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*Friendship, Liberalism, and the Novel:*  
A Passage to India

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Friendship, liberalism, and the novel: all three terms have become objects of scrutiny and even skepticism in recent years, either as relics of a value system no longer relevant to the present, or, worse, as falsely valorized objects that never merited the esteem in which they were held. The technology industry has repurposed the word “friend” as a verb (“to friend someone”), and our easy adoption of this usage suggests that friendship itself has been compromised by the logic of social media, which allows market forces to reach ever more deeply into our private lives. This phenomenon is, however, merely an intensification of a transformation already lamented by Theodor Adorno in 1944, when he observed that personal relationships were being contaminated by the need to forge professional connections: “The private lives of countless people are becoming those of agents and go-betweens; indeed the entire private domain is being engulfed by a mysterious activity that bears all the features of commercial life without there being actually any business to transact ... [People] believe that only by empathy, assiduity, serviceability, arts and dodges, by tradesmen’s qualities, can they ingratiate themselves with the executive they imagine omnipresent, and soon there is no relationship that is not seen as a ‘connection.’”<sup>1</sup> Self-advancement is regarded as honesty, while private friendship is eyed with suspicion: “Today it is seen as arrogant, alien and improper to engage in private activity without any ulterior motive.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, aspiring professionals are told that they have no choice but to be on social media. Indeed, younger readers may be silently correcting me right now, noting that Facebook has been supplanted by newer platforms, and that the

term “friend” has given way to the more ominous “follower” – a transformation whose implications Adorno surely would have discerned.

Liberalism, meanwhile, has long been a target for those on both ends of the political spectrum, but only lately has liberalism as a political system appeared on the defensive. Francis Fukuyama provides a global context: “It is clear that liberalism has been in retreat in recent years. According to [the non-profit organization] Freedom House, political rights and civil liberties around the globe rose during the three and a half decades between 1974 and the early 2000s, but have been falling for 15 straight years prior to 2021 in what has been labeled a democratic recession or even depression.”<sup>3</sup> During these years, elected leaders in Hungary, Poland, Brazil, Turkey, and the US “have used their electoral mandates to attack liberal institutions ... [including] the courts and justice system, nonpartisan state bureaucracies, independent media, and other bodies limiting executive power under a system of checks and balances.”<sup>4</sup>

The attacks come from both political extremes. On the right, conservatives may regard so-called classical economic liberalism as a beneficent force, but they view the accompanying rise of cultural and political liberalism – the centuries-long expansion of individual autonomy, equal rights, and personal freedoms – as corrosive of valued traditions and hierarchies. Meanwhile, the academic left invokes the word “liberalism” with a slightly different valence, associating it with humanism, Enlightenment, and sometimes capitalism. They decry liberalism as a false universalism masking the operations of power, or a philosophical framework that fails to offer sufficiently systematic analysis, so that, as Amanda Anderson points out, “there remains ... a widespread default use of ‘liberal’ to signal benighted, ideological, or normative elements of thought or art.”<sup>5</sup>

The novel, lastly, has survived the rise of movies and television, of the new journalism and the memoir, yet it is once again being laid out and toe-tagged in the morgue of cultural forms. The writer Will Self declares the death of the novel even as he carves out exceptions for various popular genres. Self, writing during the ascendance of *Harry Potter* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, laments not merely the novel’s diminished prestige but its diminished relevance to the intellectual life of a society:

I do not mean narrative prose fiction *tout court* is dying – the kidult boywizardsroman and the soft sadomasochistic porn fantasy are clearly

in rude good health. And nor do I mean that serious novels will either cease to be written or read. But what is already no longer the case is the situation that obtained when I was a young man. In the early 1980s, and I would argue throughout the second half of the last century, the literary novel was perceived to be the prince of art forms, the cultural capstone and the apogee of creative endeavour.<sup>6</sup>

The culprit for Self is, once more, the digital universe, which erodes our ability to enjoy extended private reading with offers of limitless screen time, gaming, and binge-watching. If Walter Benjamin is right that “the birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual,”<sup>7</sup> then its final resting place must be the social media influencer.<sup>8</sup>

Having laid out these narratives of decline, I do not intend either to affirm or to refute them. I have no special ability to prognosticate, particularly when it comes to such vast, uncertain subjects as the fate of social relations in a technologized world, the future of political systems, or the forms and media that will become the dominant modes of expression of the human imagination. But, in turning to E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, I do want to suggest that our attachments to all three of the ideas in my title are related, and that liberalism might constitute an unspoken third term in the framing of this volume on friendship and the novel. For each of these concepts in its own discrete sphere – the social, the political, the aesthetic – relies on a valorization of the individual, the pluralistic, and the contingent. Thus, we value a friend precisely for those gifts that lie outside or beyond the professional realm, resistant to the medium of exchange. Liberalism, with its commitment to the individual over the nation or the tribe, may seem ineffectual, but its ideals look very much like the ideals of friendship writ large. And while the novel, at least for Foucaultians, has been understood as a technology of ideological discipline, such disparate thinkers as Mikhail Bakhtin, Milan Kundera, and Lionel Trilling have affirmed its ability to honour that which is overlooked, denigrated, or expunged by totalizing ideologies – the peculiarities, eccentricities, and necessary flaws of human beings and human life.

Forster famously declared, “I belong to the fag-end of Victorian liberalism,”<sup>9</sup> and early critical studies by Trilling, Frederick Crews, and others situated liberal values firmly at the centre of his work. Trilling argues that “Forster’s novels are politically and morally tendentious and always in the liberal direction”;

he counts among Forster's liberal ideals "spontaneity of feeling," "the virtues of sexual fulfillment," and "the values of intelligence."<sup>10</sup> Crews, meanwhile, identifies the inner tensions of liberal political philosophy in late nineteenth-century Britain and positions Forster in the intellectual traditions descending from Paine, Bentham, and Mill.<sup>11</sup> Yet with the rise of poststructuralist theory and its offshoots, liberalism (along with its cousin humanism) becomes a term of derogation, even among readers who ultimately commend Forster's work for adumbrating alternative political or philosophical value systems. For example, in an essay focused on friendship, David Ayers sees *A Passage to India* as "anticipat[ing] current demands in postmodern philosophy" precisely because it supersedes the "classic liberal pose" represented by the character of Cyril Fielding.<sup>12</sup> Benita Parry similarly praises Forster by rejecting the label of liberal: "When Forster is relegated as a bloodless liberal, whose understanding of and opposition to empire was circumscribed, or whose affection for the East is suspect ... his considerable distance from the prevalent ideological positions of his day is occluded."<sup>13</sup> Even Paul Armstrong, who does defend the idea of Forster as a liberal, suggests that he might be read for a "postmodern hermeneutic sensibility."<sup>14</sup> Taken together, these essays affirm Anderson's judgment that "the dominant forms of literary scholarship in recent decades have not only kept their distance from liberalism, but also constituted liberalism as an assumed stable target of critique."<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, the reader can easily find expressions of liberal sentiment in *A Passage to India*. Fielding is introduced as a man "happiest in the give-and-take of a private conversation," who believes the world "a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence" and who lacks "racial feeling."<sup>16</sup> He says to Aziz, "I believe in teaching people to be individuals, and to understand other individuals. It's the only thing I do believe in" (131). For his part, Aziz tells Fielding that what India requires is "[k]indness, more kindness, and even after that more kindness" (126), while Mrs Moore tells Ronny that what is needed is "[g]ood will and more good will and more good will" (53). Of course, it is always a challenge in reading Forster to gauge the level or quality of his irony; if these statements hint at a naïveté in the liberal world view, do we ascribe that naïveté to the limitations of the characters or to the novel as a whole? Moreover, *A Passage to India* is a novel that from the first pages insists on a multiplicity of viewpoints, warning the reader repeatedly against mistaking

a “spurious unity” for something “durable” (94), and so taking a character’s passing thought as an authorial dictum looms as a special risk.<sup>17</sup>

Still, admitting the novel’s complexities, we can safely affirm that Forster’s major political statements show him to be a liberal and, moreover, to articulate a connection between liberalism and friendship. In his essay “What I Believe,” Forster declares himself “an individualist and a liberal” as he famously offers up his “two cheers for Democracy” as a system “less hateful than other contemporary forms of government.”<sup>18</sup> (Even when affirming his creed, Forster can sound anxiously aware of its weak spots.) Forster begins his essay with a paradox, “I do not believe in Belief”; however, writing in 1939, he feels compelled to declare belief in something and that something is “personal relationships” (67). This phrase, of course, is familiar to the reader of *Howards End*, where it serves almost as a refrain; Forster in 1939 sounds a lot like Helen Schlegel of 1910, for whom “personal relations are the real life, for ever and ever.”<sup>19</sup> But Forster, again, is attuned to his internal interlocutors, and so even as it valorizes personal relations, *Howards End* also tells us that “nomadic civilization,” or modernity more broadly, “is altering human nature ... profoundly, and throws upon personal relations a stress greater than they have ever borne before.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, some twenty years later, Forster concedes in “What I Believe” that the self upon which any personal relationship depends is unstable; his defence of liberalism begins with the psychoanalytic insight that the so-called liberal subject has been “shattered” (68).

The lesson that Forster draws from the shattered state of the subject is not to dispense with personal relations, but to redouble his commitment to them, by aspiring to “be as reliable as possible” (68). And reliability, he declares, “is not a matter of contract – that is the main difference between the world of personal relationships and the world of business relationships. It is a matter for the heart, which signs no documents” (68). Invoking the tradition of Renaissance humanism, Forster declares his law-givers to be not Moses and Paul but Erasmus and Montaigne. On this prompt we might recall Montaigne on friendship, the true form of which is never transactional: “the union of such [true] friends, being truly perfect, makes them lose the sense of such duties, and hate and banish from between them these words of separation and distinction: benefit, obligation, gratitude, request, thanks, and the like.”<sup>21</sup> Consistent with Montaigne’s understanding of friendship as beyond relations of exchange, Forster cordons off personal relations from the world of business

and contracts, anticipating the fear that Adorno voices – that friendship, by definition lacking in instrumental value, might be swallowed up by forces of rationalization or commodification.

Indeed, in Forster's view, both the business class and the class-conscious left are wary of friendship: "Personal relations are despised today. They are regarded as bourgeois luxuries, as products of a time of fair weather which is now past, and we are urged to get rid of them, and to dedicate ourselves to some movement or cause instead. I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country" (68). In this passage, the most famous in the essay, Forster explicitly opposes friendship to nationalism or group identification. This opposition, again, is familiar to readers of his fiction, since both *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* test the ability of characters to forge friendships – to connect – across barriers of group identity: education, class, and gender in the earlier novel; nation, race, and religion in the later. *A Passage to India*, in fact, even organizes its plot in order to dramatize exactly the hypothetical choice that Forster the essayist imagines: when Aziz is accused of sexual assault, Fielding is forced to choose between betraying his friend or his countrymen. Even outside of this central crisis, Forster urges us to think about the potential tension between friendship and nation; the novel both opens and closes by asking whether friendship is even possible between an Indian and an Englishman.<sup>22</sup>

In the novel's first full scene, Aziz joins some Indian friends for dinner as they consider the question "whether or no it is possible to be friends with an Englishman" (6–7). The topic provokes lively discussion, but no anger: "Mahmoud Ali argued that it was not, Hamidullah disagreed, but with so many reservations that there was no friction between them" (7). Forster, in other words, not only discusses but also dramatizes friendship, so that the conversation offers a loose model of liberal deliberative debate as an effort among friends to reach consensus. At the same time, the provocative conversation-starter allows a rehearsal of various indignities suffered at the hands of the British that binds the discussants in a shared validation of their otherwise shameful experiences. The opening thus puts the (English) reader on their heels, privileges the perspective of Indians, and allows insight into the injustices of British rule.

The question of English-Indian friendship arises even before the opening scene. Forster apparently does consider such a bond possible, since he dedicates the book “to Syed Ross Masood and to the seventeen years of our friendship.” Masood, the prototype for Aziz, came from a prominent family of Muslim intellectuals; he arrived in England at age seventeen and Forster tutored him for his Oxford entrance exams. According to Wendy Moffat, Forster fell in love with the tall, handsome Masood (ten years his junior), but Masood was not gay and the relationship remained platonic.<sup>23</sup> Still, Forster “romanticized his new friend,” writing in his diary in 1906, “Masood gives up duties for friends – which is civilisation.”<sup>24</sup> Visiting Masood was the reason for Forster’s first journey to India in 1912, and the Englishman saw his Indian friend again on his 1921–22 trip during which, according to Moffat, he “was happy to see [Masood] married, and they seamlessly renewed their friendship.”<sup>25</sup> When he finished writing the novel, Forster saluted his friend as “the only person to whom I can open my heart and feel occasionally that I am understood.”<sup>26</sup> In dedicating the book to Masood, then, Forster idealizes not only his friend but the very idea of friendship.

Even as he idealizes friendship, however, Forster is attuned to the weakness of its bonds in the face of nationalism or identity politics. For this reason, he uses his introduction of the Anglo-Indian characters to draw a sharp opposition between private and public modes of feeling. When the Anglo-Indians gather at the Chandrapore Club for an amateur theatrical production, we see how their rituals shore up their group identity:

the performance ended, and the amateur orchestra played the National Anthem. Conversation and billiards stopped, faces stiffened. It was the Anthem of the Army of Occupation. It reminded every member of the club that he or she was British and in exile. It produced a little sentiment and a useful accession of willpower. The meagre tune, the curt series of demands on Jehovah, fused into a prayer unknown in England, and though they perceived neither Royalty nor Deity they did perceive something, they were strengthened to resist another day. (24)

The passage offers a sly analysis of nationalist feeling. The grammatical description of “God Save the King” as a “curt series of demands on Jehovah,”

combined with the dismissal of the melody as a “meagre tune,” defamiliarizes the anthem, while satirically recasting it as an anthropological oddity. The reflexive change of behaviour and the stiffening of faces illustrate the action of ideology on the body itself, how politics inheres in manners. The ritual as a whole strengthens the British resolve “to resist another day” – even though what the British are resisting is nothing but resistance to their own imperium. Thus, while the anthem enforces a sense of group identity, the bonds that it forges are clearly not the bonds of friendship. They are the bonds of nation.

To a critic of liberalism, however, such stirrings of national sentiment are not a target for dry satire; they are ennobling. Consider the anti-liberal theorist Carl Schmitt. As Forster’s almost perfect contemporary, Schmitt confronted the same far-reaching questions about national identity, empire, war, liberalism, democracy, human rights, global order, and the rule of law that Forster did, and though he generally rejected all that Forster stood for, the points of overlap and contrast are illuminating.<sup>27</sup> Most notably, Schmitt insists on the importance of the concept of the friend to political life: “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.”<sup>28</sup> But this concept of the friend does not belong in any idealized Forsterian realm of personal relations. On the contrary, Schmitt’s concepts of friend and enemy are emphatically not to be understood “in a private-individualistic sense,” but rather in a public one, determined under pressure of life-or-death struggle: “An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship” (28). Whereas Mrs Moore tells Ronny that “God has put us on earth to love our neighbors” (53), Schmitt argues, on the contrary, that the Christian injunction to “[l]ove your enemies” has no bearing on politics: “Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love for the Saracen or the Turk” (29).

For Schmitt, then, a national identity is forged among friends in opposition to enemies, and it is in recognizing friends and enemies that we recognize the fundamental purpose of existence: “Each participant [in a war or political struggle] is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought off in order

to preserve one's own form of existence" (27). True political struggle forces a decision on whether one's "form of existence" is worth dying for. One of the problems with liberalism, in Schmitt's view, is that it weakens this nationalist identification, depriving a people of the collective identity that furnishes their existential *raison d'être*. Although for Forster such sentiment is, as shown by the anthem scene, utterly factitious or superficial, for Schmitt it is the essence of authenticity: "The high points of politics are simultaneously the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy" (67). While it is a short distance from Schmitt's position to an outright fascist celebration of violence, his is nonetheless a position that Forster must take seriously.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, the character who articulates this Schmittian perspective is the liberal Fielding. Musing on Aziz's request for kindness, he thinks, "yes, that he might supply, but was that really all that the queer nation needed? Did it not also demand an occasional intoxication of the blood?" (127).

Alongside his analysis of national sentiment, however, Forster examines the bonds of transcultural friendship. A key scene in this regard is the first meeting between Aziz and Fielding. Fielding accidentally steps on a collar stud while dressing; Aziz offers his own while falsely claiming it is a spare. Sara Suleri (among others) notes the Freudian imagery of homoerotic encounter in which Aziz inserts his stud into the "back hole" of Fielding's collar, but she ultimately sees the scene as an instance of failed interracial intimacy.<sup>30</sup> Yet even if this exchange represents a sublimated erotic bond between friends, it is still influenced by the differences of power that stem from the fact of British rule. Aziz's gift of the stud prompts a discussion of why collars are worn at all; for the modern-minded, cosmopolitan Fielding, they are merely an outmoded feature of style, but for Aziz, they are protection against racial profiling: "If I'm biking in English dress – starch collar, hat with ditch – they [the police] take no notice. When I wear a fez, they cry, 'Your lamp's out!'" (69). The critique of British injustice here advances the prevailing anti-imperial argument, while also affording Fielding an understanding of Aziz's experience of daily humiliation. At the same time, Aziz's unprovoked generosity expresses an incipient friendship; he undertakes the gesture, in the spirit of Montaigne, with no transactional purpose. Indeed, it is Aziz who, later in the novel, rebukes Fielding with perhaps the most Montaignian account of friendship that the book offers: "If you are right, there is no point in any friendship; it all comes down to give and take, or give and return, which is disgusting" (283).

Ultimately, in spite of the budding good feeling, Aziz's excessive deference renders the friendship something just short of a relation between equals. Aziz knows to conceal the fact that he takes the stud from his own collar, and his little silent prayer that his own collar "would not spring up at the back during tea" (68) reveals misgivings about his sacrifice. What taints this otherwise pure gesture of friendship, then, is the racial-national hierarchy of power whose dictates Aziz has unconsciously absorbed. Moreover, Forster refers to the scene some twenty pages later, when Ronny interprets the missing stud as characteristic of "the Indian," an example of "the fundamental slackness that reveals the race" (87). This particular instance of Ronny's offhand racism, significantly, is an insult that Aziz will never hear or have the opportunity to correct. Since neither Adela nor Mrs Moore corrects it, the reader must fill the vacuum. We are prompted to experience the outrage that Aziz cannot and to become his silent defenders. The dramatic irony makes the insult all the more cruel; this slur comes in response to an act of generosity from Aziz, one that he knew made him vulnerable and performed nonetheless. Even Aziz's seemingly ideal gesture of friendship, then, is entangled in a wider political context.

It is the putative assault in the Marabar Caves, however, that pushes to the fore the question raised in "What I Believe," whether to betray one's friend or one's country. However one interprets the incident in the cave itself,<sup>31</sup> the evidently false accusation against Aziz forces Fielding to make exactly such a choice. And while the instinctively apolitical Fielding "regret[s] taking sides" (193), he does choose friend over nation. In forcing this choice, the trial constitutes precisely one of those "high points of politics" that Schmitt celebrates as "moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy" (67). Such a sentiment is expressed repeatedly. Major Callendar says, "You can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, at least not in this country" (208). McBryde, the police superintendent, tells Fielding, "at a time like this there's not room for – well – personal views. The man who doesn't toe the line is lost" (190). Even Hamidullah greets Fielding's decision with skepticism by asking him, "you are actually on our side against your own people?" (193). The Schmittian moment of decision thus confirms Ronny's earlier comments that "Nothing's private in India" (32), and that "one's always facing the footlights" (50). The private is subsumed into the political. Predictably, then, an "exalted emotion" (199), akin to the patriotic sentiments stirred by the anthem, takes hold of the whole community: "Each felt that all he loved

best in the world was at stake, demanded revenge, and was filled with a not unpleasing glow” (203). The responses of the Anglo-Indians, indeed, confirm Schmitt’s claim that moments of determining the enemy are what imbue a collectivity with purpose.

Again, the contrast between Forster and Schmitt can illustrate how liberalism and anti-liberalism respond to a similar moment. In “What I Believe,” Forster recognizes that there are times when politics demands participation in the collective decision of the nation, but his instinct is to resist the will of the collective as coercive and potentially authoritarian: “Love and loyalty to an individual can run counter to the claims of the State. When they do – down with the State” (69). Schmitt, for his part, recognizes that in moments of political crisis or decision, “a part of the population” – the part made up of free-thinkers like Fielding – sometimes “declares that it no longer recognizes enemies.” But in that case, he maintains, the dissenting individual either “joins their side and aids them” or “place[s] himself outside the political community to which he belongs and continue[s] to live as a private individual only” (51). Therefore, when Ronny enters the club, the English “in instinctive homage, [rise] to their feet.” Fielding, precisely because he recognizes the decisive force of Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction, understands that “while honouring him they condemned Aziz and India” and so refuses to rise (208). We sympathize with Fielding’s choice, but he is operating within the political logic that Schmitt describes.

In *A Passage to India*, then, it is not only the characters’ decontextualized statements of belief that valorize both friendship and liberalism. The narrative tone and the dramatic unfolding of scenes and sequences offer liberal indictments of the arrogance and racism of British rule, while dignifying Aziz by valuing his perspective on events and implicitly commending Fielding’s guts in choosing friendship over country. Indeed, when Adela recants her accusation, Aziz is vindicated, and with him Fielding; both friendship and liberalism seem to have their day. Adherence to a liberal institutional process – what McBryde, with bitter sarcasm, calls “the fruits of democracy” (217) – has compelled Adela to testify and allowed her the opportunity to recant. Even here justice is achieved more by the vagaries of Adela’s conscience, perhaps influenced by the supernatural “telepathy” (293) of the deceased Mrs Moore, than through the healthy operation of a functional liberal court system. Mahmoud Ali is convincing when he shouts, during the trial, “this is English

justice, here is your British Raj ... I am not defending a case, nor are you trying one. We are both of us slaves" (249). From the Indian perspective, the court system is not a truly liberal institution, but a sham that supports the imperial power.

Although Forster surely means for his reader to admire Fielding's loyalty to Aziz and to celebrate Aziz's acquittal, critics such as Ayers are not wrong to note that liberal values such as "liberal, rational interchange" are nonetheless challenged in *A Passage to India*.<sup>32</sup> Even Trilling, the great champion of Forster's "liberal imagination," insists that although Forster is "tendentious" in a "liberal direction," "he is deeply at odds with the liberal mind," adding that "while liberal readers can go a long way with Forster, they can seldom go all the way."<sup>33</sup> As we have seen, Forster never ignored what Trilling calls the "weaknesses and complacencies" of liberalism.<sup>34</sup> The trajectories of two characters in particular, Mrs Moore and Aziz, hint at some of his doubts.

Mrs Moore is, like Fielding, in many ways a liberal herself, even if her sentimental Christianity stands in contrast to Fielding's "blank, frank" atheism (284). Her first meeting with Aziz in the mosque, like Aziz's collar stud exchange with Fielding, presents an ideal of friendship arising spontaneously through understanding and humour. Despite an initial misunderstanding, Aziz and Mrs Moore can joke about all that they share, while remaining aware of their differences of age, gender, nation, and religion:

"Mrs Moore, this is all extremely strange, because like yourself I have also two sons and a daughter. Is not this the same box with a vengeance?"

"What are their names? Not also Ronny, Ralph, and Stella, surely?"

The suggestion delighted him. "No, indeed. How funny it sounds!"  
(20)

Both have lost their spouses, both have two sons and a daughter, and so they are in "the same box." Yet they can still laugh at the cultural gulf between them, which is given comic form in the suggestion that Aziz's Indian children would have English names. As widow and widower fall silent, both are "thinking of their respective families" (20), sharing an even deeper transcultural bond. And this bond proves durable: Mrs Moore, like Fielding, also refuses to aid in Aziz's persecution, telling Ronny, "I will not help you torture him for what he never did" (228). During the trial itself, Mahmoud Ali invokes her presence as the

“poor Indians’ friend” who “would have proved [Aziz’s] innocence” (249). She then becomes transmuted into what Kenneth Burke calls a “tutelary deity” whose “expression of disbelief” in Aziz’s guilt “had been the exact thing needed to help awaken Adela from her trance.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, her spectral presence, either literally or figuratively, seems to secure Aziz’s acquittal.

Although Mrs Moore proves a true friend in death, she also, while in India, begins to question the value she has always placed on personal relations: “She had brought Ronny and Adela together by their mutual wish, but really she could not advise them further. She felt increasingly (vision or nightmare?) that, though people are important, the relations between them are not, and that in particular too much fuss has been made over marriage; centuries of carnal embracement, yet man is no nearer to understanding man” (149). While these doubts are part of Forster’s more general skepticism about marriage – skepticism that can be linked to queer or feminist perspectives – they also extend to his humanism.

Mrs Moore’s experience in the caves, as traumatic in its own way as Adela’s, prompts a rejection of what she calls “poor little talkative Christianity” (166) in favour of the terrifying nihilistic insight that “Everything exists, nothing has value” (165). Hers, then, is not a political critique of liberalism but a philosophical one, a critique that so dramatically alters our perspective on human existence that value itself dissipates. This view aligns with both Forster’s invocation of the antiquity of the Indian landscape and his mischievous observations about the obliviousness of animal life (“the majority of living beings” [123]) to the political situation of the country. Nor must this perspective be granted the stamp of authorial approval; Parry argues that Mrs Moore “(mis)recognizes” the echo of the caves as sign of “nullity,” and that their significance can be better understood as an expression of a Jain “cosmology incommensurable with positivism, humanism, or theism.”<sup>36</sup> Whether we take Mrs Moore’s changed world view as the misrecognition of an Englishwoman with a limited frame of reference or the insight of an aging widow gaining wisdom about personal relationships, her crisis casts a shadow over the rest of the novel, placing human existence in the context of a meaningless cosmos.

In contrast to this quasi-mystical alternative to liberalism, the trajectory of Aziz offers a different critique, that of an invigorated nationalism. Aziz too is a liberal in outlook, and he too begins the novel seeking cross-cultural

friendships that escape the demands of politics. During the outing to the caves, he sounds resolutely apolitical as he laughs with Fielding about the burden of British rule: “Kick you out? Why should I trouble over that dirty job? Leave it to the politicians ... This picnic is nothing to do with English or Indian; it is an expedition of friends” (177–8). After his acquittal, various events and misunderstandings estrange him from his friend and defender.<sup>37</sup> When, in “Temple,” Fielding returns to India after two years, the ties of friendship have been broken, or at least frayed. The intervening years have strengthened Aziz’s sense of injury and national feeling, while for his part Fielding wonders “at his own past heroism” and thinks, “Would he to-day defy all his own people for the sake of a stray Indian?” (358).

The change in Aziz may in part reflect changes in Forster’s larger vision of the novel, which he put aside in 1913 to write *Maurice* and did not resume until after his second trip to India in 1921–22. Back in England, he wrote to Masood: “When I began the book I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between East and West, but this conception has had to go ... I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits, and I am not interested in whether they sympathize with one another or not.”<sup>38</sup> No doubt the causes of this new attitude were many, including the death of his lover Mohommed el Adl,<sup>39</sup> but the political situation in India had altered considerably between his two trips. In particular, the brutal Amritsar Massacre of 1919, in which the British brigadier general Reginald Dyer slaughtered hundreds of peaceful nationalists protesting the extension of wartime emergency measures, provoked a joint Hindu-Muslim non-cooperation movement – alluded to in *A Passage to India* as a “Hindu-Moslem entente” (296) – that “claimed complete social equality between the British and Indians.”<sup>40</sup> Forster, never friendly to imperialism, was sympathetic to the new nationalism, and his second sojourn in India may have strained his confidence in a politics that relied too heavily on goodwill, the quality that Mrs Moore, early in the novel, calls for in abundance.

Whatever we make of the changes in Forster’s attitudes, Aziz’s awakened political consciousness seems a direct consequence of his trial. There is a telling sequence early in the novel, when, after a combative exchange with Panna Lal, Aziz begins to worry that he has offended the district collector, Turton: “The complexion of his mind turned from human to political. He thought no longer, ‘Can I get on with people?’ but ‘Are they stronger than I?’” (62). This shift “from human to political” thinking suggests a sudden awareness of

group conflicts – both Hindu-Muslim conflict and Indian-English – that had been suspended during Aziz’s spontaneous round of polo with an unnamed British soldier, with its “fire of good fellowship” (60). It is a shift to the kind of political consciousness that Schmitt values, in which each participant in a struggle “must judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought off” (27). The shift here is momentary, but it foreshadows the later shift in Aziz’s attitude that appears more entrenched.

The novel’s final scene therefore presents the problem of forging friendship across socio-political divides as considerably more difficult than what is suggested by the collar-stud scene with Fielding or the mosque scene with Mrs Moore. As Aziz and Fielding ride together on horseback in the state of Mau, they argue the future of the Raj. In an about-face, Fielding defends the British presence as a necessary evil, while Aziz voices a full-throated nationalism: “India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Down with the English anyhow. That’s certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don’t make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it’s fifty-five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes” (361). Even allowing for some playful irony in Aziz’s tone, the contrast with his words at the picnic, where he leaves the job of expelling the British to “the politicians,” could not be starker.

For Fielding, however, this nationalist fervour is hard to take seriously. “India a nation!” he declares. “What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps!” (361). On the one hand, for the cosmopolitan Fielding, nationalist aspirations belong to the century gone by, and are something to be overcome, not celebrated. On the other hand, for Aziz, nationhood is the only route to dignity. “[India] must imitate Japan,” he tells himself. “Not until she is a nation will her sons be treated with respect” (298). It now appears that the choice between friend and countryman, which seems straightforward to the Forster of “What I Believe” and even the Fielding of Aziz’s trial, is not so simple. National identification creates a positive barrier to forming a friendship in the first place.

Of course, in spite of the political differences, Aziz qualifies his anger, and though he promises to “drive every blasted Englishman into the sea” (361),

he also rides right up against Fielding and, “half kissing him” (362), tells him that after the British are expelled, the two men can be friends. Fielding reciprocates the physical warmth, “holding him affectionately” (362). “Why can’t we be friends now?” he asks. He then adds, “It’s what I want. It’s what you want” (362). The personal affection is as strong as ever, but the notion that friendship can obtain under political conditions of oppression appears dubious. The injustice of British rule is represented as a force of nature pulling the friends apart: “But the horses didn’t want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn’t want it, they said in their hundred voices, ‘No, not yet,’ and the sky said, ‘No, not there’” (362). The non-human world of animals and landscape not only serves as a metaphor for political forces obstructing friendship but also seemingly collaborates in enforcing a physical distance between the two men. The relationship has taken a Schmittian turn from the human to the political, in apparent defiance of the Forsterian desire to choose friend over nation.

The mysticism of Mrs Moore and the nationalism of Aziz clearly complicate any effort to derive a unitary, simple politics from *A Passage to India*. The presence of these troubling alternatives, these incompatible perspectives, is a testament both to the form of the novel that accommodates them and to the political system that allows for the existence of difference. That system is assuredly not one that insists, à la Schmitt, on an intoxication of the blood. Rather, as Trilling would say, what is needed is a capacious liberalism, “a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine,” one that remains receptive to critique and recognizes the pressures that social and political forces place on human relations.<sup>41</sup> A novel that expresses such an outlook will disallow any gratifying reconciliation based on wish fulfillment.

The capaciousness and flexibility of the novel form, its ability to represent and dramatize an ongoing negotiation among competing values and world views, proves superior to more monological kinds of discourse in accommodating these antagonisms. In other words, literature in general and the novel in particular are congenial to Forster because they promote, through the directed use of our imaginative faculties, a capacity to recognize simultaneously the abiding affection between Fielding and Aziz and the intransigent claims

of the political. Forster's liberalism, realized in the imaginative construction that is *A Passage to India*, ultimately consists not simply in a valorization of friendship in a protected private sphere outside of politics, nor merely in the espousal of a progressive political cause, but in the novelistic perspective that can represent both of these goods without falsely reconciling them.

Ultimately, a political thinker far more sympathetic to Forster than Schmitt is Isaiah Berlin, for whom the clash of different value systems is not a rousing call to arms that gives life meaning but a sometimes tragic consequence of the variety of human cultures and values. Nonetheless, Berlin adheres to liberalism in a way that aligns closely with the values embodied in Forster's novel. In his famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty," he upholds the idea of pluralism, which, rooted in "negative liberty," offers "a truer and more humane ideal" than that of "'positive' self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind." It is truer because it recognizes a plurality of often incommensurate "human goals," more humane because it allows the individual and not the collective to determine their own values. Thus Berlin insists on the importance of standing for one's values "without claiming eternal validity for them" – a recognition of both their contingency and their legitimacy. Indeed, Forster's readers of various theoretical persuasions generally agree on the capacity of *A Passage to India* to accommodate multiple perspectives and interpretations, even incompatible ones. As Aziz says to Adela on their ill-fated picnic, "Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing" (160).

#### NOTES

- 1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 23.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 3 Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2021), viii.
- 4 *Ibid.* With the rise of Narendra Modi, we can add India to this list.
- 5 Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 47.
- 6 Will Self, "The Novel Is Dead (This Time It's for Real)," *Guardian*, 2 May 2014, [www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction).
- 7 Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,"

in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 87.

- 8 Behind the success of the digital universe stands another villain – neoliberalism. Under neoliberalism, writes Daniel Rodgers, “Politics, deliberation, and public action dissolve under the relentless pressure for leveraging one’s self into a position of greater human capital and competitive advantage. The state remodels itself as a firm, the university as a factory, and the self as an object with a price tag.” It is thus essential to disentangle neoliberalism from liberalism proper, as Anderson and Fukuyama have done; to use the older vocabulary of Frederick Crews, the economic liberalism of utilitarianism needs to be distinguished from the moral liberalism of the Enlightenment. Rodgers, “The Uses and Abuses of Neoliberalism,” *Dissent* 65, no. 1 (2018): 84–5. Crews, *E.M. Forster: The Perils of Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 25.
- 9 E.M. Forster, “The Challenge of Our Time,” in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1951), 56.
- 10 Lionel Trilling, *E.M. Forster: A Study* (London: Hogarth Press, 1944), 14.
- 11 See Crews, *E.M. Forster*, especially chapter 2. Michael Levenson argues that Forster was always dubious about the compatibility of an “old” liberalism that emphasized personal freedoms and a “new” Benthamite liberalism that emphasized the collective good. Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86–8.
- 12 David Ayers, “The Politics of Friendship in *A Passage to India*,” in *English Literature of the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 215, 217.
- 13 Benita Parry, “Materiality and Mystification in *A Passage to India*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 31, no. 2 (1998): 190.
- 14 Paul B. Armstrong, “Reading India: E.M. Forster and the Politics of Interpretation,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 38, no. 4 (1992): 366. Armstrong, mounting the strongest defence of liberalism, draws upon Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas to make a case for Forster as a liberal ironist and pragmatist.
- 15 Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 4.
- 16 E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 65. Further references appear parenthetically in the essay.
- 17 Armstrong details some of the ways in which partial knowledge in the novel “result[s] in disastrous misreadings.” “Reading India,” 371ff.
- 18 E.M. Forster, “What I Believe,” 76, 70. Further references appear parenthetically in the essay.

- 19 E.M. Forster, *Howards End: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong (1910; New York: Norton, 1998), 22.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 186.
- 21 Michel de Montaigne, "Of Friendship," in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 141.
- 22 Forster's short story, "The Other Boat," completed in 1957–58 and published posthumously in a version reconstructed by Oliver Stallybrass, depicts a love affair between an Englishman, Lionel March, and Cocoanut, a mixed-race businessman "influential in shipping circles." Lionel's attraction to Cocoanut seems bound up with the transgressive nature of an interracial love. Ultimately, however, the fear of exposure induces homosexual panic in Lionel, leading him to murder Cocoanut and then kill himself. In this instance, a childhood friendship develops into adult sexual love, and because the characters indulge their homosexual desires, the friendship must die. E.M. Forster, "The Other Boat," in *The Life to Come and Other Short Stories*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (New York: Norton, 1972), 171.
- 23 One can only speculate on the degree to which the renunciation of physical desire stemming from a difference in sexual orientation was displaced into Forster's representation of the unfulfilled friendship between Fielding and Aziz on the basis of racial and national difference, or as Ayers says, that the friendship "denied in the novel by the history which divides their respective nations ... [derives from] Masood's unresponsiveness to Forster's love." Ayers, "Politics," 217. Suleri adds that "Aziz is ... both a tribute to Syed Ross Masood and a memorial to Forster's Egyptian lover Mohommed ed Edl." This is not to say that racial or national concerns are merely displaced representations of sexual ones, but rather that the emotions deriving from Forster's cross-cultural friendships, sexual and platonic, informed his representation of the relationship between Fielding and Aziz. Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 136.
- 24 Wendy Moffat, *A Great Unrecorded History: A New Life of E.M. Forster* (New York: Picador, 2010), 90.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 190.
- 27 Michael Lind writes, "If Schmitt were merely one of many German conservatives of the Weimar era who disgraced themselves by collaborating with the Nazis, he would be of interest only to historians. Instead, Schmitt's reputation

- as a major thinker endures, sometimes in surprising quarters. American law professors wrestle with Schmitt's theories about constitutionalism and power, while the Western Left is impressed by his denunciation of liberal globalism as a mask for Anglo-American and capitalist imperialism." Michael Lind, "About Schmitt," review of *Carl Schmitt: A Biography*, by Reinhard Mehring, *National Interest* 137 (May/June 2015): 81.
- 28 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 26. Further references appear parenthetically. For Schmitt it is axiomatic that the political is autonomous, distinct from moral, economic, aesthetic, or other aspects of life; just as "good" and "evil" are the defining terms of morality, so "friend" and "enemy" are the defining terms of politics.
- 29 Richard Wolin offers a blistering critique of Schmitt's rejection of liberal democracy and embrace of fascist dictatorships: "Schmitt's account of politics wished to replace a rational world of norms and rules with a pre-rational order of visceral ruthlessness in which tolerance was inimical to survival and war was eternal." Richard Wolin, "The Cult of Carl Schmitt," *Liberties: A Quarterly Journal of Culture and Politics* 3, no. 2 (2023): 115.
- 30 Cf. Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, 138–9. In Suleri's tortuous formulation, Forster "attempts to reconfigure colonial sexuality into a homoeroticization of race" (135), but she more felicitously concludes that the failed intimacy of collar-stud scene "suggests the prevailing cultural sadness that inhabits utopian narratives ... of friendship across cultures" (139).
- 31 The incident in the caves is of course both central to the text and famously unresolved. Space prohibits a full analysis, but I tend to credit the view that the assault is Adela's projection of an unconscious fantasy: not attracted to her fiancé, wary of married life in British India, she is drawn instead to the Indian doctor whom she has just imagined to be a sexually vigorous polygamist.
- 32 Ayers, "Politics," 213. Ayers argues for a conception of friendship operating in the novel that "goes beyond ... the pragmatics of politics," a Derridean *ai-mance*, a friendship like that of Aziz and Mrs Moore "based precisely on loving/liking before knowing" that lies outside "the rigidity" of the British Raj (219–20).
- 33 Trilling, *E.M. Forster*, 14.
- 34 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Society and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), ii.

- 35 Kenneth Burke, "Social and Cosmic Mystery: *A Passage to India*," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 229.
- 36 Parry, "Materiality," 185.
- 37 Armstrong argues that "After unequivocally affirming the possibility of finding a legitimate agreement about truth and right at Aziz's trial, Forster throws open the question of justice and consensus again in the debate about compensation which ultimately drives Fielding and Aziz apart." Armstrong, "Reading," 376.
- 38 Moffat, *Great Unrecorded History*, 190.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 40 G.K. Das, "A *Passage to India*: A Socio-Historical Study" in *A Passage to India: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. John Beer (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1985), 2. Das shows how Forster threads through his novel multiple references to recent outrages of British rule, and maintains that he viewed the non-cooperation movement with "sincere interest and sympathy" (4).
- 41 Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, xii. As Anderson argues, "Properly assessed, liberalism can be seen to encompass, and not simply occasionally to disclose, the psychological, social, and economic barriers to its moral and political ideals." Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 2.