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E.M. FORSTER'S "A PASSAGE TO INDIA": CREATION
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PREVIEW

E. M. FORSTER'S "A PASSAGE TO INDIA":

CREATION AND CRITICISM

By

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CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
I. AN INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE RAW MATERIAL OF <u>A PASSAGE TO INDIA</u>	30
III. THE MANUSCRIPT OF <u>A PASSAGE TO INDIA</u>	83
IV. <u>A PASSAGE TO INDIA</u> AND THE CRITICS	123
V. <u>A PASSAGE TO INDIA</u> : AN INTERPRETATION.	191
BIBLIOGRAPHY	223

CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION

Writing of his visit in 1921 to a small Indian Native State, Dewas Senior, E. M. Forster was to say, thirty-two years later, "It was the great opportunity of my life."¹ He has never ascribed to any other experience, not even the undergraduate years at his beloved Cambridge, such importance. His first forty-two years had prepared him well--as a child growing up in the English countryside; an explorative University student; a traveller to Greece, Italy, India (previously in 1912), and Egypt; a writer of four novels, ten stories, and about one hundred fifty essays; and a man who thought the Indian Temple might reveal the Truth²--to make this sojourn the central event of his long life and the impetus for his masterwork, A Passage to India. As he has written in his second novel, "There comes a moment--God knows when--at which we can say, 'I will experience no longer.

¹E. M. Forster, The Hill of Devi (New York, 1953), p. 8.

²E. M. Forster, "The Temple," Athenaeum, Sept. 26, 1919, p. 947. "When we tire of being pleased and of being improved, and of the other gymnastics of the West, and care, or think we care, for Truth alone; then the Indian Temple exerts its power, and beckons down absurd or detestable vistas to an exit unknown to the Parthenon. We say, 'Here is truth,' and as soon as we have said the words the exit--it if was one--closes, and we fly back to our old habits again."

I will create. I will be an experience."³

This study aims to consider, first and briefly, the temperament, background, and ideas of the man who sailed for Bombay in March of 1921, as well as something of the history and condition of the conquered land he was about to enter as they relate to A Passage to India. Then it will examine his encounter with Moslem and Hindu and British India during his two visits--the raw material of his novel. A third chapter will describe that novel in manuscript, as its author altered it to realize his intention. Following this, I will present the responses of the readers, that is, the critics, of the book--the problems they discovered and the solutions they offered. Finally, I will offer my own ideas about A Passage to India.

i

The first of his trips abroad took place in 1901 when, "after a fourth year at Cambridge, Forster visited Greece and Italy, returning to England in 1902."⁴ Greece impressed itself on his art--directly in the employment of pagan gods in his fiction,⁵ and indirectly in his use of symbolism--

³E. M. Forster, The Longest Journey (New York, 1964), p. 66.

⁴Lionel Trilling, E. M. Forster (New York, 1964), pp. 35-36.

⁵Consider Phaeton, the carriage driver in Forster's A Room With a View, as well as the short stories "Other Kingdom," "The Curate's Friend," and "The Story of a Panic," and the conception of Stephen Wonham in The Longest Journey.

aside from generally influencing his views on beauty and style. In The Longest Journey, Mr. Jackson, the humanist school master, "tries to express all modern life in terms of Greek mythology, because the Greeks looked very straight at things, and Demeter or Aphrodite are thinner veils than 'the survival of the fittest' or 'a marriage has been arranged,' and the other draperies of modern journalese" (p. 189). As for Italy, Forster's own voice sounds in Fielding's thoughts about Venice, when, in A Passage to India, he is returning home to England. Venice offers him "the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form, with flesh and blood subsisting. . . . The Mediterranean is the human norm."⁶

In October of 1912, Forster left Naples for his first Indian visit, traveling with his friends Robert Trevelyan, the poet, and the Cambridge don G. Lowes Dickinson. He stayed until the following spring.⁷ Since his 1921 visit began in March and lasted through the autumn, Forster's Indian journeys comprised a calendar year. The sense of a weather cycle is as fundamental to the structure of A Passage to India as it is to Thoreau's Walden.

⁶E. M. Forster, A Passage to India (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), p. 282. All further references will be to this edition.

⁷E. M. Forster, "Indian Entries," Encounter, XVIII (January 1962), 20.

During the First World War, Forster was stationed in Alexandria as the result of volunteering for the Red Cross. In the introduction to Alexandria: A History and a Guide, he writes, "I arrived there in the autumn of 1915 in a slightly heroic mood. A Turkish invasion was threatened, and although a civilian I might find myself in the battle line. The threat passed and my mood changed. What had begun as an outpost turned into something suspiciously like a funk-hole, and I stuck in it for over three years, visiting hospitals, collecting information, and writing reports."⁸ Thus, because of his Egyptian experience, he had, by the time he wrote A Passage to India, an especially full knowledge of Islam.

The importance of travel to Forster's scheme of things is illustrated by his recent complaints about the altered nature of modern tourism. It "misses the graciousness and the gravity of the earlier travel, the personal approach, the individual adventure, the precious possibilities of friendship between visitor and visited."⁹ Such adventures and friendships figure largely in the prodigious amount of writing Forster produced between his first published story, "Albergo Empedocles," (1903) and A Passage to India (1924).¹⁰

⁸(Garden City, 1961), p. xv.

⁹E. M. Forster, "Tourism v. Thingism," Listener, (Jan. 17, 1957), 124.

¹⁰Forster writes in The Hill of Devi, p. 81, that one of the main reasons for his desiring to visit India again in

Where Angels Fear to Tread, his first novel, published in 1905, presents an attempted rescue of an innocent from the depraved foreign society of Italy by a young man whose background is similar to Forster's--a plot rather like that of Henry James's The Ambassadors.¹¹ In fact, Rose Macaulay writes that Where Angels Fear to Tread was first called Rescue.¹² Although his second novel, The Longest Journey, published in 1907, is set in England, as is his fourth, Howards End, 1910, A Room With a View, which appeared in 1908, is divided between England and Italy.¹³ Of the twelve stories Forster reprinted in collections, "The Road from Colonus" takes place, aside from the epilogue, in Greece, and "The Story of the Siren," "The Eternal Moment," and "The Story of a Panic" are set in Italy. Before his last novel, he also published two works drawn from his Egyptian experiences, "Pharos and Pharillon," a collection of essays, and the aforementioned Alexandria.

The Celestial Omnibus, the first collection of stories, is dedicated to the memory of the Independent Review. In

1921 was to see his good friend Syed Ross Masood. Masood's personality, in turn, figures in A Passage to India.

¹¹Forster seems not to have cared for James's work. They met unsuccessfully at tea when Forster was an undergraduate.

¹²Rose Macaulay, The Writings of E. M. Forster (New York, 1938), p. 36.

¹³A Room With a View was begun after Where Angels Fear to Tread and was put aside for The Longest Journey according to Rose Macaulay. Ibid.

the Introduction to The Collected Stories, Forster describes the periodical as "a monthly controlled by an editorial board of friends, who had encouraged me to start writing."¹⁴ Its political commitment was also Forster's. In an oft-quoted paragraph from his biography, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Forster writes, "The main aim of the review was political. It was founded to combat the aggressive Imperialism and the Protection campaign of Joe Chamberlain; and to advocate sanity in foreign affairs and a constructive policy at home. It was not so much a Liberal review as an appeal to Liberalism from the Left to be its better self--one of those appeals which have continued until the extinction of the Liberal Party."¹⁵ Almost all of Forster's early work was published in The Independent Review. His obvious admiration for its goals and his affection for the men who edited it color his statement that "The first number lies on the table as I write: as fresh and attractive to hold as when I bought it on a bookshelf at St. Pancras thirty years back, and thought the new age had begun."¹⁶

Two of the men connected with the Independent Review had been Forster's teachers at King's College, Cambridge: Dickinson and Nathaniel Wedd, of whom the novelist says, "it is to him . . . more than to anyone--that I owe such

¹⁴(New York, 1947), p. viii.

¹⁵(New York, 1934), p. 115.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 116.

awakening as has befallen me."¹⁷ Almost all of his readers have heard of the thunderclap that Cambridge sounded for Forster when he entered King's College after an unhappy time at public school as a Tonbridge day-boy.¹⁸ "That the public school is not infinite and eternal, that there is something more compelling in life than team-work and more vital than cricket, that firmness, self-complacency and fatuity do not between them compose the whole armour of man . . ."¹⁹ this is what Forster discovered at Cambridge. The standard-bearers of the Public School Ethos, like Ronnie Heaslop in A Passage to India, a paragon of "firmness, self-complacency and fatuity," are always the target of sharp attack. Rickie Elliot in The Longest Journey follows his creator's path at the University: "He had crept cold and friendless and ignorant out of a great public school, preparing for a silent and solitary journey, and praying as a highest favour that he might be left alone. Cambridge had not answered his prayer. She had taken and soothed him, and warmed him, and had laughed at him a little, saying that he must not be so tragic yet awhile, for his boyhood had been but a dusty corridor that led to the spacious halls of youth" (p. 4).

Forster delighted in Cambridge because it satisfied his need to "connect." He had written in Howards End, "Only

¹⁷Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁸Trilling, p. 27.

¹⁹op. cit., p. 26.

connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die."²⁰ And of Cambridge, he wrote, "Body and spirit, reason and emotion, work and play, architecture and scenery, laughter and seriousness, life and art--these pairs which are elsewhere contrasted were there fused in one. People and books reinforced one another, intelligence joined hands with affection, speculation became a passion, and discussion was made profound by love."²¹ In 1941, he called Cambridge, simply, "the place which I have loved for forty years, and where I have made my best friends."²²

Forster's attendance at the University was made possible by a bequest from his great-aunt, Marianne Thornton: "This £8,000 has been the financial salvation of my life. Thanks to it, I was able to go to Cambridge--impossible otherwise, for I failed to win scholarships. After Cambridge I was able to travel for a couple of years, and travelling inclined me to write. After my first visit to India and after the First World War the value of the £8,000 began to diminish, and later on it practically vanished. But by then my writings

²⁰(New York, 1958), p. 187.

²¹Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, p. 35.

²²E. M. Forster, "Cambridge" in Two Cheers for Democracy (New York, 1951), p. 78.

had begun to sell, and I have been able to live on them instead."²³ Thus, the Thornton legacy made possible Forster's introduction to India.

Because there is nothing approaching a biography of Forster himself, his admirers have been forced to gather any knowledge they possess about his life from a wide range of his writings, and chief among these is his biography of his great-aunt. Two rather different heritages combine in Forster. Emphasis has been given to his father's mother's family, the highly respected Thorntons of Clapham Common; less has been made of his mother's family, the Whichelos, who were of humbler stock and achievement: his paternal grandmother's father had been a wealthy banker and M.P.; his maternal grandmother's husband a drawing master who died leaving a poor widow with ten children. Yet of his mother's mother, and of his mother's side, he writes, ". . . it is with her--with them--that my heart lies."²⁴

²³E. M. Forster, Marianne Thornton: A Domestic Biography (New York, 1956), pp. 324-325. As has been indicated above, Forster was most prolific. The periodicals he wrote for most frequently between the first Indian trip and A Passage to India are The New Weekly, The Daily News, The Daily News and Leader, The Athenaeum, and The Nation and Athenaeum. According to Trilling, he was literary editor of The Daily Herald, a liberal weekly, in 1920. In that and the previous year together, he published eighty-eight articles. He was also busy with some abortive projects: an unpublished play, The Heart of Bosnia (1911); Arctic Summer (a novel begun before Howards End); an untitled novel (about a large family, begun after Howards End).

²⁴Ibid., p. 279. Neither Forster nor his critics have offered much information about his paternal grandfather's family. The Reverend Charles Forster came of poor, Irish gentle folk.

Forster considers family stock of importance and the contrasting strains which meet in him interest him a good deal. The Whichelos were gay, improvident, artistic, and likeable. Forster's "a refusal to be great," his mistrust of pomp and religiosity, his irony and light touch--all this is in the Whichelo manner. The Thorntons were pious, rich, sensible, and impressive. Forster recognizes the worthiness of his father's family, but remains detached enough to be critical. Writing of the weakness of the "Thornton-Wilberforce outlook" which was anti-slavery abroad, but not as reforming on the domestic scene, he says:

When slavery was industrial they did nothing and had no thought of doing anything; they regarded it as something "natural," to encounter it was an educational experience, and an opportunity for smug thankfulness. Misery might be alleviated at the soup-kitchen level, but to do more might make the workers unruly and even un-Christian. Hence Hannah Moore's tracts, recommending industry, frugality, obedience, and harder and still harder work. Hence Wilberforce's unsatisfactory record in Parliament when it came to Home Affairs--his support of the Combination Acts, his approval of the Peterloo Massacre--and hence Francis Place's description of him as "an ugly epitome of the devil."

I agree with the above line of criticism. But I do not share the moral indignation that sometimes accompanies it. The really bad people, it seems to me, are those who do no good anywhere and help no one either at home or abroad. There are plenty of them about, and when they are clever as well as selfish they often manage to slip through their lives unnoticed, and so escape the censure of historians.²⁵

²⁵Ibid., pp. 48-49.

According to Forster's values, there is an even more crucial weakness in the Thornton philosophy, an "indifference to the unseen" which strikes their descendant as "the great defect in my great-grandfather's set, and the reason why they have not made a bigger name in history."²⁶ The limitation of rationalism is, of course, a major theme in Forster's fiction, including A Passage to India.

Despite these reservations, Forster's attitude toward his forebears is notably affectionate. Some critics claim to have found in him hostility, conscious or otherwise, toward his father, who died when the writer was not quite two years old, thus "abandoning" him in the world.²⁷ But the little that Forster has written about his father is marked by candor rather than anger: "He was quick at the uptake, amusing, sarcastic, could always make old Monie [Marianne Thornton] laugh, and he had integrity and unselfishness. How these qualities combined to make him a real person I do not know. He has always remained remote to me. I have never seen myself in him and the photographs of him have not helped."²⁸ Aside from the autobiographical interest of this passage, it is helpful in understanding Forster's

²⁶"Henry Thornton," in Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 195.

²⁷Wilfred Stone in The Cave and the Mountain (Stanford, 1966) is the chief proponent of this psychoanalytic viewpoint. Reading the novels autobiographically is a simplistic method.

²⁸Marianne Thornton, p. 235.

ideas about a "real person" and, by extension, a real character. "Qualities" are of limited usefulness in envisioning someone; it is how they "combine" that is essential. The combinations create the complexity and ambiguity of behavior.

Forster says that he used some of his relatives and friends as models for characters in his books. Mrs. Honeychurch was his grandmother, the three Miss Dickinsons became the two Miss Schlegels, Philip Herriton was modelled on Professor Dent, as the professor knew. Miss Lavish was a Miss Spender. "Miss Bartlett was my Aunt Emily--they all read the books but they none of them saw it. . . . Uncle Willie turned into Mrs. Failing."²⁹

ii

"Forster is . . . an Edwardian in point of time, and he is equally so in spirit" writes Frederick C. Crews.³⁰ Placing himself more fully, Forster writes, "I belong to the fag-end of Victorian liberalism, and can look back to an age whose challenges were moderate in their tone, and the cloud on whose horizon was no bigger than a man's hand. In many ways it was an admirable age. It practiced benevolence and philanthropy, was humane and intellectually curious, upheld

²⁹P. N. Furbank and F. J. H. Haskell, "The Art of Fiction," Paris Review, I (Spring, 1953), 37.

³⁰E. M. Forster: The Perils of Humanism (Princeton, 1962), p. 3.

free speech, had little colour-prejudice, believed that individuals are and should be different, and entertained a sincere faith in the progress of society. The world was to become better and better, chiefly through the spread of parliamentary institutions."³¹ Forster, the Edwardian, the fag-end Victorian, can also be seen in terms of an earlier nineteenth century dichotomy, that between Bentham, the utilitarian, analyzer, and mechanist, and Coleridge, the romanticist, synthesist, and organic creator. This schema puts Forster squarely in the Coleridgian camp.³² In any event, there can be little confusion concerning Forster's ideas about art, criticism, creativity, government, religion, morality, or metaphysics; few authors have spelled out their credos in such detail. However, since much of this material was written after the completion of A Passage to India, Forster's ideas can only be considered in connection with that novel when earlier publication justifies such a use.

Forster's passionate commitment to art has not come at the expense of his concern for life. One is curious when reading Forster on the two domains to discover how this paradox has been brought off.

"Creation lies at the heart of civilisation like fire

³¹"The Challenge of Our Time," Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 56.

³²Wilbur Stone makes this point in The Cave and the Mountain.

in the heart of earth."³³ This vital energy of the culture --and for Forster, culture matters; he has faith in it³⁴ --manifests itself in art. Chief of art's wonders is that it orders: it "creates little worlds of its own, possessing internal harmony, in the bosom of this disordered planet."³⁵ And such a world, "while it lasts, seems more real and solid than this daily existence of pickpockets and trams."³⁶ "It is the world within. And since the poet cannot hope to escape from this world, he should at all costs arrange and rule it sensibly."³⁷

"Though remote from life," art "enhances life's values."³⁸ One major aspect in which art differs from life is that art can possess a quality psychologists call "closure." Writing of a Schumann piece in A Room With a View, Forster says, "The melody rose, unprofitably magical. It broke; it was resumed broken, not marching once from the cradle to the grave. The sadness of the incomplete--the sadness that is often Life, but should never be art--throbbed in its dis-

³³"Three Anti-Nazi Broadcasts" in Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 43.

³⁴"Does Culture Matter?" Ibid., p. 101.

³⁵"The Challenge of Our Time," Ibid., p. 59.

³⁶"Anonymity: An Enquiry," Ibid., p. 81. This essay is of special interest because it was first published much earlier than most of those in Two Cheers for Democracy--in 1925.

³⁷"The Poetry of C. P. Cavafy," in Pharos and Pharillon, p. 93.

³⁸Howards End, p. 88.

jected phrases, and made the nerves of the audience throb" (p. 140). Schumann is magical, but the world he creates does not have the salient feature of order that Beethoven's has--completion. Two decades later, however, Forster decided that the ordered world of the artist did not depend on the principle of finiteness; the imagination could have greater freedom if the form--"the outward evidence of order"³⁹--possessed the capacity for further growth: "Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out."⁴⁰

Art bears others gifts to the beholder. It "can solace us. . . . [By suggesting] a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, [it gives us] the illusion of perspicacity and power."⁴¹ It can--especially in the form of the modern novel--heighten our sense of the freedom of the Will, of the triumph of human intention over the impersonal forces of fate. Forster praises an "interesting and sensitive French critic who writes under the name of Alain [and who] has some helpful if slightly fantastic remarks on this point. . . . 'What is fictitious in a novel is not so much the story as the method by which thought develops into

³⁹"Art for Art's Sake" in Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 94.

⁴⁰E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (New York, 1954), p. 169. The material of this book was first presented as a series of lectures in 1927.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 64.

action, a method which never occurs in daily life. . . . History, with its emphasis on external causes, is dominated by the notion of fatality, whereas there is no fatality in the novel; there, everything is founded on human nature, and the dominating feeling is of an existence where everything is intentional, even passions and crimes, even misery."⁴² Art can also bridge the gap between intellect and feeling which some thinkers consider the greatest schism in the modern world: "Music, like all the arts, is making the double appeal to emotion and thought, and great music so makes it that it seems, while we listen, a single appeal, and only afterward do we realize that two sides of our nature have been involved."⁴³

But art improves on life only because it is subsumed by life. Dante, who is one of the drivers of "The Celestial Omnibus," tells the pedant who would worship him, "I am the means and not the end. I am the food and not the life" (p. 73). And Forster says of Gibbon, whom he greatly admires, "He loved books but was not dominated by them."⁴⁴

⁴²Ibid., pp. 45-46.

⁴³E. M. Forster, "A Concert of Old Instruments," Athenaeum, No. 4653 (July 11, 1919), p. 597.

⁴⁴"In My Library" in Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 304. In the same essay, Forster says Gibbon is one of the authors whose books he would want in every room. The other two are Shakespeare and Jane Austen. In "A Book that Influenced Me," an article in the same collection, Forster rates The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, War and Peace, and The Divine Comedy as the three great books of his life.

Although Forster declares that "art is not all gossamer . . . it has become part of our armour,"⁴⁵ he never suggests that the chief uses of art are moral. George Crabbe's "moral values" are "not good enough reason for reading him, or for reading anyone."⁴⁶ In any event, "a writer's duty often exceeds any duty he owes to society."⁴⁷ If art seems to get the approving nod more often than life, it must be remembered that Forster most admires imagination, tolerance, affection, and honesty--qualities which cut across the two domains.

Forster also holds a number of other beliefs which are sometimes considered mutually exclusive. In American political parlance, he would be classed as a liberal, yet he has a conservative strain something akin to that of our southern literary agrarian movements like the Fugitives. That is, he will give two cheers for Democracy because "it admits variety and . . . permits criticism";⁴⁸ he has always been an enemy of imperialism and an advocate of the broadest liberty for all: a thorough-going egalitarian. But he hates our technological society and feels the likeliest place to achieve the "connection" he so desires is on an English farm.⁴⁹ He knows

⁴⁵"A Note on the Way" in Abinger Harvest (New York, 1955), p. 71.

⁴⁶"Sidling After Crabbe," Listener, LIII (June 9, 1955), 1039.

⁴⁷"English Prose Between 1918 and 1939," in Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 274.

⁴⁸"What I Believe" in Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 70.

⁴⁹Howards End, p. 269. "In these English farms, if any-

that industrialism and the welfare state gradually are emancipating the working man--whom he likes but does not patronize. Still, everything is so ugly. There is "a huge economic movement which has been taking the whole world, Great Britain included, from agriculture towards industrialism. . . . It has meant organisation and plans and the boosting of the community. It has meant the destruction of feudalism and relationship based on the land, it has meant transference of power from the aristocrat to the bureaucrat and the manager and the technician. Perhaps it will mean democracy, but it has not meant it yet, and personally I hate it."⁵⁰

Since Forster is both a democrat and a nostalgic traditionalist--"If you drop traditional culture you lose your chance of connecting work and play and creating a life which is all of a piece"⁵¹--he has difficulty with the role of science. Science does "not bring happiness or wisdom" but at least it represents the world as its practitioners think it is, not as they think it ought to be.⁵² Thus, in its historic war with Christianity, Forster supports "the age of enquiry" as against "the age of authority."⁵³

where, one might see life steadily and see it whole, group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth, connect--connect without bitterness until all men are brothers."

⁵⁰"English Prose Between 1938 and 1939," p. 273.

⁵¹"Does Culture Matter?," p. 103.

⁵²Alexandria, pp. 41, 45.

⁵³Ibid., p. 45.