

*La mel es més dolça que la sang: Fiction as Magical Intervention -
a reading of E.M. Forster's The Life to Come.*

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Abstract: Drawing on Deborah Bird Rose's notion that there is a need for a magical intervention on the part of individuals if humanity is to survive, this paper will consider how the ethical interventions of fiction writers are acts of imagination that bring about a new idea of the past (history), the human being (memory) and our own Life to Come (the mythic).

The paper explores a short story by E M Forster. *The Life To Come*, written in 1922 and published fifty years later in 1972, is set in the eye of an historical encounter both post-colonial and queer. Forster's story gives voice to an alternative historical space often made invisible; it represents one of, what Ashis Nandy calls, *History's Forgotten Doubles*. *The Life to Come* is therefore a marker within a cultural discourse about injustice and the past, that continues to emerge, and write the world: it shifts the contents of our histories and memories through the invocation of myth. In the second part of the paper, I explore recent examples of this literary tradition.

Key Words: Ahistorical, Forster, Heteronormative, Post-colonial, Queer, Myth.

This paper explores the idea that fiction has the capacity to redress the wrongs of history because it can speak on behalf of the silenced and the oppressed. At the heart of the paper is a powerful and unsettling short story written by E M Forster in 1922, the same year that Joyce's *Ulysses* was published. However *The Life to Come* remained unpublished for fifty years. Forster called his story "violent and wholly unpublishable" (Forster: 1972, p. 14), and indeed, it is charged with salient anger that rails at the injustice of Forster's age against homosexuals. The story relates one poignant sexual encounter that takes place between a South American chieftain, Vithobai, "the wildest, strongest, most stubborn of all the inland chieftains" (Forster: 1972 p. 95) and the young priest with whom he falls in love, Paul Pinmay, who is in all ways, Vithobai's inferior. In a single night their passion transforms into rejection. Then, in an entropic structure from Night to Evening, then into Day and finally, Morning, we ride into the wake of the initial event, to the deaths of both these characters, ten years later.

Forster sets his story in the past, during the early colonization and Christianising of South America. However *The Life To Come* is not about a documented historical event, quite the contrary; Forster was writing into the spaces of history. It is the absence of such a story from history that brought *his* story about. And the tone of the text, its expression of rage and a powerful cynicism, is testament to Forster's purpose: to address what he saw as an injustice. It is clear he saw that a connection exists between the past and the present: the values and practices of the past can be used to inform and justify those in the present.

In my view, what Forster was intending to do was to create a magical intervention into history. Inserting a metaphorical screwdriver into the heteronormative hard wiring of historical discourse, and "...More from my heart than anything else I have been able to turn [out]" (19), Forster hoped to create a space for the other, the omitted voices that are not part of dominant narratives, which he refers to as a "bleak ritualised offstage chorus of spiritual and commercial oppressors" (Forster: 1927, p. 19) that naturalise historical orthodoxy. Further, by writing into the gaps, a tale of those silenced *others*, it is possible that Forster believed the narrative of the past and the mirror image it provides us could be transformed, as if by magic.

That he gave up publishing fiction suggests that he came to believe the enterprise of literature, as ethical intervention into the silences of history, (which constructs the narrow human present), was not viable. Perhaps he felt the story would not be listened to, that is, understood and accepted. In time, the stories he wished to communicate would be valued, but in his time he could not expect that stories dealing with homosexuality and criticizing the collusion between imperialism and Christianity would be published. Further, "Given Forster's deep inner honesty and artistic integrity, his gradual acceptance of himself as a homosexual made the decision to abandon the writing of fiction for publication heroic but almost inevitable" (Stallybrass in Forster: 1972, pp. 16-17).

In an attempt to "think other-wise about history" (Rose: 2008, p. 157), Deborah Bird Rose, who once titled an article, *What if the Angel of History was a Dog?* (in the way of a response to Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History'), discusses the struggle to "resist reconciling her learning, and... desire to understand and communicate what [she] has learned, with a 'modern, empirical and scientific' anthropology... I worry," she says, "about whether my words are sustaining ...respect...or ...opening gaps wherein the awesome can be tamed" (158). History, that Baconian scientific rational categorizing enterprise, outcome of the Enlightenment, does not deal with angels or dogs – neither is represented as a subject for history. Thus neither exists. And we might well wonder therefore – if that angel-made-dog were, as Rose suggests, howling, how would we hear its pain; since it is both invisible and inaudible? She writes:

I came to realize I know this song; I have listened to it and sung it many times. From the Babylonian victory right up until today, the song cried out the anguish of exile and diaspora, of those who can never go home again...if we could better hear the waves of their [animals'] agony we would know... that for the rest of our lives we would hear a growing chorus of increasingly diverse voices. (Rose: 2006. Pp. 154-5)

It is not just angels and dogs that are unrepresented. There are, as Ashis Nandy points out, “millions of people [who] still live outside ‘history’. They *do* have theories of the past; they *do* believe that the past is important and shapes the present and the future, but they also recognize, confront and live with a past different to that constructed by historians and historical consciousness” (Nandy: 1995, p. 45). Furthermore, he suggests, historical consciousness, intrinsically connected to the imperialist and colonial enterprise, is singular: “It is my suspicion, broadly speaking, cultures tend to be historical in only one way, whereas each ahistorical culture is so in its own unique style” (47). The implication is that history is an homogenizing and exclusionary discipline and that all ventures practitioners of history attend to can not help but be reified to “an agglutinating, schematic ideology of astounding coarseness.” (Alonso, I. and Ortega, M: 2008).

Intrigued by Nandy, Rose sits with, listens to and reports that trees and dingoes become subjects when exploring the sense of the ahistorical in Aboriginal culture. Rose’s work is published, acknowledged and valued; as such it has the capacity to shift cultural consciousness and create possibilities of alternatives to history, extending our understandings of human consciousness which turns out to be far more diverse than accounted for by either scientific rationalism or myth. But Rose is not Forster. She is not a homosexual, writing a story about homosexual history(s) in early C20th England.

There is also a powerful congruence between Nandy’s analysis of history with Barthes’ conception of myth as a bourgeois juggernaut that absorbs all difference through a universalizing homogenization. “The petit bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other” (Barthes: 2000. p. 151). Both writers trace a plethora of contemporary injustices to the justifications provided by history or myth or a blurring of the two.

Inga Clendinnen however sees a distinction between history and myth. She critiques former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard’s vision of Australian identity, and associated values, as based on a version of the past that is in fact mythic, not historical. She says, “I was surprised to find myself in sympathy with much of his speech, even with his longing for a clear celebratory story of how Australia got to be the fine country it undoubtedly is” (Clendinnen: 2006, p.2). But Howard “will find it difficult to arrive at his *objective record of achievement*...in human affairs there is never one narrative. There is always a counter story, and usually several...” (3). Later Clendinnen suggests, “...Perhaps what Mr Howard needs is not history...but legends” (8). Howard seeks an unquestionable, mythic spirit embodied through the white, male, Anglo-mateship of Gallipoli and The National Project of Federation, but this is one way at least that history with its scientific method and emphasis on the empirical differs and ‘disappoints.’

Yet, as Clendinnen implies, history as science offers a logic that contextualizes humanity in a metanarrative of linear time and progress: in the end it optimistically prophesizes a better future: the life to come is attainable. And given that, “Those who control the past own the present” (Orwell in Nandy: 1996. p54), the Prime Minister was looking in the right direction when he was looking backward.

Scholars like Rose have attempted to step away from this desire for control of what Nandy calls the “the historical viewpoint [which] has been complicit with many new forms of violence and exploitation amongst many other horrors” (44). Forster would have agreed and he stands in a remarkable position because he embodies the virtue of diversity: homosexual, writing about civil liberties and sexuality *and* a bourgeois, he is at the interstices of the colonial and the colonized. He embodies the ahistorical and is therefore able to achieve in his writings “*moments of freedom from history*” (46).

Perhaps his time spent in India, translating the Vedas, helped him to frame his opposition to the ‘truths’ of linear history. He recognized and developed an understanding of a relationship between history and the social function of myth, “Mythologisation is also moralization” (47) and an awareness that “...history fears ambiguity” (48), especially because it “includes mythic elements ...but ...it can not accept that history can be dealt with from outside history” (50).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Max Planck was theorizing quantum theory and Freud had published *An Interpretation of Dreams*. In that first decade too, Picasso and the Cubists were determining a mode of painting that gave voice to the notion that “The truth [representation] is a lie” (Picasso in Conrad: 1998, p161) In England, Victoria had died, and Forster had completed most of his novels. Though it was not until after World War I, in 1924, that *A Passage to India* was published, both it and *Maurice* were already near completion in 1914. Forster’s social and historical context, an Englishman and a European, at the birth of modernism, was conflicted: this was also the time and culture that vilified, tried, sentenced and imprisoned Oscar Wilde for being homosexual. Wilde died in exile three years after his release from jail, at the age of forty six in 1900.

So it is probable that Forster had begun to turn aside from writing and publishing fiction even as early as 1914. His engagement with fighting for civil liberties reveals his belief that fiction was not enough to change the injustices in society and “my patience with ordinary people has given out” (Forster in Stallybrass p.16). He continued to write short stories but no novels. Possibly he still felt that even the act of writing fiction had a social purpose, but his only audience was a carefully selected group of trusted friends such as Christopher Isherwood and Lytton Strachey.

One collection of short stories that represents his efforts, like *Maurice*, (his novel of homosexual love that challenges and transcends class) remained unpublished until after his death in 1970. This is *The Life to Come and other Stories*. About a third of the contents in this collection deal with issues of sexuality, but without the viability of publication the stories of those ‘others’ remained invisible for fifty years; thus they had no place in human memory and they did not act to shift human consciousness. In effect they remained silent, ahistorical sleepers, both at the centre of history: imperialist Britain, and, to what is paradoxically central to human identity – sexuality. Forster felt that the purpose of prose was to find ways to generate passion within the reader but, “Every institution and vested interest is against such a search: organised religion, the State, the family in its economic aspect, have nothing to gain, and it is only when outward prohibitions weaken that it can proceed: history conditions it to that extent [and]... If human nature does alter it will be because individuals manage to look at themselves in a new way” (Forster in *Aspects of the*

Novel: 1927). In my view, Forster gave up on fiction as a means too difficult to use to bring about this new way of looking at ourselves. Perhaps he had lost faith in the capacity of society to be qualitatively changed through fiction. Even in the more liberal climate of the 1960's, when he was still making adjustments to the manuscript of *Maurice*, Forster still refused to publish.

The Life to Come's Paul Pinmay is not just a weak individual who has chosen to become a patsy of 'civilisation'; his choice, represented in this prophetic text, represents a stand against diversity of culture, identity, sexuality and experience that Forster condemns. Indeed Pinmay's is a stand against the sweetness of life. He sides with his own internalised, brutal authority structures rather than act with bravery and live with love unconditionally. Forster, however, believes that love and creativity are transcendent over family or any other institution. A saying in Catalan sums up his perspective: *La mel es mes dolca que la sang*: the honey is sweeter than the blood. The small-minded, the ungenerous, the narrow and unloving are bit players in *The Life to Come*, which is above all, a pagan homage to the 'wildness' of life. Forster was not aiming to domesticate the past but to represent an ahistorical, disruptive truth that queer lives are fundamental to who human beings have been, are and will be. And queer lives are fundamental to living in dignity.

The two key characters, Paul and Vithobai, exist in the vast and dark forest of difference, a "wondrous night web - all the fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family [you are] born into or the headlines of the day" (Ondatjee: 1987, p.151). This "night web... of human order" eludes rationalization; it is outside labels and categories. "Love had been born somewhere in the forest... Trivial or immortal, it had been born to two human bodies as a midnight cry. Impossible to tell where the cry had come, so dark was the forest... so vast was the forest" the story begins. In a hut a light is lit to reveal "the pagan limbs and the golden ruffled haired of a young man", calm and dignified, smiling, and surrounded by red flowers. The hut he is in lies at the roots of an "aged tree", a stream "sings outside" this "remote, romantic spot" (Forster: 1972, p.94). But within moments the young man is assailed by guilt. By the end of the story red flowers of joy and passion are an echo of a lost world. They are replaced by "a curious skein of blue flowers threaded round a knife", the colour of despair. The "young man", Paul Pinmay's hair is now sparse, no longer golden and his cowardice has trumped his spirit. He is "fussy" and rebukes the dying Vithobai for lying "stark naked" and exposed on his roof,

"You can not possibly lie on hard asphalt," he says.

"I have found that I can", is the poignant reply (108).

Vithobai has after all been witness to the destruction of the forests and his culture; civilization now bathes everything in a "whitish light that seemed to penetrate every recess" (103), and the people have lost their culture and their health:

"Can't you grasp, Barnabas, that under God's permission certain evils attend civilization... Five years ago there was not a single hospital in this valley." "Nor any disease, I understand."

“There was abundant disease. Vice and superstition... the cost of civilization is worth it,” says Paul (104).

Vithobai, renamed Barnabas, has also changed. From an enigmatic and powerful figure “impassive and unfriendly behind his amulets and robes” (95); then as “this gracious and bare limbed boy whose only ornaments were scarlet flowers” (96) who visits Paul in his jungle hut where they make love, he is robbed of his dignity. He submits when Paul rebukes him for “wearing but little” (100). Forster describes him: “A cincture of bright silks supported his dagger and floated in the fresh wind when he ran. He has silver armlets and a silver necklet...his eyes flashed like a demon, for he was unaccustomed to rebuke...” (100). He is demeaned - clothed in “soiled European clothes” (100), and in Paul’s eyes he becomes “an affable and rather weedy Christian with a good knowledge of English” (102). After ten years, Vithobai, impoverished and landless, awaits his death from (the introduced disease of) tuberculosis. When Paul delivers a confused and heartlessly simplistic diatribe about repentance, Vithobai replies with a world-weary insight: “I repent. I do not repent...I forgive, I do not forgive, both are the same. I am good. I am evil. I am pure I am foul. I am this or that...” (109). He says, “The life to come... I had forgotten it...And we shall meet in it, you and I?” In characteristic weakness Paul says that they will, but “properly” and, as Paul leans over him, Vithobai draws of his last energy and stabs Paul through the heart. Then, on the rooftop parapet of his small house, he dies himself. In the final scene Vithobai rises in spirit. Renewed and like a predatory bird of vengeance, “...a great chief again” (111), he begins pursuit of the ‘terrified shade’ of Paul into the spaces beyond time and history, spaces where the empirical does not reach.

It is this mythic, universal dimension to the story that is at the heart of its power to disrupt heteronormative fixed identities as naturalized through historical discourse. *The Life to Come* is therefore a powerful defense for the diversity of sexuality. Further it demonstrates that fiction does have the capacity to intervene into history on behalf of the other. The effect of this is at once magical and transformative. If Forster did lose faith in writing stories for the public, he was mistaken. Fiction acts as an ethical intervention on the memory of *ourselves* that we have inherited. Like alchemy, our understanding of what it is to be human is transformed. “That narrative”, says Judith Butler, “is not capturable by a category or it may only be capturable by a category for a time. Our life histories are histories of becoming”, (Butler: 2004, p. 80). This is why Forster has used the prophetic voice of myth to write otherwise of our humanity, enlarging its meaning. His was a pre-emptive strike for sexual diversity written at a time when silence was mistaken for survival. This alone makes a story like *The Life to Come* remarkable and of enduring relevance.

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