E. M. Forster's Ciphers, Puns and Ambiguities

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"Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation – for they have one – does not depend upon human speech. It is as if the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon them to exclaim 'Extraordinary!' and the word has taken root in the air, and been inhaled by mankind" (E.M. Forster 2005: 116).

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1. The metaphoric geography of the South and the North-South cultural divide

Recalling his first moment of inspiration, which set his imagination whirling, Forster wrote:

> For it is in Italy that I began. Here and nowehere else was my first attempt to do creative stuff. I can direct you to the exact spot. It is a valley a few miles north of Ravello called Vallone Fontana Caroso – at least that was its name on the map. /.../ I walked out there one afternoon at the beginning of this century, and sat down among the chestnut saplings with which both slopes of the valley were covered. Nothing was in sight except the little wind, and far to the left Ravello outlined against dark blue sea, a distant spectator. I sat down aimlessly, and no doubt in a receptive state, and suddenly – I sat down upon a story. Instantly there came into my mind the idea of something I could write out as fiction. I would bring some middle-class Britishers to picnic in this remote spot, I would expose their vulgarity, I would cause them to be terribly frightened they knew not why, and I would make it clear by subsequent events that they had encountered and offended the Great God Pan (Forster 1983: 290).

In that "receptive state" (Forster 1983: 290) into which Forster allowed himself to fall, waiting for his eye to see the signs, for his mind to process them, and for his imagination to weave a story, Forster actually "sat down upon" (Forster 1983: 290) more than one story. Italy, the setting of "The Story of a Panic," the first he ever wrote, suggested a whole space of the South, a culture of freedom and projected desires but at the same time of dangerous adventures.

Likewise, Greece, the setting of Forster's other short stories like "Macolnia Shops," "The Road from Colonus," "Cnidus," is the epitome of a pantheism with a whole array of connotations of freedom. In his short stories, Forster conflated Italy and Greece into a metaphor of the South, which promised freedom from all sorts of

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social, cultural and sexual conventions and restrictions. In her essay on Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, Parminder Bakshi traces the British writer's interest in creating a metaphoric geography of the South (the cultural Other) in the short stories, which eventually led him to the metaphoric geography of the East (the colonial Other) in his Indian novel. Bakshi uses Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and argues that:

> Orientalism originates in the North-South divisions in Europe. For many Victorians and Edwardians, travel was associated 'with blessed escape from a painful state of mind and oppressive society' (Pemble 1987: 149–50). The journey to Italy and Greece gave many British writers a sense of release from social and religious taboos, and they found 'in the rich art and emotional life of the South an invitation to relationships based on sympathy and sincerity rather than on rules of conduct' (Pemble 1987: 157) (Bakshi 1994: 28).

This space readily lent itself to the games of imagination and fantasy, and Forster saw the stories he collected and published in 1947 as fantasies. The space this fantastic realm opens is polarized between a Mediterranean South, which his imagination coloured as homosexually appealing and freedom promising, on the one hand, and a North (i.e. mainly England) that stood for everything that was socially and sexually stiff and dry, on the other.

2. Picnic turned into panic

With its idea of a picnic – a civilized social event of a leisurely nature – getting out of control and degenerating into a panic, which upsets the civility of social conventions and inflicts psychological discomfort or even damage, "The Story of a Panic" gave Forster the pattern of a plot he reshaped into an even more serious clash between the East and the West in the "Caves" section of his most accomplished novel *A Passage to India*.

In the hands of a naïve narrator, a "Britisher" whose eyes are not trained to see beyond what he takes to be an absolutely enchanting place run by a "nice landlady" and a "nice English-speaking waiter," the description of Ravello in the opening of "The Story of a Panic" is urbane : "Ravello is a delightful place with a delightful little hotel in which we met some charming people" (Forster 1989 : 9). Ravello looks perfectly familiar : the good old English habit of attaching "delightful" to any form of prettiness, and "little" to any form of coziness, the general air of snugness and urban comfort, all the elements of English culture, civilization and language in the menu may be reassuring for the narrator, albeit meant to raise suspicion in the reader. Forster treats the reader to his ironical mode here. One page later, after being introduced to the characters, we are plunged deeper into the story and, joining the characters, we start our journey into the valley. The "delightful little hotel" is left behind, and with it, the familiar coziness and charm of civilization vanish. The farther the characters, and with them the reader following the narrator's account, walk from the nice place peopled by nice landladies and nice English-speaking waiters, the more they find themselves into an unfamiliar, virtually threatening danger zone :

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> The valley ended in a vast hollow, shaped like a cup, into which radiated ravines from the precipitous hills around. Both the valley and the ravines and the ribs of hill that divided the ravines were covered with leafy chestnut, so that the general appearance was that of a many-fingered green hand, palm upwards, which was clutching convulsively to keep us in its grasp (Forster 1989: 10–11).

The anthropomorphic design of the landscape, this pathetic fallacy, with its monstrous anatomic details, seems to be shaped by a malefic hand, eerily replicated by the arresting hand of the valley. The irony gapes widely, alerting the reader to the discrepancy between the "delightful place" (Forster 1989 : 9) and the "many-fingered green hand", "clutching convulsively" to keep its prey "in its grasp" (Forster 1989: 10–11) like a huge carnivorous plant or like an ambiguous womb/tomb.

The divide between the North and the South starts unravelling, and its pattern will be echoed by that between the West and the East in *A Passage to India*. The anthropomorphized landscape of the Marabar Caves is another pathetic fallacy, while the Caves echo the ambiguous womb/tomb metaphor in "The Story of a Panic". The last lines of the first chapter in Forster's Indian novel read :

> No mountains infringe on the curve. League after league the earth lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again. Only in the south, where the group of fists and fingers are thrust up through the soil, is the endless expanse interrupted. These fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves (Forster 2005 : 7).

3. Forster's ciphers

It is obvious that Forster had an eye for landscapes, and a remarkable talent for descriptions, which he coloured in impressionistic and postimpressionistic brushes, alternatively. However, his landscapes are textualized as ciphers strewn with signs and symbols the reader is almost lured to decipher. In "The Story of a Panic," the encoded Italian landscape flashes its signs at the naïve narrator, who makes sense of their peril but not of their true significance. In *A Passage to India*, the geographical expanse and old geology of the Indian subcontinent are "interrupted" by the almost unearthly, strangely anthropomorphic spurts of bizarre-looking "fists and fingers" (Forster 2005: 7), where the narrative "voice" is impersonal, or rather there is no "voice" at all. In the opening chapter, the voice strangely morphs into an impersonal hand holding a camera that records the dramatic changes of scenery from a variety of angles: zooming in on the Marabar Caves which "are twenty miles off" (Forster 2005: 5), the camera captures the streets, temples and houses along the bank of the Ganges river, then the "inland where "the prospect alters" (Forster 2005: 5) to eventually zoom out in a panoramic view of the city of Chandrapore, where "the sky settles everything" (Forster 2005: 6).

Hopefully, the reader has a sharper mind to deal in the signs, and this makes the novel *A Passage to India* a challenge. Thus, the reader's task is to find a hermeneutic strategy to make sense of a succession of baffling and mind-blowing stimuli: the endlessly deferred extraordinary nature of the caves; the meaning of the echo; the ambiguity of the incident in the caves; Mrs. Moore's "twilight of the double vision", "where the horror of the universe and its smallness are both visible at the same time" (Forster 2005: 195); the Hindu profusion of objects of all sizes and

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colours, and their sacred import in a transcendental scheme of things in the "Temple" section; the open ending, with all the elements of the Indian landscape saying "in their hundred voices: 'No, not yet'", and the sky saying "'No, not there" (Forster 2005: 306).From its very first line ("Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary" (Forster 2005: 5) to its very last, *A Passage to India* is a textual limbo, a linguistic construct whose passages follow a deconstructive progress in the Derridean sense that "iln'y a pas de hors-texte", as many wish to understand it (that there is no reality apart from language). In other words, the message of Forster's cipher is, no matter what individual readers may find in it, that there is no fixity of meaning, only an unlimited number of possibilities.

4. *Genius loci* and mythical spaces

Very significantly, any place in Forster's universe, be it Italy, Greece, England or India, has a *genius loci*, a spirit embodied by a demigod (Pan in "The Story of a Panic"), or a woman who has passed away, and whose spiritual presence is uncannily perceptible this side of the grave (Ruth Wilcox in *Howards End*, Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India*).The *genius loci* turns the physical place (Ravello in "The Story of a Panic", Howards End in the novel of the same title, Cambridge in *The Longest Journey*, the suburb east of Patna in the state of Bihar, India, which is Bankipur on the map, fictionalized by Forster into Chandrapore in *A Passage to India*) into a mythical space, in the sense defined by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* :

> Literature is an undoubted mythical system: there is a meaning, that of the discourse ; there is a signifier, which is this same discourse as form or writing ; there is a signified, which is the concept of literature; there is a signification, which is the literary discourse (Barthes 1991: 133–134).

Forster's Victorian heritage and his temperate nature prevented him from radical experiments that led two of his outstanding contemporaries (Joyce and Virginia Woolf – a literary friend) to the most daring experiments with stream of consciousness or gigantic orchestrations of soliloquies. Forster never pushed his discourse beyond the limits of language into silence, like Beckett. Although he indulged in building a polymorphous image of India as "muddle" (a recurrent appellation), which baffles the eye and the mind, *A Passage to India* still reads as a mythologized space. The "recurrence", which, according to Barthes, is "the major power of myth" (Barthes 1991 : 134) is enacted by the Hindus participating in the Gokul Ashtami Festival in the "Temple" section of the novel, which opens with an incantation: "'Tukaram, Tukaram,/ Thou art my father and mother and everybody'" (Forster 2005 : 269), repeated several times. The recitation is part of a syncretic ritual employing music and choreography that ultimately induces Godbole, the Hindu character in the book, to a trance.

The mythologizing element whose effect Forster discovered in the first story he wrote is the *genius loci*. Looking back at the role of the *genius loci* in his own fiction when he wrote a preface for his collected short stories in 1947, Forster explained :

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> One of my novels, *The Longest Journey*, does indeed depend from an encounter with the genius loci, but indirectly, complicatedly, not here to be considered. Directly, the genius loci has only inspired me thrice, and on the third occasion it deprived me of a sovereign. As a rule, I am set going by my own arguments or memories, or by the motion of my pen, and the various methods do not necessarily produce a discordant result. If the reader will compare the first chapter of "The Story of a Panic," caught straight off the spot it describes, with the two subsequent chapters, in which I set myself to wonder what would happen afterwards, I do not think he will notice that a fresh hemisphere has swung into action (Forster 1989 : 6).

The *genius loci* in "The Story of a Panic" is a god not so great as Forster ironically claims. Pan is actually a demigod in the Greek pantheon, and since he is in charge with the wilderness, shepherds and flocks, folk and improvised music, he is in the best position to become the *spiritus loci* in the story. In the same preface written in 1947, Forster recalled that the idea of the story occurred to him when he "took a walk near Ravello" "in the May of 1902" (Forster 1989: 5). He remembered that the first chapter "rushed" into his mind "as if it had waited" for him there, and that he "received it as an entity and wrote it out" (Forster 1989: 5) upon returning to the hotel.

5. Forster's puns

Forster makes a pun on the god's name in the very title of the story (the "panic" being a state induced by Pan) to open the space of fantasy, which is a flexible and hybrid genre, a she or a he: "For fantasy", Forster explains in the preface, "though often female, sometimes resembles a man, and even functions for Hermes who used to do the smaller behests of the gods – messenger, machine-breaker, and conductor of souls to a not-too-terrible hereafter" (Forster 1989: 5).

Howards End came after two Italian novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908), which sandwiched Forster's first English novel *The Longest Journey* (1907). This "Condition of England" novel, published in 1910, harps on the theme of a long-sought connection. Howards End, a place in the English countryside, the house and the wych elm there are clustered into the metaphor of a spiritual home, which bridges and virtually heals the North versus South divide in most of Forster's short stories and in the Italian novels, and the Sawston versus Cambridge divide in *The Longest Journey*.

Forster always felt that rural England breathed an air of eternity, that its hills and green woods preserved the spirit of a place about whose mythology, he thought, nobody had ever written. He reminisces about the place where he was born, which inspired him:

> I never thought at the time that this running about over the fields or muddling around in the farm or chasing the chickens or being chased by a cow or fingering the wych elm would ever advantage me as a novelist. But I was certainly breathing in the notion of the continuity of England and the desirability of her continuance, and both my English novels – *Howards End* and *The Longest Journey* – touch on the theme (Forster 1983: 294).

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Howards End is imbued with the spirit of Ruth Wilcox and the wych elm. What Forster felt to be the "primitive magic" (Forster 1983: 63) of the place is suggestively embodied by a woman and a tree, which allegedly alleviated pain if people came and chewed its bark. I argue that, by foregrounding Ruth as a *genius loci*, Forster spatialized an essentially feminine spirit of what he considered to be eternal about England, without which no form of connection would be possible. Ruth, a rather enigmatic figure in the novel and a flat character in Forster's terms, magically enwraps the house and the garden in her presence, which is uncannily perceived as lingering there long after her death. Thus, the house becomes a shrine of Ruth's femininity, which is protective and indestructibly connected with nature through all its fibers.

The feminine space of Howards End radiates its spirit throughout the book, and so the novel becomes an icon of England's spiritualized past, which is bound to continue in the context of a modern England threatened by the non-spirit of "telegrams and anger", "panic and emptiness", two recurrent motifs. *Howards End* opens with Helen's letter, which plunges the reader straight into the poeticized atmosphere of the house and the garden, with a first inkling that Ruth impregnates it with her floating presence. All the natural elements of this English Eden are there in Helen's letter, which opens the novel: the house, the wych elm, which is described like some sort of *axis mundi*, a boundary between two realms, more trees, the vine, which covers the house, and Mrs. Wilcox with her long dress trailing over the grass, as if sowing a crop, and coming back with her hands full of the freshly cut hay.

Forster's propensity for double meanings, puns, ambivalence and ambiguity alerts the reader to the possibility of reading the "end" in the name of the place, which gives the book its title, in several ways. The "end" may be the end of an era or age in England's history, *la belle époque*, and its characteristic optimism, boosted by colonial power, economic prosperity and innovative spirit. Indeed, the world of *Howards End*, in spite of being visited by the "goblins" of "panic and emptiness", which are Helen's recurrent visions, and irrespective of its clashes, tensions and divisions, still has the potential of piecing the "fragments" of the Wilcoxes' bourgeois "prose" and the Schlegels' idealistic "passion" together. Another meaning of "end" is that of purpose. The "prose" and "passion" are metaphorically and literally wedded at Howards End, and this other significant meaning of the word emerges as a challenge of the book's ending, through a carefully handled progress of the plot. Ruth Wilcox passes away rather early in the book, Henry Wilcox marries Margaret Schlegel, carrying out Ruth's plan, Margaret implements the plan, which is one of connection, Helen has Leonard Bast's child, Leonard dies, and everybody is happily reunited at Howards End.

To plot, Forster added pattern: the novel is circular, in keeping with the mythology of the place. It opens with the image of a mysterious Ruth impregnating Howards End with her physical but evanescent presence, and it ends with her unseen spiritual presence, having passed on Howards End to Margaret, her spiritual heir, to be inherited by Margaret's sister's child. The book's end is circularly in its beginning, another eternal return, when Helen looks at the field and exclaims:

> The field's cut! Helen cried excitedly – the big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never! (Forster 1973: 362)

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6. Concluding remarks: reading signs; (inter)textuality; the seen vs. the unseen

A twofold concluding remark dwells on the experience of reading, in the light of my recent focus on the complexity of this process. The former, in the order of implications, is that Forster was a keen reader both of his own and of other writers' texts, which made him a sensitive critic and a theorist of the novel. The latter is that the overarching theme of Forster's work, in my reading, is the philosophically and aesthetically charged pair of the seen and the unseen, which gives substance to his endeavor and weight to his achievement. I argue that this theme of the seen and the unseen, a major dichotomy related to all the others running through his fiction and criticism, is the result of a very subtle observation of the natural and cultural environment, whose signs he trained both his eyes and the readers' eyes to see.

Forster always took a distance from his own creation, contemplating its moments, the intricacies of its stitches, and even accounting for the factors that contributed to his inspiration to dry up. After a first visit to India in 1912–1913, he started his novel *A Passage to India*, while struggling with two other novels, but he felt he could not complete it. It took him a second visit, in 1921, and an interval of eight years, to start bridging the gap between "India remembered and India experienced" (Forster 1983: 99), and projecting India as fiction. Besides, what Forster had to accommodate in the novel were the Muslim India he met on his first visit and the Hindu India he met on his second stay. This demanding task of writing a novel that would not be written sharpened the writer's sense of reflection on his own process of writing. In "A Note on *A Passage to India*" Forster accounted for it:

> I began this novel before my 1921 visit, and I took out the opening chapters with me, with the intention of continuing them. But as soon as they were confronted with the country they purported to describe, they seemed to wilt and go dead and I could do nothing with them. I used to look at them of an evening in my room at Dewas, and felt only distaste and despair. The gap between India remembered and India experienced was too wide. When I got back to England the gap narrowed, and I was able to resume (Forster 1983: 99).

The Hill of Devi, published in 1953, is Forster's memoir, which contains the letters he wrote during his two visits. The letters are mortared by Forster's comments of his experiences, most of them on a humorous note. The first edition included photographs of his visits and of the writer wearing traditional costumes, and a portrait of the Maharajah in whose service he was in 1921. In *Impressionistic Modes and Metaphoric Structures of E. M. Forster's Fiction and Criticism*, I read *A Passage to India* and *The Hill of Devi* in conjunction in order to highlight this reflective process (Bădulescu 2001: 172–173).

There is yet another distance Forster needed to take from his first-hand experience of India, on two occasions and at an interval of eight years. This distance works at the same time as a metaphoric bridge for the writer, and the bridge is intertextual. At a loss for a writing strategy to use in order to complete the novel, Forster found it by reading a poem. The poem in question is Walt Whitman's "A Passage to India". Perusing the American bard's poem, Forster discovered the major

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themes of the dichotomy of the seen and the unseen and of fusion in the lines of the poem, which he turned into the passages of his own novel.

There is a double meaning of "passage" in *A Passage to India*, and Forster had already used his readers to his puns and double meanings in his other writings. Of course, one meaning of "passage" is "voyage", with its connotations of life as a journey, and death, which is the last passage from the world of the living (an aspect of the seen) to the world of the dead (an aspect of the unseen). Mrs. Moore, who becomes the embodiment of this metaphoric passage, dies at sea, which receives her body to liquefy it. The sea, a symbolic metaphor of life and death, is suggestive of the protean nature of reality itself and of a liquid border separating realms and elements, which makes the fusion on so many levels easier to achieve both in the poem and in the novel.

A second meaning of "passage" is that of paragraph organization, which highlights the textual nature of the novel. Looking into the metaphoric space opened by this double meaning of "passage", I argue that there may be a third connotation of the word. I suggest that this connotation is in close relation with a modernist "indeterminacy", which became one of the main tenets of postmodernism. This indeterminacy, with all its elements of deferred meaning, ambiguity, and its protean and liquefied reality, turn the novel into a new kind of novel, the novel as a cipher to be decoded by the reader.

This new model of the metaphoric, symbolic and epiphanic novel infused with lyricism replaced the old mimetic one. In the more daring hands of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, it departed from the old paradigm, and was reshaped into a hybrid genre, where the characters' firm contours were eroded, and the plot subsided as the aspects of pattern, rhythm and fantasy (in Forster's terms) brought it closer to poetry, music, the visual arts, and the cinema. D. H. Lawrence, another writer of transition from Hardy's late Victorianism to modernism, also contributed to this paradigm shift, especially in the abstract design of *Women in Love*, where the tenuously connected chapters and their changing settings succeed like the acts of a play. Of course, Aldous Huxley's experiment of the "musicalisation of fiction" in *Point Counter Point* adds to this landscape of the new modernist novel.

In order to perceive the unseen and "show" it to the reader, Forster trained his mind's eyes in reading the under-layers of reality for barely perceptible signs of their existence. I consider this to be the subtlest aspect of Forster's writing, where he used his own most finely tuned reading skills.

The first sign of the unseen Forster noticed and captured in his writing was in "The Story of a Panic": while looking "down the valley" at "Ravello and the sea", the narrator notes that "that was the only sign of another world" (Forster 1989: 11), and later in the story, when the picnic turns into a panic, the presence of Pan is described in terms of an absence, which is another sign of the same other world of the unseen. The signs which make the characters assume that the place they have visited has also been visited by God Pan are just traces "of some goat's footmarks in the moist earth beneath the trees" (Forster 1989: 18), which look like writing marks on a page, and a whistle cut in two.

In *Howards End*, the unseen is embodied by Ruth Wilcox: her presence is spiritual on both sides of the grave. In a rather inexplicable way, the plot of the

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novel is sketched by her in the last note she writes before she passes away, and made visible by the narrator's writing hand. In *A Passage to India,* the embodiment of the unseen is Mrs. Moore who, like Ruth Wilcox in *Howards End*, becomes an inspiring presence after her death.

Reading for the signs of the unseen is ultimately aimed to train the readers of Forster's writing in hermeneutic endeavours. This kind of writing, based on a careful reading of signs, is not an easy task for the reader to make out: under the layers of mimetic realism, there is a goblin, or a midget, a demigod, a pun, or the baffling ambiguities of a cipher, like the echoes in the empty Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*.

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Abstract

This study starts from the premise that a writer, and E. M. Forster makes a case in point, will always be a good reader of signs, be those the signs one discerns in the natural environment or the signs in the shape of letters forming words in a text. Forster wrote his first short story under the impression of the signs his eyes beheld in the Italian landscape of a valley, which suggested a plot of a fantastic nature to the then young man who found himself "in a receptive state" (Forster 1983: 290). Much later, in his most accomplished novel *A Passage to India*, Forster challenged his readers' perception of the abstract geography of "fists and fingers" (Forster 2005: 7) in the remote distance to build the whole text in the key of a cipher. In the same key, pun and ambiguity contribute to the reader's sense of active participation in decoding a prose of many-layered and deferred meanings.

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