the novel as he understood it.¹⁶ He cloistered himself in Cambridge, and Virginia Woolf complained that he spent his days rowing old ladies on the river.

On the other hand, there is a major stylistic difference between *Passage* and the metropolitan avant-garde. In the wake of the First World War, writers like Beckett, Eliot, Joyce, Stein and Woolf opt for a range of formal techniques that seek to model disconnection, randomness and non-linear association on the page, in 'real time' as it were: via montage, jump-cuts, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, pastiche, formal fragmentation. Forster, though, would never do something so jejune as to break syntax in order to convey psychological or social brokenness. In moving so far from the European metropolis and dealing with racial hurt and humiliation, *A Passage to India* sets itself greater challenges than many of the feted works of high Modernism. But in doing so it refuses a whole range of techniques that seek to model – in a formal, mimetic way – cognitive rupture via linguistic disarray. That is to say: Forster's novel addresses itself to the impenetrability, incoherence and incommunicability of human experience, but it does so in full sentences.

Such sentences – grammatically coherent, immaculately styled – are then carrying an unusually heavy load. They combine Modernist inscrutability with an Austenite prose surface; the most radical scepticism about inherited

cultural forms mingles with the most intense stylistic control. And in this sense the thousands of negative constructions scattered through the book might be seen as a kind of tic, a signal that the language is being placed under pressure, and asked to absorb far more than it is used to, or made for.

“The use of negative forms opens constantly towards indeterminacy,” writes Gilliam Beer: “To say what something is *not* leaves open a very great area of what it might be.”¹⁷ A double negative (‘not bad’) does not equal the positive (‘good’), and within this asymmetry lies the gap through which *A Passage to India* will try to cram more and more into a certain kind of English sentence. As with the avowedly anti-Modernist Philip Larkin, the prose will often inhabit the most deceptively simple language, even a cliché, and then turn it inside out. In the poem “Talking in Bed,” “dark towns heap up on the horizon” and two lovers who should be in the heart of intimacy struggle to find a way of speaking to each other:

None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.¹⁸

True, kind. Not untrue, not unkind. The poem’s whole emotional force resides in the space between those opposed pairs. The quintessential English understatement, normally used to disarm and neutralize, is made to yield a different effect.

George Orwell dismissed double negatives (or litotes, to use the technical term) as a sign of bad writing. In “Politics and the English Language,” he complained of how “banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not un-* formation.”¹⁹ It is certainly a charge that can be levelled at some of Forster’s more purple passages. But while preparing for this lecture, I realised that capably handled negatives, whether single or double, can yield intriguing literary results in all kinds of places.

“She may think that I have forgotten her,” sings Bob Dylan, “Don’t tell her it isn’t so” – which derails a pop ballad, and requires careful deciphering. “I have not bummed across America / with only a dollar to spare, one pair / of busted Levi’s and a bowie knife,” writes Simon Armitage: “I have lived with thieves in Manchester.” It is a poem which eschews the Taj Mahal and other gap-year pursuits for skimming stones across a lake on the moors close to home; and as in Forster’s novel, the language falters when it tries to express the inexpressible:

I have not toyed with a parachute cord
 while perched on the lip of a light aircraft;
 but I held the wobbly head of a boy
 at the day centre, and stroked his fat hands.

And I guess that the lightness in the throat
 and the tiny cascading sensation
 somewhere inside us are both part of that
 sense of something else. That feeling, I mean.²⁰

James Fenton's "A German Requiem" begins as follows:

It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down.
 It is not the houses. It is the spaces in between the houses.
 It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist.²¹

What does it mean? That we are formed more by the things we no longer remember than those we do; that all kinds of memory are also forms of mass forgetting? It is a cryptic poem, but its ghost structures find an echo in a place like Cape Town, where so many people were planned out of existence. Or, still thinking about this city, here are some words from Albert Camus: "Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking I should like never to be unfaithful either to the second or the first."²² How much less that would have been had it read: ". . . I should like to be faithful both to the second and to the first." *The Plague* also begins in a dull, heat-struck colonial town where something extraordinary will happen; and like Forster's, Camus's work explores the possibilities of empathy in an unjust world. In both, a private, beleaguered liberalism encounters the psychic damage wrought by an immense, trans-individual structure of racialized oppression – the kind of negation diagnosed with such force by Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko.

Finally, there is this virtuoso display, from a United States Defense Department briefing of 12 February 2002: "We know there are known knowns: there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns: that is to say we know there are things we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know."²³ Donald Rumsfeld shows promise here as a literary critic. In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood outlines a similar argument to distinguish between reliably unreliable narrators in literature (fairly common) and the rarer, more slippery case of unreliably unreliable narrators. I want to deal quickly with the known unknowns in *A Passage to India* before getting to the unknown unknowns – those moments operating on the outer envelope of awareness.

What happens in the Marabar Caves? It is one of the most famous absences in English literature: a well-known known unknown. If we shift the emphasis of that student's complaint, we can say that *Passage* is less a text in which nothing *happens* than one in which *nothing* happens. That is to say, a quality of nothingness is bodied forth by the language. Nothing attaches to the caves, we are told, a nothingness that may be extraordinary. At the mid-point in the novel, Mrs Moore goes into them and a kind of narrative anti-matter is introduced into the fictional universe, dematerializing everything it touches:

The more she thought over it, the more disagreeable and frightening it became.... The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, 'Pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value.' If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same – 'ou-boum.'²⁴

Just after this, Adela enters the Marabar with Dr Aziz, and what happens there remains a mystery. "I tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an unexplained muddle," Forster wrote to William Plomer in 1934: "When asked what happened there, *I don't know*."²⁵ So nothing does indeed have value, at least as a plot device, or a compositional principle. "My writing mind is therefore a blur here – i.e. I will it to remain a blur [. . .] I wouldn't have attempted it in other countries, which though they contain mysteries or muddles, manage to draw rings round them."²⁶

There is, of course, a dismaying Orientalism to this – another reason why one should never trust the teller, only the tale. It makes India stand for the muddled, the inscrutable, the impenetrable. It produces the kind of "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" which so annoyed F. R. Leavis,²⁷ and later Chinua Achebe, about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?"²⁸ It is also disingenuous on Forster's part, since at one point, if you consult the manuscripts, he did know what happened in the Marabar Caves. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say: he didn't yet realize that he didn't know.

In any case, I won't go into what he wrote in that early draft. I want to tiptoe around the entire central section of the novel and all the problems that it throws up for a certain kind of literary analysis. I can use that ponderous

academic locution and say: “This is not the place to consider the problems that a sympathetic postcolonial analysis of the novel creates for a feminist approach” (because excusing Indian men means blaming English women). Or indeed, the fact that Forster’s most pointed animus towards the English colonial presence is often aimed at the ladies of the Club (while the men come across as largely decent sorts) – that is not within the scope of this lecture. It’s a cheap rhetorical trick, of course, because while saying that you won’t be doing it, you do it anyway.

What are the unknown unknowns? This is a novel best approached via its smaller details and distinctive linguistic textures, the finer growths that it deposits or secretes in obscure and unexpected locations within the text. “Adventures do occur, but not punctually,” we are told early on, and the same applies to the insights that the novel releases obliquely, unexpectedly.²⁹

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A Passage to India is one of the few books I have read more than twice, and what convinces me of its (problematic) greatness is that it is a shape-shifting text. It reads differently each time: different parts come into relief; others recede. The centre of gravity moves and re-sites itself. As a teenager on the Highveld, I was captivated by the novel’s landscapes, the temporal and geological reach of Forster’s prose. In the opening of “Caves” we are told about “the high places of Dravidia:” older than anything in the world, never covered by water, watched for countless aeons by the sun, who “may still discern outlines that were his before our globe was torn from his bosom. If flesh of the sun’s flesh is to be touched anywhere, it is here, among the incredible antiquity of these hills.”³⁰ It is a sentence that shows how far we have moved from Austen’s topography, and one of many in the novel where the narrative camera suddenly pulls back, vertiginously, reminding us of everything that can never be contained in its chosen form.

Studying the book as an A-level set-work in Sussex, I had an English teacher who was very English (tweed jackets with elbow pads, bow ties) but also immersed in Buddhism, Sanskrit and the Bhagavad Gita. He drew out the “ou-boummmmmm” of the caves into a full yogic mantra, and pointed out the sly comedy of why Fielding and Professor Godbole are late for the expedition to the caves: because the latter “had miscalculated the length of a prayer.”³¹ He performed Godbole’s speeches in an Indian accent, most memorably the one at the end of Mr Fielding’s disastrous tea party, when the Brahman chooses what seems the most inopportune and socially awkward moment to sing his song about the milkmaid calling Shri Krishna: “Come,

come, come, come . . .” The sniggering of some class members did not dissuade him; he intoned each syllable until we all fell still:

‘But he comes in some other song, I hope?’ said Mrs Moore gently.

‘Oh no, He refuses to come,’ repeated Godbole, perhaps not understanding her question. ‘I say to him, Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come.’

Ronny’s steps had died away, and there was a moment of absolute silence. No ripple disturbed the water, no leaf stirred.³²

The next time I read the book was in India, on a gap-year complete with a backpack and Lonely Planet. Teaching English in a nondescript town called Jaisinghpur, I was struck by the creativity and felicity that the language took on in Indian mouths. Like the cricket which the students played obsessively during breaks, it had become something utterly and self-sufficiently Indian, entirely unconcerned with comparisons to its historical source. Forster’s work helped me to realize this because of the obvious pleasure it takes in Indian English. Here the novel marks a break with much empire writing about the subcontinent: a canon in which the figure of the *babu* Indian (the native clerk who has book knowledge and uses English in ornate but half-baked ways) is held up as a figure of ridicule.

In the works of Rudyard Kipling and many lesser writers committed to the ideology of “the white man’s burden,” this is how cultural texts police a central paradox of the colonial project: that while ‘progress’ in the image of the colonizer was to be encouraged, racial divides should remain in place – native subjects were to be “white but not quite” in the words of Homi Bhabha.³³ Hence the ridicule and animus to push away those who begin to use and over-use your language with skill and pleasure – a literary version of what Freud called the narcissism of minor differences.

A Passage to India, though, is remarkably free from prescriptive ideas about what English should be, and full of finely rendered conversations. After the portentous opening chapter, we are dropped suddenly into a world of social interchange and linguistic ease as Aziz relaxes with his friends:

‘No, that is where Mrs Turton is so skilful. When we poor blacks take bribes, we perform what we are bribed to perform, and the law discovers us in consequence. The English take and do nothing. I admire them.’

‘We all admire them. Aziz, please pass me the hookah.’

‘Oh, not yet – hookah is so jolly now.’

‘You are a very selfish boy.’ He raised his voice suddenly, and

shouted for dinner. Servants shouted back that it was ready. They meant that they wished it was ready, and were so understood, for nobody moved.³⁴

In just a few lines of social performance – comic, painful – the text is able to set in motion a range of shimmering ironies with regard to race, gender, class and caste. Such passages also set up the novel’s odd rhythm: vast and inscrutable landscapes, then zooming in to the micro-world of social interaction. Cosmic meditations reaching on the birth of the solar system – then back to tea parties, gossip, “the third act of *Cousin Kate*.” In the passage above, it is not clear whether Aziz and Mahmoud Ali are speaking English, or Urdu heard ‘behind’ the language on the page; but in either case, we see English remade and repurposed – not doomed to endless mimicry (as in V. S. Naipual’s darker moments) but rather a site of creative hybridity which gestures toward the work of Garcia Marquez, Rushdie and their many imitators.

As an undergraduate, I came to feel that this reading was too easy (and also got over my adolescent crush on magical realism). The hookah-smoking is after all interrupted by a rude summons from Major Callendar, and soon Aziz finds himself caught in a net of roads:

But at last he was rattling towards the civil lines, with a vivid sense of speed. As he entered their arid tidiness, depression suddenly seized him. The roads, named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India. He felt caught in their meshes.³⁵

We have a similar net here in Cape Town, a more literary one, stretching across the suburbs of Woodstock, Salt River and Observatory. TENNYSON, POPE, DRYDEN and SWIFT run one way, bisected by ADDISON, BURNS, GOLDSMITH and SHELLEY. Coming off Lower Main Road, we find the only writer who might possibly have walked down the street named after him: KIPLING.

For the more hard-nosed critic, Aziz will always be caught and demeaned in the meshes of Forster’s text. And here it is interesting to trace the divided responses from Indian critics: appreciative remarks regarding its attempt to understand the subcontinent’s social and religious systems, set against the accusation that it makes a character like Aziz seem querulous and child-like – an “inverted toadie” in the words of Nirad Chaudhuri.³⁶ How, he asks, could Forster write a novel set in this period and make the main Indian character a Muslim? Why is there no voice of emergent Hindu nationalism? Questions of artistic representation inevitably become entangled with

matters of political representation. Reading the novel back in the tragically delayed postcolony that is South Africa, Forster's novel can seem even more naïve and hopelessly liberal. If we have heard the message of Biko and Fanon, how seriously can we take his insistence on the sanctity of personal relations?

This, I realized while sitting through graduate seminars, is the kind of approach rewarded by literary studies as a profession. But in setting such store on brushing all cultural texts against the grain, we risk assuming that literary works are automatically more naïve than we are. Time and again, the kind of disciplined literary critique that I was exposed to as a student managed to be entirely accurate, justified, politically impeccable – and also completely beside the point. It asks for a different novel (or play, or poem) altogether, rather than thinking through the work in front of it.

In chapter three Mrs Moore tells her son about how she met a charming doctor in the mosque, but (to Ronny's annoyance) does not indicate that she is talking about "a Mahomedan." Flustered, he then proceeds to diagnose the native 'type' that Aziz represents – educated, spoilt Westernized, 'cheeky' – and makes her reconsider her meeting: "Yes it was all true, but how false as a summary of the man; the essential life of him had been slain."³⁷ I think of this when hearing the predictable accusations levelled at the novel: Yes, yes, true, all true: but how false a summary of the whole.

Just after that is what seems to be a throwaway moment, as Mrs Moore goes to hang up her cloak on a peg, but finds it occupied by a wasp: "Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside a house as out; it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces trees, houses, trees. [. . .] 'Pretty dear,' said Mrs. Moore to the wasp. He did not wake, but her voice floated out, to swell the night's uneasiness."³⁸ Reading the novel again on a Greek island with the hum of cicadas in my ears, I was attuned to all the animals and other, non-human presences that press in from the margins of the text. *A Passage to India* has this oddly ecological dimension, the sense of its human scenes unfolding within a much larger, infinitely complex system.

And if a novel itself is a kind of ecosystem, a tangled bush of relations, then where do its final meanings reside? "So you thought an echo was India; you took the Marabar caves as final?" say the palm trees to Mrs Moore as she leaves on a ship from Bombay: "What have we in common with them, or they with Asirgarh? Good-bye!"³⁹ Where do the most concentrated or lasting messages of a literary work secrete themselves? In its characters and images? In the course of single, memorable sentences? Or in a larger, more diffuse relation between the parts?

* * *

The discursive, meandering character of Forster's writing produces more negatives in the criticism about his work. "Not quite major" wrote Malcolm Bradbury when trying to rank his achievement;⁴⁰ for Lionel Trilling he was "sometimes irritating in his refusal to be great."⁴¹ Even Virginia Woolf, whose novels flit so readily between different sites of consciousness, found that her contemporary risked diluting his gifts in trying to do justice to all fictional parties, in trying to be all things to all men (if not perhaps, to all women). "If he were less scrupulous," she wrote, "less just, less sensitively aware of the different aspects of each case, he could, we feel, come down with greater force on one precise point. As it is, the strength of his blow is dissipated."⁴²

Yet this quality is read more positively by Zadie Smith, who applauds him for never settling into the predictable postures of the ageing writer. What's unusual about Forster, she writes, is precisely what he *didn't* do:

He didn't lean rightward with the years, or allow nostalgia to morph into misanthropy; he never knelt for the Pope or the Queen, nor did he flirt (ideologically speaking) with Hitler, Stalin, or Mao; he never believed the novel was dead or the hills alive, continued to read contemporary fiction after the age of fifty, harboured no special hatred for the generation below or above him, did not come to feel that England had gone to hell in a hand-basket, that its language was doomed, that lunatics were running the asylum, or foreigners swamping the cities.⁴³

Still, she continues, "like all notable English novelists, he was a tricky bugger," and the middle ground that he sought to occupy can seem by turns profoundly ethical and annoyingly non-committal:

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.

In another essay, she writes about her debt to the tradition of the English comic novel, in which "there is no bigger crime [. . .] than thinking you are right."⁴⁴ As a mode that thrives on the humbling and disciplining of those who take themselves too seriously, it finds rich pickings in the genre of the campus novel – Smith's *On Beauty* is one example, itself a re-writing of *Howard's End*.

A Passage to India takes this comedic insight about the danger of certainty and relocates it to the colonial endgame. Here it begins to take on a much deeper force, as we are made to see the violence that resides in any categorical statement. This applies at first to the racist certainties bandied around the Club; but eventually, as the novel pushes its negatives further and further, it comes to comprehend any form of meaning-making, opening the text out toward much larger philosophical terrains. We can see this at work when the Indian social wasp reappears in chapter four, another minor moment in which we hear of Mr Graysford and Mr Sorley, “the devoted missionaries who lived out beyond the slaughter-houses, always travelled third on the railways, and never came up to the Club.”⁴⁵ In this brief cameo, they preach about all converts being welcomed into the mansions of our Father’s house, but are then questioned by a disembodied narrative voice. Will there be room for the monkeys? And jackals?

Jackals were indeed less to Mr. Sorley's mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well embrace all mammals. And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps, and was apt to change the conversation. And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud? And the bacteria inside Mr. Sorley? No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing.

Again, the sudden shift in depth of field: the narrative camera pulls back, the aperture widens. And one sees another of Forster’s fictional special effects here: what he called “rhythm,” the repetition of certain motifs (in this case, the wasp) throughout a text, but in a manner that should not allow them to “harden into symbol.”⁴⁶ Rather, we are asked to consider them in terms of a musical analogy: variations on a theme, transposed into different harmonic contexts, emerging unawares from the larger orchestration.

Both techniques are at work as the book moves to a close, producing a series of thought experiments which signal the larger philosophical (and formal) problem the novel poses to itself. We are made to see that any system of meaning must rely on exclusions and discriminations; that all meanings come into being by disavowing other possible meanings; that all forms are arbitrary and limited, including the novel that we are now coming to the end of.

In the closing passages, the camera pulls back one final time as the whole landscape conspires to keep Fielding and Aziz apart:

‘Why can’t we be friends now?’ said the other, holding him affectionately. ‘It’s what I want. It’s what you want.’

But the horses didn't want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there.'⁴⁷

The ability of friendship and sincerity to transcend larger political structures; the frank voicing of love between men – these are revealed as impossible within the world of the novel. But at a further remove, the writing gives the sense of a whole literary tradition that has reached its limit. Transplanted to northern India, the novel probes the limit not only of *the* English, but also of English itself – its own medium, language, tradition, inheritance, structure of feeling, mode of address. *A Passage to India* arrives at a philosophical insight about the wisdom of uncertainty at an historical moment – the moment of decolonization – that demanded political conviction and collective action. Placing itself in this impossible position, the book dissolves, and it is seldom that a novel shows such a powerful sense of its own limitations, the event horizon of its understandings, rushing towards us.

But I am not going to end with that. Instead, there is a more obscure moment, one concerned with Professor Godbole and the wasp. The text is flooded with the monsoon and the festival of Gokul Ashtami, a ceremony that Forster remembered as the strongest and the strangest Indian experience granted him.⁴⁸ In the opening of "Temple," it produces a chapter of lights and misspelled signs, harmoniums, cacophonous music and dancing, greasy rice and papier mache cobras. "All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear."⁴⁹ Is this woolly mysticism and proto-New Age nonsense? Or is it some of the most remarkable English prose of the twentieth century? "Did it succeed?" asks the narrative voice: "Books written afterwards say 'Yes.' But how, if there is such an event, can it be remembered afterwards? How can it be expressed in anything but itself?"

Without needing to come to a verdict, we can watch a certain kind of English unravelling before us. The knowingness that fortifies the language of Dr Johnson, Austen and Orwell, the ironic distance and empirical control – all of this must now apprehend the unquantifiable dimensions of religious experience: of unknowability, total identification, mantra-like simplicity, submission, surrender.

Having begun with a joke at the expense of students, I should also mention that another member of the class came up to me after a lecture

and explained in detail about Apophatic or Negative Theology. Here we see the furthest reach of the novel's roundabout syntax, for in this tradition, the divine can only be approached via negative constructions – a thought experiment that recurs in all the world's major religions. “We do not know what God is,” wrote John Scot Erigena in the ninth century: “God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.”⁵⁰

In this final section, Forster's prose abandons the portentous tone that can attend such mystical pronouncements. It sloughs this off for a playful description of a religion that is able to accommodate practical jokes and clowning, a ceremony not constrained by stultifying notions of good taste. But even as these final sections are ostensibly about Hinduism, I think of them also as a kind of meta-commentary on the novel itself, perhaps the closest we come in the whole book to sensing what it is, rather than what it is not. As Godbole explores the contours of his religious trance, we are told that “his senses grew thinner, he remembered a wasp seen he forgot where, perhaps on a stone. He loved the wasp equally, he impelled it likewise, he was imitating God.”⁵¹ But then his attention cannot hold, he tries too hard, he loses the memory, but it does not matter:

Covered with grease and dust. Professor Godbole had once more developed the life of his spirit. He had, with increasing vividness, again seen Mrs. Moore, and round her faintly clinging forms of trouble. He was a Brahman, she Christian, but it made no difference, it made no difference whether she was a trick of his memory or a telepathic appeal. It was his duty, as it was his desire, to place himself in the position of the God and to love her, and to place himself in her position and to say to the God, ‘Come, come, come, come.’ This was all he could do. How inadequate! But each according to his own capacities, and he knew that his own were small. ‘One old Englishwoman and one little, little wasp,’ he thought, as he stepped out of the temple into the grey of a pouring wet morning. ‘It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself.’

Postscript:

Since giving this lecture, I have retired *A Passage to India* from the syllabus, and replaced it with Camus's *The Plague*. After the events of 2012 in South Africa, it seems more and more unlikely that a voice as quiet and careful as Forster's would even be heard above the din. Indeed, the whole project of trying to hear it, of spending so much time thinking about a single text has

come to seem faintly ridiculous to me while revising this piece. As such, the centre of gravity of the novel has shifted again, coming to rest in the passage where Fielding is turned out of the Club at the height of the scandal. He looks toward the Marabar Caves from the veranda and looks back on his forty years' experience. He had (we are told) learnt to manage his life,

developed his personality, explored his limitations, controlled his passions – and he had done it all without becoming either pedantic or worldly. A creditable achievement, but as the moment passed, he felt he ought to have been working at something else the whole time – he didn't know at what, never would know, never could know, and that was why he felt sad.⁵²

NOTES

1. Cited in Zadie Smith's appreciative essay: "E. M. Forster: Middle Manager," *New York Review of Books*, August 14 2008.
2. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Abinger, 1974), 17.
3. Although there is, of course, the case of Ben Kingsley as Mohandas K. Gandhi. In his essay "Outside the Whale," Rushdie quotes David Lean on that production: "I haven't seen Dickie Attenborough's *Gandhi* yet [...] but as far as I'm aware, nobody has yet succeeded in putting India on the screen" Rushdie comments: "The Indian film industry, from Satyajit Ray to Mr N. T. Rama Rao, will no doubt feel humbled by the great man's opinion." In *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1992), 87.
4. E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* [1951] (London: Edward Arnold, 1972), 285.
5. E. M. Forster, *The Hill of Devi and Other Indian Writings* [1953], ed. Elizabeth Heine (New York: Abinger, 1983), 298.
6. Forster to Syed Ross Masood, 27 Septmeber 1922. Quoted in P. N. Furbank, *E. M. Forster: A Life*, vol. 2 [1978], (London: Cardinal Sphere, 1998), 106.
7. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* [1924] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), ed. Oliver Stallybrass, 29.
8. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 289.
9. John Keats, "[Letter to George and Thomas Keats: Negative Capability]," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume 2*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York and London: Norton, 2006), 942.
10. Walter Benjamin, "Picturing Proust," *One-way Street and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2009), 126.
11. Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel* (New York: Verso, 1998).
12. Jane Austen, "To James Edward Austen, Monday 16 – Tuesday 17 December 1816," in *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 323.
13. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 257.

14. T. S. Eliot, "What the Thunder said," in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), 42.
15. Forster, *The Hill of Devi*, 153.
16. *Maurice* appeared in 1971, a year after his death.
17. Gillian Beer, "Negation in *A Passage to India*," in *A Passage to India: Essays and Interpretations*, ed. John Beer (London: Macmillan, 1985), 48.
18. Philip Larkin, "Talking in Bed," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton, 2005), 1655.
19. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Politics and the English Language and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford City Press, 2009), 10.
20. Simon Armitage, "It Ain't What You Do It's What It Does To You," *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 2001), 4.
21. James Fenton, "A German Requiem," in *The Memory of War and Children in Exile* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 11.
22. Albert Camus, "Return to Tipasa," [1954] in *Summer in Algiers* (London: Penguin, 2005). The lines are used as an epigraph in Stephen Watson's collection *In This City* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).
23. Donald Rumsfeld, "Known Unknowns" (US Defence department briefing, February 2002). Available in "Rum Remark wins Rumsfeld an Award," BBC News, accessed June 13, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3254852.stm>.
24. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 146.
25. E. M. Forster, "Letter to William Plomer, 28 September 1934," in *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster Vol. 2*, ed. Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1985), 125.
26. *Ibid.*
27. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), 177.
28. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), 8.
29. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 43.
30. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 125.
31. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 132.
32. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 87.
33. Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 126.
34. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 32.
35. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 36.
36. Nirad Chaudhuri, "Passage to and from India," *Encounter* 2 (June 1954): 22.
37. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 50.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 195.

40. Malcolm Bradbury, *E. M. Forster: A Passage to India* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 1.
41. Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster: A Study* (London: Hogarth Press, 1944), 9.
42. Virginia Woolf, "The Novels of E. M. Forster," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 110.
43. Smith, "Middle Manager."
44. Zadie Smith, "Love, Actually," *The Guardian* November 1 2003.
45. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 52.
46. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 116.
47. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 289.
48. Forster, *The Hill of Devi*, 103-106.
49. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 260.
50. Cited in "Apophatic Theology,"
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apophatic_theology>
51. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 259.
52. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 180.

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