

PROPHECY AND VITALITY: RECLAIMING E. M. FORSTER AND  
CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD'S THEORIES OF LITERARY AFFECT AS  
CRITICAL TOOLS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF FICTION

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
August 2010

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DATE: August 30, 2010

AUTHOR: Emma Katharine Baasch

TITLE: PROPHECY AND VITALITY: RECLAIMING E. M. FORSTER AND  
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AS CRITICAL TOOLS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF FICTION

DEPARTMENT OR SCHOOL: Department of English

DEGREE: MA CONVOCATION: October YEAR: 2010

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For Morgan, Christopher and Birgit.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the value of literary affect and reader experiences thereof for critical analysis. Two authors, E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, sit at the core of this thesis due to their respective ideas of “prophecy” and “vitality” that propose the importance of individual reader experience in interpreting fiction. Their theories propose, in different ways, that fiction has the ability to extend beyond its mimetic and contextual limits. Derek Attridge and Emmanuel Levinas have contributed to these theories more recently and from a different perspective to re-establish the examination of literature based in reader experience and its ineffable effect. These theories are examined and combined to achieve a holistic and functional theory of literary affect that can be applied critically. The novels used as examples are E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Christopher Isherwood’s *Prater Violet*, *A Meeting by the River*, and *A Single Man*.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge and thank Birgit, Justin, Malachy, and Ruari for their support and help. I am even more indebted to numerous individuals who have contributed time and brainpower to assist me in the writing of this thesis. These people are: Alice Brittan, Anthony Enns, Bruce Greenfield, and, first and foremost, Len Diepeveen, without whose help these leaves would be blank. Gracias, Merci, Danke, Thanks.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

When one considers the legacy of E. M. Forster, his novels probably come to mind first and foremost. *A Room With A View*, *Howards End*, and *A Passage to India* in particular seem to appear year after year on syllabi for university level literature courses and continue to play a role in theoretical examinations of issues such as colonialism, queer writing, and modernisms. In a career that spanned six decades, however, writing fiction occupied only a 20-year portion thereof. After the publication of *A Passage to India* in 1924, Forster stopped writing novels and turned to lecturing, broadcasting, teaching, and writing a few short stories. In this period Forster codified his theory of the aesthetic value of fiction and worked as a professor and critic of literature. His critical output during and prior to this later period develops a broad-ranging collection of interpretive techniques and focuses that, taken together, constitute a fascinating attitude towards literature and the study thereof. By examining Forster's aesthetics and similar theories, particularly his idea of reading that prioritises experience, this thesis reconsiders the value of the affect of literature for criticism. In this thesis I draw on the work of two novelists, Forster and Isherwood, and two theorists, Derek Attridge and Emmanuel Levinas, to consider how novels develop individual and challenging experiences and encounters between text and reader that stimulate considered and representative critical enquiry.

In considering Forster's aesthetics this thesis explores a wider applicability for them evidenced by their influence on other writers. One of Forster's closest relationships with an author was with Christopher Isherwood. Because of their age difference—Forster was 25 years Isherwood's senior—there is a sense in which Isherwood attempted to



emulate Forster's technique and, in a lecture he gave in 1960, admitted that for many years "Forster seemed somehow to express exactly the kind of artwork which [I] longed to produce" (*Isherwood* 55). In a lecture series entitled "A Writer and his World", Isherwood quotes Forster's essay "What I Believe" at length and draws into his own theories Forster's ideas of fiction and artistic ethics. Due to this apparent respect for and belief in much of Forster's aesthetic vision there is a clear relationship between the two authors' theories of fiction, even though the style of their writing differs greatly. Despite several crucial differences of opinion—their vastly different religious views for example—their personal and professional relationship left a mark on Isherwood's writing and beliefs about art. Through Isherwood's deviations from Forster's concepts and his vastly different style and focus the complications and advantages of applying and relying on an aesthetic theory as abstract and nebulous as Forster's can be examined. Using three of Isherwood's novels—*Prater Violet*, *A Meeting by the River*, and *A Single Man*—the uses of Forster's aesthetics and the difficulties associated with the application thereof will be examined.

Also of interest are Isherwood's own aesthetics, particularly those outlined in "A Writer and His World". The three novels that are examined were chosen because they represent different tones in Isherwood's writing and a historical progression from Isherwood's youth to the conclusion of his career as novelist and the solidification of his aesthetic theory. Reading these three novels through Forster's theories is an experiment in applying his aesthetics to texts he had not chosen and, quite possibly, never considered himself in those terms. Applying Isherwood's theories simultaneously reveals the difficulties and advantages of relying on concepts of the affect or ineffable nature of

fiction. As a whole, therefore, this thesis attempts to position the core idea of Forster's aesthetics within a more recent theoretical examination and move them from the fringes of critical reading to the centre, particularly in dealing with novels by Forster or those of authors, like Isherwood, who were directly influenced by his ideas and techniques.

Forster and Isherwood met in 1932 through a mutual friend and, despite their age difference and Isherwood's immigration to America, formed an intimate friendship that would last until Forster's death in 1971 (Furbank 179). Throughout their friendship Isherwood sent manuscripts to Forster and, both in person and via letters, discussed issues associated with fiction, politics, and life in general. On Forster's death, Isherwood was granted the rights to Forster's unpublished novel, *Maurice*, which he had read many years earlier and had discussed many times with Forster. When Isherwood met Forster, he had only published one novel, but was soon to publish *The Memorial* and shortly thereafter *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. Forster, on the other hand, would not publish another novel until the posthumous publication of *Maurice* and was already ensconced in a teaching position at Cambridge University (Beauman 347). In the years before the two authors met, Isherwood and a friend, Edward Upward, studied Forster's work and coined the term "tea-tabling" to describe Forster's restrained and domestic style. Isherwood went so far as to revise his first novel, *All the Conspirators*, to more closely resemble this style (Furbank 177). Isherwood's early work was greatly influenced by Forster, but their relationship was to develop well beyond the limits of an up-and-coming author idolising an older, established one.

During their early friendship Isherwood frequently asked Forster abstract and elaborate questions about literary issues, including—but by no means limited to—

Forster's beliefs about God and the spiritual in fiction, the role of the author, and the quality of his (Isherwood's) work (*Letters* 26, 33-6, 39, 112-4). He sent Forster manuscripts of *All the Conspirators* and *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* soliciting advice and commentary, just as Forster shared manuscripts of *Maurice* with Isherwood, leading them to discuss at length possible endings for the novel (18, 42-3, 33, 52, 74). In a fascinating set of letters dated between January 28<sup>th</sup> and May 9<sup>th</sup> of 1944 the two discussed their beliefs regarding God and moral obligations in relation to fiction. The letters commence with Isherwood suggesting that as an author it is, at times, possible to feel "something inside you [Forster] which is larger than your personality, and which has some kind of access to what is outside you" (116). Forster responds by outlining that he agrees but does not refer to it as "God," as Isherwood does, and figures it as "*different*" and not "*greater*" than the individual (123).

Tied up in this discussion is the creative impetus behind *A Passage to India* and Forster's decision to burn several short stories to allow for the completion of the novel. Forster characterises the novel as his "best book" and their discussion reflects Isherwood's interest in understanding how the novel achieves a level of greatness unparalleled by Forster's other work (71). The two topics, spiritual belief and the excellence of *Passage*, appear quite separate, but through their correspondence it becomes clear that the two were working through how they perceived the onus for morality in fiction, what Forster terms "mysticism and aesthetics" and Isherwood terms "mysticism and conduct" (119). Their interest is not explicitly the quality of "God" or any associated spiritual sensation, but how fiction, and particularly the author's act of writing, sets down something "*different*" from the author, something outside and yet

inside his being. The proposition is, therefore, that through writing the author attempts to achieve transcendence by remaining, in a sense, passive to the act of writing. He can, by achieving this, create a novel that is neither infused with a definitive set of beliefs or guided by a predetermined outcome. In this construction novels are not contained by their textual bounds, but create a sensation or experience for the reader that extends their parameters and diffuses the author's objectives or intentions. The ethical and critical result is that both Forster's and Isherwood's novels address issues without reliance on a set moral code or ethical intention, but exist as propositions that can be read from numerous perspectives.

At this point in their relationship, Isherwood had ceased to idolise Forster, but his attitude is still somewhat that of a disciple or student. Isherwood's shift from writing what he terms biographical "portrait" novels to more traditional "constructed" fiction reflects his desire to more closely emulate Forster's style (*Conversations* 6). P. N. Furbank describes Isherwood's early attachment to Forster in terms of symbolism; in the face of WWII Forster "grew into a symbol and a hero" for Isherwood and a few others—a symbol of "England" in opposition to the threat of fascism and a consummate artist "worth saving from Hitler" (Furbank 229). Their friendship, however, became deeply affectionate and a tool through which both men considered the act of writing and its ultimate goals by engaging with a loved, respected, but, ultimately, distant individual. Despite his immigration to the United States and many years spent travelling the continent, Isherwood frequently returned to England and visited with Forster. Their meetings are, of course, not documented, but from diary entries and Forster's entrusting

of Isherwood with the rights to *Maurice* it is clear that their friendship continued strong until Forster's death.

In Isherwood's and Forster's writing there is a similarity of aim, of interest in social issues that can be addressed by fiction, but there is also a difference of approach in addressing these issues. For Forster there is one central potential effect of fiction that he terms "prophecy". In Forster's aesthetics "prophecy" refers to an "implication" in the author's tone that creates an experience for the reader that expands her frame of reference from the text at hand to more general and universal concerns. His ideal is not to construct a novel with a purpose and a necessary mode of interpretation or reading; "prophecy" simultaneously suggests a broader meaning and diffuses the power of the author's intentions toward said meaning. Isherwood proposes a similar effect felt by the reader, but attaches it to the author's abilities and intentions. According to him, the author "works simultaneously in a novel on two levels," one in which "[H]e has to mind that people suffer. . . . [H]e has to depict the circumstances of everyday life" and another in which "he is also the eternal, who looks down upon everything and enjoys it . . . . [H]e has to have . . . compassion" (*Isherwood* 66). He concedes there is an effect caused by the act of reading fiction, but he ties it to the author's ability to achieve this dual mindset and communicate from both perspectives. Isherwood's is a more objective theory, but which of these concepts is more useful, Forster's or Isherwood's? And which is more ethical? Does Forster's idea of "prophecy" remain far too abstract to be usefully applied or does its unfixed nature leave greater room for critical examination? These are some of the questions that will be posed throughout this thesis.

Forster is deeply interested in “the contradictions, paradoxes, and dangers of living the moral life . . . the inextricable tangle of good and evil” (Trilling 17). Despite this Forster has gained a reputation as “a representative of the liberal imagination” (Armstrong 127). His staunch liberal humanist principles, explained in his essay “What I Believe”, have been repeatedly employed as structures through which his novels can be read and have become so widely repeated that they are incorrectly substituted for the ethical commitment of his works. In “What I Believe” Forster begins with the declaration that “[T]olerance, good temper and sympathy are no longer enough in a world which is rent by religious and racial persecution, in a world where ignorance rules” (65). These politics, however, are frequently employed single-mindedly in interpreting Forster’s novels. His technique of using “the double turn,” for example, to undermine ideas already established in a novel is often read as “tolerance,” despite the fact that “it almost as often makes the severest judgments” (Trilling 16). Similarly, the liberalism in *A Passage to India*—primarily, the critique of the imperial establishment—is undermined by the equally critical treatment of all individuals. Despite readings that pit Forster firmly as colonialist or anti-colonialist, his novel refuses to take sides in the debate over Anglo-India. Criticisms of *A Passage to India* tend to focus on the successes or failures of Forster’s personal ethics and frequently propose a solid relationship between Forster’s aesthetics and political beliefs. These readings, however, fail to acknowledge certain aspects of Forster’s theories of art and his complex ethical commitment to produce fiction and celebrate those works that “sing” rather than “preach” (*Aspects* 86-7).

The reliance on Forster's personal politics has tainted criticism and stagnated thought on his work because of the attitude on the part of "politically minded critics" that Forster is

a token for error or lamentable naiveté, whether he is presented as an illustration of the fallacies of liberal humanism, or as a last remnant of British imperialism, or as a practitioner of traditional narrative methods who lacks self-consciousness about the epistemological ambiguities of language. (126-7)

It is doubtless that from a critical standpoint Forster's aesthetics as a whole reinforce the central tenets of a liberal education, particularly the "desire [for] a politics that would enable us to act with a sophisticated, sceptical awareness that all norms are provisional and contestable" (129). Indeed his aesthetics and idea of "prophecy" constitute a complex critical perspective towards fiction—one in which utility and purpose are not fixed or absolute, but, rather, aspects of a constantly mutating dialogue. Critics, therefore, have long been operating under the misconception that Forster's works propose an absolute liberal obligation that is not actually apparent.

Forster's success as a novelist, both in his lifetime and since his death, has guaranteed his fiction a place in the public literary consciousness, but shifts in academic focus and motivation have led to a gradual forgetting or omission of his critical approaches. This is particularly apparent in the omission of his theories in the most frequently applied modes of criticising his work. For example: Edward Said's post-colonial interpretation of *A Passage to India* in *Orientalism*, Sara Suleri's and Hunt Hawkins's similar perspective, and analyses of spiritual or mystical symbolism

performed by Michael Roeschlein, Frederick C. Crews, and Robert L. Selig have established *A Passage to India* as committed in a variety of ways to any number of political or moral ideologies. These criticisms, however, address the text through established modes of critical analysis without reference to Forster's emphasis on and belief in the importance of the always individual and constantly changing experience of reading the novel. Interpretations of *A Passage to India* often focus on its exposition of the colonial setting and the ethical implications thereof, employing a limited perspective to analyse one set of cues while ignoring the movements and shifts of the novel whole.

According to Forster the atmosphere of a novel as a whole is capable of affecting its reader on multiple levels and in a variety of ways. The potential for this effect is central to his aesthetics and should, therefore, be at the very least kept in mind when reading his novels. As Armstrong suggests, *A Passage to India* is "a work of much greater epistemological complexity than its seemingly conventional narrative form suggests" (128). His conclusion rests on the argument that "[T]he 'double turns' that define the *experience* of reading *A Passage to India* endorse a paradoxical but pragmatic course of pursuing goals that are impossible to justify or attain" (143, emphasis added). The concept that "the *experience* of reading" Forster's work is crucial to understanding its critical complexities sits at the core of this thesis and its readings. Reconsidering Forster's seminal novel as a literary testing ground for his theories of literary effect and singular experiences of reading is, therefore, long overdue.

A broader concern has made this project necessary; Derek Attridge and several other theorists have declared a concern over a widespread academic disdain towards aesthetic theories like Forster's, which rely upon an "unspoken" and uncertain emotional



or sensation based experience of reading. These theories make use of the affective experience of reading a text for critical purposes and are perceived, therefore, as lacking objectivity or denying social and political issues. Attridge argues that texts are currently treated as “instrumental in furthering an existing project . . . . The project in question may be political, moral, historical, biographical, psychological, cognitive, or linguistic,” no matter how reductive the critiques created by these approaches (7). His attempt is to conceive of literature (and the other arts) “as defined by its *resistance* to such thinking” (7). Simply put, the experience of the reader in accessing something non-instrumental through the act of reading has ceased to carry weight in critical analyses of texts, to the potential detriment of criticism in general. The failed or reductive readings alluded to above are a prime example of how the omission of a discussion of the experience of reading and its non-cognitive influences from critical study may create problematic analyses.

Concepts such as Forster’s idea of “prophecy” are difficult to define and seem to lack objectivity, but can produce more accurate and holistic criticism by proposing an expansive perspective resistant to authorial intent or political, cultural, and ethical implications. As a result the central concern in Attridge’s work is establishing how the experience of reading functions and, therefore, has critical value. The proposition in Forster, as well as in the work of Attridge and Levinas, is that this effect, while difficult to define, has influence on the reader’s perspective that improves and supports potential responses. There is also a concern expressed in these theories with how “prophecy” and its peers resemble an encounter with an unknowable other—not a human individual other, but a textual other—that causes a transcendent or potentially sublime experience.

This experience of transcendence caused by an encounter with an other is analysed at length in Levinas's work, but demands closer analysis to consider the ethics of figuring prophecy in this way and constructing a critical perspective out of this encounter.

The first chapter analyses both Forster's and Isherwood's aesthetics, with particular emphasis on how "prophecy" and "vitality" function or defy functionality and may contribute to the interpretation of fictional works. Chapter two explores the ethical concerns associated with theories of literary "encounter" through an examination of contemporary theoretical discourses. It also proposes potential applications of these aesthetics in criticism and the difficulties associated with these applications by examining the work of Attridge and Levinas in relation to Forster's idea of "prophecy" and Isherwood's "vitality". The final chapter performs readings of Forster's *A Passage to India* and Isherwood's novels *Prater Violet*, *A Meeting by the River*, and *A Single Man* to demonstrate how a focus on the ineffable effect of fiction can lead to useful and productive readings that question reductive criticisms and instigate more broad-based analyses.

## CHAPTER 2 PROPHECY AND VITALITY

Forster is interested, like many other artists associated with the Bloomsbury group, in the function of art and the ways in which the disparate arts can be united. Art, with a capital A, is a crucial concept in Forster's work; it is the basis upon which he develops his aesthetics. Forster draws heavily on the romantic tradition for his construction of an artistic effect akin to the sublime, in which a reader's experience of reading creates an indefinable and expansive encounter with the text that goes beyond the limits of reason and elevates the work. According to Wilfred Stone "Art," for Forster, is "the transcendent value that, like Moore's organic unity, is more than the sum values of its parts" (103). Here the novel—or any other work of art—is perceived as more than the elements that compose it, but in this estimation the elements are not absent. There is something in art that is "implied" by the creator, by "the accent of his voice, his song," that extends beyond the frame of the text, object, or piece of music (*Aspects* 93). Forster calls this extension "prophecy," but he does not mean this in the sense of foretelling; the prophet in art "is trying to push across at us something which is neither an aesthetic pattern nor a sermon," but rather an idea or sense of "the universe" ("Not Listening" 124, *Aspects* 86). For Forster this is not necessarily part of a value judgment, but an added aspect of art that may "illumine" the invented world and the real world for the reader (93). "Prophecy" sets novels apart and, though its existence is often met with laughter and ridicule, its value—if it can be called value—is that "[I]t seems more real than anything" ("Not Listening" 124).

Isherwood, similarly, develops a theory of the expansive quality of fiction, but puts in place certain limitations and restrictions for this quality. Isherwood and Forster's

close relationship, particularly Isherwood's early desire to emulate Forster's techniques, positions the younger man as a potential vessel for Forster's aesthetics and the concept of prophecy in particular. Initially, Isherwood's respect for and personal adoration of E.M. Forster must be acknowledged. Not only was their 40-year friendship quite intimate, but Isherwood also acknowledges that in his youth he dearly wanted to be able to emulate some of Forster's writing techniques (*Isherwood* 56). However intimate their friendship was after 1932, and it seems they were quite close, it should be remembered that Isherwood, while a young writer and before meeting Forster, already deeply respected and admired the elder's abilities. Keeping this in mind is important because, without acknowledging this, Isherwood's personal love of Forster and admiration of his work can be confused and the former used to explain the latter as mere affection. In a lecture series Isherwood gave at the University of California in 1960, entitled "A Writer and His World," the somewhat disparate lectures have one uniting element: in each Forster's work is mentioned, quoted, or examined. No other author appears with such frequency or is proposed with similar respect and adulation. To say that Isherwood is a fan of Forster's work would be an understatement, but to say that Isherwood is obsessed with emulating him in all ways would be a lie. The primary deviation from Forster's work that Isherwood proposes is a reconsideration of the author and her use of her own personal experiences, beliefs, and friends as fodder for fiction. Subsequent to this, Isherwood reconsiders a "prophecy"-like effect or mode of communication in fiction from the perspective of the author and considers how authors can position themselves to achieve an effect similar to prophecy.

This chapter examines both Isherwood and Forster's theories of an expansive literary effect to establish exactly what may be implied by these theories, what can be gained from readings performed with them in mind, and their potential utility for criticism of fiction. Beginning with Forster's idea of "prophecy," this chapter explores the technical underpinning of this concept and questions what "prophecy" is and how it might contribute to the understanding and study of fiction. Subsequent to this, Isherwood's idea of literary "vitality" will be examined and considered in reference to "prophecy." The implications and uses of these two theories will become apparent and will initiate a discussion of how critical responses are constructed and carried out.

### **PROPHECY AND FORSTER'S IDEA OF ART**

In "Art for Art's Sake," Forster proposes an "order which an artist can create in his own work . . . . A work of art . . . is a unique product . . . because it is the only material object in the universe which may possess internal harmony," "it is the one orderly product which our muddling race has produced" (90). This "internal harmony" creates the sense of accurate mimesis, of reflecting an ordered world, which the prophetic novelist focuses on developing. It is from within the experience of developing "internal harmony" that "prophecy" surfaces and surprises the artist who, "when the picture or symphony or lyric or novel (or whatever it is) is complete . . . will wonder how on earth he did it" ("Raison D'Être" 111). It is through this unconscious intervention, this release of control on the part of the author that, according to Forster, art transcends the immediate fictional world and speaks on a personal level to the reader. "Internal harmony" is necessary to create this transcendent effect, but it by no means includes "prophecy" in its order. Prophecy does not solely rely on "turns of phrase" or "rhythms"

in a novel, but also on a text's effect as a whole, on what the reader feels both while reading and after the novel has been finished and set aside. The construction of "internal harmony" should not be neglected because it is, in a sense, through the implications and turns of phrase therein that the reader is made conscious of "prophecy."

Wilfred Stone perceives Forster's theory of art to be "a missionary enterprise" (102). The end of this "missionary enterprise" is, according to Stone, the inclusion of fiction in the pantheon of Art because it can "transcend technique and become something that might be considered an end in itself" (102). In Forster's aesthetic vision, technique and "transcendent value" collide and become nearly inextricable, suggesting proximity between the author's ordering of the text and the "extension, the melting, the unity... which can only be implied" (*Aspects* 92). Stone perceives Forster's theories as devaluing technique in favour of a broader, less specific artistic force, but his conclusion ignores the importance placed on technique and form by Forster. Indeed, the entirety of *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster's most comprehensive analysis of the novel, deals with the association between technique and the novel that is "an end in itself." Forster repeatedly perceives artistic "value" in well-written fiction that communicates something beyond its mimetic content to the reader, specifically in which "every sentence [the author] writes implies this extension, and the implication is the dominant aspect of his work" (Stone 105, *Aspects* 91). This "value" takes different forms in Forster's writing, but is always attached to a work's existence as a "self-contained entity" that causes a "creative state of mind" in its audience ("Art for Art's Sake" 88; "Raison D'Être" 111). What Stone overlooks is the importance Forster places on the technique of writing as a gateway to the "value" at stake; the two are co-dependant and should be considered as such.

The “value,” which will be examined in more depth below, at the core of Forster’s beliefs about fiction is grounded quite firmly in his analyses of the stylistic and technical aspects of a novel. What Stone sidesteps, then, are the building blocks upon which Forster erects his temple of the novel; they must bear the weight of Forster’s theories or the construction topples. This chapter repositions Forster’s theory of the novel to consider the role of technique by working from the bottom up—as Forster does in *Aspects of the Novel*. This allows for the analysis of what “value” or “prophecy” can be read in Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* and for questions to be raised about how Forster’s theories create an interpretive ethical complexity. With his heavy insistence on the construction of an ordered whole, Forster appears to place interpretive power in the hands of the author, while simultaneously distancing “prophecy” from the author’s control. For interpretive purposes, “prophecy” appears to be an abstract version of reader response or experience, but because of the weighted emphasis on technique it becomes closely tied to authorial intent. Forster, therefore, constructs a carefully balanced aesthetic vision in which the author is privileged to direct reader attention and response, but with the caveat of “prophecy” acting as a safeguard against potential polemics from the author and purely utilitarian readings. Can Forster be taken at his word that the reader should not be “concerned with the prophet’s message,” but rather with “the accent of his voice”? Does “prophecy” allow the reader to develop critical distance or does it draw the reader into the author’s ideology?

## ***ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL: "STORY," "PLOT," AND "PEOPLE"***

Forster's perspective in *Aspects of the Novel* is that of critic and reader, not of author. Leaving behind the authorial perspective serves two distinct purposes: primarily, this allows him to speak of works freely and not comment on his own, and secondly, it prefaces the attitude he will take towards all, or nearly all, works in the lectures. Indeed, the separation of the text and its author is crucial to Forster's critical work and contributes greatly to his theories of "Art" and "prophecy." In the introduction, therefore, he establishes that "We are to visualize the English novelists . . . seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British-Museum reading-room—all writing their novels simultaneously" (*Aspects* 5). This imagined room of authors allows the investigation to avoid chronological history and take completed texts without reference to their historical context and, to a lesser extent, their author's beliefs and character. This proposes that it is possible to read novels without reference to their authors' lives. When discussing the works individually, Forster refers to their authors and invokes them as characters involved in the act of writing, but he does not consider their position in society, religion, politics, nationality, etc. as important for interpreting the text. This introduces the concept that the author's biography is not crucial to interpretation and that the tools that he proposes for reading,—"Story," "People," "Plot," and "Rhythm and Pattern"—are the province of the reader and not the author. Technique is crucial, but it is, to an extent, taken as given and it is the style of reading that is crucial (*Aspects* 6-7, 15). Forster discusses novels as individual works that develop their own world and continue to exist and flourish without their author's presence. Indeed, the primary impression given by *Aspects* is not one of an analysis of different styles and techniques, but rather of an



inclusive consideration of what novels share and how these shared components construct both an idiosyncratic and common fictional world that reflects onto the reader's perception of her own world.

According to Forster the most basic common trait of the novel is story. Forster has limited respect for story, but recognises its importance. When considering how different types of individuals respond to story Forster imagines himself saying "in a sort of drooping regretful voice: 'Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story' . . . I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form" (17). The novel, and particularly its story, is a "low atavistic form" because it is necessarily controlled by time; story is "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence", "it is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms", but it is this quality that ties together all fiction from pre-history onwards (18-9). Recognising that attempts have been made to get rid of the clock of time, Forster comments briefly on some of these attempts—namely those by Marcel Proust, Emily Bronte, Gertrude Stein and Lawrence Sterne—but concludes that these, and all other attempts, merely disguise or confuse the running of time, not doing away with the clock, only perverting its constant direction (20). The clock is, therefore, a constant presence in fiction, unlike in music, poetry, and the plastic arts—in which works Forster considers time to be invisible, unnecessary, or entirely absent—but its presence varies in importance from work to work. Story is a quite straightforward concept, but Forster's description of it underscores a basic similarity between all fictional works: the progression from one point in time to a later one. This emphasises the reliance on a cognitive order; story does not make heavy demands on the reader, but it does set up parameters in which the novel must be read.

Plot, unlike story, has causal links buried within it; Forster distinguishes the two concepts thus: “[T]he king dies and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot” (60). This describes plot at its most basic and Forster pointedly acknowledges that plots come in varying forms and shapes. Examining different novels, Forster explores the potential variations and influences of plot. He argues that *Great Expectations* can be summed up quite easily, its plot stems from a single misapprehension, while George Meredith’s works cannot, not because they are superior, but because he ties plot inextricably to his characters. In Forster’s words, Meredith’s type of plot “resembles a series of kiosks most artfully placed among wooded slopes, which his people reach by their own impetus, and from which they emerge with altered aspect” (63). Meredith’s characters do not act out of their emotions, but rather they enter the kiosks and leave altered because the novelist demands it; in real life people do not necessarily act out of emotion, so why should they in the novel? The demands plot places on the reader, however, are crucial; they keep those who are only in search of a story at bay, and create a complexity that stimulates something in the reader bearing “intelligence and memory” (60). Well-structured plot develops the fictional reality that Forster finds necessary for a novel to be considered “Art”. This fictional world creates “a reality of a kind we can never get in daily life,” a reality that appears more real than real life (44). Where story mirrors the chronological progression of our lives, plot gives the illusion of real causality, of internal order, dressed to resemble reality, but bearing certain hallmarks of invention and imagination. Story and plot are reliable, they are the basis upon which fiction is built, but it is through the apprehension of their existence as

inventions that the reader can come to grips with how fiction controls or constructs her mindset to direct her attention and perception to particular concerns and issues.

Between the essays dealing with story and plot, Forster discusses characters, “people,” providing an analysis of varying types of characters, narrators, and the ways in which these influence readings. Setting “people” between story and plot is, in itself, a loaded proposition on Forster’s part. Returning to the concept of an upward gradation in the structure of *Aspects*, the positioning of “People” so early and as merely one step above story suggests that Forster does not perceive characters or narration as particularly complex or important features of the novel. Indeed the two chapters on “people” bear a marked tone of irony and deprecation; according to Forster, characters “come into the world more like parcels than human beings” and “Miss Bates and Emma [Austen’s characters] are like bushes in a shrubbery . . . and anyone who has tried to thin out a shrubbery knows how wretched the bushes look if they are transplanted elsewhere” (36, 45). This tone, however, is mediated by the fact that the examination of “people” introduces the beginning of his conception of the higher functions of the novel. People have two sides to their existence:

All that is observable in a man—that is to say, his actions and such of his spiritual existence as can be deduced from his actions—fall into the domain of history. But his romanceful or romantic side . . . includes ‘the pure passions . . . the dreams, joys, sorrows and self-communings which politeness or shame prevent him from mentioning’; and to express this side of human nature is one of the chief functions of the novel. (32)

It is this function of the novel that Forster relies upon, because “this is why [characters] often seem more definite than characters in history, or even our own friends” (32). This suggests that a character whose inner life is revealed cannot be a part of the “real” world, but appears to be “real” for the reader. Forster uses the example of *Moll Flanders* to explain this and elaborate. Moll is psychologically real, the reader is given all manner of internal and external information about her and all of it is believable and apparently human, but the novel bearing her name as its title is her only home. Defoe’s novel is constructed solely around her existence and life; she appears real, but without the world of the novel she ceases to exist (43). The same can be said of Austen’s *Emma*, in which the protagonist may appear realistic, but outside of her own world she would, according to Forster, cease to exist (43-4). Fictional characters, therefore, appear realistic because they can be known inside and out, but they are limited to their specific fictional setting and, though they resemble people we know, they are entirely distinct from them. They do, however, raise one more important question for Forster: “can we, in daily life, understand each other?” (45)

It is this question that introduces the second essay devoted to “people”—Forster’s term for characters and narrators—it is an essay in which more complex types of characters and various forms of narration come under scrutiny. The essay has three distinct thrusts. For the purposes of this work they are all important, but can be treated as interrelated. Forster’s central premise is that “people” represent reality, expand it in some cases, but always refer back to the reader and his or her knowledge and understanding. The reader knows instinctively that characters should be treated as “real” people, or else reading fiction would be pointless, and, therefore, the more realistic the character, the less

forced the cognitive shift required in the reader. The difficulty with this concept is that “[a]ll of us [readers], even the sophisticated, yearn for permanence” and this desire allows for, even demands, flat characters (48). A flat character can be summed up in a singular idea: “[H]e is the idea, and such life as he possesses radiates from its edges and from the scintillations it strikes when other elements in the novel impinge” (47). The flat character is not so simplistic or unrealistic as to be unnecessary or unwelcome in a work. “A novel that is at all complex often requires flat people as well as round” because, as Forster exemplifies through Dickens, flat characters are highly recognisable and can be very useful in obtaining a realistic tone or atmosphere. In Forster’s estimation, in quotidian—or “real”—life we are forced to make assumptions about people around us because we do not have access to their internal lives. We pigeonhole individuals based only on what we can perceive: external signs, actions, or appearances. Similarly, flat characters give the appearance of having some complexity; they certainly have emotions, thoughts, and idiosyncratic behaviours, but these are apparent on the surface of the character. The reader believes she has analysed the individual character and discovered his or her essence, as in real life, thus creating a similar relationship between reader and character as that between reader and other reader.

Because Forster defines flat characters at length he does not enter into a protracted discussion of round characters. “They have already been defined by implication” and are, quite simply, characters “capable of surprising in a convincing way . . . [that have] the incalculability of life about [them]—life within the pages of a book” (54). He leaves the analysis at that: flat characters are more interesting because, though they might appear simple, they can be as effective as round characters when used

properly. Round characters more closely resemble real people, but this is only because they occasionally surprise, as real people do. Removed from their fictional world, round characters fare no better than flat. Both types of character are used to ground the text as a whole in the real world from which it stems, but remain inevitably tied to the fictional world they inhabit. Round characters simply add a note of uncertainty; they cannot be fully explained and are often unpredictable, surprising the reader who believes they have already been fully exposed. It is the ability to surprise that is crucial to Forster's concept of "prophecy": without the intangible and unpredictable a text merely conforms to expectations and the reader's involvement is only one of pursuing the story to its conclusion. By shocking or startling a reader into the awareness that she cannot predict an individual character, uncertainty enters into a reading and subtleties of character, plot, setting, tone, etc. begin to weigh more heavily in the ultimate interpretation. Like the surprises provided by plot, round characters are a gateway into the complex and uncertain realm of "prophecy".

Forster is also keenly aware that "prophecy" cannot always stem solely from a single character. Novels are not about a single individual; therefore, there must be meetings, arguments, affairs, and friendships that are mediated to protect the author's interests and cause *bouleversements* in the reader. One person in isolation can only represent an individual, no matter how complex, but bringing a cast of characters together allows the text to contend with broader issues facing any and all collections of individuals. The author and narrator both engage in the difficulties of bringing the characters together and presenting their relationships realistically because both have the duty of creating a believable fictional realm in which their concerns are addressed.

Forster calls this the “power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says” and situates this responsibility of the narrator and author at the core of how a text functions (*Aspects* 54).

Analysing Lubbock’s formulae for recognising types of narrators, Forster suggests that criticism tends to stay confined to an analysis of the three primary narrative positions: that of first person, third person, and third person omniscient (55). For Forster the rules of narrative viewpoint do not function as hard and fast; if the reader accepts what she is given the text has succeeded, no matter what form the narration takes. He praises a shifting narrative perspective because “it has a parallel in our perception of life. We are stupider at some times than others; we can enter into people’s minds occasionally but not always, because our own minds get tired; and this intermittence lends in the long run variety and colour to the experiences we receive” (*Aspects* 56). The reader is drawn into what is happening due to the subtle shifting of the narrator’s position. It is the influence of a shifting, realistic narration that triggers the reader’s “creative state of mind” because it sets to rest the need for intellectualisation of the text (“Raison D’Être” 111). So long as the novel is believable and interesting, readers will stick around and introduce their interpretations, emotions, and thoughts into the text; the sum of the novel’s parts may not equal its value as a whole, but without excellent technique, the whole crumbles into nothing. Technique, therefore, serves two very important purposes: the first is “bouncing” the reader along, while the second is creating the sense of a realistic and causal world that reflects and extends into reality. When these two goals are achieved the door preventing “prophecy” from reaching the reader can be opened. By using the aspects of fiction Forster analyses how “internal harmony” can be developed

and used to comment on the reality it feigns resemblance to. Reading these aspects consciously, however, is a far more complex issue because the reader is not expected or desired to acknowledge the creation of “internal harmony”. It is, in a sense, through the ability to carry the reader’s consciousness along, disguising the involvement of the author throughout the novel that allows prophecy to develop. Prophecy depends on atmosphere, on the experience of reading the facets of the novel together without recognition that they are purely fictional, but in its ability to extend beyond the text, prophecy comments back onto the text by inviting questions about the feigned realism and its commentary.

### **PROPHECY AND “THE CREATIVE STATE OF MIND”**

In a letter dated 1914, Forster suggests: “creative acts, such as producing books or children, have inexplicable value” (*Letters 1879-1920* 209). He never produced any children, but Forster repeatedly appealed to the potential for fiction to deepen human understanding and transcend social conventions, politics, and religions. The value Forster perceives in literature is not restricted to high art; he appears to find value in all works, but there is an advanced form of creative power to be found in novels that produce a somewhat definable “prophecy” out of their internal harmony. An elusive concept at best, Forster describes prophecy as

an accent in the novelist’s voice . . . His theme is the universe or something universal, but he is not necessarily going to ‘say’ anything about the universe; he proposes to sing, and the strangeness of song arising in the halls of fiction is bound to give us a shock. (*Aspects* 86)



Forster uses several texts to try and define prophecy. The most successful is Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* from which he quotes an entire scene in which "Mitya is – all of us . . . The extension, the melting, the unity through love and pity occur in a region which can only be implied" (71). Forster goes on to state that in the prophetic novel "characters ask us to share something deeper than their experiences. They convey to us a sensation that is partly physical" (93). Prophecy is, therefore, based in sensation and not rational thought; it is an affect of fiction that is conveyed to the reader through atmosphere, suggestion, implication, and the act of reading.

From Forster's examination of prophecy we can glean the following: 1) prophecy is an extension of meaning that goes beyond literal references and remains unfixed; 2) it is universal and concerned with unity because the reader shares something with the characters, text, author, and other readers; 3) it is a form of communication, in a sense, between the text and the reader, fiction and reality. Forster's insistence on the "universal" aspect of prophecy in which "the characters and situations always stand for more than themselves . . . infinity attends them" is reminiscent of Romantic conceptions of the sublime in its insistence on a transcendent and unlimited force or object within a text (86, 91). Indeed, Forster's examination of technique summons Longinian theory with its emphasis on the rhetorical devices through which the sublime can be achieved. Also, Forster's idea that a work of art has "the power of transforming the person who encounters it towards the condition of the person who created it" harkens to Kantian sublimity in which "the mind" confronted "recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object" ("Raison D'Être" 113, Weiskel 24). Both concepts, Forster's and Kant's, consider encountering art as an act of

transformation in the mind of the observer, both demand a cognitive shift in the observer to achieve a new state of awareness, but they are not entirely the same. The central difference between prophecy and these ideas of the sublime is the quality of the experience itself.

Prophecy, unlike the sublime, is not necessarily an overwhelming or awesome experience; it is subtler due to its existence in suggestions and implications that colour the text as a whole. The cognitive repositioning of prophecy functions similarly to that of the sublime, but it does not shock or overwhelm the reader. The result of prophecy is an effect in the reader that is more in tune with the world around her and her experiences thereof; an effect that suggests delicately without overthrowing completely the reader's mental equilibrium. Prophecy does not "conceal anything (mysticism), [and] does not mean anything (symbolism)," its existence merely suggests a connection or expansion that may not have been apparent before (92). It also, like the sublime in some sense, calls attention to itself after the act of reading has been completed and makes apparent the reader's "fresh relationship between [themselves] and the object" (24). According to Forster, alluding to the potential relationship between fiction and music, "When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom . . . when we have finished does not every item . . . lead a larger existence than was possible at the time" (*Aspects* 116). Because of this echo-like expansion of prophecy, it is best summoned up after reading, in reflecting on the text and the experience of reading it. Prophecy, therefore, requires or forces distancing between reader and the act of reading, which in turn offers a consideration of how prophecy was sensed or experienced. Through this a

retrospective critical engagement occurs in which the reader considers the text as a whole, from a removed standpoint, without necessary reference to its content or political commentary, to consider its continuing echoes and her *experience* of reading.

Quite usefully, Forster notes that the effect of prophecy is not restricted to fiction; indeed, he relies heavily on music to explain and situate his concept of prophecy. Music is, in Forster's estimation, the best representation of how a sentiment or sensation can be conveyed without literal description or information. Forster frequently associates prophecy with music and believes, according to Rukun Advani, that "like the individual, art is inextricably tied to time, matter and society, but—reaching its high point in music—art assumes an atemporal, circumscribed individuality" (144). Forster makes use of musical terminology to describe prophecy; he figures it as a "song" and its absence as "silence," reiterating, time and again, that a novel must be *heard* uncritically and without symbolic associations to be "prophetic" (*Aspects* 86, 97). According to Forster, music is the ultimate medium for expressing prophecy because of its ability to be "untrammelled and untainted by reference"; thus music is able to "get nearer the centre of reality" ("Not Listening" 124). The novel, however, cannot achieve these great heights without becoming entirely abstract or no longer a novel; therefore, fiction should aspire to the effect of music, but must remain both within time, and related to human experience and the external world. The prophetic artist "when the process is over, when the symphony or lyric or novel (or whatever it is) is complete, the artist, looking back on it, will wonder how on earth he did it ("Raison D'Être" 111).

Prophecy is, taking all of these disparate comments together, an effect caused by the act of reading—or writing—a text that, though linked to content and form, expresses

something not absolutely tied to the text itself. It is, in a sense, a mode of communication between author and reader—or between text and reader—that does not convey a stable or definable message. What Forster’s myriad definitions share is an emphasis on the uncertain or indefinable nature of prophecy, but he couples this with an acknowledgment that “it is the implication that signifies and will filter into the turns of the novelist’s phrase” (86). There is, therefore, some evidence for prophecy’s existence and content when a text is read with an eye—or ear—to the broader implications of what is written. Forster himself comments on the content of prophecy in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the former seeming to expand into a suggestion of the universal struggle for “pity and love” and the latter into a contest between good and evil (*Aspects* 92, 97). The qualification of prophecy as “unspoken,” therefore, seems to relate to the effect rather than to the content. While reading and immediately after reading the experience remains solely an inexpressible effect, but with analysis of both the quality of the experience and how it colours the reader’s critical response its content can be revealed.

In considering a text with reference to prophecy it is crucial to not only consider the “minutiae of style” that suggest and signal to the prophecy, but also the very personal, emotional, and indefinable experience of reading. By examining this a critical analysis can be developed that not only considers the political, cultural, social, and technical aspects of a novel in isolation, but also how a reading of that specific novel influences its reception in broader and more cohesive terms. Though prophecy is based on an individual experience of a text, Forster insists that it can be felt by all readers and constitutes a “universal” commentary. Prophecy prefaces an examination of how a text

confronts, engages, and responds to its readers and how the readers, in response to these effects, construct a style or form of reading. It is a mode of engagement that offers the opportunity to consider and reflect upon the act of reading and textual communication, proposing a greater critical awareness of how different issues and concerns addressed in a given novel fit together and influence the reader.

One important clue to untangling the concept of “prophecy” that Forster provides is “rhythm,” one of the subjects of the final chapter of *Aspects*. “Rhythm” can be defined against “pattern”; “pattern” is a fixed and repeated structure and, because it is fixed, “[t]o most readers of fiction the sensation from a pattern is not intense enough to justify the sacrifices that made it” (112). “Rhythm,” by comparison, has no set structure, it is a repeated image, suggestion, or atmosphere that tries “not to be there all the time like a pattern, but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope” (115). “Rhythm” “lessens our need of an external form” and can be simply defined as “repetition plus variation” (115). The power and beauty of rhythm are Forster’s ultimate goal (115). According to Forster:

Music, though it does not employ human beings . . . does offer in its final expression a type of beauty which fiction might achieve in its own way. Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the *rhythm* of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot the novel be like that? (116, Emphasis added)

Thus Forster proposes how a novel can break out of its chains—its reputation as a “low, atavistic form” with fixed symbolisms, patterns, and commitments—to represent more than simply a story or a collection of characters subjected to a plot. After reading a novel these rhythms appear in the reader’s mind; they are recalled not through specific words or images, but are re-experienced, and it is these that the reader takes away and considers. It is also through these that critical distance and communication can be achieved. In the construction of prophecy, Forster relies heavily on the potential effect of fiction to expand a reader’s mind and suggest movements, commentaries, or ideas that might otherwise seem extraneous to the novel. In a reading conscious of the potential for prophecy, therefore, the reader’s sensation of the text as a whole is of greater import than specific suggestions or symbols within the text. Prophecy is, in a sense, an ethical disentangling of the evident and—probably—intended commentaries of the novelist and the reader’s individual sensation of the result or suggestions of a text. The text’s politics may, for example, be quite evident in a purely rational reading, but the effect of the text as a whole may signal away from these politics to unexplored or external concerns, giving the text a less stilted or deterministic existence.

### **“A WRITER AND HIS WORLD”: AN AUTHOR’S PERSPECTIVE**

In 1960 Isherwood gave a set of lectures entitled “A Writer and His World” that outline Isherwood’s beliefs about his own role as author and the various stimuli behind his writing. From the outset of “A Writer and his World” it is clear these lectures deal more directly with Isherwood himself than *Aspects* does with Forster or any individual author addressed therein. The consideration of Isherwood’s identity in relation to his

writing is somewhat enforced by the title of the lectures (given to him by the university); however, Isherwood, unlike his mentor, values authorial experiences above other aspects of fiction in other writings and in interviews (*Isherwood 37, Interviews 28-9*). Isherwood, for example, positions himself as a genetic and social outsider, whose “life as a writer has been mainly occupied in writing about people who don’t fit into the social pattern, and these people of course are very varied” (*Isherwood 48*). He goes so far as to claim feelings of “a great bond with some kind of anti-heroic hero, somebody who laughed at the heroic side and yet who was, fundamentally, a person to whom one could look up as a hero” (48). He takes this characterisation of himself quite seriously and believes it to be a central aspect of his writing, as it would be for any writer. He pursues this autobiographical tone, but to the end of—in the following lecture—considering how an author from the “Outside” can possibly influence the “Inside” and use his position as an “Outsider” to constructive ends (52).

It may seem a little optimistic and idealistic, but for Isherwood the author has an immediate and proximal role to play in creating the effect his fiction will have on the reader. According to Isherwood: “autobiography is the characteristic art form of our time [the 1960s]” and “art really begins with the question of my own experience . . . . I write in order to find out what my life means and who I am, to find out if there’s meaning in the external world, and then, I suppose, if I decide that there isn’t, to impose a meaning of my own” (54). This sort of personal influence in fiction is entirely absent from Forster’s aesthetics; he does not even address the role of the author beyond his removal from chronological history and his ability to suppress his conscious mind to achieve prophecy. Isherwood, on the other hand, freely uses an eponymous narrator in many of his novels

and adapts his real experiences to fictional works without much concern. Establishing how Forster would construe this act is difficult; he frequently lauded Isherwood's novels, but how could his focus on universality be attuned to such an emphasis on authorial intent?

As we shall see in Chapter 4, however, it is possible to achieve prophecy in a highly personal text, most frequently through an examination of the author's or narrator's position and identity in relation to the text. If this sort of novel never considers the author or narrator's position, the proximity of the author to the proposed mimesis continuously reminds the reader of the specific particulars of his involvement. The experiences themselves, however, are of incredible value and Forster appears, through his emphasis on the need for excellent and convincing mimesis, to merely advocate a more clearly fictional approach to relating them. The two authors are clearly somewhat at odds. The potential for prophecy may be stifled by Isherwood's use of fiction as a personal playground in which to document his own feelings and enlightening experiences, but it may also constitute another aspect of prophecy unexplored by Forster. Aside from Isherwood's emphasis on autobiographical fiction, however, he reintroduces, in a new guise, the concept of prophecy. He, unsurprisingly, considers it from the position of an author, rather than as a reader or critic as Forster does, and contributes greatly to an understanding of how it can be conceived of when writing.

In the third lecture, "What Is the Nerve of Interest in the Novel?" Isherwood attempts to explain "what actually makes a novel vital, alive, good—great" (64). The central tenets of Isherwood's concept of the "vital" novel are that there is "a kind of mad vitality which exists in the universe" and that a "great novelist" will recognise and



convey this, while remaining involved in “human suffering and struggle” (65-6). A “great novelist . . . has to have a moral code” because he “is not only down there, covered with mud and blood, fighting and suffering with his characters, but he is also up above. He is also the eternal, who looks down upon everything and enjoys it” (66). Without the “moral code” his engagement in the struggle of the lower, human realm would be pure sadism and his writing revelry in the suffering common to mankind.

The issue of a double authorial consciousness returns us to Forster’s conception of prophecy and his aesthetics in general. If the principle of prophecy is grounded in a text that is successfully mimetic and probably moral in some sense or other—recall Forster’s analysis of *The Brothers Karamazov* and its emphasis on the need for universal “love and pity”—then prophecy is the part of the reader’s consciousness that moves upwards, as the author does in Isherwood’s construction, and takes stock of the entirety of the fictional realm, even that which is not written, and the surrounding reality (*Aspects* 92). For the reader or critic this rising up is crucial as it allows for a reading of the whole text and possible external ramifications. Isherwood’s characterisation of the upper consciousness as eternal should not necessarily be taken as a spiritual portrayal. Despite Isherwood’s beliefs in Hindu spirituality and use of the Hindu concept of joy to base his own use of the term, the “eternal” perspective comes from “a joy that accepts the whole of human experience, artistically speaking, and says about it that it is ultimately wonderful” (*Isherwood* 73). The author and reader are not being asked to adopt a spiritual or godly perspective, but rather to remove, to a certain extent, his or her own prejudices and preferences to be able to find joy in *everything*.

This joy should then be available to the reader. It is communicated, not through the author's responsibility to "delineate the characters vividly, describe the scene, make it all come to life," but rather through several distinct and somewhat poorly explained types of writing (74). Isherwood, like Forster, has some difficulty in describing how "vitality" in fiction can be achieved. He attempts to figure it out through following the "*via negativa*," but only gets seriously close to it in describing Tolstoy and Lawrence. First, in Tolstoy, Isherwood feels that there

is the sense that all Tolstoy's creatures, that all these people, live and exist vividly in Tolstoy . . . and Tolstoy pauses very often and talks to them for us just for a moment and indeed we always see something unique, something wonderful about these people, which nevertheless is all part of his expression of the genuine situation. (78)

In considering Lawrence, Isherwood suggests that he "seems absolutely himself looking at people, and he's so full of his attitude and himself that he can look at a landscape, or anything, and charge it with this personal subjective significance" and still have the "other self that looks down in compassion" (80). Evidently this "other self" can be naturally within an individual, perhaps within all individuals, and its role is to look not only at the issues of immediate import or the present setting, but also everything else around them and to consider the whole with "compassion" and "joy". The part of the author that perceives from a distance with pity and joy for all mankind, though his focus is merely on a small section of the whole, is, in a sense, removed from the function of everyday life. This is why Isherwood emphasises his own position as outsider and considers the importance of being "outside" for authors; however, it also raises the

question of whether Isherwood's writing and critical thinking acknowledge the concept of outside and inside, other and self. With the raising up of the authorial perspective, divisions cease to have sway and the *entirety* of human life must be treated with joy; is the position of outsider, therefore, merely a preparatory situating that allows for this move or does it complicate Isherwood's idea of vitality? Indeed the expansion of the specific to the general in authorial perception and understanding appears to sit at the core of Isherwood's theories and fiction, but is confused by his reliance on ideas of "Inside" and "Outside." In a sense he is reconsidering Forster's interest in writing for the universal audience and to universal subjects in a more controlled and immediate situation that specifically demands elevation or distancing in the author.

Is Isherwood's concept, therefore, a reiteration of prophecy? Yes and no; the universal characteristic is certainly an important shared characteristic and both authors emphasise the importance of fiction as a tool and as having an inexplicable, but evident effect on the reader. Forster's concept of prophecy, however, situates this effect within the text, put there unconsciously by the author, while existing simultaneously outside the text. Isherwood is more concerned with the author's perspective than that of the receiver and he constructs a definitive idea of what that perspective communicates to the reader. The basics of the two concepts are quite similar, but Isherwood is more interested in outlining how he and other authors achieve greatness—or attempt to do so. His definition of "vital" fiction is more applicable and less abstract than Forster's; with the example of Tolstoy, for example, the concept of a double consciousness and the signs of its existence are laid bare and made usable for a critic.

The differences, however, are not a difficulty, but the result of Forster's and Isherwood's different aims and assigned roles. Forster lectured on issues of interpretation and the construction of recognisable techniques and forms and their implications for the reader, while Isherwood was asked specifically to discuss how he writes and how he perceives his own fiction. Their lectures were destined to be different. Isherwood was also, generally speaking, far more interested in autobiography and experienced great success with his autobiographical works. Unlike Forster, he does not shy away from examining his position as an outsider through fiction and, thus, does not feel the need to disguise reality with mimesis. Providing a less abstract explanation for what makes fiction "great" also makes it more likely that others might adopt or consider Isherwood's theories in future readings, particularly readings of his works. It offers the same critical distancing apparent in prophecy, but with the recognition that authors attempt to guide their readers and that this guidance may not be avoided or ignored. A note of caution is implicit in Isherwood's theory because they are so deeply concerned with the author's position, but it is possible to adopt and make use of these theories without reference to authorial intent. The same encompassing critical perspective as that developed by prophecy can be gained, but with the acknowledgement that there may be an implied use or direction within the text that should be considered.

This leads to the difficult question of what value there is in establishing the presence or nature of prophecy or "vitality" in a text. Isherwood attempts to make it more easily recognisable and cites the double consciousness as the preserve of "great" fiction, but how valid or useful is this sort of value judgment of an entire text based on a fairly abstract premise? For Forster and Isherwood personally the value of the proposed

effects—prophecy and vitality—is clear, they are after all writers themselves and lovers of literature, but how do their aesthetic viewpoints fit into a more modern mode of analysing fiction? Do they productively challenge current theories of literary ethics in their rejection of purely or pointedly utilitarian readings? The central difficulty to addressing these issues is that there are, in fact, two types of utility at stake. Prophecy and greatness do not discount a utilitarian role for a text, but they suggest it is secondary to the higher and more important potential for an uncontrolled and unbiased communication between text and reader. In a sense, prophecy and vitality ask that all utilitarian aspects of a text—its politics, symbolism, mysticism, etc.—be considered in reference to how their implications and suggestions work as a whole on the consciousness of the reader and transcend any purely useful role. What Forster and Isherwood are attempting to understand and convey to their audiences is the sense that literature is not only the sum of its parts; that it is not only fun to read, informative, or persuasive, but also sublime and transcendent as other forms of art are often perceived to be. Two uses are possible in fiction, one sublime and one more earth-bound, but how is the sublime or transcendent aspect of fiction to be measured, absolutely comprehended, or formalised? And, to what end?

### **CHAPTER 3           ATTRIDGE AND LEVINAS: PERSPECTIVES ON PROPHECY**

To this point our focus has been on E. M. Forster's concept of prophecy and its relationship to Isherwood's idea of vitality. This chapter picks up where the last chapter left off—in the midst of considering what value there is to analysing the prophecy or vitality of fiction. Isherwood's critical examination of fiction—and particularly of *how* fiction is written—reveals a progression from the deeply abstract concept of prophecy towards a more discernible yet still abstract literary effect. It does not, however, bring us any closer to understanding why the ineffable or transcendent qualities of fiction have critical value. Indeed, it is quite difficult to establish absolutely what value prophecy has for critical discourse as it is impossible to concretely describe this literary effect. By examining the causes and functions of prophecy it is possible to construct a framework through which its potential uses can be explored. How does prophecy function in a reader's mind? And how does this improve or challenge a reader's perspective?

By addressing theories on these two issues it becomes increasingly clear that prophecy stimulates engagement or an encounter with the text by a reader. This engagement is productive in the sense that it develops a new set of focuses or emphases that may not be apparent in a solely rational or planned reading. Relying on and examining a sensation or felt response may be difficult, but these effects are as much a part of the text as apparent political or social commentaries or the novel's plot, story, and people. Effects such as prophecy are the stimulating undercurrents that draw readers into a text's more expansive issues again and again, forever creating new territory for critical exploration. Prophecy's repositioning of the reader in relation to the text and expansion

beyond specific political, cultural, or ethical implications create an emphasis on examining the broader and shifting ramifications of a text.

To examine this and other issues related to the critical adoption of prophecy as a tool it is necessary to consider the input of other, more current theorists working in the field of literary ethics. Martha Nussbaum and Elaine Scarry have made significant contributions to this field, but Derek Attridge's concept of literary singularity most closely resembles and expands Forster's and Isherwood's aesthetics. It is, therefore, the central theoretical framework used in this chapter. Coupled with Attridge's theories, this chapter explores Emmanuel Levinas's theories of a transcendent other to enlarge the field of inquiry into a consideration of prophecy as a mode of encounter or communication and the ethical implications thereof. By examining both of these theories, this chapter argues that prophecy has value as a tool for critical response no matter how abstract the results may appear. What the previous chapter's analysis of prophecy and vitality proposes is, in more definable terms, an expansion of fiction beyond the confines of mimesis or entertainment into a form of communication that provides greater insight for critical or reader response. The idea of prophecy as a mode of (potentially subconscious) communication between author and reader creates a fascinating ethical relationship between reader and text. The author, by dropping "a bucket into his subconscious" and infusing his novel with this subconscious experience or information that "is normally beyond his reach," is, unknowingly, creating a nebula of uncertainty and sensation in the text and thereby inviting the reader to share, question, and, ultimately, communicate something back to the text ("Not Listening" 111).

Prophecy is Forster's attempt to explain the same affect that Derek Attridge terms the "literary" nature of some works. This "literary" quality can be explained as the inexplicable effect that novels, music, poetry, and art in general have on their audience (Attridge 4-5). This concept will be developed in depth below, but for our current purposes it is crucial to consider that Attridge may be responding to the same imperative as Forster: an impetus to understand and explain the effect of literature or art on its audience. What Attridge, Isherwood, and Forster are attempting to define, therefore, is the widely, if not universally, experienced "creative state of mind" caused by fiction and other forms of art ("Raison D'Être" 111). Though this effect is recognisable and it would be outrageous to discount its existence absolutely, it is not widely recognised as useful for critical discourse. Ironically, however, the concepts of prophecy, vitality, and Attridge's concept of the "literary" all raise issues of interpretative stability in forms of critical response that deny their relevance. Not acknowledging all of the various ways a reader responds to a novel, however abstract they may seem, may lead to unfounded or unsupportable interpretations. For example, if *A Passage to India* is interpreted as having a strong colonialist perspective while simultaneously affecting readers with its anti-colonial atmosphere, how is the former reading fully justified? Interpreting and analysing prophecy, vitality, or the "literary" is not an impossible or pointless activity, but neither is it straightforward.

As Forster suggests that writing prophetic fictions has "inexplicable value" and Isherwood equates vitality with "greatness" several ethical questions arise surrounding what this value might be. Also, as Forster insists that the prophetic theme is "the universe, or something universal," are all readers expected to understand or acknowledge



the same prophecy? (*Aspects* 86) If a reader fails to recognise a text's prophecy is this a failed reading or has the text failed? Does prophecy or vitality necessarily qualify a novel as superior to another in which there is no apparent communication or prophecy? Of what value is prophecy at all? Does prophecy distract from the conscious inferences, opinions, and beliefs the author attempts to convey? Does prophecy prevent the reader from locating and addressing issues worthy of consideration in the text? Or does it more accurately suggest what these issues are and how they are dealt with? And finally, is the unguided or unorganised engagement of reader and text at all ethical? For our purposes these questions will be dealt with as three distinct issues: the issue of readership and particularly universal (or non-universal) readings, the value of prophecy as a critical tool, and the ethics of communication through fiction.

### **PROPHECY IN ALL ITS GUISES**

In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge introduces the term "literary" to describe texts that are unique, inventive, original, and affective. His ideas are closely akin to Forster's, but with extended parameters and a more critical gaze over the "literary" product. The central tenet of Attridge's theory is that fiction, "literary" fiction specifically, presses against cultural conventions to develop, in a variety of senses, an inventive or original text experience or act (25). All literary texts begin in the experience of an individual's particular culture, or—as Attridge specifies—within the bounds of an "idioculture" constructed upon a broader social culture. They are written with these "familiar materials" in mind, but the author must "press at their limits and extend their capacities, and that in so doing . . . a work of startling newness [emerges]" (20). Literary

texts, therefore, are not only unique—in that they are not plagiarised and do not contain identical concerns to another preceding text—but are also in some sense new for the author and for each individual reader. This Attridge terms “singularity” and it “consists in its [the cultural object’s] difference from all other such objects, not simply as a particular manifestation of general rules but as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations” (63).

As in Forster’s conception of “prophecy,” the “literary” text has both its existence within the rules or forms of culture and genre *and* an existence beyond this that communicates something to the reader. The literary text is, therefore, a bastion of otherness, but this “otherness’ . . . is neither a mystical ideality nor an inviolable materiality” (76). Attridge moves away from the classification of “the other” as a human individual and constitutes a literary otherness that is, finally, termed the “literary”. Through its inventiveness a text becomes situated as other; it presses against the conventions in which it was written (both formally and socially). The reader, through her individual reading, can experience this otherness and, by experiencing it, adapt her “idioculture” or idea of self to include the inventive or “other” aspect of the text (19-22). The mode of reading, therefore, is important. Reading occurs on two levels; one concerned solely with the form and information of the text and another that occurs as a function of surprise or realisation without immediate conscious recognition that something new or “literary” has been encountered (80-1). There is, therefore, a standard reading and a creative reading that, when combined, constitute “an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity” of the text (80). What is communicated to the reader in a creative reading is not only the sense of the other, though this is crucial, but also the

sensation of personal expansion and re-formation caused by the engagement. This reconstitution of the reader's self may occur consciously and rationally, but it may also be formed in abstract or felt experience. A literary text does not cease to surprise once it has been read, but through its richness continues to exhibit pressures that were previously unnoticed or non-existent. The text itself does not change over time or with reading; rather, the mindset from which it is read alters with each new reader and each shift in the reader's "idioculture."

Attridge, unlike Forster and Isherwood, approaches his concept from all angles—providing explanations of the function of the literary for readers, critics, and writers. From each perspective he charts the relationship between individual and literary work with an eye to how the otherness of the text comes into being, is perceived, and is accounted for in a critical reading. A writer who discovers in his or her own work a sentence that is "just right" is passive to the act of writing a literary text. This passivity is constituted as openness to the other in which the author allows alterity to influence his work rather than containing his writing to maintain control (23). From this perspective the author may not even be conscious of writing a literary text and, as in Forster's aesthetics, a level of openness—though not necessarily to the "subconscious"—is necessary. Similarly, the reader exhibits a level of passivity in order to be open to the experience of the other in a text, as does the critic who will in turn exhibit the author's passivity or openness in composing his response.

Forster may not employ the concept of "the other" in his work, but the idea of an intruding force, or a force outside the conscious self of the reader (and author) is clearly present in his essay "The Raison D'Être of Criticism". Attridge's use of the concept of

“the other,” however, engages the discussion with a prominent and wide-ranging theoretical discussion. This may appear to be a semiotic change instigated by the sixty odd years dividing Forster’s work and Attridge’s, but the implications of interpreting prophecy as an encounter with an other are fascinating. For example, Attridge argues: “all reading is an event as much as it is an act... but the event of creative reading is marked by the experience of alterity that, as we have found, is extremely difficult to articulate” (81). Forster provides for “creative reading” as: “a change analogous to creation. We are rapt into a region near to that where the artist worked, and, like him, when we return to earth we feel surprised,” suggesting the same reconstituting response as Attridge (“Raison D’Être” 113-4). The reader and critic may “remain pottering about with theories and influences and psychological and historical considerations,” but these are useless in the face of the prophetic “song”—a concept far removed from the standard technical definition of fiction (114). Prophecy is, apparently, an other for Forster as it is alien to the concepts that objectively constitute novels and external human experience. Prophecy and the literary thereby introduce the unknown or the uncertain into critical interpretation and instigate a necessary relationship between reader and text based on the desire to know or comprehend.

The critic has a somewhat privileged position in the study of literature; not only is he or she gifted with a variety of tools through which to read a text, but he or she is also asked repeatedly to construct an opinion on a text. The act of responding, be it private or public, is a form of creative work in itself in which a reader considers a text not only through her personal or emotional response, but also through more calculable social, historical, biographical, etc., constructs. Attridge acknowledges a paradox in the mode of

academic literary study in which responses are expected to conform to a pre-existing theoretical or cultural field of study *and* be original. Interestingly, however, he finds that the only way in which to “affirm and sustain the singularity of [a] work is by a singular response, since my response grows out of the particular act of reading” (91). This form of reader response “takes account of all the programmable procedures that the institution of literature requires in a full account of its formal arrangements . . . but will also be an unpredictable, singular affirmation of the singular event of the work’s otherness as it impinges on me” (91). In a sense, criticism relies first and foremost on prophecy or “the literary” to establish a relationship between critic and text that will stimulate the creation of a new work; however, all too often no emphasis is placed on the critic’s experience or it is discounted as subjective and irrelevant.

Attridge’s concept of the literary is not precisely like prophecy or Isherwood’s idea of vitality, but this is mostly because, in the intervening years, critical language has expanded to include more specific and loaded terms. The concept of the text as “other,” for example, would not be accurately comprehended when *Aspects* or “A Writer and His World” were written. Because of this the concept of a text as other is not fully realised, but is latently suggested. In *Aspects*, Forster implies in several ways that novels exist in their own realm, one relevant to or reflective of the *real* world, but in a separate and distinct fictional universe. Reference is not made to the reader’s role in this, but the concept is quite similar to Attridge’s: readers experience a particular sensation in reading literary or prophetic novels and this experience is due to, but is not contained, by the text (*Aspects* 86). It is, for Forster, the “strangeness of song arising in the halls of fiction” that sets a prophetic novel apart (86); in its “strangeness” it presses against our concept of

fiction, of how our world is or should be portrayed, and in so doing expands itself and the reader. Isherwood's concept of fiction emphasises the position of the outsider as crucial; he does not employ the concept of the other, but his idea is focused on the author as outsider who, though familiar with the society under question, is removed from his subject in such a way that he looks on, as it were, as an alien (*Isherwood* 54). The literary, prophecy, and vitality are not identical, but they are all attempts to explain the same effect and consider its potential uses and value. Whole miles of theoretical advance intervene between Isherwood and Attridge, even more space is apparent between Forster and Attridge, but it would appear that the stimulus they respond to is the same.

Attridge's work, with some few differences and a broader focus, is another attempt at explaining prophecy or the ineffable effect of literature. As Forster by no means originated the concept of prophecy, Attridge too is picking up a long-standing bone of contention and shifting the dialogue into the realm of contemporary literary studies. There are numerous names and forms used by authors, readers, and critics to refer to and explain the concept at the core of this thesis. Prophecy, the literary, the ineffable, vitality, beauty, and the sublime all are used for explaining the same or very similar effects. The concerns expressed by Forster and Isherwood are, apparently, not yet dead, but they do require certain refashioning and reconsideration to ascertain how their theories might be applicable and whether they represent ethical modes of analysis. It is also timely to question whether recognition of these concepts has been, for the most part, lacking in critical discourse considering how important they are to the reading of texts by or directly influenced by Forster's work. Therefore, we must question how these ideas

may be applied or considered in critical readings and, to this end, a new term should be set in place to clarify the discussion.

As, to this point, prophecy has no doubt been the most used term in this text it has come to be associated with specific theories and ideas. From this point, however, it is crucial to be clear about which concept in particular is under scrutiny; it seems necessary to propose an extra term that will refer to the effect under question in a general sense, without reference to the specific qualities attached to it by any individual author. This will allow for a discussion of the affect of fiction and art in general, thereby freeing the terms “prophecy,” “literary,” and “vitality” to be used as referents to a specific explanation or idea of the effect. For this purpose I have chosen the word “encounter” for a variety of reasons. For one thing, “encounter” proposes the meeting of two people (author and reader, for example) but does not presuppose a verbal or even cognitive recognition of said meeting in either of the two parties. Another reason is that “encounter” can also be thought of as a meeting between a reader and the text, both consciously and unconsciously, in which both parties are given a level of autonomy and agency in the meeting and any distinction between encountering and encountered is moot. “Encounter” is also not associated with mysticism (as “prophecy” in some senses is) or with a value judgment (as “vitality” or “greatness” are) or, in fact, with the quality of the specific text (as “literary” suggests). “Encounter,” therefore, will be used as a term for the experience of reading a text and finding or “encountering” something beyond the content of the text itself that enlarges the reader’s mental state as well as the issues considered in the text without reference to any specific theory discussed thus far.

## THE UNIVERSAL READER

One of the central concerns with Forster's concept of prophecy is its "universal" nature. He specifically outlines that the prophetic author is "not going to 'say' anything about the universe" but that prophecy is "about the universe or universal" (*Aspects* 86). The implication is, clearly, that not only should all readers comprehend or experience prophecy, but that the content, if there is one, concerns all people everywhere and not solely the realm examined in the text. Implicitly, therefore, Forster is arguing for novels written in any language, by an author in any nation, as tools for communication with any reader so long as the text can be read and understood, even in translation. Attridge, similarly, acknowledges that a text may be literary even in translation, but proposes that the translation actually plays a role in its literariness and alters the original text due to its treatment by another author. The broader difficulty with this concept of universality is that Forster only proposes his theory from the perspective of the Western tradition because his discussion is limited to a single form. How might a reader entirely unfamiliar with the novel form have access to prophecy?

The central reason that this issue might not occur to Forster is that, primarily, he is lecturing on a single form as outlined by the lectureship he holds. There is a sense in which Forster appears to perceive prophecy as an experience of involvement for any reader, presupposing a basic understanding of the novel form. While examining *The Brothers Karamazov* he pointedly states: "Mitya is—all of us" (92). There is not only an expansion of the text's ability to comment or hypothesize, but also an inclusion of the reader in the experience itself and the opportunity to understand her role within the expression of the text. It is, therefore, necessary to consider how Forster uses the term



“universal” in relation to readership. He obviously does not intend “universal” to mean that there is a single universally held prophecy, but he instructs, rather, in the mode of reading necessary to achieve prophecy: one with “humility and the suspension of the sense of humour” (*Aspects* 87). The cultural and formal limits of prophecy are not intended to prevent or restrict the experience, but rather to suggest the potential for fiction to speak to a broader subject if the reader is prepared for the “song” of the prophet. This is, evidently, somewhat restrictive in its focus on a single form and a specific tradition, but the extension of prophecy into other forms of fiction—oral traditions and myths for example—would be complicated and not necessarily fruitful. Prophecy relies on an atmosphere developed through “rhythms” in a novel and because Forster is conscientiously focussed on this single form it would be dangerous to transpose it onto another.

It is, however, crucial to acknowledge that, though Forster is focussed on the novel, prophecy stems from an aesthetic tradition concerned not with the novel, but with art in general. The emphasis on the novel, therefore, does limit the potential for a “universal” readership, but is the result of Forster’s interest in the use of prophecy to argue for a more elevated estimation of the novel as art. He also proposes similar transcendent encounters with other art forms, music in particular as noted in the previous chapter. In the case of fiction specifically, prophecy is based in the universality of an emotion or experience such as Mitya’s dream sequence demanding “pity” for everyone or the irradiating of beauty he perceives in Lawrence’s writing (92, 99). Though this is his personal experience of these two authors, he does not seem to limit the potential for prophecy to solely this quality of experience or the novel form. Similarly, Attridge uses

poetry to explain his idea of the “literary,” but makes no distinction between the effect of fiction, poetry, criticism, and any other form of writing. Forster and Isherwood propose culturally restrictive ideas, but necessarily so as their emphasis is solely on fiction in the novel and short story forms.

It is also crucial to note that Forster, though supposing novels have universally recognisable effects, does not suggest that these effects must be interpreted in a specific mode or to a critical end. In “The Raison D’Être of Criticism” Forster explores an artistic experience to which criticism is wholly incompatible because the work under scrutiny “expects to be heard or read or seen for the first time, always to cause surprise. It does not expect to be studied” (114). He disdains most formal criticism, which relies on collectively held standards and structures, because it fails to encapsulate how a work affects a reader suddenly or unexpectedly. Attridge proposes that expansion in a text is due to the potential for a text to extend an individual’s perception of the world, to exert pressure on “idiocultures,” that *may* be widely acknowledged, but are by no means dependant on wider response (Attridge 91). “Universal” should, therefore, be interpreted as a statement of the always possible and unrestrictive potential for encounter and not as a presumption that all readers should have the same experience or analyse their experience with sole reference to collective structures or beliefs. When an experience of encounter becomes more general it becomes more likely that criticism will emphasise the issues perceived in this encounter. Encounter may, but by no means ought, to rely on the comprehension of specific social and cultural conditions or a specific technique employed in the text. It is, in effect, more successful and informative when it causes

surprise in the individual reader and allows her to consider external concerns after the fact.

### **ENCOUNTER AND THE VALUE OF THE TEXT**

The question of literary value will be approached cautiously as it is of great import to understanding many aspects of Forster's and Isherwood's perspectives. For example, there is a significant concern in Forster's work over form that is nearly absent in *Singularity* and "A Writer and His World". This disparity is fascinating as it arises from two distinct attitudes towards literature: Attridge and Isherwood are not concerned with the technical quality of "literature" (its status as literature marks it sufficiently), while Forster more clearly suggests that the formal quality of a text influences its ability to achieve encounter. According to Forster, therefore, a text able to instigate encounter has, generally speaking, greater technical value than other texts. Forster perceives this sensation as evidence that fiction is "Art," Attridge perceives the effect as a mislaid tool for analysis, and Isherwood perceives the effect as how an author achieves "greatness". For Forster, the impetus is elevating fiction to the level of poetry, music, and the other arts by attributing to it characteristics already recognised in other forms. The "creative state of mind" he proposes was, at the time, already used and accepted in the aesthetics of other arts, thanks to the Romantic tradition; therefore, by applying it to fiction Forster is trying to achieve recognition and respect for the form in which he toils. That aim has since fallen somewhat mute. Novels are no longer considered "low" or "atavistic," but the goal of recognising and communicating a force within fiction, whether universal or not, does not seem to have diminished, only to have become sidetracked by other concerns.

The value of prophecy is invariably tied to its ability to comment or expose through expansion and to engage the reader in the issues and concerns subsumed within the text. This value is rooted in Forster's commitment to the "liberal tradition," but is "at war with the liberal imagination" because of its implicit certainty that "good is good and bad is bad," thus denying the potential for "good-and-evil"—the more realistic blending of the two absolutes that constantly questions moral and ethical certainties (Trilling 13-4). Prophecy can force a reader to question the absolutes and propositions she is coerced into accepting by utilitarian and political modes of reasoning or reading ingrained into the liberal mind by a liberal education. Forster was not alone in his distrust of liberal absolutism: Woodrow Wilson described the liberally educated individual as able to "see, he can discriminate, he can combine ideas and perceive whither they lead; he has insight and comprehension," but is frequently trained to use these skills to negative or dangerous ends (*Representative* 472). It is not solely the "liberal imagination" that Forster is at war with; he distrusts any reading that proposes finality or absolutism and constructs prophecy as both a safeguard against these and a way of engaging readers in the search for something more. The concept of prophecy as an effect of expansion, as an encounter with the unknown or unexpected other in the guise of familiarity, allows for discrimination and perception, and yet demands more: the sacrifice of ideals and certainty.

In the reading of *A Passage to India* performed in the next chapter of this thesis, political issues raised by the Anglo-Indian setting are taken into consideration, but the demands of prophecy ask that they be considered within the atmosphere of the novel as a whole. This raises the issue of what, if any, political commitment is demonstrated by the

text. The novel can be read as pointedly anti-British or unethical in its treatment of Indians, but by focusing on its effect as a whole these sorts of divisive categorisations are mediated and questioned. The novel's prophecy can act as a disentangling, in a sense, of the author's or society's views and the text's effect; by remaining unspoken and individual, prophecy bypasses polemics to wait and watch, to reconsider proposed ideals or truths whenever possible. Prophecy does not propose that Anglo-India is discriminatory, the text does that very well on its own, but, rather, it asks the reader to question why or why not this may be true and how or why Anglo-India is judged discriminatory. Encountering the text as a reader is not a straightforward experience, it is a work of great complexity, but through the encounter—whatever its form—greater awareness of this complexity can be achieved. The value of encounter for critical reading is the simultaneous demand for consideration of a text as a whole and its component parts without prioritizing any single commitment or commentary sought out by the reader to achieve a specific criticism.

For Isherwood, the value of vitality is established slightly differently; the author, according to him, imposes meaning and is attempting to work through his own misgivings about a particular issue by writing a novel. By accessing “joy” and achieving vitality, however, the text expands its perspective from the limits of the author's concerns to those of a mass. For Isherwood the value of vitality is calculated against the author's ability to explore and expand his concerns, thereby transforming a personal concern into a universal concern that can be addressed from any and all perspectives. Isherwood's commitment is different from Forster's; his interest lies with how the author expands his mind to cover all aspects of his fictional and real world, whereas Forster believes the

expansion to be innate to the act of writing and not the author. Both concepts include the potential for a “creative state of mind,” but Forster is committed to distancing himself and other authors from the initiation of this state of mind.

According to Attridge “[R]esponding responsibly to a work of art means attempting to do justice to it as a singular other; it involves a judgment that is not simply ethical or aesthetic, and that does not attempt to pigeonhole it or place it on a scale of values, but that operates as an affirmation of the work’s inventiveness” (128). Valuing a text would be, in a sense, demarcating it as less or more “other” or less or more successful for *all* readers; the literary is, patently, an individual experience that can be shared by a community, but need not be. The responsibility, therefore, is not one of attempting absolute adjudication of the text’s politics or techniques, but, rather, of acknowledging the singularity of a text—the critic’s specific encounter—and developing from this encounter a new and potentially individual perspective on the text. This is where the value of encounter resides; it is not within a text and it does not confer value on a text, but rather improves and advances the mode in which readings are performed. Encounter can overhaul a critic’s original perspective and illuminate unthought-of or previously unconsidered issues and concerns. Its reorganization of the critic’s mind is crucial to achieving ethical analysis because it stimulates a more complete and representative perspective.

Criticism reliant on encounter may not find a wider applicability, but it remains an important exposition of how the novel expanded into the critic’s world or perception. Critics have a responsibility to consider all possible implications of a novel before passing any sort of judgment, but all too often personal concerns, interests, and the

imposition of cultural formulas complicate the performance of such an analysis. The ineffable or inexpressible effect of encounter, in all its various forms, begins with the essential experience of reading a specific text. Be it an encounter with the other or the apprehension of the sublime, these experiences are always events external to the mimetic or political confines of the text that can offer insight into what a text attempts to do and what it actually does. To achieve a reading conscious of all this, however, requires more than mere recognition of the potential value of encounter; it demands that readers acknowledge and trust their own responses—no matter whether immediate or delayed—for critical guidance.

### **UTILITY AND THE ENCOUNTER**

Encounter, in its capacity to ensure a continued life for texts after publication, contributes in some sense to the existence and prominence of a text and can enhance certain aspects of textual analyses. In responding to encounter there need only be limited reference to the text itself; the mode of thought or experience is beyond the actual object under scrutiny and, therefore, by acknowledging and analysing both the encounter and responses to encounters it becomes possible to explore the broader implications of a text. In reading *A Single Man*, for example, a reader may be confronted by the protagonist's homosexuality or by the sensation of paranoia caused by references to the Cold War or to the often variable and contradictory moods this man, George, expresses and find her personal idioculture under stress because of these. The reader may also read the scene in which George frolics in the sea at night and “washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes” and recognise that identity as a concept is under scrutiny and subjected to stress by the text (162). Further, she may find “rhythm” in the images of

an earlier less urban time and begin to experience, beyond the text itself, a sensation of expansion into considering ageing and change in more general terms than those attached to George. There may, of course, be countless other similarly sensation based responses to the text. How, therefore, can these instruct or influence criticism?

What these aspects of the novel share is an emphasis on something that is uniquely within and without the text. The text may not contain a direct examination of how George constitutes his own identity in reference to others, but the sensation of this issue is apparent throughout and colours the text-reader encounter. Is there such a thing as an “other” individual if there is no steady sense of self? *A Single Man* certainly seems to propose a hypothesis on this issue, but it is in the sensation given by the text as a whole, its play with the relationship between narrator and protagonist that the hypothesis is expanded and deepened to include all people. These issues, however demanding of attention, are not only suggested by the text’s content, but by the reader’s relationship to the text and to the experience of their reading.

If the text is criticised without recognition of encounter this response may fail to pick up on the subtle interweaving of narrator, protagonist, and his numerous identities to focus instead on objective issues such as homosexuality, urbanization, and paranoia. Describing the encounter of *A Single Man*, or any novel, is nearly impossible, but as a sensation or reorganization of the reader’s ideas of same and other it can be thought of as a productive feeling produced by the text. There is an argument to be made for the analysis of encounter in this and other cases as it raises fascinating questions about how any specific atmosphere is formed and how the reader’s norms are challenged. Experiences caused by reading do not rely on specific cues in isolation; they are



responses to the atmosphere of the text, to its nuances and powers, the relationships between its characters, ideas, settings, and descriptions. The experience of encounter can also stimulate recognition of and consideration of how a text exists within the society and world it reflects. Novels do not exist in a vacuum; the styles, technical aspects, issues and ideas they propose operate in concert with one another just as they do in the real world. The use of criticizing or examining encounter, therefore, lies in the reordering of focus from single issues to broader and more nuanced concerns that function in relation to one another, the plot and atmosphere of the text, and the reader's personal response.

Attridge examines the value of the literary by considering the critical response and how it both constitutes a potential literary work and contributes to the more formalised critical analyses of texts (98-100). Because a formal written or oral response is a creation itself, it can be read as both singular and literary in its own right while it responds to these same characteristics in the original work. The academic acceptability of a formal response, however, is dependent on how the encounter is exposed and treated; when the encounter is only considered in reference to the initial experience and is used solely as a gateway to the ends of measurable criticism there is no problem, but when the encounter is the sole basis for criticism and constitutes a substantial portion of said criticism a problem usually develops. Encounter is widely perceived as being of lesser value, despite being (hopefully) the central reason for the study of literature in general and potentially the central cause of the critic's perspective. Clearly the utility of encounters in all their forms and the acknowledgment that texts create a specific and abstract affect has fallen by the wayside in academic study.

Attridge and Levinas perceive this and mourn the loss, hoping their theories will return the study of literary encounter to standard academic writing. There is a commonly held belief that because of the uncertainty of an “unspoken” and external expansion that cannot always be defined it would be nearly impossible to incorporate prophecy, vitality, or the literary into most academic examinations. Acknowledging the important role played by these sorts of encounters in fashioning Early-Modern, Romantic, and Victorian modes of criticism, however, suggests that encounter has merely been set aside in favour of other tools.

### **ETHICS AND THE ENCOUNTER**

Having already discussed the ethical difficulties involved in Forster’s conception of a potentially universal reader, it is interesting to consider how encounter raises several other ethical questions. Broadly speaking there is, obviously, a difficulty in prophecy that is not present in Attridge’s idea of the literary: how is a reader to understand prophecy without imposing and asserting her own interpretation that may, in fact, be hostile to the text? It is a valid concern, but not one that seems to disturb or worry Forster himself. Isherwood’s aesthetics, probably due to his desire to concretise encounter into a set of guidelines useful in examining authorial positioning and intent, sidestep the issue entirely by letting go of the “unspoken” content of prophecy and focusing solely on the quality of the encounter. Forster’s lack of concern suggests either that—and this would hardly be surprising—the issue of reader imposition does not disturb him as it does most theorists today *or* his theory itself disdains the potential for this. Considering that Forster not once considers that a reader might comprehend or experience prophecy in the ‘wrong way,’ it

is possible that his interest is not at all in the content of prophecy, but rather in the implications of the experience. From Attridge's position, Forster's theory is perfectly serviceable as it acknowledges, in one way or another, the individual nature of readership and the potential for readers to interpret what they will in the text. A difficulty arises, as mentioned above, with Forster's construction of the "universal" nature of prophecy because it seems to imply an identical prophecy (in content and effect) for all readings and, therefore, all readers without reference to their individual "idioculture." Rather than returning to this issue proper it seems timely to question in a more general sense the ethics of the encounter and of potential critical applications.

In the term "encounter," as mentioned above, there is the implication of two or more entities present and involved in some form of meeting. The broad sense or atmosphere of *Aspects* is one of conversation; Forster frequently draws his audience and their likely identity and reasons for attending his lectures into the issues he confronts. He is not lecturing in any traditional sense, but, rather, is attempting to introduce the audience—and, with later publication, the reader—into his personal mode of reading and considering fiction, often by appealing to their experiences and common sense. His impressions also return over and over again to the proximity between the author and the reader. As an author himself, Forster is hyperconscious of the presence of the author and wants to signal his unimportance at every turn. He is, however, caught in his other role, that of reader and critic, and is forced to acknowledge not only the importance of the author to the quality of the text, but also the frequent *rapprochement* between author and reader. It is an achievement, however, according to Forster, to keep the reader "bouncing along," distracting her from all thought of the author to remain focused on the content

and feeling of the text in hand. Prophecy is, in a sense, the happy medium between a text with no authorial presence and a text heavy with its author; the subconscious aspect of prophecy guarantees there will be a speaker, a voice, but that this voice will not sound distinctly like the author—Forster may be speaking, but it will not sound like Forster.

If the novel is, therefore, a mode of (subconscious) communication is the encounter balanced or reciprocal? Attridge claims that criticism and reviewing are a form of response available to the reader and he isn't mistaken, but what of the reader that does not compose a public and verifiable response? Is a response (whether written or not) demanded by the text? It is these questions that begin to open our inquiry into the more fascinating aspects of Forster's aesthetics because it is through these questions that the wider implications of *Aspects* become clear. With the author's presence acknowledged, but its imposition set within certain restraints, it becomes important to question to what extent a text exists of its own accord and how much is due to the author's intervention. From Forster's perspective the content of the novel can have little or no influence on the prophecy and, therefore, the actual force for encounter is by no means part of a conscious design or dependent on the author's desired message or expected response. Also, with the prophetic content left entirely "unspoken," the reader is asked to formulate her response based solely on the sensation of the encounter and, potentially, without reference to the text at all. Ethically, therefore, encounter is not dependent on authorial intent or a reading thereof, but acknowledges this aspect of a text in relation to every other aspect that influences encounter.

Encounter is also figured as a response to an essentially unknown, somewhat alien, force within a text. As Attridge suggests, the literary quality resides in a text's

ability to be other to the individual's "idioculture" and thereby cause a reordering or reconstruction of the parameters of "same". In Forsterian terms: the reader cannot necessarily define or describe what she has encountered, but she internalises it to an extent and acknowledges it because it is already known—it is "universal". The only evidence of an encounter is, therefore, the reordering of the reader's mind—perhaps expressed as interest, enjoyment, shock, confusion, etc.—that either internally or externally contributes to the dialogue that surrounds the specific work or issues raised therein. Experiencing an encounter with fiction, therefore, is an attempt to communicate with an other that is not necessarily the author or the text, but, as an aspect of both, is an idea or concept that is outside the reader's norms.

This is made increasingly interesting when considered in line with Levinas's concepts from *Alterity & Transcendence*. According to Levinas, transcendence is located within the other as it is a path to "God" achievable by the ordinary individual. In an encounter the individual is able to touch or approach the transcendent sublimity of God through the "face of the other," but must also take on a heavy responsibility for this other (23-5). By excising the concept of "God" as an individual or higher power and proposing instead an idealised, but entirely non-deistic, state of transcendence this theory becomes an interesting exemplar for how Forster and Attridge perceive encounter. Encounter, in this construction, is "the face of the other"—in fact Attridge proposes nearly the same association as Levinas only in more limited terms—that would constantly be in a state of rapprochement with the reader, constantly becoming "same" and then retreating on further readings back into the state of otherness only to return again, a constant cycle. In the text's otherness, its prophecy or literariness, therefore, there is an encounter with the

other that is transcendent. What should be increasingly apparent, however, is that the “missionary enterprise” of Forster’s aesthetics is not only deeply indebted to spirituality, in the guise common to Levinas, Hinduism or Christianity, but that it simultaneously presses against these to demand a more earthbound and human recognition of alterity. He goes so far as to outline that prophecy “may imply any of the faiths that have haunted humanity . . . or the mere raising of human love and hatred to such a power that their normal receptacles no longer contain them”(86).

The idealism of this perspective potentially constrains critical uses of textual encounter as it presupposes a deistic or transcendent experience that may be unacknowledged by the reader. It does, however, place the reader in a position of ethical responsibility not only towards the author, but also towards the text itself. The reader must respond equally to his or her own personal and transcendent experience *and* to the literal textual reality in which social commentary and formalised mimesis are key. Prophecy, vitality, and the literary all, in their own ways, acknowledge and demand recognition of the actuality they represent or expand. To achieve a critical reading solely concerned with encounter would be to enter into a swirling nexus of uncertainty without any sense of its relevance for the reader. The effect of encounter can be construed as a sublime or transcendent moment, but its implication for criticism demands a return to the content of the novel and the concerns of reality. In *Aspects*, for example, Forster is unable to detach prophecy from the underlying structures and ideas proposed within the texts he analyses. Dostoevsky, Lawrence, and Melville are not lauded for their ability to construct novels that introduce the reader to a higher power or transcendent force; rather, their works are celebrated for their expansive, even colossal, stories and ideas.

It should be noted that Levinas proposes that “all renunciation of wisdom in favour of the simple love of wisdom, or philosophy, would one day come to be looked upon as romanticism, a pejorative appellation” (9). Recognition, therefore, of the power not only of fiction but also of philosophical inquiry and sociological study for and of themselves are often discounted when they might have unknown or unacknowledged value (8). The act of responding should not be seen in a necessarily technical or scientific light, but also in an emotional and unspoken manner. The content of prophecy or the experience of an encounter may be unspeakable, but this does not necessarily suggest that it is valueless for critical responses. Levinas’s fear that “philosophy always dissatisfied with being just philosophy,” represents the contemporary concern that all analysis, even in the fictional realm, should have a purely utilitarian or technical bent (9). Through the potential transcendence of acknowledging and encountering the other, fiction may have value in and of itself not only as a text, but also as a philosophical tool and exposition of “a kind of mad vitality which exists in the universe” that combines “human suffering and struggle” and “compassion,” considering both in relation to one another (“A Writer” 66).

There is, apparently, a theoretical argument in play over the validity and value of basing criticism on an emotional or felt experience of reading. The difficulty is in knowing just how useful readings based on these aspects of encounter can be and to what end they should be performed. Forster, interestingly, does not confront this issue at all. He makes no justification for the reading of prophecy; its merit as a higher truth establishes it, in his lecture, as sufficient to validate the interpretation or even the basic acknowledgment of its existence. He reminds his audience that to read prophecy “we have indeed to lay aside the single vision which we bring to most of literature and life

and have been trying to use through most of our enquiry, and take up a different set of tools” (*Aspects* 101). He is uncertain about which set of tools, the single-minded analytical approach he uses to address the minutiae of style, or the humbler mentality necessary for prophecy, is superior. In the lecture “Pattern and Rhythm,” Forster and his audience “take them [the single-minded tools] up again, but with no certainty that they are the best equipment for a critic, or that there is such a thing as a critical equipment” (101). Over the course of the chapter “Prophecy,” Forster travels further in the analysis of what constitutes a “novel” and how a novel may be construed as “Art” than in any of the other lectures. It is so successful as a single lecture that the return to more specific and absolute analyses appears foolhardy. His acknowledgment that there may not be “such a thing as a critical equipment” redefines the entire question of this chapter in a single stroke and to great effect. Are more utilitarian or formalised modes of criticism anymore effective or valid as tools? Is not reading always, at its base, an experience that produces unpredictable, personal, and abstract responses?

In Attridge the awareness of encounter in its multifarious forms leads, most of the time, to a more precise and interesting analysis of an object or text. The ability to read a text with “humility,” as Forster stresses, permits greater breadth of interest and vision; the reader attuned to a novel’s atmosphere is, by extension, more ready to perform an original, profound, and holistic analysis of the text. Why then is there any question of admitting this form of reading into critical analyses? Are the ethical demands of judging a novel too weighty to admit any subjective response at all? Or is there a concern that, faced with the association with transcendence, critical responses will break down into masturbatory reflection? These concerns are tied to the established but growing debate



about literature and literary ethics. It is a fruitful and important debate that, on all sides, has the aim of improving how works such as this thesis address their subjects. The impetus in the debate is on achieving a more just and insightful mode of reading, on comprehension and not reduction. Prophecy, vitality, and the literary are tools in this search for a more perfect criticism; their potential should not be discounted because of accusations of subjectivity or abstraction. It is in this time of critical uncertainty that it becomes important to recall that fiction's ability to affect the reader and to thereby remain relevant even after hundreds of years is the basis not only for the debate, but also for the study, enjoyment, and love of literature. The question remains, therefore, what can be gleaned from readings based on prophecy, vitality, or the literary?

## CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter the final question of the previous chapter will be explored through readings of E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* and Christopher Isherwood's novels *Prater Violet*, *A Meeting by the River*, and *A Single Man*. These novels all produce a somewhat definable literary affect that extends their relevance beyond the confines of their content. Whether prophetic, vital, or literary, these novels create, for the reader, the sense of an experience or encounter that calls into question individual norms. In *A Passage to India* the exposition of political and social questions has kept the novel relevant and popular with critics and readers of every stripe. Criticism of the novel, however, tends to focus on one question at a time, leading to interrogations of alterity, orientalism, colonialism, and sexuality in the novel without reference to the broader implications of the text experience. Isherwood's novels, by comparison, have received far less critical attention and so, in the spirit of setting a trend, this chapter reads his novels in a concerted effort to acknowledge and consider the implications of their respective encounters for possible critical discussions. Different forms of reader response will be raised in this chapter, particularly criticisms and contemporaneous reviews, with the hope of interrogating how these incorporate aspects of the ideas of encounter into their analyses and where a greater recognition of encounter would benefit the inquiry.

### READING *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

I turn initially to the work of Christopher Burra, whose interpretation of *A Passage to India* from 1942 was lauded by the author himself. Burra's interpretation sheds some

light on what Forster presumably believes the prophecy or goal of *Passage* entails. Burra refers to Forster as an author “interested in causes” and “interested passionately in human beings;” it is with this authorial stance in mind that Burra carries out his analysis of *Passage* (Burra 321, 326). He argues that the novel is not focussed on the complex racial issues of the British Raj, but primarily on the “friendship of Fielding and Dr. Aziz” (327). Burra does not speculate on the content of the novel’s prophecy, it remains in his words “Anonymous,” but he suggests that it is tied to Forster’s liberal humanism (333). Burra concludes that, despite the important racial issues present in the novel, the text in fact builds itself around the difficulties of interpersonal relationships. In his essay “What I Believe”, Forster argues “Tolerance, good temper and sympathy are no longer enough in a world which is rent by religious and racial persecution” (*Passage* 65). “Personal relationships,” despite their difficulties, are an important mode of organisation because they force the individual to “be as reliable as possible” and reveal “[W]hat is good in people . . . their insistence on creation, [and] their belief in friendship and loyalty for their own sakes” (66, 69). Reliance on these traits is not, however, “enough,” thus the novel subtly discredits “Tolerance, good temper and sympathy” and liberal humanist beliefs in general, suggesting a subsumed or unconscious reaction on the part of Forster to his own beliefs. The central difficulty of Burra’s interpretation is that it relies almost entirely on Forster’s personal perspective to define the novel’s prophecy, without reference to how the text communicates independently to the audience—a central aspect of interpreting prophecy.

Burra’s work, however, does not focus solely on Forster’s humanist ideals and he suggests that prophecy appears, primarily, through the impression that *Passage* gives as a

whole. He describes the novel's structure as "planned like symphonies in three movements . . . [The caves] are the keynote in the symphony to which the strange melody always returns" (325-6). In an interview Forster suggested that the caves "focus everything up: they were to engender an event like an egg" (Furbank 27). Throughout the first section the caves remain on the horizon; they are discussed and considered, but not visited by narrator or character. Godbole, who has visited them, is asked to describe them; however, he is unable to elaborate on their attraction, thus introducing the atmosphere of uncertainty that will prevail throughout the novel (*Passage* 92). Again in the final section the caves are a point of reference for Aziz and Fielding, but remain unexplained and powerful, even years after the ill-fated visit. At the opening of chapter twelve, they are described as "very dark," with "marvellously polished" walls that reflect visitors and create a "terrifying echo" (137-8, 158). Thus the reader is fascinated by them, drawn into their mysterious nature, and—by implication—forced to construct their own impression of the caves that reflects back onto their individual reading.

The caves are marked by the fact that "[N]othing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation . . . does not depend upon human speech"; indeed "there is something unspeakable in these outposts. [T]hey are like nothing else in the world" (137-9). This description and the treatment of the caves throughout the novel create an atmosphere in which the forces of human organization—including religion, politics, and race—hold no sway and the individual, both reader and character, is confronted with a never ending, always shifting uncertainty. It is this mysterious and inexplicable atmosphere of the caves that recurs as one of the central "rhythms" of the text; they are seen from different perspectives and through the consciousnesses of different characters, but their mysterious

nature is always present, overshadowing the recognizable world. The sheer number of critical analyses of the caves attempting to produce a solution to their mystery or propose a symbolic or mystical explanation for them, speak to their role as part of the novel's encounter. The atmosphere developed by the mystery of the caves has been a lasting source of consternation and fascination for readers and critics. A reading of the suggestions or implications of the novel's atmosphere, its effect on readers, may go some distance in explaining this fascination with the novel.

A useful comparison can be drawn between the Marabar Caves as described in the novel and Forster's concept of "prophecy": both are "unspeakable" and both lack direct reference or attachment to the world around them. In a novel, for example, prophecy does not absolutely rely on the content of the text and can exist independent of the novel's mimetic aspects; similarly, the caves sit in the midst of the novel and India, surrounded by information and points of reference, but "[N]othing, nothing attaches to them" (137). It is also interesting to consider how modes of communication are unsuited to confronting or explaining both the Caves and prophecy. Not only is Godbole unable to describe their attraction, the Caves' reputation "does not rely on human speech" and silences all noise, including speech, into the echo: "'boum'" (138, 161). Similarly, "prophecy" cannot be spoken and yet, ironically, is concerned with universality and is universally communicable. The "unspeakable" quality of the caves' echo leads Mrs. Moore to become "terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul" and, after her encounter, she "didn't want to communicate with anyone, not even with God" (161). She realises that "if one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the

same—‘ou-boum’,” a comment that resembles both Forster’s insistence on the universal nature of prophecy and its non-linguistic nature (160). In a sense, therefore, Forster places a literal representation of “prophecy” at the core of *Passage*. The group of visitors acts as representative readers; Mrs. Moore hears the prophecy and is depressed by it, Adela is frightened by it, Fielding bored, and Aziz distracted by external concerns.

In a broader sense the Marabar Caves act as a constantly recurring suggestion of an unknown force or state that underlies the novel and, in the text’s ability to expand, the world upon which it is based. The repeated suggestion of a transcendent and unending unknown, situated both within and without the caves, draws attention to how knowing and not knowing are treated in the novel. According to Paul Armstrong the novel “invokes the ideal of nonreified, reciprocal knowledge of other people and cultures only to show that interpretation invariably requires distancing, objectifying prejudgments” (128). Epistemologies proposed in the novel always come under scrutiny through Forster’s use of ironic “double turns” that, through the “manipulation of point of view demonstrates the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of attaining a lasting consensus about any matter or of discovering a final, uncontestable meaning to any state of affairs” (128). Throughout the novel hundreds of pages after seemingly certain truths or judgments are proposed they suddenly break apart, forcing a reconsideration of all they have affected. The caves are the focus of the undermining of assumed knowledge, but are by no means the only emblem of the unknowable and unfixed. For example, early in the novel Mrs. Moore is positioned as the Ur interpreter or reconciler when she declares that she doesn’t “understand people very well” and only knows “whether [she] like[s] or dislike[s] them” (45). After her encounter with the caves, however, her sympathy with those around her

comes into question when she realizes that “she didn’t want to write to her children, didn’t want to communicate with anyone . . . . She lost all interest, even in Aziz, and the affectionate and sincere word that she had spoken to him seemed no longer hers but the air’s” (161). Her initial, almost psychic feeling of acceptance and love for individuals is undercut by the desire to be apart, away, and distanced. It is figured by the narrator as a realisation that the caves and their void have negated the structures upholding her feelings—her faith in God and Christian morality particularly.

There is also a cultural commentary embedded in the novel’s examination of knowing in its even-handed and tolerant examination of the Anglo-Indians, Indians, and their relationships. Ronny, for example, is obsessed by knowing and performing his duty, but not by knowing or understanding the Indians around him (54-5). To substitute for his lack of experience in India he argues by “using phrases and arguments that he had picked up from older officials” (54). These “older officials” propose that they have privileged information; Mr. McBryde, for example, argues: “I know them [Indians] as they really are” because he, as a police officer, knows them “after they have developed into men” (178). Also at a club meeting about Adela’s situation the repeated mantra “those drums are merely for Mohurram” soothes in its assumption of tradition and repetition, not violence and anger (189). The reader, however, is party to ironies such as that of the subaltern who declares of Aziz: “the one I had a knock with on your maidan . . . he was all right. Any native who plays polo is all right” without realising it is the same man, the “criminal” being discussed and abused that he is referring to (192). It is this sort of reflection or echo that creates a sensation of reversal that develops a more critical and uncertain response from the reader.

The difficulty with these presumed forms of knowledge is that their reliance on the expansion of an individual behaviour onto a group stalls the potential for cross-cultural understanding. Adela, unlike the Anglo-Indians, is obsessed by the desire to “see” and, by inference, know the “*real* India” and Indians (46). She brings, however, a limited scope to her exploration and is gradually caught up in the epistemologies of Anglo-India. On the ascent to the site of her supposed attack Adela thinks to herself “Mohammedans always insist on their full four, according to Mrs. Turton” and asks Aziz how many wives he has (163). Her question is, to him, the height of insult and he responds internally: “to ask an educated Indian Moslem how many wives he has—appalling, hideous!” (164) Reliant on the presumptions of those around her, Adela stumbles into a subject that she has no genuine comprehension of and, as seems to always be the case with this form of information, causes an insult that, in part, leads to the confusion about the attack.

On the other side of the divide, Aziz is frequently characterised as knowing his position or place based on his religion and that certain modes of knowing or perceiving are more congenial to him than alien ones (33, 41, 290). The Indian characters demonstrate some of the same prejudices as their Anglo-Indian counterparts, correlating knowledge of individuals as group understanding, even among themselves, as definitive of individual character. In one exchange between Aziz and the Hindu Mr. Das, Aziz thinks to himself “I wish they did not remind me of cow-dung’,” while Mr. Das thinks “Some Moslems are very violent” (265). This is followed by a promise on Aziz’s part to “see more of Indians who were not Mohammedans” that is carried out in the final section when he moves to the predominantly Hindu area of Mau, but where Aziz remains



staunchly “outside” the Hindu enclave and suspicious of its traditions and motives (265, 300-2). Everywhere in the text there are attempts to know; to know people, places, secrets, etc., is the central goal of most of the characters and from their feeling of knowledge comes a sense of belonging, possession, and power. The difficulty with knowing people is that fictional characters “even if they are imperfect or unreal they do not contain any secrets, whereas our friends do and must, mutual secrecy being one of the conditions of life upon this globe” (33). Readers may be privileged with understanding of the inner world of a character, but characters, as in real life, must remain mysterious to their fellow characters. Epistemologies of culture, race, and religion—exhibited by the Anglo-Indians and Indians—disguise a lack of knowledge by proposing a collective identity that can be known through and through. The novel, through its suggestion of the importance of the unknown, creates an atmosphere in which the reader is asked one after another to examine proposed epistemologies with the weight of the unknown in mind.

It is, pointedly, Adela’s recognition that she is “not quite sure” what happened in the caves or what evokes the echo that releases her from the control of the English contingent, the spell of the caves, and her own uncertainty and guilty conscience. Similarly, it is Mrs. Moore’s acceptance that she cannot “understand people” that releases her and her son Ralph from the controlling doctrine of the English establishment. Throughout the book, not knowing acts as a release from the confining or restricting powers surrounding the individual characters. The caves, as the ultimate unknowable force or space, operate as a tool through which the novel repeatedly confronts the reader with not knowing and exemplifies how not knowing plays a crucial role in understanding human relations. Because people in fiction are fully known, “prophecy” often replaces

the unknowable aspect of human character common to everyday life or is tied closely to the characters and their experiences. Following Adela's accusation, for example, Fielding quits the English club in Chandrapore and, while leaving, pauses to observe the infamous Marabar Hills from a veranda:

At this distance and hour they leapt into beauty; they were Monsalvat, Valhalla, the towers of a cathedral, peopled with saints and heroes, and covered with flowers. What miscreant lurked in them, presently to be detected by the activities of the law? Who was the guide, and had he been found yet? What was the 'echo' of which the girl complained? He did not know, but presently he would know.

In this moment, as in numerous others, the implications of Fielding's thoughts and the scene expand from the text. Granted he is considering the situation at hand, but his belief that "he would know" and his faith in the law are not only his. The reader shares his anticipation of a resolution and explanation because novels and stories rarely propose a mystery without giving some resolution. Fielding's mode of knowing is questioned through his characterisation of the caves as "Monsalvat, Valhalla, the towers of a cathedral;" this imagery is familiar to him, it is comprehensible and is, therefore, the refuge of a mind confronted with the unknowable.

The caves, the guide, and, least of all, the echo can be understood, but by attempting to transpose them into a familiar epistemology Fielding tries to conquer them. Undoubtedly the reader performs similar epistemological transpositions while reading in the hope of figuring out what really happened in the caves. After Adela removes her accusation she and Fielding spend several days discussing and working through the

incident to establish the events and their cause, but their logic is not equal to the situation (239-42). Even after the shift from Part Two to Part Three (an interval of two years) the same mystery exists; Aziz declares that he wants to “wipe out the wretched business of the Marabar for ever,” but Fielding’s wife “too believes that the Marabar is wiped out” without being able to explain why or how (312). A new person has been drawn into the mystery, with her own perspective; thus the echoes continue on into new circles. Because of this never resolved mystery, constant questioning is the suggestion and implication of the novel—the dilemma of the caves is more than a mere court case, it is a question of how a mind can be brought to fear another and the universe. This is the mode of the novel’s encounter: confronting the reader with uncertainty and the unknown to stimulate consideration. The explicit mystery of what happened in the caves is coupled with repeated uncertainties of knowing people, responsibilities, cultures, etc., and by confronting the reader with these unknown factors an encounter develops between reader and text. In this encounter the reader is forced to question certainties and epistemologies, both familiar and foreign, to recognise the importance of consideration, discussion, and the act of constant reconsideration in understanding individuals, mysteries, cultures, etc.

Critical examinations of *Passage* tend, in their search for a conclusion or political/ethical meaning to the novel, to focus on specific aspects to prove a perspective on the part of the critic. The Marabar Caves, for example, have been repeatedly interpreted as symbolic of a spiritual centre, a life giving primal force, and various other forms that might stand at the core of a complex, often mystical, allegory (Stone, Selig, Allen, Spencer). It is hardly surprising that this trend has appeared in criticism of the novel because the caves are inherently mysterious and their effect on the central

characters devastating. This common critical response underscores the danger inherent in the use of a mysterious and inhuman image or concept in a novel that is deeply conscious of spiritual concerns and issues. In a letter to Robert L. Selig, Forster advises him that he “never thought of Aum when [he] wrote Boum... was unaware of the subdivision of the mystic syllable . . . [had] never been interested in Plato, never thought of his cave in connection with the Marabar” and that the young critic goes “too far. [He tends] to make every hole, and every object longer than it’s broad into a sexual symbol” (Selig 473). Despite this disavowal of a spiritual, subconscious, or allegorical reading of the caves, Stone and numerous others trace the lineage of the caves back to Hindu temples and the concept of a “dark and primal cavity” from which issues “all the transformations we call life,” Freudian symbolism, or a spiritual implication on the part of Forster (Stone 308).

This manner of reading relies on symbolic cues in the text: the characterisation of the echo as “a little worm coiling, which is too small to complete a circle, but is eternally watchful”, Mrs. Moore’s association of “ou-boum” with a defiance of Christianity, and the essential void of the caves (159, 161). What these readings ignore, on the other hand, is the important comment that “some saddhus did once settle in a cave, but they were smoked out, and even Buddha... has left no legend of struggle or victory in the Marabar” and that “nothing, nothing attaches to them” (138). The caves do not represent anything symbolic in the text beyond being emblems of Adela’s false accusation or a sightseeing destination, but in the atmosphere created by them—Mrs. Moore’s response, Adela’s accusation, and the tumultuous aftermath of their visit—the caves come to represent far more in a critical estimation than mere totems. They are a point of uncertainty and mystery that shifts with every reading and denies the potential for an absolute reading of

their nature or the problem that surrounds them. There is certainty underlying the readings performed by Selig et al. that reinforces the use of the novel as a—potentially subconscious—argument or proposition on the part of the author. The experience of reading *Passage*, however, does not depend on the comprehension of symbolic cues, but rather on the experience of its specific mimetic atmosphere and its implications for each individual reader.

As Paul Armstrong suggests, Forster makes “an appeal to the reader to act with an awareness” because “[the novel’s] manipulation of point of view demonstrates the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of attaining a lasting consensus about any matter or discovering a final, uncontestable [sic] meaning” (128). A directed reading, a reading hungry to determine what the caves represent or suggest, often imagines symbolism and commentary where none exist; however, the lasting impression of the caves and the novel whole cannot be defined and, probably, should not be. Like prophecy, the caves imply something beyond their physical or symbolic confines: they suggest a deeper unknowing, a realistic uncertainty that underlies the novel, its characters, and reflects back onto the reality of the reader.

It should be noted that the obvious insertion of a prophecy-like aspect, such as the Marabar Caves in *Passage*, causes the sense of a hole in the novel, of a void in its midst that can have interpretations and ideas inserted into it to prevent the inrush of the surrounding novel. Prophecy itself, as it is “unspoken” or “Anonymous,” demands the same filling in of meaning, but the mode of creating meaning differs between the two. At no time is prophecy proposed as a solution or explanation for the text. *Passage*’s prophecy reflects predominantly on the world outside the novel’s content, whereas

interpreting the caves leads to resolutions through specific critical modes, usually intended to solve the novel. The caves resemble prophecy, but because of their crucial role within the text it would be wrong to attribute them with prophecy, rather the encounter they represent between the known and unknown and the effect of this encounter is prophecy.

The involvement of the author, suggested by Isherwood, in particular causes some difficulties in reading the prophecy or encounter of *Passage*. Burra, for example, associates Forster's humanist principles with the prophecy of the novel, despite the provision that prophecy is subconscious and external to the author's intentions. He emphasises the novel's repeated examination of tolerance and understanding in relationships, but these can be read as a pointed aspect of Forster's commitment to using the novel as a tool for explicating and exploring the limits of his own beliefs. On the other hand, the ultimate absence of resolution in the novel suggests distancing between Forster and this form of prophecy as it fails to ascribe to the liberal mantra that "good is good and bad is bad" (Trilling 14). Armstrong argues that the form used in *Passage*, its movement from one group to another and emphasis on failure, is part of a broader ethical plan on the part of Forster, but what of certain moments in which the novel seems to stretch beyond these?

There is, for example, the narrator's mention of "circles even beyond—people who wore nothing but a loin cloth, people who wore not even that, and spent their lives in knocking two sticks together . . . humanity grading and drifting beyond the educated vision, until no earthly invitation can embrace it" (57-8). How do these people figure into a discussion of the Anglo-Indian problem or into the novel's analysis of different modes

of knowing and the failure of liberalism? How do the Marabar Caves fit into this construction? Clearly a critic must read the novel with attention to the author's intentions, the novel's content, and the expansive aspects of the novel, considering these in relation to one another and with caution over their interrelation. However interrelated prophecy and authorial intent are there is an important role to be played by the analysis of prophecy. Simply by its role as an expansive effect, prophecy demands consideration of broader ramifications for the text, of the novel as a whole, and how the individual reader experienced the text.

Reductively speaking, the novel's main exploration is the issue of alterity and the unknown; its prophecy, on the other hand, raises a discussion of the possibility of knowing individuals ethically despite the restrictions of class, race, religion, politics, and the universal mystery inherent to all individuals. Because of this it is surprising that Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, discounts out of hand the end of *Passage* as a moment in which Fielding and Aziz (and the reader) come "tantalizingly close" to one another, but are forever alienated (244). Said interprets the end of the novel, when Aziz and Fielding are parted by India itself, as an act of forced ignorance—on the part of Forster and Fielding—in which the oriental (and the orient) is "destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West" (244). This interpretation, however, presupposes that Aziz and the other Indian characters are the only individuals left unknowable and that Fielding, the narrator, and Forster purposefully orientalise Aziz and Indians in general. The overwhelming tone and atmosphere of the text, however, is one of shared failure, of a lack of coherence and communication on all sides that is aggravated by the obsessive desire to know, or understand, when complete

comprehension is impossible. Sara Suleri has a similar reading of *Passage* to Said's in which she suggests that the novel employs "representation as a mode of recolonization" (169). It is interesting, however, to consider that, when it was initially published, Anglo-Indians were insulted by the novel's treatment of the English establishment, while one contemporary review of the novel emphasised "the feeling that the blending of races is a four dimensional problem . . . . It is something much less conscious; not so much a virtue as a fatality of his [Forster's] genius" (Furbank 126-30, Arnold). Evidently different readings and readers experience an incredibly different novel. The post-colonial and Anglo-Indian readings, however, stem from a focus on a single aspect of the text—the portrayal of Indians or Anglo-Indians—and do not recognise the subtle suggestions and uncertainties of atmosphere that allow a consideration of more than the colonial setting, as suggested by Arnold's review. His emphasis on a "feeling" created by the text is in line with the concept of a literary encounter and leads his reading to extend beyond the divisiveness of pitting Indians against Anglo-Indians. This is not to say that Said or Suleri's readings have missed the boat or do an injustice to the text, but rather that they consider one issue raised in the text rather than the text itself. *Passage* does more than comment on the relationships of its characters or attempt to represent Anglo-Indian relations in the 1920s; it expands beyond this through its contrasting and echoing tones into a proposition of the need to acknowledge a multitude of approaches and modes of thinking.

The reader is, in this sense, offered a privileged position to view a group of divided individuals attempt a *rapprochement* and to feel—"consider" would be the wrong word—how their failures come about. Aziz is not a single individual representing the



forever-estranged Orient; he is an individual playing out the unpredictable character willed him by the narrator and author. As a character he can be fully known to the reader, but the novel's atmosphere of confrontation and interest in the unknowable engender a reading in which the failure of Aziz and Fielding's relationship is premised on the patently idealistic trope that individuals can be understood. The political implications of the novel are crucial to comprehending it within its time, but its atmosphere does not fit that time in the least. Concerned over the divisions that act in society generally, Forster uses India as an exemplar by providing a political commentary suited to 1924 *and* a subsumed suggestion that there is, in fact, a greater problem in hand than the cruelty of Anglo-India. This is the novel's master scheme: to make use of the unparalleled ability for fiction to act and exist without necessary reference to the divisions and ideologies of the everyday world.

According to Stone, Forster wants to “wash his hands of [the novel's] earthly clay” and become “a kind of bodiless transparency” (120-1). Stone recognises, however, that Forster does not take himself entirely seriously; otherwise his novels would not exist at all. He writes instead like “the Christian who does not doubt that heaven is of first importance but hates to die” (121). There is an important irony in Forster's aesthetics: the complexities of the novel simultaneously ground the text, bring it to earth so to speak, and elevate the text beyond its mimetic bounds by suggesting an “atmosphere” or “prophecy.” All novels of a certain sort, those that aspire to something like “prophecy,” attempt to speak to universal themes and ideas, as Forster says: “[T]he extension, the melting, the unity through love and pity occur in a region which can only be implied . . . . [I]t is the ordinary world of fiction, but it reaches back” (*Aspects* 92). The reader must be

engaged in this “melting” and recognise the implications of her reading to the world outside the covers of the book, thus bringing her interests, ideas, norms, and “idioculture” into play, with the corollary that all these may be called into question. Texts that simultaneously act as mimetic fiction and “prophecy” have a potent dualism: there is the fictional aspect (the story, people, setting, etc.) and the universal prophetic aspect that underlies the story and its trappings. The ability for fiction to carry on a double existence, one that shares a point of communion between readers, author, and other novels or types of art, positions it as the ultimate tool for exploring and explaining the world it represents.

*Passage* itself, quite abstractly, suggests that the reader, any reader, is a privileged and more powerful force for good. This is achieved by several means; a good example, however, appears in the final section in which Hindu spirituality takes centre stage and is given incredible sway over the outcome of the novel. Godbole is driven by a small card reading “God si Love” to attempt to unite and love Mrs. Moore, a wasp, and a stone (283-88). The card’s message is an error, but the meaning behind it, “God is Love,” remains. Love here is the ultimate goal, but even Godbole, the only Brahmin in the text and a sage character to say the least, is unable to love the wasp, Mrs. Moore, and the stone equally. But Godbole recognises that even his small act, loving the wasp and Mrs. Moore, is “more than I am myself” (288). As he reads the card he understands the true, if muddled, meaning and responds to it with an act of imagination that mirrors that of the reader.

Taking this event out of context, Godbole appears as the omnipresent reader; he attempts to sum up the whole, to understand and appreciate the text as an expansive unity, and, though unsuccessful, his mind has been opened up to the potential for such an

act. This does not limit or stifle his ability to return to the immediate concerns around him, the Krishna festival or the health of the Rajah, but positions these concerns in a continuum that offers him greater awareness. Fiction, for Forster, should operate like this moment in the midst of the Krishna ceremony. A text should “expand” beyond its confines and confront the reader with something greater than himself or herself, greater than the text even, which must be dealt with not through intellect or reason, but through sensation. The characters are not the only people *Passage* comments on; through its mobilising of a sense of expansion the novel attempts to extend itself to consider all humans through the reader’s engagement and feeling of expansion. The novelist’s ability to “dip a bucket down into his subconscious” and bring out a novel that is realistic, readable, and influential for the reader is second only to the reader’s act of understanding and interrogation that brings about the novelist’s envisioned unity (“Raison D’Être” 111).

It is unsurprising that Stone equates Forster’s aesthetics with a “missionary enterprise;” they more closely resemble spirituality than theory. The novel is Forster’s bible of art. It is a guide to the everyday practitioners of the faith. There is, however, an ethical complexity to the construction of prophecy in *Aspects*: how much of a novel’s prophecy is merely the subsumed intentions of the author? In the case of *Passage*, is it possible to read prophecy without reference to Forster’s ideas of tolerance or without simply taking on faith that the reader can discover or sense its prophecy from its structure? Nonetheless it is apparent that novels, music, poetry, and paintings can contain every manner of human experience and should, therefore, be read with an open mind to how they influence and engage the reader in an unrestrained communication with the text and other readers, whether consciously or unconsciously. Following this through,

*Passage* as a whole becomes the “prophecy” it conveys because of its ability to communicate experiences and not absolutes to the reader. In it all manner of attempt at unity and comprehension is made; these attempts fail, but through these failures something else is suggested. The content of the suggestion is unspeakable, but its presence recognisable; analysing it, therefore, offers the reader a greater understanding of her role as interpreter and a more complete understanding of how the immediate concerns of the text (its politics or social commentary) fit together and compliment one another.

### ***PRATER VIOLET: A “DYNAMIC PORTRAIT”***

In 1933 Christopher Isherwood was hired as a writer for the film *Little Friend*, based on a novel by Ernst Lothar and directed by Berthold Viertel. The film was not particularly successful and Viertel himself felt the film and novel were beneath him, but the experience was crucial to Isherwood’s development as a writer and was the source for his novel *Prater Violet*. Transforming the actual experience, Isherwood fictionalised the individuals involved—including himself—and greatly altered the facts of the situation for the purposes of the novel. Commenting on the novel many years later, Isherwood revealed that he considered it a “portrait” rather than a “constructed novel” (*Conversations* 6). The portrait concept works, according to Isherwood, quite well in *Prater Violet* because the Christopher Isherwood narrator “was up against a real talker, a tremendous dynamic behavior and talker, and a person whom at the same time, although he [Christopher Isherwood] regarded him with humor, he could regard with great affection and genuine admiration” (41). Through the use of this sort of narrator the novel confronts the complex and fascinating issue of narration and modes of perception, thus

expanding beyond the confines of a mere “portrait”. Constructing a critical reading through Isherwood’s theory of vitality limits or fails to fully encapsulate the experience of reading *Prater Violet*. The less specific constructs of prophecy or literariness, in fact, offer a more accurate and interesting critical perspective for the reader.

The “dynamic portrait” of Viertel—called Bergmann in *Prater Violet*—works quite well. From Forster’s perspective the construction of Bergmann’s character is fascinating because it appears to expand into roundness over the course of the text, while actually remaining mostly contained and flat. Forster defines a flat character as one that is composed of an idea: “[H]e is the idea, and such life as he possesses radiates from its edges and from the scintillations it strikes when other elements in the novel impinge” (*Aspects* 47). When first introduced to Bergmann, Isherwood (the narrator) characterises him as “[A] tragic Punch” and it is this thought that sums him up for the entire novel (*Prater* 16). Before meeting Bergmann, Isherwood is told “[O]h, you’ll know him all right when you see him . . . You couldn’t mistake him in a million” and a shop girl characterises Bergman as “[Q]uite a character” (13). In this way the novel sets up a comedic persona for him that is sustained in the image of Bergmann as “an old clown, shock-headed, in his gaudy silk dressing gown . . . [T]ragicomic, like all clowns” finding “a copy of *Mein Kampf* which he kissed, before throwing it into the wastepaper basket” (24-5, 26-7). The movement from tragic to comedic character gives the appearance of roundness, but in point of fact constrains Bergmann within a binary characterisation. He varies wildly between comedy and seriousness, one moment considering pictures of his family in Vienna who are in potential danger and the next inventing a novel that reduces English psychology to a flawed oedipal metaphor—in short, he appears ridiculous (29).

This is not a real person; Bergmann only shines in response to the people and things around him and exists within an unrealistic binary. Despite moments of tragedy, Bergmann's wildly bouncing character appears more like a pantomime clown than a real person.

Isherwood described his portrait of Bergmann as a “dynamic portrait”, one

that grows . . . the idea . . . of uncovering a picture, a painting of somebody and everybody looks at it and says ‘Yes, yes,’ and then you say, ‘No, wait a minute, you think you’ve looked at this picture, but you haven’t. Allow me to point out certain things about it.’ And by successive stages, the viewer is encouraged to look deeper and deeper into the picture, until finally it looks completely different to him. (*Conversations* 6)

Planned in this way, the initial conception of Bergmann in a single thought—as a flat character in other words—is hardly surprising, but Isherwood's concept of gradually revealing more of the character through successive realisations fails to come across in the novel. The initial characterisation is intended to give way to a rounding out of Bergmann that is once again altered, the cycle repeating throughout the novel. Through Isherwood's careful use of reader expectations, narration in the novel appears to reveal every aspect of Bergmann, while subtly maintaining a limited perspective. This is achieved through the reliance on the ability for humans to “know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and intimacy” (*Aspects* 32).

The narrator presents Bergmann like a real person: constantly and with full reliance on assumptions to create a whole identity. His presentation, however, is based on

a set of uncertain conceptions of Bergmann's character—such as the descriptions of him as a clown. For one thing, Isherwood the narrator, on first meeting Bergmann, thinks “[T]he name, the voice, the features were inessential, I knew that face. The face of Central Europe,” diminishing Bergmann's identity to a representative symbol of a political situation (17). Isherwood maintains this perspective of understanding Bergmann based on an assumption or felt connection, throughout the novel and only glances about at other characters. This absolute focus on a single individual through the perspective of a naturally flawed and presumptuous narrator stifles, according to Forster's ideas, the novel by providing “confidences about the individual people” that “beckon the reader away from the people to an examination of the novelist's mind” (*Aspects* 57). The forcefulness of this sort of narration does not allow for the expansion of “rhythm” and keeps the novel strictly within the confines of biographical examination of a specific time, setting, and company.

Indeed the novel in general is, in a sense, limited and lacks the broader authorial perspective Isherwood desires for vitality. One contemporary reviewer called the novel “a post-card-size, black-and-white impression of Europe as the pre-war bundle of nerves, news, and neurosis” and it is this limitation of size or scope that seems to prevent the novelist achieving the distance necessary to “look down upon everything and enjoy it” (*Chicago Review, Isherwood* 66) According to the narrator “[T]he three of us [Bergmann, Isherwood, and Bergmann's secretary Dorothy] formed a self-contained world, independent of London, of Europe, of 1933” (40). The outside world creeps in, but it is not shown anything like the “love and pity” offered Bergmann; expansion is curtailed by the insistent focus on Bergmann and the majority of the novel is engaged in tracing the at

once comedic and tragic individual, not the experience of living in pre-war England or the transcendent joy of life despite tragic circumstances.

*Prater Violet* is an excellent portrait of an individual, but it fails to offer a broader prophecy until the mode of narration is itself called into question. The “portrait” concept of the novel has an implicit tone of ownership embedded in it that resonates throughout; Isherwood (the narrator) is concerned solely with summoning up one individual and understanding him absolutely as if obsessed by the desire to possess the individual through comprehension. The text, interestingly, acknowledges this tendency in Bergmann himself: “[H]e seemed determined to possess me [Isherwood] utterly. [H]e pursued me with questions, about my friends, my interests, my habits, my love life . . .” (38). Isherwood refuses to respond to his questions, but this secrecy extends to the reader. It is not until the final few pages that the ultimate goal of this portrait is revealed: the narrator is, in fact, the subject of the “dynamic portrait”.

Expansion, therefore, occurs because the Isherwood narrator “bounces” the reader into a comfortable space in which the story appears open and honest, only to discover that all along she has been at the behest of a cunning deflector (*Aspects* 55). In a moment of sudden self-revelation, Isherwood explains to the reader that he is, despite his pretensions to fully comprehending Bergmann, as much in the dark about Bergmann as anyone might be in real life:

What was he thinking about? *Prater Violet*, his wife, his daughter, myself, Hitler, a poem he would write, his boyhood, or tomorrow morning? How did it feel to be inside that stocky body, to look out of those dark, ancient eyes? . . . There is one question which we seldom ask each other directly:



it is too brutal. And yet it is the only question worth asking our fellow travellers. What makes you go on living? Why don't you kill yourself? Why is all this bearable? What makes you bear it? (*Prater* 123)

This revelation in the narrator prefaces his disclosure that, despite Bergmann's desire to "possess" him, Isherwood has in fact been leading a secret life that is only revealed at the end of the novel and never to Bergmann. It is from within the narrator that the novel confronts the reader with her submerged reliance on the narrator and belief that all questions, particularly the "one question which we seldom ask each other directly," have been answered by him. The sudden confrontation pulls the reader into an engagement with the text that forces a questioning not only of the Isherwood narrator, but also of all narration or presumed exposition of character.

The reader, by inhabiting Isherwood's perspective so fully for much of the novel, is suddenly confronted with Isherwood's insecurities about his own identity and identity in general. After a particularly bad day working with Bergmann, a "movie gossip columnist," Patterson, approaches Bergmann and Isherwood to stir up trouble (102). The narrator exclaims privately "[W]hy can't they leave me alone?" . . . [B]ut the 'I' that thought this was both Patterson and Bergmann, Englishman and Austrian, islander and continental. It was divided, and hated its division" (104). Through this and similar moments of concern, Isherwood explores the external forces that corrupt and constrain his own identity. Once his final revelation about his secret life is made the reader is almost forced to take a step back and to consider all that she has read to that point. Questions of perspective come to the fore and the "dynamic portrait" of Bergmann crumbles under the suddenly apparent weight of an insecure and uncertain narrator.

The novel portrait actually reveals more about the artist than the subject. It is through Isherwood's insecurities as narrator and individual that the issues of narration are confronted, particularly how the role of narrator forces him to make inferences, to feign knowledge of Bergmann's inner world. There is a level of self-consciousness in the portrayal of Bergmann that raises ethical concerns not solely about the role of narrator or author, but also about any individual that interprets or makes inferences about the character of others. When the reader is informed that throughout the novel there has been another story, one of immediate relevance to the narrator, that has gone unmentioned it becomes clear that the gaze of the story has been entirely unidirectional:

Love had been J. for the last month—ever since we met at that party . . . I was glad I had never told Bergmann about J. He would have taken possession of that, as he did of everything else. But it was still mine, and it would always be. Even when J. and I were only trophies, hung up in the museums of each other's vanities . . . It's no use being sentimentally cynical about this, or cynically sentimental. Because J. isn't really what I want. J. only has the value of being now. (125)

What follows this revelation is Isherwood's first examination of what exists within him and has been ignored until Bergmann is removed from his immediate focus. Through this interesting but abrupt disclosure, the novel expands beyond the confines of the text. Read literally it is only a somewhat interesting philosophical examination of how fear can guide and construct an identity, but coming at the end of a text that appears so honest and upfront there is an unavoidably jarring note within. Suddenly the Isherwood narrator could be anyone; all readers, all people in fact, create the same myths of themselves and

others. As this is the only mode of understanding available the novel does not condemn or celebrate the act of narrating, inferring, or mythologizing identity; rather, it exposes this tendency in a shockingly immediate way and then steps back to allow the reader an opportunity to consider.

Not going so far as to suggest that this moment is sublime, there is, however, an important association between the revelation of the narrator's disguise and Kantian sublimity. The cognitive progression of the sublime moment involves the mind of the observer being "in a determinate relation to the object, and this relation is habitual," which breaks down causing "surprise or astonishment . . . [because] there is an immediate intuition of a disconcerting disproportion between inner and outer" that forces the observer's mind to "recover the balance between inner and outer by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object" (Weiskel 23-4). The concern is, therefore, that texts propose the recognisable or "habitual" and then break this down through subtle suggestions or expansion and thereby force the reader to reconsider the situation posed and her own relation to it. Critically speaking this sudden confrontation at the close of the novel allows for more than a simple consideration of pre-war Europe and ideas of foreignness; it, quite suddenly, pushes the reader away from her close association with the narrator (and author) to offer a new, more distanced perspective on the very act of narration or writing.

There is an atmosphere attached to the ideas of the text, but not rationally proposed and, therefore, dependent on the shock of the revelation to cause the break down of the reader's previously steady relationship to the text. In this case it is not, as Isherwood the author suggests, balance between a specific and expansive perspective that

lends critical distance or expansion to the text. Forster's idea of prophecy, specifically its insistence on a sense of "unity" and "creativity" in the reader's mind, more accurately describes the reader-text relationship and communication. The narrator seems to undergo the same moment of sublime cognition in his recognition that, though focused on Bergmann for the whole novel, his perspective is limited and uncertain. Is the shock of discovering Isherwood's personal life alone sufficient to disrupt the reader's relationship to the text or is the exposition of his uncertainty about Bergmann necessary to achieve this revelation? This is no doubt specific to the reader, but the idea of an encounter is patently obvious in a reading and carries an important suggestion of what the novel may be implying on a larger scale.

### ***A MEETING BY THE RIVER: VEDANTA AND ENCOUNTER, BROTHERHOOD AND LOVE***

*A Meeting by the River* is the only novel explored in this thesis that deals directly with Vedanta philosophy and Hinduism in general, though they were crucial to Isherwood's development as a writer and informed his ideas in "A Writer and his World." Unlike *Prater Violet*, *Meeting* does not have an Isherwood narrator—indeed, it has no narrator at all. The novel centres on the relationship between two brothers, Patrick and Oliver, and is structured as a collection of letters and diary entries. Patrick is an ex-publisher and is in the early stages of a film career, whereas Oliver is in the process of taking his final vows, Sannyas, in order to become a Hindu monk in India. In interview, Isherwood said that he believed he is "far more Patrick than [he is] Oliver", but, unlike in *Prater Violet*, Isherwood mostly keeps his own identity out of the novel (*Conversations*

82). There are two central concerns in the novel that circle around the brothers' relationship: the construction and destruction of identity in a communal world.

Beginning with its structure, *Meeting* establishes an interesting discourse of self-revelation versus external revelation. Composed solely of personal documents the text is, as Isherwood intended, "like a court and all the evidence for the prosecution and for the defence is presented and you suddenly realize there isn't going to be a verdict" (*Conversations* 82). Interestingly the documents that make up the text are not created equal: Patrick's side of the story is entirely composed of letters to his wife, lover, mother, and brother, whereas Oliver's includes a few letters to Patrick and a substantial number of diary entries. Patrick's letters, presented always in a set of two or three to allow comparison, emphasise how he alters his attitude and the truth dependent on his audience. In one particularly striking comparison Patrick tells his mother that: "Oliver is *well*, and I mean well in every way" and then tells his wife "[D]oes he look healthy? No, I'm afraid he doesn't" (*Meeting* 55, 61). Also shocking is the comparison between his letters to his lover, Tommy, and wife; in both communications he promises fidelity and love, maintaining both relationships without any apparent sense of remorse or concern over the pain this may cause (161-9). The reader is coerced into a critical mindset because Patrick is denied self-revelation, forcing the reader to make inferences based on Oliver's perspective and the persona Patrick adopts when communicating to an audience.

Oliver, on the other hand, is given the ability to reveal his own "inner life" and reflect on the world around him with freedom and immediacy. There is, however, something performative in his act of writing a diary; Oliver repeatedly acknowledges his own presence and consciously upbraids himself for writing lies that satisfy an external

desire or requirement, but ignore the reality of the situation (35). The two modes of presenting the brothers act, in a sense, as loose binaries portraying Patrick as the modern, worldly brother and Oliver as the intensely subjective, introspective brother. From their two perspectives, the former directed outward and the latter inward, *Meeting* questions how these two attitudes or stances are constructed out of a philosophical or spiritual precedent. The novel as a whole, therefore, addresses the issue of perspective and motivation in relation to both individual identity and external constructions thereof. This creates an atmosphere similar to that in *Prater Violet* only with a slightly different focus. In *Meeting* the relationship is key, concepts of identity are involved, but there is a general tone of concern over how the two ostensibly divided brothers could find a point of communication or unity.

As Oliver has, prior to the start of the novel, immersed himself in a monastic way of life the theme of spirituality is crucial to the novel. A primary concern, because of Oliver's immersion in an Indian way of life, is connection and division across cultural and religious barriers. Oliver himself is greatly concerned with how he can "be one with these people [Indians]" (120). This is not only made apparent on a cultural level, but also because of, what he perceives as, "the utter simplicity of their [his fellow monks'] feelings"—a simplicity that he does not share (120). Similarly, once Patrick arrives for his visit, Oliver informs his diary: "I get afraid that I'll start behaving like him and lose my own identity altogether," thus raising the question of how susceptible Oliver is to outside stimuli for constructing his identity (115). He recognises that "if I really believe in what I say I believe in, then a million Patricks won't be able to shake me," suggesting

that he is not certain in his beliefs and is searching for a way to establish them and his own identity (116).

Oliver is, obviously, torn between feelings of kinship with his brother and his desire to feel connection with the Hindu monks with whom he believes he should be closer. It is, ultimately, Hindu spirituality that acts as the tool through which these concerns are, at least partly, resolved. Oliver reminds himself repeatedly “What unites us [Oliver and the other monks] is the one and only thing that really matters,” referring to their shared faith and life choice (120). His difficulty in establishing an identity suitable both to his past and present is, through the act of taking Sannyas, partially solved: Oliver “dies” and a new, symbolic identity takes his place. As this transformation approaches, Oliver declares, “Patrick must never meet Oliver again . . . Oliver must die” (128-9). But this ambition oversteps what is immediately possible; he expects a “melodramatic transformation,” but in fact finds his symbolic death to be a “gradual” process (188). It does, however, allow him to be “free” in a sense and feel that “for the first time, there were no barriers between [him and the other monks], [he] wasn’t an alien, and the others seemed to understand this” (188).

This symbolic death appears to solve every problem of connection that has appeared between Oliver and his brother monks and relies on an otherworldly presence or force. Before becoming a monk, Oliver was disciple to an elderly Hindu monk, simply called “Swami” in the novel, upon whose death Oliver decided to pursue a future as a monk and travel to India. Throughout the novel it is Swami’s spiritual presence or the memory of him that keeps Oliver focused on his goals and, ultimately, guides him to annihilate his individual identity. The peace and comfort Oliver finds following his symbolic death is

due, in large part, to a dream or vision in which he realises that “Patrick is in Swami’s care and in Swami’s presence” (175). From Oliver’s perspective, Patrick has “got himself into a spiritual state which was very serious, so serious as to be almost ridiculous, but that nevertheless *he would be all right*” (175). Because of this use of Hindu spirituality as a sort of catch all for the very serious issues facing Patrick and Oliver the novel seems to stagnate towards the end: no matter what terrible difficulties have been proposed, Swami or God will act as guardian and, possibly, intervene to assist. Introducing an omnipotent or mystical force in this manner silences the role Isherwood envisioned for the reader as judge; suddenly, not only are Oliver’s insecurities and Patrick’s obsessive performativity no longer of great concern, but the brothers are united without a moment’s thought to the deceptions and cruelties committed by both.

There is a note of uncertainty embedded within the text about this final resolution: the vision of Swami and its effect are only apparent to Oliver and only come to the reader through his diary entries. Oliver is, like many other Isherwood characters, concerned about his ability to connect with those around him, but his concerns are deeply rooted in issues that are, perhaps, beyond the solution of a spiritual epiphany. His belief that “what unites us is the one and only thing that really matters” can be compared with Godbole’s attempt, in the final section of *A Passage to India*, to unite Mrs. Moore, a wasp, and a stone (287-8). In both situations, Hindu principles of universal unity are intended to override illusions, *Maya* in Hindu theology, of division set up by society. In Forster’s construction, however, unity through love does not succeed and the potential for unity called into question. This is not to say that Forster is a pessimistic humanist who refuses to accept the omnipotence of spiritual love, but, rather, it suggests his recognition of the



limits of such abstract solutions, at least in a fictional realm. Spiritual union is a starting point, a well-meant and beautiful gesture, but it does not reverberate outwards because it is restricted to the advanced practitioner of Vedanta.

*Meeting* has a subtle but apparent note of failed spiritual epiphany in it that reflects back through the text and creates, potentially, a sense of encounter. After Oliver has taken Sannyas he and Patrick meet for the first time following Oliver's symbolic "death;" as a sign of respect Patrick takes "the dust off" Oliver's feet (a sign of respect for Hindu monks) and Oliver, overcome with emotion, hugs him. It is a simple scene that is keyed up by Oliver's sensation that "[A]t that moment I seemed to stand outside myself and see the two of us, and Swami, and the onlookers," but underlying it is something far more important than Oliver's transformation into a monk and loss of his personal identity or Patrick's symbolic attempt at harmony. Throughout the novel, Oliver's concerns over how he will cease to exist and how this will affect his relationship with Patrick have been paramount, particularly because of Oliver's inability to communicate his new, absent identity to Patrick or his family.

In the final line of the novel, however, these concerns are brought to a close through the simple recognition that Oliver can and must be both alien and familiar to those around him, both Englishman and Hindu, of the world and out of it. Suggestions of this are made earlier in Oliver's belief that he will be sent to England as a representative of the monastery, but he fails to consider how this will thrust him back into the world he is ostensibly giving up. After Patrick takes the dust off Oliver's feet, the other onlookers respond by "smiling and murmuring, as much as to say how charming it was of Patrick to play this scene according to our local Hindu rules, and how very right and proper it was

that we two brothers should love each other” (191). With this it becomes apparent that, despite the emphasis Oliver has placed on annihilating his existent identity, there are underlying influences that cannot and should not be ignored simply to satisfy an external ideal. Suddenly, the novel takes a leap out of its focus on the differences between the brothers, turns away from Oliver’s intense uncertainty about his identity, and expands its focus into a broader questioning of what motivates concepts of identity and the validity of these forces. The atmosphere generated by the novel is one akin to a balanced “court” that can find no verdict. Its simplistic ending stimulates a sensation of incompleteness, of a lingering uncertainty that might be resolved through consideration. In reading the novel, therefore, a reader is increasingly conscious of the absence of a possible resolution and is asked to set aside the desire for conclusion and question instead how the brothers might overcome their distance and how the distance came to exist. From a critical perspective, reading *Meeting* with dependence on spiritual or purely structural cues would not take account of the interweaving of these two and the variety of other issues that extend outwards from the novel.

### ***A SINGLE MAN: THE OUTSIDER IDENTITY***

Isherwood’s focus, unlike Forster’s, is apparently on the relationships between two individuals; his novels shun the vast cast of characters common to Forster’s novels in favour of a more immediate examination of how two people can understand or interpret one another. In both *Prater* and *Meeting* this is the system under scrutiny— how do these two, brothers or friends, respond to each other and question their identities in relation to one another. In *A Single Man*, however, Isherwood stretches beyond this somewhat

limited perspective to include a larger cast of characters. This does not, however, drive him to an analysis of many relationships, but actually encloses the text far more by questioning how one individual responds to a number of others. The focus of *A Single Man* is, unsurprisingly, one man—George—who has been isolated by his sexual orientation, his nationality, his perspective on the world, and, most strikingly, the death of his partner, Jim. By removing the other in the usual Isherwood relationship, in this case Jim, the novel takes a more holistic look at the forces that constrain and mould identity in modern society. If the central question in *Prater* is “How do individuals construct an identity without being possessed?” and in *Meeting*, “Can a person remove some forces influencing their identity while maintaining others?”, then the question in *Single* is “Who is George?” Despite the apparent restrictiveness of this focus *Single* is, of the three novels, the most expansive and prophetic because all manner of identification and characterisation is called into question. It also performs Isherwood’s ideal of the dual focus and is infused with suggestions of an expanded concern throughout, not solely due to a single *bouleversement* in the text.

Central to the novel is George’s concern over existing in a highly modernised, uncertain, and divisive world. Two modern forces in particular overshadow *Single*: the Cold War and the rise of mass production and industrialisation. The Cold War in particular stands in thematically for paranoia about identity and, frequently, national identity. For George, however, existence on the fringes has driven him to considering how he would act as a terrorist to the norm. In one scene he imagines himself as “Uncle George,” a terrorist for sexual freedom who would use brute force to cause the “removal of that apartment building, the suppression of that newspaper, the retirement of that

senator” (38-9). The fears that generate the crimes he perceives against minorities are, however, “not really real . . . They can be un-thought and made to vanish” through the simple practice of routine and social conventions (45). He submits to these forces, but is consciously aware of the fallacy underlying all of these behaviours and cherishes the potential for rebellion. One colleague, who regularly attempts to rebel against the controlling forces of Cold War fear, treats George as a “fellow subverter [sic],” but he does so without realising “that George might be scared . . . He probably thinks George excuses himself from these outings for fear of being bored” (86). The irony is that George has a level of independence that might lead him to rebel, but he prefers to engage in the system and merely observe it consciously. This passivity is in response to “all those old crises of the twenties, the thirties, the war—each one of them has left its traces upon George, like an illness” and what he perceives as the “fear of survival . . . survival into a Rubble Age” (87). Thus, George represents an individual who, no matter how conscious of the crippling and homogenising effects of fear, chooses to remain embedded within it and avoid disrupting the status quo.

Mass production and urbanisation function similarly to paranoia and fear in the novel as external forces that influence George despite his disgust with their powers. The novel explores, among other things, George’s work life and reveals his abhorrence of the form modern education takes and that he must engage in as a professor. Recognising the influence of mass production in education, he comments that “the male and female raw material which is fed daily into this factory [the university], along the conveyer belts of freeways, to be processed, packaged and placed on the market” surrounds him (47). These students are told to “invest in some solid technical training” and are each

distinguished by “an oblong card slotted and slitted and ciphered by an IBM machine, expressing some poor bastard of a student’s academic identity . . . . Indeed, this card *is* his identity” (45). There is a promise in the education system, a promise of advancement, but underneath it George perceives the tendency to devalue the individual and reify the individual’s potential productivity. This tendency is even apparent in his students because “*they don’t give a shit*” about literature for its own sake, but as a tool through which they can achieve the standard aim: comfort and family (63). George feels that he “is like a man trying to sell a real diamond for a nickel, on the street . . . . The diamond is protected from all but the tiniest few, because the great hurrying majority can never stop to dare to believe that it could conceivably be real” (48). His position as an educator, therefore, is a crucial part of his identity, but is performed according to the wishes of the “hurrying majority” and cannot be substituted for the “diamond” without potential danger.

*Single* takes a very critical stance towards the forces around George, but George himself seems to remain staunchly under the sway of these forces and identifies himself partially through their lenses. Atmosphere is developed in the novel through examinations of influences like these on George and questions who George is in relation to the world around him. The most influential powers constructing his identity are his personal relationships and the ways in which he adopts numerous identities to deal with those around him. These adopted roles vary from that of a “monster” to the wise, experienced professor, but they all share the same difficulty or danger: they all prevent George from feeling that he is, in that moment, himself. It is this sensation that overrides much of the directly mimetic or fictional concerns of the text; the curiosity over who

George is and how his identity is formed outweighs the analysis of urbanisation, economics, etc.

While talking with a student, for example, the narration acknowledges that the student is focussed on

George's talking head. For it obviously *has* been talking. George realizes this with the same discomfiture he felt on the freeway, when the chauffeur figure got them clear downtown . . . . Oh yes, he knows from experience what the talking head can do . . . . But *here*, in broad daylight, during campus hours, when George should be on-stage every second, in full control of his performance! Can it be that the talking head and the chauffeur are in league? *Are they maybe planning a merger?* (54)

Clearly, here there is the "talking head" role, the "chauffeur" role, and the "professor" role, but all of these roles are perceived, apparently, by another identity entirely. It is the identity that recognises the presence of these three roles and that fears, with striking paranoia, the potential for a merger between two roles that underlies much of the novel. This identity is rarely seen, it hides in almost all public situations, and yet it is this identity that seems to acknowledge and interpret the other roles layered upon it, this is George within and according to George, but who or what is this identity and why are there other identities incorporated within or around it?

It would be wrong, however, to assign any one identity as George's "true" identity. The novel is not concerned with exposing the *real* George, but rather with questioning what roles are adopted and why. Most striking perhaps is the novel's recognition that even with George's beloved dead partner he disguised or altered aspects

of himself. Considering how he is envisioned by the children of his neighbours, George acknowledges his role as “a mean old storybook monster”, but this role “releases a part of his nature which he hated to let Jim see . . . George is ashamed of his roarings because they aren’t playacting. He does genuinely lose his temper” (21). Even with the man he loves most in the world, George felt uncomfortable acting as his emotions dictated and so finds solace, to a certain extent, in the ability or right to act out his angers more openly. Even with one of George’s old friends, Charley, he acknowledges that he adopts the role of storyteller to entertain her and finds it “fun,” but is, as ever, performing (134).

The impositions of friends, lovers, and the world at large are not necessarily evil or painful, but it does seem crucial that George remain in control of his various roles or risk losing something. While talking to Kenny, one of his students, George “can’t resist slipping into the role Kenny so temptingly offers him” (79). The role itself is that of wise old man who knows more than he will tell, but it is only successful because George accepts it himself, puts it on as it were, and remains in control of the situation, if only for a time. It is through these numerous roles that George not only expands into a fully round and fascinating character, but also expands the bounds of the novel to question if there truly is a *real* George underneath the acting, if identity can be absolute or pure.

There is, just under the surface of the plot and people of *Single*, a discussion of identity— of an identity that has been disguised and attacked so many times that it can no longer stand on its own. There is one moment, while George and Kenny are swimming naked in the sea, in which,

intent upon his own rites of purification, George staggers out one more, wide-open-armed, to receive the stunning baptism of the surf. Giving

himself to it utterly, he washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes; again and again he returns, becoming always cleaner, freer, less. He is perfectly happy by himself . . . (162)

It is through this pseudo-baptism that the reader senses most directly that George, like so many others in the novel, is most frequently only performing a role that can be dropped in favour of honesty. The sensation of freedom, however, is short lived. Brought to the surface by Kenny and forced to walk home through the lit streets George sobers and begins to regain the roles that he had briefly cleaned off. He even settles back into the role of the knowing elder by telling Kenny “You want me to tell you what I know . . . believe me—there’s nothing I’d rather do . . . But I can’t. I quite literally can’t” (176). Only now George admits to something new: he cannot tell Kenny what he knows because “*what I know is what I am* . . . I’m like a book you have to read. A book can’t read itself to you. It doesn’t even know what it’s about. I don’t know what I’m about” (176). The concerns expressed throughout over who or what influences identity, of being read correctly or comfortingly, are the concerns of the readers themselves and not of George: he knows he must be read and interpreted and does not fear it. Through the plethora of roles proposed for George, one comforting fact appears: the act of reading, call it understanding or knowing, is always an external to internal activity, but it is by no means absolute or fixed.

The character of George is not, as in real life, entirely knowable. *Single* shies away from exposing him completely even to the reader, revealing only bits and pieces of what might be considered his true identity and forcing the reader to infer the rest. As in *Meeting*, the reader is left to judge who George is amidst the maelstrom of assumed



identities. Also, as in *Prater*, it is the narrator that holds the power and can reveal what he wants when he wants. The narration of *Single* is 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited with frequent instances of free indirect discourse, carrying the reader along with the dual internal/external perspective, colliding the narrator and George repeatedly. Considering his fellow colleagues the narration slips almost imperceptibly into free indirect discourse, saying: “Christ, it is sad, sad to see on quite a few of these faces—young ones particularly—a glum, defeated look” (83). The interjection of “Christ” and the tone employed seems to come directly from George, unfiltered by the narrator. Through this narrative perspective and the numerous thematic influences the text questions modes of reading in general and ways of reading an individual cautiously. Infused in every line is the sense that George’s identity is uncertain and that the reader, by intruding is, in a sense, asked to consider her role as reader and the narrator’s role as narrator. Vitality is apparent in the focus on the specifics of George’s life coupled with the concern over how his situation reflects social difficulties surrounding him. Prophecy appears in the same concerns; there is an unspeakable atmosphere of uncertainty and fear over the construction of identity that is suggested by the themes of paranoia, mass production, and narrative uncertainty, but that expands beyond these into a broader interrogation of texts as modes of understanding and the experience of modern life. The potential encounters are innumerable, but they are all charged with a complex analytical dialogue about the issue of identification.

## ISHERWOOD AND FORSTER: THE NECESSITY OF READING ENCOUNTER

The central tenet of Forsterian fiction is that the function of a literary work should be disguised in the familiar trappings of fiction already widely known and accepted *and* should remain untrammelled by the author's input. For Isherwood, however, the act of disguising utility ceases to be a central goal and becomes nearly extraneous to the function of literature. In other words, where Forster believes prophecy should not be purposefully written into a text but, rather, occur naturally through a distancing between novelist and text, Isherwood attempts to command prophecy and direct readers to it, shying away from concealment or abstraction. Forster's insistence on the unforced nature of prophecy can be seen as an attempt to infuse fiction with an otherworldly or spiritual power and that Forster acknowledges indirectly that prophecy must be constructed or written into a text to a certain extent. Therefore, the relationship between Isherwood's work and Forster's is apparent, but with Isherwood dispensing somewhat with the "unspeakable" aspect of prophecy with the intention of confronting his reader more directly. This confrontation, also, is intended less as a reciprocal encounter than in Forster's aesthetics because the expansion of "vitality" is not intended to expand into the reader's experience of the world or concerns, but rather to prove the author's ability to find joy in all manner of life.

Considering the three Isherwood novels in progression reveals how indebted he is to Forster's ideas, but also how students very often, in attempting emulation, overstep the mark set by their teacher. *Prater Violet* is a near-perfect realisation of Forster's concept of the novel in *Aspects*; the, supposedly, round character is set off by a flat character, the plot flows quite convincingly from cause to result, and the image of Bergmann's family

and the occasional reminders of the political situation in Austria approach the intensity of rhythm in their variety and weighted suggestions. Expansion in the early portion of the text is, however, limited. The concerns, for the most part, are those of a select few Europeans in 1934 and the narrator-character relationship is too intimate to permit the implication of the reader. Isherwood hits every mark established by *Aspects*, but relies too heavily on the sensations and memories of his real experience with Viertel to achieve expansion beyond the historical. That is, until he seems to reconsider his narrator and, by implication, the unsettled relationship between how one perceives and what is perceived: Bergmann through Isherwood's eyes and Bergmann through his own perception. The final exposition by the narrator of the fear caused by the troubles in Europe appears to be an explicit attempt at prophecy, but the implications of this moment of realisation and revelation for the reader are far more expansive. As in *Meeting* and *Single* it is the position of the narrator or protagonist, particularly the variety and complexity of modes of understanding available to them, that summons up universality. Unlike Forster, Isherwood is not concerned with demonstrating the limitations of tolerance or love, but rather with questioning how these two attitudes are expressed and felt as forms of understanding.

This results, surprisingly, in a similar outcome in the works of the two authors. Forster's exposition of the failure of tolerance due to the overwhelming desire for intimacy and understanding is strikingly reminiscent of the underpinning suggestion in *A Single Man* and *A Meeting by the River*. The difference between the two propositions is that in Forster's works characters can be known completely by the reader, following his suggestion in *Aspects*, whereas in Isherwood's novels the limitations of perspective are

extended to the reader as well. Forster's novels, therefore, stick to the concept that fiction, though reflective of life and essentially mimetic, functions with its own rules; Isherwood applies the rules of real life to fiction more explicitly. The source of this disparity can be traced to Isherwood's early success as an autobiographical writer—which mode, though strictly speaking fictional in Isherwood's case, contains the novel within his own limited perspective. Recognising the importance of inference as an approach to autobiographical writing, Isherwood became fascinated with the concept of written points of view and their influence on the finished novel.

*A Meeting by the River* and *A Single Man* demonstrate that Isherwood turned his attention away from the proselytizing evident at the end of *Prater* and began to consider the more complex issues discussed above concerning perspective and construction of identity. What is less certain is how divisible *Single* and *Meeting* are from Isherwood's own interests. The motivation behind Isherwood's fiction after *Prater Violet* ceases to be primarily autobiographical and engages in a broader exploration of perspective in general, but the use of themes and political issues suggests a pointed use of expansion for the author's personal purposes. A reading or criticism of encounter, therefore, becomes even more crucial in the case of Isherwood's novels because the reader must disentangle her own experience of the text from Isherwood's intentions.

Of particular interest to Isherwood are the influences of fear, modernisation, relationships, and the past on the development of a perspective and, its companion, identity. The comment in *Single*, "As if there weren't far too much understanding in the world already," suggests that, whether in fiction or real life, comprehending another individual entirely is not only impossible, but also undesirable (123). Interestingly,

according to Isherwood “not-understanding, the readiness to remain at cross-purposes, is in itself a kind of intimacy” (82). Forster’s ideal philosophy, in which all people tolerate each other and attempt closer connection when possible, is too idealistic for Isherwood, particularly during the Cold War years. He pushes the issue of human connection back a step and addresses it by suggesting the otherness of all individuals—not only to the outside world, but to themselves as well. In *Single* this is most apparent in George’s insecurity and confusion over his base identity, while in *Meeting* this appears through Oliver’s concerns over losing himself in Patrick, his failed attempt to annihilate himself, and Patrick’s constant performance of the variety of identities he has adopted. In both novels, not understanding—the thrill of disagreement, secrecy, sudden recognition, and the acceptance of the individual mystery—is a far more powerful position because through it the individual recognises her own embedded mystery.

This perspective and suggestion can be read through a close examination of the narrative position in Isherwood’s novels and depends more on the chapters related to technique in *Aspects* than on the exposition of prophecy. They are more akin to Isherwood’s idea of vitality and come across not through a felt, unconscious sensation, but through examination and conscious consideration of the wider implications of the novels’ suggestions. As with the final revelation of *Prater* in which the process of the sublime moment is made apparent for the reader, Isherwood’s novels put their ideas and concerns up front for the reader to recognise. Is Isherwood’s commitment to “people who don’t fit into the social pattern” and “to engage to say, however indirectly, what does it [the novel] signify” too strong to allow for the non-referential quality of prophecy? (*Isherwood* 48, 60) Or is Isherwood’s “vitality” a more realistic and less nebulous version

of prophecy that provides the same critical distance through the implication of a broader ramification for the novel's commentary? It is imperative that questions like these are asked when reading Isherwood or Forster's works; not only do their personal theories of fiction bear some relevance to their fictional works, but the current theoretical debate surrounding literary ethics demands it. In the readings of *Passage* and Isherwood's novels carried out above there has been reference to, but never reliance on, an ethical commitment or failure within the texts. Indeed, the reliance on questioning the ethics of these texts has stilted interpretation and created an atmosphere in which the experience of reading, its subtleties and uncertainties, have been replaced by reliance on determinative and purely political analyses.

Using the example of Isherwood's novel *Prater Violet*, it is apparent that as a novel it has numerous potential readings and that in acknowledging the encounter between reader and text—or reader and narrator—the text expands beyond its mimetic and authorial bounds. As mentioned above, the expansion of prophecy is hindered somewhat by Isherwood's use of his own experiences, aspects of his own identity, and the novel's stilted examination of Bergmann (Viertel). This aside, however, there is a clear encounter between reader and text when the narrator-author reveals: "I was glad I had never told Bergmann about J." because immediately the realm of the text is torn down to reveal the much larger realm at play (125). In Attridge's terms, this moment reveals that there has been a norm operating subconsciously in the reader—she has probably assumed the narrator is relating his life somewhat in full—and pressure is exerted on this boundary by the revelation that the narrator has been purposefully deceiving or withholding information from the reader. *Passage* has a similar moment

when Mrs. Moore reappears in Godbole's spiritual endeavour and the wasp is recalled without consciousness of the original association between the two (283-4). The reader is suddenly confronted with a feeling of synchronicity tainted by human divisiveness and cruelty and is made to recall the hope of the initial chapters, the potential that was so apparent, and was destroyed almost entirely between the two moments.

In both situations the experience of reading these passages transcends what is written on the page and suggests an interpretation outside of what is explicitly in the text. In the case of Isherwood's novel the encounter produced in this moment is one of distrust, not in a simple form, but to the extent that all the narrator-author has produced to that moment is suddenly suspect and the distinction between narrator and author becomes less and less stable. Isherwood himself (the author and not the narrator) comes into question and the nature of biographical—and autobiographical—writing is analysed without direct reference to the text. The confrontation is productive and emotional, the narrator-author lays himself bare to demonstrate something to his reader, but it is the sensation of discovering a long established falsehood that lives on in the reader's mind. *Passage*, on the other hand, expands the immediate situation and explores feelings of optimism and hope, their placement and validity, as well as the role symbolic actions have in genuinely achieving understanding or tolerance. Beyond these readings there is also a sense in which these encounters produce a response in the reader that grants the text a second life of critical and personal responses. In the same process in which a reader may suddenly become conscious of the importance of spiritual divisions and actions within *Passage* or of the narrator's constrained perspective in *Prater*, she may acknowledge the necessity of her initial feelings of attachment, affection, astonishment,

etc. in reading. These, more than anything else, may suggest or expose underlying concerns and currents in the novel that would have otherwise been left unexplored. Texts breed ever more readings once they encounter a reader and suggest, through their very existence, the importance of texts in general as more than objects or doctrines.

Readings, some of which have already been mentioned, of *Passage*—not to mention of most works of literature—tend to rely on a pre-existing ethical, political, or social construct that can be applied to determine if the work is feminist, misogynist, racist, inclusive, ethical, or unethical. In criticism that attempts to refigure a work already established as one of these, the technique used is one of repudiation, of reversal for the sake of seeing the opposite perspective in the novel. In what sense, however, is it ethical to assign a status to a text simply to explain away or castigate the attitudes expressed or subsumed therein? The critical benefit of focussing on prophecy, vitality, or the literary is the avoidance of any and all absolutist judgments that might stifle analysis in the future. In the readings of Forster and Isherwood's novels what should come across is the importance of reconsidering established modes of analysis; these texts—*Passage* in particular—are in danger of falling under the castigation or celebration of a specific ideology that has little to do with them. This is always a danger when a text rich with images, characters, issues, themes, and symbols is studied by minds trained with the restrictiveness of the liberal imagination, minds that will not acknowledge the underlying and crucial uncertainty of all cultural issues and artefacts. All readings have, at their core, an individual engaged in the process of encountering a text: what could be more useful or powerful than the impressions created through this act? What has been lacking for quite some time in the field of literary ethics is the recognition of how a novel creates a feeling



that may (or may not) respond to absolutist categorisations. Encountering a novel should not be treated as an opportunity to pass judgment, whether positive or negative, but rather to expand the field of inquiry and the reader's consciousness in the hopes of finding new territory and new ideas for inquiry, to allow for expansion by encounter. The ultimate aim of understanding encounter, therefore, is gaining consciousness of potential readings and unforeseen commentaries and ideas that will, ultimately, contribute to a greater understanding of individual texts and fiction as a whole.

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