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ON INTERPRETING LITERATURE



THE CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATION

PARTISANS IN THE CONFLICT of interpretation adopt different positions over what literature ought to be studied, and with *what* comes *why* and *how*. There's no claim to objectivity here, which is fine since the conflict is a clash of subjectivities. But, even among the subjectivities, evidence is still important when interpreting literature; and evidence doesn't come pre-packaged with a theory of reading. Evidence is more straightforward in scientific writing; where a hypothesis or question is stated at the beginning; where there's a prescribed structure of introduction, methods, results, discussion and conclusion; where legitimacy depends on analysing and presenting and discussing sufficient evidence if not to convince then to encourage the reader to think about the hypothesis or question differently.

The scientific method wouldn't be hard to approximate in literary studies, where the most important evidence comes from the text being critiqued rather than from a theory of what the text represents or means. In literary studies there has long been something similar to the scientific method: close reading. But since the ascendancy of literary and cultural theory, some partisans in the conflict plead a special case. They object to close reading, argue in favour of theory, and don't feel evidence is too important. When a discussion about interpreting literature occurs, I advocate three principles of hermeneutics: the science of interpretation; the study of behaviour and institutions.

First, while prejudice isn't something we're comfortable admitting to—it's something other people have—prejudice is a normative part of understanding. What's confronting to those who believe in objectivity—and promote the goal of either abolishing prejudice or converting everyone to their prejudice—is the proposal that some prejudices are true while others are false. The task of reason is to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices, but the broad thrust of post-

Enlightenment critique is to demonstrate how reason has been used to validate a wide range of prejudices—sometimes with horrifying consequences. As the dictum attributed to Nietzsche says, reason masks the will to power. Conrad demonstrates this in *Heart of Darkness* through the character of Kurtz.

Second, as far as literature is concerned, interpretation is best conducted with an eye towards something called

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the hermeneutical circle. In this circle there are three smaller circles that overlap, which represent the horizons of author and text and reader. In the first, the author is intentional and this intentionality is reflected in the text. In the second, the text has a life that extends beyond the author's intention and signals to the reader the ways in which it seeks to be read. In the third, the reader is expected to dialogue with their horizon, which requires them to recognise their prejudices (as prejudices) and try to open out to the horizons of author and text. The goal of the hermeneutical circle is open-ended. It seeks a fusion of horizons of author and text and reader.

Third, in any act of interpretation, the parts of a text need to be read in relation to its whole, just as the whole of a text needs to be read in relation to its parts. If we critique the Gospel of Matthew to better understand its Hebraic character, as a book written by Jewish Christians for a Jewish readership, we need to examine every verse and pericope in relation to the gospel as a whole and allow the gospel as a whole to inform what each verse or pericope might mean. If we critique *The Eye of the Storm* to better understand its post-metaphysical character, as a book written by a late-modernist author interrogating the varieties of religious experience within the Western meta-narrative, then the same process applies.

These principles of hermeneutics offer a system of checks and balances that come as close to the scientific method as literary studies can. But not all literature stands up to the rigour they encourage. They're best employed when approaching literature written with hermeneutical intentions. To demonstrate how they

work, this article applies them to *A Passage to India*, a hermeneutical and post-metaphysical novel that's fallen out of favour among academics who take their cues from theorists such as Edward Said.

Said tells us, in his desultory and ephemeral *Culture and Imperialism*, that "Forster's India is so affectionately personal and so remorselessly metaphysical that his view of Indians as a nation contending for sovereignty with Britain is not politically very serious, or even respectful". He calls *A Passage to India* "evasive" and "patronising". Said believes Forster inscribes imperialism and describes Indians as "oriental", which to him is a Western way of constructing anyone Eastern as "other". Said offers little textual evidence to support his assertions. He simply makes them and takes their truth for granted. Said and his clique avoid close reading because they live in a world where hermeneutics and metaphysics are tainted Western prisms that have no place in their theory of reading.

Forster's epigraph to *Howards End*, "only connect", is the informing principle of *A Passage to India*, a novel that explores why humans fail to connect. This exploration is as relevant today as it was when the novel was first published in 1924. We'll overlook Forster's relevance if we continue to blame dead white males, wherever they come from in the anglosphere, for our inability to engage with the reality around us.

THE CLASH OF HORIZONS

IF WE READ *A Passage to India* closely, we can see Forster is as critical of Islamic imperialism as he is of British imperialism and, as far as British imperialism is concerned, Forster acknowledges that not all the British in Anglo-India are the same. Clashes of horizon occur when the British act out their meta-narrative in India. The civil servants of Anglo-India represent the worldview of the Enlightenment, as Forster understood it: they're the servants of empire. British characters not bound by the civil service represent the interrogation of the Enlightenment, as Forster understood it: they're more wary of empire.

Within India more broadly, clashes of horizon occur when monotheists and polytheists interact. The novel gives much more space to Dr Aziz and Islam because, according to Forster's logic, the monotheistic truth they mediate depends on language. The dialogue between Aziz and the novel's Western characters, whether secular or religious, occurs because the West also depends on language. In the novel, dialogue exists between Islam and "poor little talkative Christianity" because there's a language to conduct it. The novel gives much less space to Professor Godbole and Hinduism because the pantheistic truth they mediate is largely silent; hence the absence of dialogue between Godbole and other charac-

ters, whether Western or Eastern, or secular or religious.

Between the great religions represented in the novel, a clash of horizons occurs when Christianity and Islam and Hinduism interact, even though their representative characters are always civil towards and respectful of each other. The Christian Mrs Moore eschews the religion of Anglo-India, which is essentially emperor-worship—a thanksgiving for the Pax Britannica as an imitation of the Pax Romana—rather than scriptural Christianity. She recognises an affinity with Aziz as a fellow monotheist just as Aziz recognises an affinity with her. But Aziz is only part of the broader reality of India that includes Godbole, a high-caste Hindu priest, and the echo in the Marabar Caves.

If we want to understand the hermeneutical character of *A Passage to India*, as a post-metaphysical novel, we need a hermeneutical method of interpreting it. A close reading of the way Forster manages the dialogue between Dr Aziz and Mrs Moore, and their shared inability to dialogue with Professor Godbole, is crucial to understanding how he represents Christianity and Islam and Hinduism in the novel. Of equal importance is how Forster represents the similar-but-different worldviews of the Enlightenment and the interrogation of the Enlightenment, evident in the way British expatriates and British tourists interact. If we read the novel the way it seeks to be read, it becomes difficult to view Forster as evasive and patronising.

ISLAM

WHETHER FORSTER is successful in his characterisation of Aziz is debated. Some critics, including Said, find Aziz an unreal and unsympathetic "oriental" stereotype. Other critics, including Indians, find Aziz real and sympathetic. According to Adwaita Ganguly, the reader can see through the "prismatic transparency" of Aziz to Islamic orthodoxy and Persian poetry. Aziz is simultaneously deep and shallow, perceptive and imperceptive, broad-minded and narrow-minded, in-touch and out-of-touch. These antitheses are emblematic of what Forster wants to demonstrate through Aziz, regardless of whether his characterisation is authentic or inauthentic.

Ganguly argues that Aziz's loyalty to Islam isn't focused on the pluralism and difference of India but on a poetic reverie for "the days of Aurangzeb" when "the Mughal Empire was at its height". While post-colonial critics insist the reality of contemporary India resists totalising discourses, Aziz's horizon is dominated, ironically, by a totalising discourse, through his ideological and theological desire for national unity under Islam. In tracing the problems of India to the collapse of Mughal hegemony, "Aziz has thus fully evoked the legacy of Islam in India after the decline of the Mughal Empire.

History bequeaths to the new generation of Indian Muslims a choice between Akbar's eclecticism and Aurangzeb's separatist orthodoxy."

Barriers to unity are important to Aziz. They're prejudices that for him are true. They protect him from the question in his heart, as Ganguly explains:

who shall own India if the British quit? The Hindu natives or the minority Muslim community? This essential political question in the Indian sub-continent perturbs Aziz's mind throughout the novel, but in his deeper self he is also concerned with the quest for a spiritual home, which is resolved partly by his flight from English society to the Hindu state of Mau, and partly by his continued allegiance to Sufi poetry and Islamic religion.

Ironically, Aziz finds his home in Mau, a Hindu state, where he continues to coexist with—but never comprehends—Godbole and Hinduism. He remains an exclusive orthodox Muslim; even though Forster's Hinduism embraces him; even though Forster baptises him into Hinduism—by capsizing his boat and totally immersing him in a lake during a Hindu festival—into the “ragged edges of religion ... unsatisfactory and undramatic tangles ... God is Love ... no man could say where was the emotional centre of it, any more than he could locate the heart of a cloud”.

At the end of the novel, Aziz utters a final challenge to Fielding, a secular and liberal British tourist. Aziz says his family will drive every Englishman from India, into the sea, and then he and Fielding “shall be friends”. Here Aziz displays deep passion and great love, in spite of his intense frustration and righteous anger, which to Forster is emblematic of the way he engages with his religion. But while Aziz's sentiments are fine, as far as they go, when defining what needs to happen before a British-Muslim détente can occur, they offer no prospect of Muslim-Hindu détente. It is ironic that Aziz never embraces the broader reality of India, even if he thinks he does, and even if his claims are demonstrably stronger than any claims the British could possibly have. So the question facing the close reader is: Does the subsequent history of Indian sovereignty, and eventual partition of India after the British departure, vindicate Forster's characterisation of Aziz?

CHRISTIANITY

HAROLD BLOOM once observed, “Western conceptualisation is Greek, and yet Western religion, however conceptualised, is not.” Knowing this helps distinguish between the neoclassical ideas that fuelled the British empire and Mrs Moore as a representative of scriptural Christianity.

There's a mutual recognition and friendship between Mrs Moore and Aziz. He declares them both to be “oriental”. He remains loyal to her throughout the novel, even while he's being treated abominably by Anglo-Indians. His horizon fuses with hers as much as the monotheistic horizons can.

Mrs Moore glosses over the differences between Christianity and Islam because she can see fundamental similarities between them. But there are limits, as she admits: “I like mysteries but I rather dislike muddles.” She won't be able to accept what's revealed to her later in the novel, at the Marabar Caves, where the muddle *is* the mystery. Ganguly tells us she's offered freedom through negation at these caves, which gradually unfolds in three stages: her experience of the echo, a revelation given by the echo, and the aftermath of this revelation. The echo isn't a pleasant experience for her because it challenges the religious paradigm through which she's hitherto understood the world. Ganguly points out that the sound of the echo ends in the syllable “aum” or “om”, which is a mantra of negation found only in the Vedic literature. This is why, according to Forster, Hinduism can accept the reality of the echo better than Christianity or Islam can.

The echo, Forster says, is “entirely devoid of distinction”. It's the sound-symbol of a God without attributes, and that God is the source of both the sublime and the ridiculous. This revelation of meaning and non-meaning resonates in Mrs Moore's mind and causes her to murmur: “Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists and nothing has value.” Forster goes on to explain:

Devils are of the North, and poems can be written about them, but no one could romanticise the Marabar, because it robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them to mankind ... Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul, the mood of the last two months took definite form at last, and she realised that she didn't want to write to her children, didn't want to communicate with anyone, not even with God. She sat motionless with horror ... For a time she thought, “I am going to be ill,” to comfort herself, then she surrendered to the vision.

At that point her horizon fuses with Brahman, which in Hindu philosophy is the ultimate reality underlying all phenomena. She loses interest in worldly affairs and her state of mind embraces nothingness (no-thing-ness). However, Ganguly tells us this fusion of horizons between Christianity and Hinduism is temporary because Mrs Moore doesn't have the “yogic power” to “attain the

reality beneath the appearance". Soon she'll leave India and die on the voyage home.

HINDUISM

WHEN PROFESSOR GODBOLE enters the novel, "his whole appearance suggested harmony—as if he had reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical, and could never be discomposed". During their first meeting, Mrs Moore hoped he "would supplement Dr Aziz", who's holding court and claiming knowledge he doesn't possess, "by saying something about religion". But Godbole's reply is to sing a raga, described as a maze of noises: "none harsh or unpleasant" but "none intelligible".

Godbole was originally invited on Aziz's excursion to the Marabar Caves but missed the train because his driver "miscalculated the length of a prayer". If Godbole had caught the train, the confrontation at Marabar may have had a less dramatic outcome. Forster contrived the absence of the pantheistic horizon from the excursion to the caves so the compatibility of the monotheistic horizons could be put to the test. At the beginning of the excursion, Mrs Moore remarks to Aziz with naive candour: "We shall be all Moslems together now, as you promised." The consequence of Godbole's absence is the different responses to what does or doesn't happen in the caves, whether it is the "oboum", which does occur, or the assault on her fellow tourist, Adela, attributed to Aziz, which probably doesn't occur. All the caves do is challenge two Britishers' grasp of reality, which in Anglo-India is enough to put an innocent Muslim on trial for indecent assault.

Later, when Fielding tries to engage a disinterested Godbole in the seriousness of the charges facing Aziz, turn those charges into a battle of right versus wrong, or good versus evil, and wants him to acknowledge that Adela suffered some kind of "appalling experience" in the caves, Godbole makes one of his few incisive and oracular observations in the novel:

"... nothing can be performed in isolation. All perform a good action, when one is performed, and when an evil action is performed, all perform it. To illustrate my meaning, let me take the case in point as an example. I am informed that an evil action was performed in the Marabar Hills, and that a highly esteemed English lady is now seriously ill in consequence. My answer to that is this: that action was performed by Dr Aziz." He stopped and sucked in his thin cheeks. "It was performed by the guide." He stopped again. "It was performed by you." Now he had an air of daring and of coyness. "It was performed by me." He looked shyly down the sleeve

of his own coat. "And by my students. It was even performed by the lady herself. When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs ... And similarly when suffering occurs, and so on and so forth, and everything is anything and nothing something ... Good and evil are different, as their names imply. But, in my own humble opinion, they are both of them aspects of my Lord."

Having uttered this unappealing truth, Godbole will soon "slip off unmolested to his new job ... he always did possess the knack of slipping off".

The last, or pantheistic, section of the novel is much shorter than the previous two monotheistic sections. It's dominated by Godbole's re-enactment of the birth of Krishna, by his worship of the God who comes but will not come—a God who is an absent-presence—and by his fusion of horizons with the deceased Mrs Moore. This fusion occurs through Hindu worship, during a birth ceremony, the main event of the Hindu year, where Godbole is beset with strange thoughts:

He had, with increasing vividness, again seen Mrs Moore, and round her faintly clinging forms of trouble. He was a Brahman, she a 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 ... "It does not seem much, still, it is more than I am myself."

CONNECTING AND DISCONNECTING

TO UNDERSTAND *A Passage to India* it's necessary to notice the author's post-metaphysical interrogation of the Christian and Muslim and Hindu horizons—as he understands them—and consider how they interact in the novel. Whether the author tells the truth or lies in his portrayal of the Muslim and Hindu horizons is contested. There are enough Indian commentators who've demonstrated the depth and integrity of the novel—as a portrait of India under waning British rule—to vindicate Forster.

Forster didn't regard himself as Christian and, like many thinkers and authors of his age and class and aesthetic ideology, his interrogation of Christianity was part of a broader interrogation of classical metaphysics. Once we understand this, we can better acknowledge his critique of Western prejudices, secular and religious, many

of which can be attributed to the classical Greek prisms of rationality and irrationality that come to us through the Platonic model of the mind. That's why the secular Adela Quested and the religious Mrs Moore, both Westerners, are equally challenged by what they experience at the Marabar Caves.

Adela, having gradually realised her mistake in the caves, retreats from India a shattered person who shuts the door against any of the religious truths permeating the novel. This is consistent with her status as a secular and liberal tourist whose dependence on reason and enlightenment has been severely challenged. However, Fielding is a similar secular and liberal tourist, equally grounded in reason and enlightenment; and, ironically, it's through him that the Christian interest in Hinduism continues beyond the end of the novel. The close reader knows this because Fielding, on a later visit to India, is curious to discover whether Godbole still asks the question, "Come, come?", a mantra Christians know as "Maranatha" or "Come Lord". It's ironic Fielding wants Aziz to satisfy his curiosity rather than asking Godbole himself. When Aziz doesn't know the answer or even care about it, Fielding:

sighed, opened his lips, shut them, then said with a little laugh, "I can't explain, because it isn't in words at all, but why do my wife and her brother like Hinduism, though they take no interest in its forms? They won't talk to me about this. They know I think a certain side of their lives is a mistake, and are shy. That's why I wish you would talk to them, for at all events you're oriental."

His wife and her brother, Stella and Ralph, are Mrs Moore's children. Like their mother they're also practising and committed Christians, much to the chagrin of the secular and liberal Fielding who wants the religions of the world to abandon their prejudices but can't see the prejudices of his own reasonable and enlightened world-view.

Fielding assumes Aziz understands Hinduism, and can explain it to his wife and brother-in-law, simply because he sees Aziz as "oriental", that tainted Western construct Said alerts us to. However, if Fielding is a naive orientalist, in Said's sense of the term, Forster certainly isn't. A close reading of the novel demonstrates this. In *A Passage to India* we see Forster's post-metaphysical interrogation of classical metaphysics, in which he leaves open the possibility that, within the "only connect" of human relationships—within the clash of horizons between the great religions of the world—there's always the possibility of a fusion of horizons: however brief and incomplete.

Where does this kind of close reading leave the literary and cultural theories of Said and his claque? Nowhere really. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said states unequivocally that literary studies needs to advocate both secular reading and secular politics. He also laments the presence of religious interpreters in the academy because they are, by definition, narrow-minded. In devoting his career to promoting such reading and politics—in which anyone who believes in God is automatically thought to be fundamentalist and conservative—Said doesn't bother to demonstrate what's right about his prejudices and wrong with everyone else's. He simply preaches against what he despises.

Said is too busy demonising Forster, as a dead white male, to pay attention to the aesthetic ideology of *A Passage to India*. He doesn't demonstrate a close reading of the novel. He doesn't feel he needs to. Instead he is satisfied to impose a theory of reading upon the novel so it becomes yet another cartoon of British imperialism in which everything is reduced to oriental victimhood and occidental prejudices. In this cartoon show, the anglo-sphere is held responsible for everything wrong in the world.

It's ironic to read, in Said's manifesto, how "flabbergasted" he is that the victimised and orientalist don't care about his black-ribbon theory of reading. When Said went to the East to bestow the benefits of his broad-minded, reasonable and enlightened methodology, he thought the victimised and orientalist would be his natural audience and share his politics. But they weren't and they didn't. They have other agendas from his; some of which he finds disturbing because these agendas oppose everything he stands for. But the penny never drops with Said. He doesn't understand the East better than Forster. He simply hates Western pluralism.

We deserve more from academic literary critics, especially when they present themselves as better, take the moral high ground, and offer a theory of reading literature that doubles as a political manifesto. They need to examine every sentence and paragraph in relation to the novel as a whole and allow the novel as a whole to inform what each sentence and paragraph might mean. They ought to keep their minds open and try to despise less. When we critique *A Passage to India* to better understand its post-metaphysical character, as a novel written to interrogate the clash of horizons, between West and East, between religious and secular, between the world's great religions, and within the Western meta-narrative itself, we need to provide evidence rather than theory. It's all a matter of evidence.

Michael Giffin wrote "Writing and Reading the Canons" in the June issue.