

Alberto Fernández Carbajal, 2014.
Compromise and Resistance in Postcolonial Writing:
E. M. Forster's Legacy
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)

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Alberto Fernández Carbajal's study sets itself the goal of challenging some of the most commonly held "negative" views on the work of E. M. Forster: the "political evasiveness" (2) of his philosophy, Forster's alleged complicity with imperialist values and ethos, and the only "mildly" disruptive quality of his modernism. Carbajal does not proceed by directly confronting and analysing Forster's narratives, but by exploring the writer's legacy (thematic, structural, aesthetic, and ideological) in prominent Anglophone postcolonial texts. Carbajal's conceptual point of departure is that the "oppositional" value of Forster's work and his "resistance to normative discourses and ideologies" (2) are elusive and complex issues, perhaps more likely to be fully grasped if assessed in relation to their long-lasting influence on the work of later authors.

By shedding light on the subtleties of Forster's political and artistic dialogue with the themes of liberalism, imperialism, and modernism, Carbajal exposes Forster's sometimes compromising, sometimes unsettling approach to such matters; an approach that has not ceased to exert its influence on postcolonial writing. Carbajal's study engages with a cluster of texts, realist, modern, and postmodern, "to challenge critical reductionisms diminishing Forster's work and to consider the various ways in which writing from several postcolonial regions, including postcolonial Britain, contends with Forster's legacies in a multivalent and complex manner" (4).

From this perspective, Carbajal postulates that a series of simplistic views should be avoided in postcolonial criticism: firstly, postcolonial literature should not be seen as a homogeneous realm of clear-cut and unambiguous anti-colonial discourse, since "postcolonial textuality is not always pitted against colonial culture" (11). Furthermore, Carbajal argues, postcolonial

writers who choose to engage with English literature are not necessarily “chained” to colonial discourse, ultimately bound to reiterate its concerns and values. Rather, Carbajal believes there are “ideological connections that can travel between colonial and postcolonial histories” (5), influences that can be appropriated differently by different authors and for different purposes. In his study, therefore, he sets out to demonstrate that the effort of studying such connections is worthwhile and productive, as it affords a greater possibility of intelligent critical exploration than a one-dimensional assessment of “consenting discourses” versus “dissenting ones.”

Hence Carbajal chooses to discuss not only Forster’s direct and acknowledged influence on the work of prominent postcolonial authors (such as Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith), but also his more abstract and not necessarily recognized presence (a kind of presence for which he employs the term “spectral”) within postcolonial narratives that re-articulate several of his concerns: “Forster’s aesthetics, politics, and ethics of representation, I argue, haunt postcolonial fiction even when writers remain unaware or bashful about their inheritance” (20).

Carbajal believes that dismissing British authors on the assumption that only “Indian perspectives can fruitfully undermine imperialism” (29) is counterproductive, as it precludes a full appreciation of the multiple and intricate ways in which British authors have engaged with imperial ideology. Consequently, he begins his investigation, in the first chapter of his study, with an analysis of Paul Scott’s *The Raj Quartet* (1965-75) and Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust* (1975). Both texts “pose important questions about British sexualities and ideologies which continue the dialogue started by dissenting colonial writers such as Forster” (31). In particular, Scott’s four-volume novel sequence “enacts a troubled critique of British homosexuality in India that reverberates with Forster’s spectral legacies” (32).

Carbajal observes that both novels, just as *A Room with a View* (1908) and *A Passage to India* (1924), place at the centre of their story British female characters “awakening to sexual self-expression and to inter-cultural connection” (51). *Heat and Dust*, in particular, “elaborates on Forster’s methods of sublimation, and inherits his representation of female sensibilities in Italy and India and their transgression of British moral codes...” (68). However, in both novels, female characters are sublimated figures through which the authors tackle the contentious topic of homosexuality. In this perspective, therefore, female characters play “the important role of challenging imperial

complacency, whilst it is the relationship between men that remains more mysteriously and surreptitiously deployed to tease out the homoerotic attraction underscoring imperial officialdom" (54). In other words, female characters are used as "objects of sexual sublimation, or as initial access points to colonial sexual relations which belie a homosexuality either repressed, in Forster's case, or about to become manifest, in Scott's" (38).

The second chapter focuses on a discussion of J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980). Carbajal detects a crucial Forsterian legacy within both novels. In the first case, Forster's vision of India is fundamental to Farrell's progressive elaboration of his "metropolitan dissent with the discourses of empire" (76). Carbajal believes Farrell's text to challenge British assumptions of political and cultural superiority and to cut through "to the core of nineteenth-century imperial self-confidence" (71).

Commenting on Farrell's debt to Forster, Carbajal notes:

like Forster's fiction depicting the subcontinent, Farrell's Indian novel constitutes not so much an objective exploration of India's colonial history, as a historically infused literary examination of India's challenges to British 'senses' which goes on to explore more primal states of being (76).

Carbajal is right in observing this, and the same could be said (and has been said) of Forster's representations of Italy. Recent criticism has brought attention to discursive practices dividing geographical places according to a taxonomy of the more or less "primal," "magical," "irrational," "traditional," and "pre modern." Although Carbajal correctly refuses to support a reductionist view of Forster's work that reads it as "ultimately colonial" (Forster's vision is indeed more complex and, as such, undeserving of this crass judgement), he should perhaps see as problematic the epistemic gesture of accommodating the other along a linear historical development that one (in this case the British subject) can contemplate from the vantage point of "the end of history."

The point, perhaps, is not so much to criticize Forster's intentions or his personal stance towards imperialism; it is to detect and question the notions that "exceed" the author's intentions, that belong to the imperial archive, and that recur in his narratives. Forster built entire narratives on a dualistic vision of cultures, and this aspect makes his work an important object

(all the more challenging because of its density and complexity) of postcolonial critique; the intelligence, finesse, and “generosity” with which such critiques may be carried out are an altogether different matter.

Desai’s novel shows structural and thematic connections with *Howards End* (1910) as well as symbolic and allegoric ones, “revealing a subconscious and affective connection with Forster’s writing” (110). Just like *Howards End*, the novel articulates a discourse on the nation through a family portrayal, making use of “a set of modernist techniques inherited from Forster in order to represent the compelling familial and national conflicts of independent India” (110). The focus is kept, throughout the novel, on the individual and the subjective, but if the author chooses not to investigate the larger political and social context that frames the lives of the Das family members “through the use of modernist symbolism and allegory, Desai brings politics to the level of the domestic and the subjective, and stitches together a new, individualistic pattern for the telling of national histories, one which rings with the echoes of Forster’s equally symbolic domestic spaces” (105).

Desai’s novel is an important instance of an engagement with colonial British literature that is, according to Carbajal, neither subdued nor merely oppositional:

Desai’s allegorical envisioning of India may be linked artistically to Britain, not in order to denounce past colonial oppression in a manner locking her to colonial discursive dynamics, but offering a new envisioning of the postcolonial nation which accounts for the possibility of cultural fluidity between the cultures of the imperial metropolis and those of its former colonies; in Desai’s case by conjoining in a modernist manner the fate of individual families with particular sectors of Indian society (101).

Chapter three proposes a reading of Nadine Gordimer’s debut novel *The Lying Days* (1953) and Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992), two narratives that “testify to the importance of human relations in times of national and international political conflict, and their explicit connections to sites of learning and scholarship” (113). *The Lying Days*, in particular, is compared to Forster’s *The Longest Journey* (1907) by virtue of the fact that both novels feature an

envisioning of universities and the study of the humanities, and interrogate the ways in which they partly equip the individual to understand others and to promote inclusion in the colonial and the postcolonial state, whilst the principles of humanism act as an ideological springboard for a wider, more generous and just understanding of nationality and citizenship (115).

Gordimer elaborates critically upon the legacy of European literature, inheriting from Forster three “lessons” that are at the basis of the existential and intellectual evolution of the young protagonist of the novel:

the need to challenge the limits of individual consciousness in order to enable human connection across cultural and racial barriers [...] the role of a humanist tradition in the development of the necessary skills to question social prescription on intercultural relations [...] [and] the need to outgrow a humanist education to directly challenge societal expectations in order to promote both social progress and individual fulfilment (118).

According to Carbajal, the element which connects Gordimer’s novel to Ondaatje’s, and both novels to Forster’s, is precisely the need to “reconfigure humanism—and the humanities—in order to question racial and cultural segregation as well as the patriarchal and rationalistic attributes of classical humanism” (153).

Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* is “the perfect embodiment” (134) of this kind of necessity, as it puts a “humanist impetus” (136) in contrast with the individual’s personal limitations and finite perspectives. The novel inherits Forster’s discourse on the limitations of European humanism and “infuses it with a cosmopolitan, oral, and exilic impetus which renders its interrogation of knowledge and personal interconnection distinctly postcolonial” (140). This narrative, at the core of which stand a series of tensions,

embraces Renaissance Italy but, in its dereliction, it regards its scarred humanism with suspicion; it is invested in, and self-consciously fascinated by, history while rejecting rationalistic historiography; it intermittently sanctions and rejects intercultural personal relations, drawing attention at once to the possibilities

and the circumscription of physical and mental interconnection (135).

In the fourth and last chapter of his study, Carbajal examines Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005). The three narratives are connected, at a fundamental thematic level, "through Forster's relinquishing of friendship and through his representation of bourgeois self-interest in *Passage [to India]* and *Howards End* respectively" (156). All these narratives constitute "attempts to come to terms with otherness in communally torn nations and in a gradually more dispersed and globalized world by forging personal connections that can challenge boundaries of faith, education, race, class and rationality" (155).

Rushdie's *Midnight Children* is a family saga that spans a long period in Indian history, from 1915 to 1977, comprehending, within its narrative, key historical and political events, such as the Partition of India and Indira Gandhi's years of the Emergency. Within the intricate game of literary references that the novel presents, Carbajal detects, in the figure of the family patriarch, Dr. Aadam Aziz, a Western-educated Muslim, a more recent literary instantiation of Forster's Dr. Aziz. The important point is that Rushdie "recalibrates Forster's failed politics of friendship in order to interrogate the growing tensions between Hindus and Muslims" (166).

In *On Beauty*, an explicit literary homage to Forster's *Howards End*, Smith questions "the ideological contradictions of the Anglo-American middle classes" (179) and, in particular, "the ethical limitations of Anglophone cosmopolitan academic communities" (179). Carbajal reads the novel as an effective critique of bourgeois moral codes: "In presenting the clash of social strata and racial identities, Smith is performing a postcolonial critique of the bourgeoisie's inability to transcend its social boundaries and to be hospitable to otherness not just in principle, but also in practice" (183).

Smith's bourgeoisie is as problematic as Forster's and equally incapable of establishing genuine and unconstrained connections with others. Smith's portrayal of it is particularly persuasive, especially in its description of its contradictory and conflicted ethos. In Carbajal's opinion, however, Smith eventually reproduces the very same ideological shortcomings of Forster's narrative as it fails to convincingly portray a social reality beyond the bourgeois one:

Smith's text walks its own version of Forster's 'middling line,' divided between a critique of the middle class and a liberal solidarity towards the plights of others which, despite its sympathy, cannot do much to counteract their oppression in a convincing manner, revealing an act of ideological emulation despite the attempt to outgrow Forster's belittling depiction of Leonard Bast (190).

Carbajal's work is particularly successful in shedding light on textual connections and mapping out a network of inter-textual references. The author's commentary to the texts is well thought-out, and in many instances very bright; it does not, however, provide enough excerpts from primary sources for the reader to adequately follow and formulate with ease his/her own thoughts about them. If it is understandable to assume the reader's knowledge of these texts, it is less obvious, to my mind, to expect all of these narratives to be simultaneously "fresh" in the reader's memory. Throughout the study, the analysed text is heavily overshadowed by the critic's interpretation.

Carbajal is so concentrated on drawing the map of ideological, structural, and thematic legacies between Forster and postcolonial authors that he ends up attributing to them too much capacity for independent artistic expression beyond a common episteme. For example, when Carbajal affirms that "Rushdie spectrally inherits from Forster a language of hospitality, of blended intimacy and violence, which is the hallmark of Forster's exploration of the failed politics of friendship in *Passage [to India]*" (189), one could argue that such combination of intimacy and violence is the hallmark of colonial power relations that both authors, each according to his own artistic sensibility and literary style, detect and describe.

In other words, Carbajal seems to envision literature as a fascinating and intricate web of autonomous voices that influence one another and inherit from one another independently from the material reality they are immersed in and from the common episteme they share and contribute to create. This approach is problematic because it ultimately makes Forster a "noble grandfather" of postcolonial literature, rather than a significant, brilliant, ambiguous, conflicted, geographically and historically located voice among other voices.