

HOW COMEDY AND POETRY INTERPLAY MANIFESTING FORMAL ORDER IN *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

Novels are made of words, and words, used skilfully, with precise and clear detail, have the qualities of the kind of verse which derives straight from the poet's vision, and, in *A Passage to India* (*APTI*), those words become rhythms.

The structure of the opening passage has a symmetry that suggests that concern, on Forster's part, with rhythm. Of the chapter's four paragraphs, the first two describe the earth, the last two the sky, and both 'earth' and 'sky' are to recur in the final paragraph of the novel. The chapter is completed by its last word: 'caves', which echoes the first noun of the opening sentence as the caves themselves are later to send forth echoes. Forster is giving us the background in which themes and motifs to be developed later are hinted at within a structure which, built up with comedy and poetry, will have a formal unity.

Through Aziz's comic remarks, the resentment of the Moslems towards the British and the divisions within India are hinted at: 'What did it matter if a few flabby Hindus had preceded him there, and a few chilly English succeeded?' (*APTI*: 45).

One of the devices Forster uses to arouse comedy is the *exaggeration of what he seemed to find wrong in the attitude of the British*, and therefore, he also satirizes them. Sometimes it is the British ignorance and their naïvety what is exploited, as in the passage in which Adela Quested says she wants to see the 'real India':

'Try seeing Indians', the man answered, and vanished.

'Who was that?'

'Our schoolmaster - Government College.'

'As if one could avoid seeing them,' sighed Mrs. Lesley.

'I've avoided', said Miss Quested. Excepting my own servant, I've scarcely spoken to an Indian since landing.'

'Oh, lucky you.' (*APTI*: 48)

But the Collector says: 'Do you really want to meet the Aryan Brother, Miss Quested? That can be easily fixed up' (*APTI*: 48). And he offers to have a Bridge Party, that is, a party to bridge the gulf between East and West.

Forster once said that he had learnt from Jane Austen 'the possibilities of domestic humour' (Gardner, P., 1977: 14). Where his *social comedy* chiefly differs from Jane Austen's is in the

acceleration of his witty reversals, the greater density of thematical irony and the greater freedom with which Forster moves his forms from the world of his characters to that of general human nature. In *A Passage to India* there are admirable scenes of that 'social comedy'. Here, Mrs. Turton, the great lady of a British civil station, is commenting on her Indian guests at the Bridge Party:

'Why they come at all I don't know. They hate it as much as we do. Talk to Mrs. McBryde. Her husband made her give purdah parties until she struck.'

'This isn't a purdah party' corrected Miss Qusted.

'Oh, really', was the haughty rejoinder. (*APTI*: 61-62)

Forster's social comedy works, on one hand, to provoke those ironic international encounters that come when one value system meets another and confusion and muddle ensue. On the other hand, that social comedy aims to call up, by a poetic irradiation, the ironies lying within the forces of mystery and muddle in the universe of nature. For there, too, are deceptions, above all, in the absence of beauty, and, therefore, of romanticism, which becomes negative under the hot sun, who is:

not the unattainable Friend, either of men or birds or other suns, [who] was not the eternal promise, the never withdrawn suggestion that haunts our 'consciousness; he was merely a creature, like the rest, and so debarred from glory. (*APTI*: 127)

Debarred from glory and beauty is Adela, and that provokes comic but cruel remarks: 'Even when the lady is so uglier than the gentleman?' (*APTI*: 222). A device Forster also uses in order to provoke comedy is the *misunderstandings*. They take place between English and Indians:

The Major, who had been up half the night, wanted damn well to know why Aziz had not come promptly when summoned.

'Sir, excuse me, I did. I mounted my bike, and it bust in front of the Cow Hospital. So I had to find a tonga.'

'Bust in front of the Cow Hospital, did it? And how did you come to be there?'

'I beg your pardon.'

'Oh Lord, oh Lord! When I live here' - he kicked the gravel - 'and you live there - not ten minutes from me - and the Cow Hospital is right ever so far away the other side of you - there - then how did you come to be passing the Cow Hospital on the way to me? Now do some work for a change.'

[...] Aziz watched him go with amusement. When his spirits were up he felt that English were a comic institution, and he enjoyed being misunderstood by them. (*APTI*: 72)

And the funny situation Aziz himself provokes, when he assumes that Fielding has married Miss Qusted:

'Jump in, Mr. Qusted, and Mr. Fielding.'

'Who on earth is Mr. Quested?'

Do I mispronounce that well-known name? Is he not your wife's brother?'

'Who on earth do you suppose I've married?'

'I'm only Ralph Moore', said the boy, blushing, and at that moment there fell another painful of the rain, and made a mist round their feet. Aziz tried to withdraw, but it was too late. (*APTI*: 297)

Forster takes every chance to hint at Adela's plainness, mainly through Aziz's remarks, as it has already been pointed out, from the very beginning, at the tea party. Aziz is the first to arrive and there is the comedy of his supplying Fielding with a stud, with the eager generosity of the young Muslim, but a little out of character perhaps in an older man. The ladies arrive and he found them easy to talk to as one was old, the other plain, and there was no beauty to disturb him: 'Adela's angular body and the freckles on her face were terrible defects in his eyes, and he wondered "how God could have been so unkind to any female form."' (*APTI*: 85)

But Aziz warms in talk and finds himself issuing an invitation to his home. Suddenly: 'Aziz thought of his bungalow with horror. It was a detestable shanty near a low bazaar. There was practically only one room in it, and that infested with small black flies.' (*APTI*: 86-87) He immediately turns the talk to the beauty of the old Muslim room in which they are sitting: 'I wish I lived here. See this beautiful room! Let us admire it together for a little. See those curves at the bottom of the arches. What delicacy! It is the architecture of Question and Answer.' (*APTI*: 87)

An echo there, for soon he and Adela will be questioning Godbole. The old Brahmin arrives and hardly interrupts the Muslim's excited speech. Eventually Aziz finds himself inviting everyone there to a picnic to the Marabar Caves - anything to avoid having them at his bungalow. Adela questions him about these caves, but he is unable to answer. He knows nothing about these Hindu Caves. Godbole undertakes to describe them: 'It will be a great honour' (*APTI*: 91) Somehow he manages to evade the honour and tells them nothing at all.

The second part, *The Caves*, opens with another rhetoric flow. Forster makes them absolutely unadorned, with bare polished granite walls. Once again, the prose changes key in a descriptive passage and we are prepared for drama. *The Marabar Hills*

are older than anything in the world. No water has ever covered them, and the sun who has watched them ... for countless aeons may still discern in their outlines forms that were his before our globe was torn from his bosom. If flesh of the sun's flesh is to be touched anywhere, it is here, among the incredible antiquity of these hills. (*APTI*: 137)

But before we encounter the drama, we have to face the preparations for the visit and the departure, which involve a comedy of confusions and embarrassments, an amusing muddle that only later on turns out to be capable of sinister interpretation. The picnic begins in a comic

spirit, retailing all the oriental details that worried Aziz in the tremendous arrangements he felt it necessary to organize. In his excitement Aziz behaves like a boy, and like a boy is nearly in tears when Fielding and Godbole miss the train. But he soon comes to terms with the situation when he realizes he has become responsible for the welfare of the English ladies, with a chance to prove the unsoundness of the Anglo-Indian adage that: 'Indians are incapable of responsibility' (*APTI*: 145). Forster's handling of the early stages of the central and crucial episode is absolutely comic. Aziz leaps on to the moving train, the servant emerges from the lavatory and 'offered them poached eggs and tea for the second time':

All was well so far: the elephant held a fresh-cut bough to her lips, the tonga shafts stuck up into the air, the kitchen boy peeled potatoes, Hassan shouted, and Mohammed Latif stood as he ought, with a peeled switch in his hand. The expedition was a success, and it was Indian. (*APTI*: 154)

The dialogue is brisk and natural, with much banter and some feigned enthusiasm of a highly conventional kind, and there are touches of realistic comic detail such as the vase of artificial flowers that stands in the centre of the cloth spread for an outdoor meal. All this is the setting for what is to become within a few pages an extraordinary incursion into poetic symbolism and metaphysical suggestion.

The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur: 'Pathos, piety, courage - they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, but nothing has value!' If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same - 'ou-boum'. If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo whatever their opinion and position, and however much they dodge - it would amount to the same, the serpent would descend and return to the ceiling. Devils are of the North, and poems can be written about them, but no one could romanticize the Marabar, because it robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them to mankind. (*APTI*: 160-61)

The visit to the caves, which began as a gesture of friendship and a comedy of errors, has produced potentially tragic misunderstanding (not comic this time) to widen the gulf between races still further. That gulf is reinforced through the caricature of the Civil Surgeon, which is particularly painful, for among all those who served India, the doctors represented the professional virtues of skill, tolerance and generosity. It is Mrs. Turton who supports Major Callendar in his endeavour to disfigure, through surgery, Nawab Bahadur's grandson. In Callendar, racist fear and hatred is shot through with fierce sadism: 'His beauty's gone, five upper teeth, two lower and a nostril', 'Old Panna Lal brought him the looking-glass yesterday and he blubbered', 'I laughed; I laughed, I tell you, and so would you; that used to be one of these buck niggers, I thought, now he's all septic; damn him, blast his soul - er - I believe he was

unspeakably immoral - er -' 'nothing's too bad for these people.' Mrs. Turton's encouragement is 'At last, some sense is being talked', 'they ought to crawl from here to the caves on their hand and knees whenever an English woman's in sight, they oughtn't to be ground into the dust.' (*APTI*: 219-20)

Another of the great scenes is the trial, introduced with befitting prose embroideries, but soon giving way to comedy, with the rebuff delivered to the English when the magistrate insists on their climbing down from the platform, on to which they had trooped so ceremoniously: 'Excuse me', 'We object to the presence of so many European Ladies and gentlemen up on the platform', 'They will have the effect of intimidating our witnesses. Their place is with the rest of the public in the body of the hall. We have no objection to Miss Qusted remaining on the platform', 'but we do object to the others.' Very impatient, the Major growls: 'Oh, cut the cackle and let's have the verdict'.

'I agree to that', said Mr. Das, hiding his face desperately in some papers. 'It was only to Miss Qusted that I gave permission to sit up here. Her friends should be so excessively kind as to climb down.

'Well done, Das, quite sound', said Ronny with devastating honesty.

'Climb down, indeed, what incredible impertinence!' Mrs. Turton cried.

'Do come quietly, Mary', murmured her husband.

'Hi! My patient can't be left unattended.'

'Do you object to the Civil Surgeon remaining, Mr. Amritrao?'

'I should object. A platform confers authority.'

Even when it's one foot high; so come along all', said the Collector, trying not to laugh. (*APTI*: 223-24)

But there are also beautiful poetic descriptions, such as the one which elevates the punkah-wallah, the humblest person in the scene, to the level of god:

He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god - not many, but one here and there, to prove society how little its categories impress her. (*APTI*: 220)

We feel Forster's elevated style in the ceremonial descriptions which open and close the parts and naturally we feel it most of all in the last part, in sentences like this: 'Some hundreds of miles westward of the Marabar Hills and two years later in time, Professor Narayan Godbole stands in the presence of God' (*APTI*: 281). But the solemnity of the phrase is soon counterpointed by the comic absurdity of Godbole himself, the absentminded professor of caricature, fumbling with his pince-nez. Yet he does have an impressive sense of religion as something that permeates life at the highest and lowest levels of experience, and neither the fact that he is a figure of fun nor some incongruities in the festival itself can alter this. Nevertheless the

poetic description goes on: 'God is not born yet, that will occur at midnight - but he has also been born centuries ago, nor can He ever be born, because He is the cord of the Universe, who transcends human processes.' (*APTI*: 281)

In the superb description of the Krishna festival which follows, the impressive spectacle and the not-too-serious religious romp are part of the Hindu inclusiveness. The spectacle may be amusing, but it reaches its goal: it is a way of worshipping God. At the end of the novel, Godbole 'covered in grease and dust, had once more developed the life of his spirit': 'Some of the torches went out, fireworks didn't catch, there began to be less singing and the tray returned to Professor Godbole, who picked up a fragment of the mud adhering and smeared it on his forehead without much ceremony.' (*APTI*: 310) But he manages not to be absurd, which is significant, since through much of the novel he is cast in the role of "comic Indian". In contrast, at the beginning of the novel, two Christian missionaries disagree about divine hospitality, producing a philosophical, but also comic speech:

Consider, with all reverence, the monkeys. May there not be a mansion for the monkeys also? Old Mr. Graysford said No, but young Mr. Sorley, who was advanced, said Yes, he saw no reason why monkeys should not have their collateral share of bliss, and he had sympathetic discussions about them with his Hindu friends. And the jackals? Jackals were indeed less to Mr. Sorley's mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well embrace all mammals [...] And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps, and was apt to change the conversation. And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud! and the bacteria inside Mr. Sorley? No, no, his is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing. (*APTI*: 58)

But Godbole's universe of spirit is much more inclusive:

They loved all men, the whole universe, and scraps of their past, tiny splinters of detail emerged for a moment to melt into the universal warmth. [...] Completeness, not reconstruction. His senses grew thinner, he remembered a wasp seen he forgot where, perhaps on a stone. He loved the wasp equally, he impelled it likewise, he was imitating God. (*APTI*: 283-84)

In the Mau Festival, divine revelation is shifted to the level of the comic sublime. The Mau festival is the celebration of the formlessness of the Indian "multiverse", seen for a moment inclusively. The poetic realm of the novel, in which above all Mrs. Moore and Godbole have participated and which has dominated the book's primary art, is reconciled with the muddle of the world of men, in an emotional cataract that momentarily repairs the divisions of the spiritual world (through Godbole's revelation) and the social world (through the festival itself).

The festival seems also to be able to reconcile divisions as long as it lasts, which can be seen in the final picture of Fielding's and Aziz's relationship. For a brief time, after being recon-

ciled during the jumble of the Hindu ceremony, they are friends; but their friendship, like the unity of India, is unstable, even if Aziz is more optimistic in that sense; when he shouts his frustrated dreams at Fielding, his friend as a man, his enemy as an Englishman: 'India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one!' At this Fielding and Forster mock:

'India a nation! What and 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.'
(*APTI*: 315)

In *A Passage to India* the comic vision accurately conveys Forster's view of human tragedy from the belittling perspective of divine indifference to our imperfect and undignified lives. But that comic vision interplays with a poetical quality, which we can find in the natural description and his entry into the minds of the central characters when they were in a febrile state.

Both comedy and poetry achieve a formal order, because *A Passage to India* is an attempt to fuse the real world of social comedy and human conflict with the meaning and value of the universe which that world mirrors; to impose and experience the pattern of moral vision; and out of these disparate elements to create a satisfying aesthetic whole.

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