

University of Ceylon Review

Vol. VI No. 2

April, 1948

Passage to More Than India?

TO justify the use of the word 'political' to describe the quality of *A Passage to India* is difficult, yet this is what most critics of the novel tend to do. Trilling¹ one of the most recent seems to have been impelled to it by his wish to impose a construct of his own upon Forster's recording of India's incomprehensibility to him. The word 'political,' (of the various convenient handles to the novel surely the most likely to cause misunderstanding, even if inflected with shades of philosophical import) can scarcely stand the peculiar stress Trilling lays upon it. One could understand the word if it had been used in irony of some things in the novel—of the narrowness of Anglo-India or the pettiness of India proper, for instance. But if one did that, one would be in danger of responding innocently to astringencies in the character drawing, and 'plot' and 'story' in the novel (to use Trilling's terms) would become aids to a sinister intention. Now Trilling sees both 'plot' and 'story'—which are really nothing more than nominal and real subject—and the relation between them as vital to the novel, and yet he draws a wrong conclusion therefrom: "The relation of the characters to the events, for example, is the result of a severe imbalance in the relation of plot to story. Plot and story in this novel are not co-extensive as they are in all Forster's other novels. The plot is precise, hard, crystallized and far simpler than any Forster has previously conceived. The story is beneath and above the plot and continues beyond it in time. It is, to be sure, created by the plot, it is the plot's manifold reverberation, but it is greater than the plot and contains it. The plot is as decisive as a judicial opinion; the story is an impulse, a tendency, a perception. The suspension of plot in the large circumambient sphere of story, the expansion of the story from the centre of plot, requires some of the subtlest manipulation that any novel has ever had. This relation of plot and story tells us that we are dealing with political novel of an unusual kind."² The metaphors indicate that the difference between plot and story makes of their necessary connection, for all the dexterity required in connecting the two, an unsatisfactory union, but that their artful combination gives the

1. Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster*, (Norfolk Conn, 1943).

2. Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

novel its 'political' character. One might accept Trilling's judgement when he writes of the imbalance between plot and story, but one must question his interpretation of it.³

Whatever meanings one might induce in to the word 'political,' in what sense could it be used of this novel? Might it signify the concept which claims that under 'politics' are subsumed all human activities? But surely this would be far from the interpretation of the word to which presumably Forster (and Trilling) would be sympathetically inclined. Forster's certainly would seem to be the offshoot of that dignified and respected view that politics is important enough to be subordinated to a very different set of ultimates hypostatized by the humane personality arbitrating among his experiences. If he recognized politics, it would be to put it in its place. What Forster sets store by in the novel—in both plot and the intimations of the story—is apparently what a cultivated liberal would support, the view that in political antagonisms and conflicts, as elsewhere, the claims of the human personality ought to be decisive, but that unfortunately it never works out so. Forster seems to be disquieted by this. The purpose of this article is to show that the dissatisfaction left upon the reader's mind by the novel, in spite of its fine perceptions of character and social modes, is not the result of the same disquiet, but that it is due to the weakness of what Trilling would call 'story.' The particular weakness of 'story' is its intrinsic deficiency in attitude. One has the feeling that the author would like his own disquiet to be the conclusion of everything the novel in its setting, characters, and their development tended to. But considered as an attitude to experience, and as it is expressed, it strikes one as a piece of arbitrary finesse. It is not only not *Passage to 'more than India,'* it scarcely takes Forster anywhere.

Had the novel really been 'a political novel of an unusual kind,' it would have given Forster just the kind of reassurance he would have welcomed, for there have been traces of a guilty avowal of deficiency whenever Forster has spoken about the writer in the contemporary world. The 1935 address to the Paris Congrès International des Écrivains from which Trilling quotes,⁴ is a rueful admission of the writer's inoperancy in a world of politics. Did not the same feeling of inadequacy enter into *A Passage to India*, and entering there did it not refuse to be laid to rest? In 1935 Forster could fall back on maintaining the pretences of belief in personal immortality and the eternity of the civilization he knew. In 1924, or rather in 1912 when he first began to write *A Passage to India* anticipations of the coming crash could not distract him.

3. For a recent questioning of Forster's position, see D. S. Savage, 'E. M. Forster,' in *Writers of To-day*, (London, 1946).

4. Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

PASSAGE TO MORE THAN INDIA?

So here we have embroidered round the Heaven-sent theme of the incomprehensible—the incomprehensibility of India to the European—another motif of the true tragedy of human personality as Forster sees it: both its superiority over circumstance and its disabling limitations. The vastness of India might have made Forster feel that “nothing is any good,” but from this he derives some satisfaction—is not this the rue that all mankind has been given to wear?

The worth of the novel does not lie in the reverberations of this theme, but in the portrayal in terms of character and incident of India's refusal to accommodate itself to Forster. The rest is not so important. It is near-metaphysical prinking up of his theme, and sentimental overtones spoil it. The theme was Heaven-sent because Forster's characteristic manoeuvre seems to be that of placing specially selected people, who seem to symbolise the upper reaches of personality, in situations which demonstrate both its and their inadequacy. Forster likes squeezing the last ounce out of this plight, and India, while it confirmed him in his valuation of personality, disquieted him. In so far as he registers in his novel the judgement of the cultured Western European of his class upon India (both Anglo-India and native India), Forster is good. When he deduces from this example intimations (they are too lightly rendered to be called conclusions) about the fatality of personality—its insufficiency—he is tiresome, because he introduces an addiction of his own into a set of circumstances that does not justify it. The weakness of the novel lies there. The ‘plot’ could have been the framework of a political novel, ‘story’ is Forster's own whimsy. He nurses it a little bit too carefully to satisfy the reader that it belongs to the plot. Furthermore, it seems just the kind of whimsy of which an intelligent reader of Forster's own generation would have been shy. So that when he tries to get it across he becomes self conscious himself and his irony loses its point, or he frankly surrenders himself to it and becomes a trifle sentimental.

The accent then has to be laid on Forster's bafflement at the impact of a culture he appreciated, but which denied him the assurances on which living depends. The very title *A Passage to India*, with the reminiscence of Whitman suggests that he is critical both of Whitman and of himself at the immensity of the task undertaken. There is irony in the juxtaposition of the Whitmanesque tones, sounded as late as in 1924, and the country which calls up the culture of several thousand years. The source of the bafflement, as we have noted earlier, seems to have been the wilful and persistent refusal of India to allow the hypotheses of Forster's reasons for living to form a basis for understanding either the Indian scene or Indians. His own countrymen, the Turtons and the Burtons, the women, the missionaries, Fielding, even the symbolical Mrs. Moore, are all clearly understood. They cannot be other than un-

impressive, because Forster measures them against his own standards (cultivated Western) and the unknown of India of which he may not be sure, but of whose definiteness he is convinced. The best of them, like Adela and Fielding, are honest, but they are by Forster's own standards callow. The feeling that goes into picturing their own sense of their emotional shallowness is one of Forster's main preoccupations. All his Englishmen and Englishwomen from Miss Raby through Rickie to Adela have a determination to react honestly to the revealing moments of feeling much in excess of their power to feel. It looks as if Forster punishes them rather savagely because of a guilty sense of community with them. If by the standards he knows they are insufficient, then by the other—the unknown India—they become impossible to grasp. As long as he turns on them his social satire they are realised, when they come within range of the sights he sets at his Indian target, they vanish. Mrs. Moore is the only one with whom he perseveres. And what a poor shot he makes at her. If, as Trilling puts it, she makes the discovery on which the 'story' in the novel hinges that 'Christianity is not enough',⁵ that in itself is not a surprising discovery if one considers the rest of Forster's novels. The summit of Mrs. Moore's achievement in India was a remark which the impulsive Aziz seized upon with avidity as earnest of her oneness with Indians. Its echo in the third section of the novel makes him recoil from her memory with the feeling that he had paid somewhat severely for overvaluing a banality.⁶ Forster is willing to admit that it is a banality, yet Mrs. Moore becomes 'Esmiss Esmoor,' and Forster can suggest that it is she alone who makes the 'Passage to India.' Over the sentence which consigns her to her symbolical goal there floats the very faint suggestion of a rhetorical cadence, the cadence which removes the sentence from the banal and seems to say 'there is a special value attached to this.' The writing, without calling attention to itself, is different from the staple of the prose of the rest of the novel:

"Dead she was—committed to the deep while still on the southward track, for the boats from Bombay cannot point towards Europe until Arabia has been rounded; she was further in the tropics than ever achieved while on shore, when the sun touched her for the last time and her body was lowered into yet another India—the Indian Ocean."⁷

She is 'tiresome old woman' and the deity of 'Esmiss Esmoor.' The two require two different styles of writing; the one, colloquial, incisive at times, good tempered, even whimsical; the other, a little too carefully managed to

5. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London, 1942). Everyman's Library, p. 129. (All references to *A Passage to India* are to this edition).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

PASSAGE TO MORE THAN INDIA?

seem genuine, full of gracious, well-rounded periods. In the one Mrs. Moore is presented as an old Englishwoman with greater sympathy and understanding than others of her class, but still the cold weather tourist in India; in the other she is invoked as something more—one hesitates to use the word 'symbol'—the index of a type of perception rarely given to human beings.

As for Fielding, important as he is, he is never as important to the novel as Mrs. Moore. His portrait is done in style No. 1, and in this style what is made clear is the inadequacy of the man, as he himself feels his inadequacy. The skill of the portrait, and the quality of mind behind Forster's judgement of Fielding, cannot be questioned. That skill is chiefly seen in the language he uses, and the language used of him: the colloquial phrase which rises so readily to his lips (like that he uses to describe his unconcern about the rumours connecting his name with Miss Quested's: "I travel light"⁸, which is taken up later in Part III to place the Fielding who had made an uneasy peace with Anglo-India⁹) keeps his function in the novel from encroaching upon regions where it would be inoperative. The excellence of the portrait of Fielding could best be seen in Forster's scoring of the conversation between him and Aziz. What he takes for granted, and can refer to casually, but none the less meaningfully, can only be conveyed by an idiom and a tone of voice which can never be understood by Aziz, who is either mystified or offended. The incomprehensibility of India to the Englishman is as sensitively recorded in Forster's transcription of the tones of English and Indian talk as it is anywhere else. On all occasions where the two races meet—at the Bridge Party, at the Government College, in Aziz's house, and at the Victory Banquet—Forster communicates by the exquisiteness of his ear the sense of two languages whose words are the same, but whose meanings are different. His tact prevents him from indulging in the cheap Babuism which is practically all his predecessors among Englishmen who have written novels on India could do. Besides the Babuism would have been too crude to register the nuances of the Indian's failure to comprehend the personality of the Englishman. If the English themselves are, at the height of their powers, consciously dissatisfied with themselves because their discourse convinces them of their pettiness, then what could be made of the many places where Englishman and Indian meet? Here Forster needs no ironic framework, no image to point his intention, the language with its sudden surprises realises the situation. Take the situation at Aziz's bedside, when Fielding mystifies his hearers by his tone:

'The Indians were bewildered. The line of thought was no alien to them, but the words were too definite and bleak. Unless a sentence paid a few

8. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

compliments to Justice and Morality in passing, its grammar wounded their ears and paralysed their minds. What they said and what they felt were (except in the case of affection) seldom the same. They had numerous mental conventions, and when these were flouted they found it very difficult to function.'

What the comment makes explicit is much more finely rendered by the words given to Dr. Panna Lal:

"Gentlemen, if I may be allowed to say a few words, what an interesting talk, also thankfulness and gratitude to Mr. Fielding in the first place teaches our sons and gives them all the great benefits of his experience and judgement—'

'Dr. Lal'!

'Dr. Aziz'?

'You sit on my leg.'

'I beg pardon, but some might say your leg kicks.'¹⁰

'What they said and what they felt were (except in the case of affection) seldom the same.' The clue is there, it leads to another of the discrepancies, the baffling differences between apparent and real, which is the cause both of Forster's disquiet and the assurance with which he seized on the subject as particularly appealing to him. Yet the observation he makes, like practically all his observations of Indians in their social intercourse with the European, is just. Waldemar Bonsels had made it before him: "Indians of mark have a definite routine for intercourse with Europeans, and in their relations with the rulers of the country they practise the art of employing speech as a means to conceal thought. One may reasonably suppose that this art dates from an earlier epoch than their struggles with the English or even with the Mahomedan conquerors, for the Hindus have suffered so many disappointments that they are extremely suspicious."¹¹ The voices of the Indians in the novel contribute to the multitude of impressions of disharmony and uncertainty provided by the detail of the plot, casual incident, image, and finally the symbol of the caves with the disconcerting echo. India, as it is revealed in the novel, is presented in a series of contradictions with which the conversational tones of the characters are linked. The radiance on the water of the river belongs neither to water nor moon;¹² Adela fails to make the 'friendly Indians' talk

10. *Ibid*, p. 95.

11. W. Bonsels, *An Indian Journey*, (London, 1929).

12. *A Passage to India*, p. 23.

PASSAGE TO MORE THAN INDIA?

at the Bridge Party: "She failed, she strove in vain against the echoing walls of their civility" (the connection with the echo in the caves will come to mind here)¹³; as Godbole sings "the ear, baffled unexpectedly, soon lost any clue, and wandered in a maze of noise, none harsh or unpleasant, none intelligible. It was the song of an unknown bird."¹⁴; the green bird, whose name they don't know, brings home to Ronny and Adela the thought that "nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else."¹⁵ And so on.

Against this background of the incomprehensible the English—men and women—come out of it worse than the Indians. This is because, in relating them both to his ostensible and his real subject, Forster judges them by two sets of standards, those of the Western European liberal and that same liberal's intuition of something else not objectively clear to him, another scale of values to which his respect for personality pays tribute. By the first—the human norm of the Mediterranean—the English are petty and pretentious, but they are perfectly understood and justified. The enlightened social comedy by which Forster controls them and manages them, does not spare them. In undervaluing them he makes clear the sources of his satire. If neither manageable Grasmere nor Venice were there to support him, neither Adela nor Ronny believing in each other, nor Fielding reassured about man's place in the world would have been possible to Forster. As a matter of fact nothing would have been possible to him. It might be that some of Fielding's fancies as Venice restores him to harmony with himself would have been disclaimed by Forster, but the setting which recalls Fielding to life again is that from which Forster himself stems. He is the product of a liberal civilization which allowed opportunities to his class for developing their personality within limits which the liberal was content to accept. The class he came from was composed of individuals privileged enough or sufficiently well-off to develop their personalities, nor was social change marked enough to warn any but the most sensitive of the end of a period of which the typical symbol was the Titan (just short of a god) weary of bearing the weight of his own consciousness. The reader of *A Passage to India* could not be blamed for suspecting that Forster regards the archetypal tragic pattern as that of humanity coming short of its divine stature. Adela and Fielding, it will be remembered, "at the height of their powers" are nonetheless fated to be dwarfs.¹⁶ It is upon this reflection that wistfulness descends as well upon Forster's style as on the two conscious of dissatisfaction with themselves.¹⁷

13. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

In Trilling's category of 'plot' or nominal subject, Forster achieves his intention because India is placed in the framework of values and a social order he understands. Everything here depends on the observation of social conduct and the sure touch with which the deviation from the norm is pictured. And the norm, as has been stated above, is the humane tradition of Western Europe, more particularly a landscape which in its literary associations and its tradition of a hundred years confronted the individual with his littleness in the immensity of Nature, but yet gave him intimations of immortality. The norm is not really Italy, nor is it Venice, it is Grasmere, "dearest Grasmere."¹⁷ It is not for nothing that the unexpected in India is more than once expressed reduced to the scale of Grasmere, the Lake District, and even a Scotch moor. As long as he retains his hold upon the reality of Grasmere, India is manageable; and the virtue of Grasmere is that it accommodates itself to the individual's notions of himself, of his survival and the fitness of everything which has upheld him. Ronny and Adela had met "among the grand scenery of the English Lakes," and they had been drawn together by their belief in the "sanctity of personal relationships."¹⁸ When they part finally Ronny can relegate her to "the callow academic period of his life which he had outgrown—Grasmere, serious talks and walks, that sort of thing."¹⁹ He can do this because judged by the norm of Grasmere he has been found wanting. The pettiness and the irritation with which Fielding's tea-party breaks up makes Fielding wonder: "Could one have been so petty on a Scotch moor or an Italian alp? . . . There seemed no reserve of tranquillity to draw upon in India."²⁰ And the two ladies, when "the supreme moment" of sunrise for which they waited never comes, console themselves with remembering Grasmere:

"Do you remember Grasmere'?"

'Ah, dearest Grasmere'! Its little lakes and mountains were beloved by them all. Romantic yet manageable, it sprang from a kindlier planet."²¹

The key-word is "manageable," what Forster succeeds in doing is in writing social satire of a high order. To do that he never really made the passage to India at all. When he does, he loses his supports and all that is left to him is the sense of India's untidiness and confusion, or the feeling that something vaster is involved here than can be projected on the screen of

17. *Ibid*, p. 118.

18. *Ibid*, p. 69.

19. *Ibid*, p. 224.

20. *Ibid*, p. 65.

21. *Ibid*, p. 118.

PASSAGE TO MORE THAN INDIA?

Grasmere. When he is content to convey the sense of the untidiness and disorder, that is where the social satire is operative, the writing is successful, as in the opening chapter of Part III, where in the description of the temple festivities Forster can ask ironically "God si Love. Is this the final message of India?"²² Where he tries to grasp at the uncomprehended, then his touch falters and we have, as we have noted, wither the faded metaphysical or the sentimental.

The failure of 'theme' or real subject is the weakness of Forster's own position. By the norm of Grasmere he must have intimations of immortality, he must espy in the weaker glories of the natural scene which sustains man, "some shadows of eternity." The Indian background refuses him this. His situation is that of Mrs. Moore, who to live must have the assurance of "those large things, that huge scenic background of stars, fires, blue or black. All heroic endeavour, and all that is known as art, assumes that there is such a background, just as all practical endeavour when the world is to our taste, assumes that the world is all. But in the twilight of the double vision, a spiritual muddledom is set up . . ."²³ Mrs. Moore's plight is Forster's, he was too honest and intelligent to romanticize India; it evaded projection on his scale, because as the Marabar caves with their echo eluded Mrs. Moore, so the India, which his keen sense for behaviour according to the social pattern he knew could not measure, failed to provide the vastness with which all he saw and sensed could be accommodated. Mrs. Moore's conclusion is Forster's: "Devils are of the north, and poems can be written about them, but no one could romanticize the Marabar, because it robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them to mankind."²⁴

What was left—to derive from this not grief, but something which could find strength in what was left behind. Forster failed to find, as the poet of "dearest Grasmere" did, oneness with the universe—Mrs. Moore had failed there too: "To be one with the universe! So dignified and simple. But there was always some little duty to be performed first, some new card to be turned up from the diminishing pack and placed, and while she was pottering about the Marabar struck its gong."²⁵ The gong Marabar struck, by its reverberations upset Mrs. Moore's hold upon life, yet its power to produce this effect invested it with some of the profundity it destroyed. Out of this possibility Forster develops his 'theme.' His attitude to the repudiation of all "dearest Grasmere" and the world of human relationships he understood becomes

22. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

clouded with 'metaphysical pathos.' Mr. A. O. Lovejoy describes the attitude so well that his comment would suffice to evaluate Forster's manoeuvre when faced with the incomprehensible: "'Metaphysical pathos' is exemplified in any description of the nature of things, any characterisation of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, awaken through their associations, and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone on the part of the philosopher or his readers. For many people—for most of the laity, I suspect—the reading of a philosophical book is usually nothing but a form of aesthetic experience, even in the case of writings which seem destitute of all outward aesthetic charms; voluminous emotional reverberations, of one or another sort, are aroused in the reader without the intervention of any definite imagery. Now of metaphysical pathos there are a good many kinds; and people differ in their degree of susceptibility to any one kind. There is in the first place, the pathos of sheer obscurity, the loveliness of the incomprehensible . . . The reader doesn't know exactly what they (certain philosophies) mean, but they have all the more on that account an air of sublimity; an agreeable feeling at once of awe and of exaltation comes over him as he contemplates thoughts of so immeasurable a profundity."²⁶ One has to be thankful that the nominal subject, for all the incursions of the real, demonstrates so admirably Forster's intelligence and his skill in the social mode of comedy.

E. F. C. LUDOWYK.

26. A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, (Cambridge Mass., 1936), p. 11.