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Only Connecting?: E. M. Forster and Empire Broadcasting

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Each year, in order to celebrate the British Broadcasting Corporation's history of public service broadcasting-- and to pay tribute to its first director-general, John Reith, who established this ethos of public service-- the BBC invites a "leading figure" to deliver the Reith Lectures in order to "advance public understanding and debate about significant issues of contemporary interest" (*About Reith*). The lectureship is arguably one of the most prestigious awards in broadcasting; the honor includes a significant stipend, preparation time, worldwide distribution, and virtual *carte blanche* in terms of content. In 1993 Edward Said accepted the invitation and chose to address the topic of "Representations of the Intellectual." In the introduction to the collection of his Reith Lectures, Said reflects on his experience at the microphone but also on previous incarnations of the series:

I had heard some of them over the air- I particularly remember Toynbee's series in 1950- as a boy growing up in the Arab world, where the BBC was a very important part of our life; even today phrases like "London said this morning" are a common refrain in the Middle East. They are always used with the assumption that "London" tells the truth. Whether this view of the BBC is only a vestige of colonialism I cannot tell, yet it is also true that in England and abroad the BBC has a position in public life enjoyed neither by government agencies like the Voice of America nor by the American networks, including CNN. (ix)¹

Said's pithy reflections on both his childhood experiences and those of contemporary listeners in

the Middle East point to a number of tensions surrounding the foreign reception of the BBC. On the one hand, Said captures one of the strengths of the medium-- its ability to create a sense of intimate address which lends itself to broadcasting becoming "a very important part of our life." The BBC is also praised for its "position in public life," because of its independence from government agencies (the Voice of America) or even multinational corporations like CNN. In other words, the BBC is trusted insofar as it cultivates a seemingly neutral treatment of topics or events. On the other hand, Said remains skeptical of the veracity of the service-- as he points out, this trust could be unwarranted, a "vestige of colonialism," or a residue of the paternalistic discourse of the colonizer. In even this short analysis, specific to the BBC, Said captures something central to the understanding of the medium of radio more generally, that it is simultaneously experienced as intimate and strangely foreign.

Although he does not specifically mention E. M. Forster in his lectures, Said makes a number of arguments that resonate with many of Forster's positions. This is somewhat surprising given that, despite Forster's overwhelming popularity with Indian writers, Said's work is largely dismissive of *A Passage to India*. In *Culture and Imperialism*, for example, Said argues that "Forster's India is so affectionately personal and so remorselessly metaphysical that his view of Indians as a nation contending for sovereignty with Britain is not politically very serious, or even respectful" (204). According to Said's analysis, the novel in Forster's hands can only register the crisis of empire without coming down firmly on the side of the oppressed; or, worse, in *Orientalism*, the novel leaves its readers "with a sense of the pathetic distance still separating 'us' from an Orient destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West" (244). Certainly Forster is open, in his broadcasts, to criticism along similar lines—he does talk about culture "our end" as opposed to culture "your end" in addition to arguing that his friend Masood, for example, had "another way of looking at life- the Oriental, and, within the Oriental, the Moslem" (SE 200). To stop here and dismiss Forster as yet another Orientalist is to miss a good deal, however. Forster stresses again and again a diversity of opinion, arguing, for example, that the works he reviewed "suggest that there are several Englands as well as several

Indias” (SE 186-7). Despite occasional use of keywords that are rightfully suspect for furthering Manichean thinking, Forster’s account of Indian culture and thought is much more nuanced than many critics of his fiction have realized.

Forster, as critic-- but especially one who claimed to stand for art for art’s sake-- made some surprising recommendations to his listeners. Despite his frequent statements that he had no interest in politics, he approvingly discussed and recommended Marxist fiction. For example, about Tarashankar Banerji’s novel he observes:

The action of Epoch’s End takes place in Calcutta, during the tragic winter of 1942-43. Famine and squalor and profiteering, bags of rice in the godowns, while the poor starve outside...the hero...will help to inaugurate the new age, and to overthrow the capitalism in which he almost acquiesced. It is a documentary novel with a purpose, and belongs to a class of fiction which originated in Russia and has now spread over the world. It does not reach or desire to reach a high artistic level, but it is sincere and warm-hearted. Tarashankar Banerji is a member of the Progressive Writers Association (SE 358).

The commentary criticizes the novel in so far as it has failed “to reach a high artistic level” but aside from this gripe, Forster describes in a sympathetic light not only the politics of the novel, but the situation that gave birth to it as well. Forster’s reference to the Progressive Writers Association points to his ardent support of a group of Indian writers organized in the 1930s to revolt against social inequality, including—explicitly—foreign rule. The group included writers that Forster discussed in numerous broadcasts, such as Ahmed Ali and Mulk Raj Anand, both of whom Forster helped get published. Furthermore, Forster not only advertised the group’s journal, *Indian Writing*, on air, but—revealing his close relationship to members of the group—did so from proofs of the first issue.

Forster’s relationship to politics was more complicated than has been realized—on the one hand, he claimed to be more concerned with art and to regret the political nature of much writing in the 30s and 40s, while on the other he supported the same writing by using his power to make sure it was published and by discussing it in his broadcasts. In short, Forster was stubbornly independent in thought, corresponding in large part to Said’s articulation of the role of the intellectual as one “whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-

opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug" (11). In a move paradigmatic of Forster's broadcasting career-- only three years after the Toynbee series recollected by Said-- Forster rejected an invitation to deliver the Reith Lectures. This refusal of Forster's was part of a larger pattern in which he avoided domestic broadcasting, citing social and political inequities in Britain with which he did not wish to be associated.

After nine successful broadcasts on the Eastern Service over the course of 1940-41, Forster was given his own monthly 14 minute program titled "Some Books" in which he reviewed new books and, occasionally, art exhibitions, concerts, and plays. The series lasted from 1941 to shortly after India gained independence in 1947. The ephemeral nature of most of Forster's broadcasts consigned his pronunciation, tone, emphasis, and timing (audible only in sound recordings) to the wind, but the typescripts of his broadcasts stand as records of the content and sometimes graphically suggest some of the aforementioned features.² Fortunately, Forster published revised versions of many of his Talks in a collection of his nonfiction, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951). Other Talks are collected in the Abinger Edition of *The Hill of Devi and Other Indian Writings* (1983) and, more recently, two collections of selected works published in 2008, *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster: A Selected Edition 1929-1960 (SE)* and *The Creator as Critic and Other Writings (CC)*.³ According to B. J. Kirkpatrick's helpful bibliography, 4 of the 61 scripts from the "Some Books" series have yet to be recovered. While not complete, the collection of typescripts nevertheless constitutes a significant sample of his output. Thanks to the recent publication of many of these manuscripts, 69 out of Forster's 87 non-domestic broadcasts were examined for this essay.

Far from reinforcing a predominant centrifugal model of empire, Forster's broadcasts reveal how programming designed for the colonies served as a model for later domestic programming and, more generally, how a more nuanced approach to empire, one characterized by exchange-- though certainly not equitable exchange-- is necessary to account for the network of people and texts involved in the BBC's Eastern Service. First, it will be useful to review how

broadcasting was envisioned as a tool to achieve the objectives of policymakers at the BBC and Colonial Office. This background shows how John Reith in particular saw Empire Broadcasting as a venue for imperial propaganda, transmitting material carefully controlled and crafted at home to subjects in far-flung colonies. Forster's 1940s broadcasts are then explored as a case study to see how one particular broadcaster worked within and sometimes against the policies and ideologies of imperial radio.

The Fantasy of Wireless Control

“London calling to the faraway towns”
- The Clash (1979)

As Raymond Williams points out about new media, “virtually all technical study and experiment are undertaken within already existing social relations and cultural forms, typically for purposes that are already in general foreseen” (120). Experiments with wireless broadcasting are no exception, with Italian experimenter and businessman Guglielmo Marconi's wireless telegraphy marketed to the British government specifically as a means of keeping the empire in close and immediate contact. Early experimentation with wireless telegraphy was cast as a means of allowing Britain's maritime fleet to stay in contact with the homeland, and thus to ensure their continuing naval superiority. Furthermore, western Ireland served as the base for many of Marconi's transmissions, initially directed to Britain, demonstrating the usefulness of wireless for keeping the colonies in touch with the homeland. When the technology for audio broadcasting was developed in 1920, it too inherited surrounding social relations and cultural forms, including (among many others) the structures of Britain's economic, political, and social exploitation of its colonies. More specifically, the twin pressures to keep the colonial elite in touch with the motherland and to cultivate a native elite to help translate British rule (*à la* Thomas Macaulay's infamous “Minute on Indian Education”) were both inherited by broadcasting.

At first, broadcasting seemed to be an ideal channel for cultural transmission from London to the empire. A 1917 poem by V. C. Jewell, published in a Marconi magazine, makes this fantasy of remote-control imperialism clear:

My messages are broadcast- seek not a chosen few,
 But fall alike upon the ears of Christian, Pagan, Jew.
 I span the raging oceans,
 Safe from their wild emotions. (qtd. in Young 54)

For this poet, radio created the distinct possibility for control from afar in that it presented the West with the ability to launch cultural material into “wild” lands without the attendant dangers of face-to-face interaction. The poem’s placement in a Marconi magazine is no coincidence—wireless telegraphy had been successfully marketed for its ability to keep the homeland in touch with distant outposts. One of the Marconi company’s advertising taglines played on the rhythm of Morse code as well as conceptions of the body politic when it claimed to be “The Pulse of the Empire.” Not surprisingly, this model was precisely what John Reith, the first Director of the BBC, had in mind; in 1923 he reflected, “I should like to organize Indian broadcasting from here” (qtd. in Awasthy 1). Reith encountered two major obstacles, in addition to the technical difficulties of long-range broadcasting. As G. C. Awasthy writes, Reith’s plan was more difficult to implement than he first imagined as India, like America and England, already had a flourishing amateur radio scene replete with music, news, and children’s programming. India was also a land of many languages. As the 1930 *BBC Yearbook* puts it, over time there was a growing awareness on the part of the BBC of, “the complexity of the broadcasting problem in a country that is really a heterogeneous continent” (133). The second obstacle was one that plagued Reith continuously, namely funding. By 1932 the BBC offered limited Empire broadcasting, directed at keeping expatriates in touch with the homeland, but Reith continually complained that the Colonial Office failed to see the political possibilities of broadcasting. Because funding was short, the Empire Service primarily replayed material developed for the domestic audience.

The Empire Service was, in short, realized along the lines initially suggested—as a centrifugal force relaying programming designed for the domestic audience-- during much of the thirties. Despite Reith’s dreams of a more robust Empire service and the existence of educational efforts aimed at creating a class of Indians who could translate between the two cultures, it was not until the broadcasting practices of Italy and Germany began to generate complaints from colonial administrators that the BBC set out to reconsider their model. Both Italy and Germany

had extended the range of their short-wave transmissions during the interwar years and were broadcasting propaganda to the Middle East, India, and other areas in languages native to the destination of their broadcasts. Italy's Arabic service was of particular concern to the British, prompting the establishment of the BBC Arabic service in 1937. French imperial broadcasting followed on similar lines: although established in 1931, it was not until 1939 that the service was revamped, re-branded, and reinforced, with additional transmitters erected in Tunis and Algiers (August 96).

Not only did the language of transmission receive reconsideration, but their concept of audience was significantly altered as well. No longer aimed exclusively at the British expatriate, Arabic programmer S H. Perowne describes the new audience as "drawn almost entirely from the executive class. That is to say, government officials, school teachers, students and men and women of leisure and means... It is in the hands of this class that the destinies of their countries must lie for some time to come" (qtd. in Briggs 143). The establishment of the BBC Arabic Service is paradigmatic of the reconceptualization of overseas broadcasting in the late 1930s, as other customized programming was broadcast to Latin America, Canada, China, Australia, and India.

The advent of broadcasting during the modernist period has only begun to receive critical attention, despite the fact that it was a major force of transnational exchange, provided a new means of transmitting texts (which was especially important during periods of paper shortages surrounding the Second World War), and, as Said's anecdote shows, shaped the ways we receive and process information today.⁴ Not only have studies of Forster, British literary modernism more generally, and early radio focused primarily on developments within England, but some of those which have examined radio as an international medium have employed an overly simplified center / periphery model inherited from Guglielmo Marconi, John Reith, and others. Paradigmatic of this trend is Douglas Kerr's analysis of George Orwell's experiences in the Eastern Service, where Kerr argues that "the BBC Eastern Service in wartime was an organ of colonial discourse, propagating the word, and the worldview, of the metropolitan centre to its

peripheral subject people” (474). Forster’s broadcasts, however, are such a valuable resource precisely because they complicate this familiar story, emphasizing the agency of his Indian listeners as well as the many intellectuals (Indian and British) who worked at the BBC during the war. While the intentions of the policymakers to use broadcasting as a means of shoring up the empire are an important element of the story, so too are the actual practices of broadcasters and listeners who may or may not have agreed with official policies. Similarly, although histories of the BBC offer rich insight into the behind-the-scenes operations of administrators, they often ignore the ways in which individual broadcasters put these ideas into practice.

Far from serving as the dumping ground for material from the Home Service or for straightforward colonial propaganda, the Eastern Service allowed more freedom for broadcasters from both censorship and the requirement to provide “light” entertainment instead of more robust, intellectual material. A number of writers were eager to take advantage of this opportunity. As Forster made clear in a letter to George Barnes, who worked in the domestic Talks Department, Forster preferred overseas broadcasting “because I’m let to rip and even allowed to be obscure if I want to be so” (qtd. in Lago 149). While the Home Service was turning to light music, The Eastern Service allowed Forster to dedicate broadcasts to the likes of Proust and Joyce. Because the Eastern Service was more accommodating with content and because of a sustained interest in India, over half of Forster’s 145 broadcast talks were directed to the country.⁵ The sheer number of Forster’s broadcasts to India point to his ongoing affection for, and interest in, the people and literature of the Subcontinent. More importantly, however, they reveal a complex circulation of books, ideas, and people that provides a new depth to understanding the workings of Empire and radio, emphasizing the agency of both Indian and English artists in a model of exchange rather than one-way transmission.

“Some Books” as Case Study

A blind uncle is better than none.
- Bengali Proverb

Challenging a prevailing idea that the colonies were simply the dumping grounds for

products from England, many of Forster's broadcasts concerned not only British and Continental fiction, but Anglophone Indian books or, occasionally, books by British authors on India as well. The largest percentage of his Talks are international in scope, covering a number of continental writers within one Talk. One such Talk, on 20 June 1943, considered playwrights from various countries: Englishman William Congreve, Frenchman Molière, Irishman G. B. Shaw, and the Russians Ivan Turgenev and K. Simonov. While he reviews many British books by British authors, he just as frequently reviews books by Indian writers or books by British writers on India.⁶ In 16 broadcasts, Forster covered the works of British writers, for example, the Talk on February 11, 1942 covered Aldous Huxley's *Grey Eminence* while one on the 27th of May reviewed Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. In 16 others, he discusses either Indian writers exclusively (as he did on July, 3 1946, reviewing Saratchandra Chatterji's *The Deliverance*, Tarashankar Banerji's *Epoch's End*, Pramatha Chaudhuri's *Tales of Four Friends*, Tagore's *Farewell My Friend*, as well as two anthologies and four critical studies) or Indian and British writers interchangeably (as in the December 9, 1942 broadcast on V. K. Narayana Menon's *The Development of William Butler Yeats* and T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," or that on February 3 of the following year, which considered new volumes by C. S. Lewis and Mulk Raj Anand side by side).

The varying national foci of Forster's broadcasts point to the physical circulation of both books and people. Forster was in a particularly good place to talk to India, having traveled there in 1912-13 (at the invitation of his friend Syed Ross Masood) and again from 1921-22 (during which time he worked as the Private Secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior). Having lived there and having written the famous *A Passage to India*, Forster was revered by both British and Indian readers. Mulk Raj Anand, an Indian novelist committed to socialist realism and now known primarily for his searing indictment of the caste system in *Untouchable* (1935), like many other Indian exiles, worked alongside Forster at the BBC during the Second World War. In *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, Anand's recollection of his early years in England, he quotes Nikhil Sen as having said to a jingoistic British writer, "I suggest, Sir, that you take a

chair in an Indian University for a few years... You might be able to go beyond Kipling's *Kim* to Forster's *A Passage to India*" (4). Beyond revealing the reverence with which he approached Forster, Anand's conversations describe various locations of London literary discussion, from Virginia Woolf's drawing room to various bookshops and, although not specifically mentioned in his volume, the BBC served as one such literary meeting place. Narayana Menon, for example, in a collection of tributes to Forster from six Indian writers, notes, "I still remember vividly my first meeting with him in the corridors of the British Broadcasting Corporation some twenty years ago... For the next five years we met frequently- at BBC studios, for lunches at the Reform Club, at Abinger Hammer..." (13). Menon's contribution is supplemented by other Indian writers who describe the assistance and friendship Forster provided them over the years.⁷

Conversations with Indian writers at the BBC and outside of it led not only to Forster helping Indian writers get published, providing prefaces to books, but also to writers handing him books to review, as in the case of Menon's books on Yeats. The exchange of books extended to books Forster purchased on his trips to India as well as to books mailed by authors and publishers seeking publicity. Forster starts his broadcast on December 2, 1943 by acknowledging one such shipment:

Before I say more, let me thank those who have sent me these books, and say that I am glad to mention in my broadcasts books published in India, whenever they are suitable. I can't make a definite promise, because I only talk once a month and then for under a quarter of an hour, and there's a great deal of ground to be covered. But if I can include books published in India I will. And I am grateful for them personally. They make me feel less lonely. They remind me that links between culture here and culture your end do exist, and that the microphone, which hangs before me now like a petrified pineapple, is capable of evoking a human response. (SE 258)

A few months later he expresses gratitude for Kumara Guru's *Life's Shadows*, further noting, "I was glad to receive it, and as I've said once before, I will always, when possible, mention in these talks books sent to me from your country. They may not always reach me, and they may in some cases be unsuitable – technical works, for instance, are unsuitable" (SE 297). Whether or not this reference to technical works constitutes an apology for ignoring shipments of such books is difficult to determine, but it opens the possibility that there were more books crossing borders than can be inferred from a mere consultation of the titles reviewed. Although it is difficult with

broadcasting to determine precisely who is listening and how, the shipments of books to Forster testify to an engagement with Indian writers at the very least.

Cyril Connolly identified broadcasting as one of the “Enemies of Promise” in his book of the same name, in that, though profitable, it distracted writers from producing longer works that better lent themselves to collection and republication (86). For Forster, who brought celebrity along with his insightful commentary, broadcasting was particularly remunerative-- “by 1941 [the] BBC was paying him twenty guineas per quarter-hour broadcast. By comparison, T. S. Eliot did not receive more than fifteen pounds for a broadcast until after 1945” (SE 7). Whether his broadcasts distracted him from producing more substantial works is difficult to determine, but Connolly’s point that producing so many short works does not necessarily lend itself to literary immortality is a good one. It could, for example, account for the relative neglect of Forster’s broadcasting career. It also accounts for Forster’s quick summaries of books. One such account, on December 19th, 1944, discusses Kumar Goshal’s *The People of India*, Beverly Nichols’s *Verdict on India*, Clive Branson’s *British Soldier in India*, and the caricaturist Vicky’s *Nine Drawings* at a rapid pace:

Mr. Kumar Goshal lives in America and addresses an American public. He is well informed and writes well. He is anti-British, not interested in the Moslems, pro-Hindu, nationalist, and favourable to congress – to Congress in its popular and socialist aspect that’s to say. Mr. Beverly Nichols, an English journalist, is critical of the British, hostile to the Hindus, and to Congress, which he regards as a purely Hindu body, and favorable to the Moslem League and to Pakistan. He eulogizes Mr. Jinnah, whom he met, denounces Mr. Gandhi, whom he didn’t meet, is most severe on the Indian arts, and dismisses the Vina as an ‘off colour guitar.’ Clive Branson – the late Clive Branson I have to say – for he was killed in Burma – he was an artist by profession, and a communist politically; what struck him in India was the poverty; anti-British, anti-Congress, and anti Muslim League too I imagine; pro-food and economic reconstruction on communist lines. With him can be classed the left-wing caricaturist, Vicky. To them, hunger not communal division is the basic problem.

That should roughly indicate to you the character of these four books. (SE 322)

Although this check-list style of presentation (anti-British, anti-Congress...) is an extreme example of simplification, the broadcasts are nevertheless open to a number of important critiques of mass media developed during the same period by Horkheimer and Adorno and, later, by one of their students, Jürgen Habermas.

Horkheimer and Adorno, writing in America during the war, argued that the

Enlightenment emphasis on human freedom had been abandoned in favor of the mastery over nature and other humans. Technology, a theoretically democratic creation of knowledge, is used as a force of mastery rather than discovery. As a tool of the culture industry, radio “confines itself to standardization and mass production” (95). Habermas, writing some twenty years later, offers a more elaborate critique of the transformation of the public sphere into a “pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption” (160). Cultural broadcasts are paradigmatic of this transformation:

...at one time the commercialization of cultural goods had been the precondition for rational-critical debate... Put bluntly: you had to pay for books, theater, concert, and museum, but not for the conversation about what you had read, heard, and seen and what you might completely absorb only through this conversation. Today the conversation itself is administered. Professional dialogues from the podium, panel discussions, and round table shows—the rational debate of private people becomes one of the production numbers of the stars in radio and television, a salable package ready for the box office... (164)

For Habermas, mass media are responsible not only for a decrease in reading, but more importantly, for a sterilization and control of public debate constituting nothing short of “a tranquilizing substitute for action” (164). In short, for the Frankfurt school, the mass media equals mass deception.

In one sense, Forster’s broadcasts seem open to such critique and not only because he was capitalizing on his fame in order to appear at the microphone as a professional commentator. Forster’s habit of dispensing with the books he reviewed in a few lines is troublingly reductive. In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that with the commodification of culture, “thought becomes short-winded, confines itself to apprehending isolated facts” (163). The book review, as it is remediated by broadcasting, suffers from the effects of the larger displacement, by information, of narrative or critical thought bemoaned by Benjamin in “The Storyteller” and associated with the rise of mass media.

On the other hand, the Frankfurt School theorists have been taken to task for succumbing to technological determinism and for ignoring reception. To simply dismiss Forster’s broadcasts as insufficiently serious or rigorous is to miss an important intervention in the history of broadcasting and empire, for Forster’s broadcasts exemplify another definition of remediation:

“reform in a social or political sense” (Bolter & Grusin 60). The book review is seemingly transformed in these broadcasts in two important directions. First, it undergoes a transformation in which the length is measured temporally and in which the content is, generally, condensed and simplified. As we’ve seen, this particular refashioning opens the broadcasts to the critiques offered by various theorists associated with the Frankfurt School. On the other hand, Forster’s broadcasts paradoxically fulfill Habermas’s “institutional criteria” for the Bourgeois Public Sphere: the bracketing of economic and social status; the “problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned,” or, situations in which works originating from the people tackled subjects formerly reserved for authority figures; and, finally, an inclusiveness in principle (36-7). In other words, while “Some Books,” may not have been a platform for explicit social critique, it certainly recognized and sought to further existing public debates concerning literature and society.

A Portrait of the Novelist as a Common Reader

While an examination of the topics of Forster’s broadcasts alone points to their largely dialogic structure, a closer look at the twists and turns of his delivery establishes the ways in which he cultivated a feeling of intimacy. In his broadcasts, Forster approaches his audience carefully, with a profound sense of humility and respect that is decidedly at odds with that of the paternalistic colonizer. As Forster tells his listeners in a “Some Books” installment in July of 1943, he tried “to be not just the Englishman advertising European civilization, but the Englishman asking for knowledge” (*SE* 232). Virginia Woolf’s observation that Forster’s tone in *Aspects of the Novel* seems to suggest a fire-side chat rather than a lecture can be usefully extended here-- his tone in many of the broadcasts is that of the tentative and curious reader rather than that of the scholar (51-5). In a particularly self-conscious broadcast on August 19, 1942, Forster starts by placing himself on the other end of the wireless:

You know how fond broadcasters are of employing the word “you”. It’s “you” this and “you” that, and it’s often “you” ought to do this or that. (You generally seems to be in need of good advice.) When I switch on myself, and become a listener instead of a speaker, I get heaps of good advice, most of which is no use whatever to me. The ether, as it were, crackles with invisible uncles and aunts, who assume that they know what I’m like and how I shall react to their admonitions. They don’t know, and can’t know. And I

don't know what you're like, you, my unknown listener. (*SE* 202)

Rather than brushing aside any uncertainty about his listenership, Forster acknowledges it while simultaneously using it to defend and explain his own ethics of broadcasting, developed before his tenure at the Eastern Service. In an article in the *New Statesman* in 1931, Forster laments the BBC's capitulation to pressure from right-wing voices critical of the attention given to events in Russia. He writes of the Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh, "He is complaining that certain speakers with whom he disagrees have been allowed and even invited to give their views... [The Cardinal's attitude] is typical of all critics, whatever their views, who adopt the new method of attack. They are outraged because somebody else has been allowed to speak. They would rather no opinions were expressed if their own are to be challenged" ("Freedom of the BBC"). Forster defends the BBC on the grounds that it is an ethical responsibility to present multiple sides to any argument. The listener can choose to ignore opinions he or she does not agree with, but these must not be prevented from being expressed ahead of time. Forster is not opposed to having to listen to the "invisible uncles and aunts" of the ether, provided they do not all take the same position on things.

In keeping with his public statements, one of the central themes of Forster's own broadcasts is that of balance. Of Penderel Moon's *Strangers in India*, for example, Forster notes, "I advise you to read him. Are you an English administrator? Are you a business man? Are you an idealistic nationalist? Are you an Indian prince? Are you an Indian villager? Mr. Moon will have in each case something to say to you which you will not want to hear, but you'll enjoy his book all the same because it is sure to say something which will vex the other fellow too" (*CC* 285). Elsewhere he singles out works by Mulk Raj Anand, John Keenan, and Premchand for the same reason- independence of thought. Representative of his praise for balance in fiction are his observations about Gurdial Mallik's translation of Premchand's short story, "The Voice of God," of which he says, "Its course was unexpected and the characters in it were neither wholly good nor wholly bad" (*CC* 305). This sense of balancing between conflicting viewpoints within works is also extended to the organization of the broadcast as a whole. In a broadcast from June of

1943, Forster reviews attempts to address the “Indian Question.” Although he is careful not to openly disagree with the government, he emphasizes opinions critical of the British by reviewing four such books after a quick treatment of Reginald Coupland’s *A Report on the Constitutional Problem in India* (CC 232-7).⁸

If Forster chose to review Moon’s book because it was capable of annoying his audience, he extended the same challenge to himself when reviewing works by James Joyce:

Can’t hear with the waters of. The Chittering waters of. Flittering bats, fieldmice bawk talk. Ho! Are you not gone ahome? What Thom Malone? Can’t hear with bawk of bats, all thim liffeying waters of. Ho, talk save us! My fous won’t mous. I feel as old as yonder elm...Night night. My ho head halls. I feel as heavy as yonder stone. Tell me of John or Shaun? Who were Shem and Shaun the living sons or daughters of? Night now! Tell me, tell me, tell me, elm! Night night! Telmetale of stem or stone. Beside the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of. Night! (FW 215.31-216.5)

This passage from Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* was chosen by Forster in 1944, for what was most likely the book’s first radio adaptation, in order to demonstrate the experimental nature of Joyce’s work. The selection of this particular passage reveals much more about Forster’s broadcasts than he lets on, however. In a fitting metaphor for his broadcasts, two women share stories, rumors, and the results of their laundry work (both hermeneutic and cleansing) on the different stains of the clothing they wash, yelling across a widening river as darkness descends. Not only does the chapter include names of rivers from around the world, but it also incorporates words from a host of languages, including Sanskrit. Forster notes, “Most of the above words happen to be English. But the whole passage isn’t English. Literature isn’t playing the game. It’s playing some other game. It’s verging towards music. And why shouldn’t it?” (SE 286). Set up as a review of Harry Levin’s *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, Forster’s broadcast on Joyce constitutes nothing short of a defense of Joyce’s difficult style.

That he should dedicate an entire broadcast to an artist that he admits he “do[es]n’t really take to,” who is both “obscure and uncompromising,” may at first glance be rather surprising (SE 283). One of the most frequently invoked themes throughout Forster’s broadcasts, however, is precisely the importance of patience and thoughtful engagement with what one does not immediately understand or appreciate. Forster is thus willing to admit to his own struggles with

Joyce to supplement his observation that “comments about him are usually abusive” (*SE* 286). Nevertheless, Forster urges patience because, “Joyce managed to build up something that was unique, something which represents our troubled age more than our age likes to confess...it expresses our inmost writhings with an appropriateness that achieves beauty” (*SE* 285).⁹ Joyce, despite the obscurity of his language, is nonetheless representative of the age for Forster in that he is an example of the cosmopolitan writer and in that his hybrid language points to the combination of traditions that Forster celebrates wherever he finds it.

Forster claims that his broadcast on Joyce is not a criticism of his work, but rather an opportunity to hand on a tip to encourage potential readers, not to mention writers who struggled with many of the same issues as Joyce. As he explains, “The tip is that Joyce was an exile... He deliberately abandoned his triple heritage of a country, a religion, and a language” (*SE* 284). If Forster’s listeners are largely composed of the native elite, many of whom were educated in (or had at least traveled to) Britain or Europe, they may view Joyce’s voluntary exile with particular sympathy. Some of Forster’s fellow Eastern Service broadcasters certainly did. Mulk Raj Anand, for example, spends the first half of *Conversations in Bloomsbury* praising Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and attempting to track down a copy of *Ulysses*. Before recalling the four novelists he had discussed a year earlier (Ahmed Ali, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, and Mulk Raj Anand), Forster informs his listeners, “the rest of my time I’ll devote to Indian writers – Indians who are over here, and are helping us to understand their land. There are not a great many of them, and they have a limitation which they frankly recognize: namely that because they live over here, they cannot be in close touch with you. Still they are doing valuable work, both as creators and interpreters” (*SE* 185).¹⁰ If Joyce’s exile is in line with the experiences of some of his listeners and co-workers, certainly the confluence of many languages in *Finnegans Wake* is another point of potential connection, and one that Forster acknowledges. He argues, “He was born into the use of the English language, and his earlier books are written in it. But in *Ulysses* he is breaking down the normal idiom of English and in *Finnegans Wake* the process has gone much further. Many of the words in *Finnegans Wake* aren’t in the dictionary at all. They are

made up out of other words, and sometimes not out of English words, for he was a learned linguist” (SE 284). On the one hand, this explanation could comfort those readers struggling through Joyce’s last work, but Joyce’s combination of languages points to a larger trend in British, continental, and Indian literature towards a combination of traditions.

Of Bharati Sarabhai’s play, “The Well of the People,” Forster comments, “This is an attempt to combine ancient Indian tradition with contemporary Indian troubles, political and economic, and to present the whole in a western literary form” employing specifically “technique[s] of Eliot and Auden” (SE 259). If “The Well of the People” represents a blend of “Indian” and “western” traditions and forms, Forster also expresses appreciation for works that capture a conflict within traditions. Of two anthologies of Bengali fiction, Forster argues, “they are interested in the collision between the old order and the new – the old order being orthodox Hinduism, with its various social implications, and the new order having two aspects. The humanitarian and the industrial. There is the same collision in English literature... [but] It is the suddenness of the break-up that excites the Bengali writers” (SE 359). What strikes Forster about the specific collision of orthodox Hinduism and the newer industrial order is that it is simultaneously local and international; Hinduism is (here) specific to India, but the broader tensions between traditional practices and industrialization are traceable in English literature. Forster does not simply imply that the process is universal, however. He is careful to note the “suddenness of the break-up,” or, in other words, the rapidity of industrialization that sets Indian experiences apart from British ones.

Forster was sensitive and appreciative of the connections between different national traditions as well as the transnational flow of literary forms, but he was also careful to stress the role of specific humans in these modes of exchange. Forster’s selection of the passage in which the washerwomen are conversing serves as one small example of the emphasis on friendship and personal relationships. Perhaps because friendship brought Forster to India, he is careful to remind listeners of his own connections and of some of the benefits he received from each. He begins by talking about Syed Ross Masood, to whom *A Passage to India* is dedicated:

perhaps I owe more to him than to any one individual, for he shook me out of my rather narrow academic and suburban outlook, and revealed to me another way of looking at life- the Oriental, and, within the Oriental, the Moslem. He prepared me for one aspect of India. When I first came East in 1912 and visited him I made another great Indian friend... Bapu Sahib revealed another aspect of India to me- the Hindu- and through it another aspect of life, and he had a deeper sense of the nobilities and the delicacies of personal intercourse than anyone whom I have ever met, whether English or Indian. (*SE* 200)

Forster not only specifically credits these friends with expanding his outlook, but he immediately demonstrates this effect by identifying the source of his own faith in personal intercourse in the figure of Bapu Sahib. This faith in personal affection and travel leading to intercultural understanding forms a major theme of Forster's Talks. Forster points out, for example, that Edward Carpenter accepted an invitation from a friend to study with a holy man and "managed to see Ceylon and India with his own eyes rather than through Imperial spectacles" (*CC* 291). Reviewing M. J. Tambimuttu's anthology, *Poetry in Wartime*, Forster posits, "Mr. Tambimuttu is from Ceylon, and his own language is Tamil, but he is living in London, he is in touch with contemporary English poets... To me it is a very cheering sign, for I believe that if our troubles are ever straightened out it won't be done by business men nor by politicians... but by so-called impractical people, by sensitive men, by people of culture and sympathy and by artists" (263). Forster emphasizes friendship not for its own sake, but for its ability to open the possibility of cross-cultural understanding.

In one example of a talk that considers both Indian and English writers, or "Indian connections of various types" as Forster phrases it, he talks about a new edition of Kipling's verse with a preface by T. S. Eliot. Forster praises Eliot for drawing out the "magical quality" of Kipling's technique, and for pointing out that Kipling's verse was meant to be clear on the first hearing, unlike poetry, which requires close study. Forster goes on to say, "But when Mr. Eliot goes further and tries to ennoble Kipling's opinions and make out that he is an estimable character, he goes rather too far for me. No amount of sympathetic pleading will conceal the fact that the man was a bully and a vulgarian, and rotten with racial-consciousness" (*SE* 185). Anand's new book, *The Sword and the Sickle*, receives much better treatment than Kipling's. Talking about a section of the book, a "considerable literary work," in which the protagonist

talks with Gandhi, Forster says, “I have read many accounts, fictitious and otherwise, of interviews with Gandhi, but this one is by far the most vivid, and gives us a picture of the Mahatma and his entourage which is partly admiring and partly critical” (SE 186). After turning to two magazines, *Indian Writing*, and a special issue of *Life and Letters*, Forster sums up the Talk by noting that the works presented “suggest that there are several Englands as well as several Indias” (SE 186-7). Before wrapping up, however, he turns to propounding his brand of humanism. Reflecting on the growth of interest in Indian civilization and art in England, Forster laments that it is still lacking, possibly because of lack of contact between artists. Playing on the famous opening of Kipling’s “Ballad of East and West,” Forster argues, “East isn’t East and West isn’t West when two such people meet” (SE 187). He further carves out an important place for literature in the growth of international understanding:

And I say to you that our job is to understand one another and to interpret to one another the communities in which we are mutually planted. People like ourselves are in the long run the only reliable interpreters. We don’t issue statistics, we don’t preach sermons, we don’t even formulate creeds. Ours is ordinary human intercourse, but it is touched and heightened by our belief in the potential greatness of man, which includes aesthetic greatness and consequently we stumble upon truths which are missed by the so-called practical observer. (SE 187)

In addition to arguments for concepts as nebulous as “aesthetic greatness,” Forster grammatically enacts a kind of solidarity with his listener by speaking in the first-person plural and by contrasting their position as cultural interpreters with that of the “so-called practical observer[s].” By rejecting a declamatory tone and style and in part by criticizing both Kipling and Eliot, Forster begins to enact and draw his listeners into a kind of detached, impartial analysis that he thinks can help spread understanding. At the same time, this call to arms acknowledges the relative powerlessness of art in the face of statistics, sermons, and creeds—tools often used by BBC and government policy makers.

Conclusion

Forster’s broadcasts took part in a kind of liberal paradox explored in his earlier fiction--the better he was at spreading his messages of friendship and tolerance, the more he was perpetuating the empire he wanted to dismantle. Although offering little in the way of

straightforward propaganda, Forster's literary broadcasts nevertheless implied an espousal of the accompanying news reports. While Forster consistently stressed the power of friendship and culture, he also acknowledges the complexity of how these goals interacted with social, economic, and political forces. In *Howards End* (1910), for example, the efforts of the Schlegel sisters to adopt Leonard Bast, though proceeding from noble intentions, are ultimately thwarted by their failure to account for Bast's economic situation. Somewhat similarly, in *A Passage to India*, the budding friendship between Mr. Fielding and Aziz becomes impracticable because of the many institutions that surround them. Published in 1924, the novel identifies many of the tensions that would be played out during the Second World War, from the hope for independence revealed by Aziz's comment, "Until England is in difficulties we remain silent, but in the next European War – aha aha! Then is our time!" to the reason the British felt it must be postponed, as expressed in Fielding's question to Aziz, "who do you want instead of the English? The Japanese?" (360). Forster's fiction, while opening the possibility of intercultural and interclass understanding, ultimately shows that such efforts are not sufficient in and of themselves. Instead, they offer a contact that must be accompanied by the transformation of human institutions. The conclusion of the novel drives this point home:

But the horses didn't want it- they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, "No, not yet," and the sky said, "No, not there." (362)

On the one hand, the two men are driven apart through the voices of natural forces, "the sky" as well as man-made ones, "the temples, the tank," etc. At the same time, these voices are countered by those of Aziz, who wants friendship after independence, and Fielding, who wants it immediately. The conflict between so many different voices is ultimately left unresolved, "not yet," and "not *there*."

Amardeep Singh offers one way out of this impasse with his emphasis on semipublic, Islamic spaces in the writing of Forster. For Singh, "Forster develops a unique concept of intimacy in semipublic spaces, which might enable him to provisionally overcome the obstacles

introduced by the imbalance of power between white and brown, between colonizer and colonized” (36). Although Singh identifies Forster’s use of semipublic spaces primarily within his fiction and correspondence, I would argue that the idea can be usefully applied to his broadcasts as well. In fact, Forster puts himself in a position similar to Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* when he tells his listeners in a broadcast from 1943 “[I] will tell you a personal experience. I was once in Cairo and I was looking into the ruined enclosure of the oldest of the Cairo mosques, the mosque of Amr... As I looked there came over me an unusual sensation of peace and well being...” (CC 272). Forster admits his reluctance to ascribe a deep spiritual meaning to his experience, but also notes that the sense of peace at this particular location has been shared by many other writers. This is but one example of how Forster took advantage of the intimate address of broadcasting to cultivate a sense of personal connection, even as he acknowledged the physical and cultural distance between himself and his listeners. Furthermore, while Forster reluctantly agreed to work within the confines of BBC policy, he also attempted to shape the use of transnational broadcasting in the service of more equitable relationships of exchange rather than exploitation. Forster’s Eastern Service Talks, in other words, attempted to present different voices and viewpoints, but this time in the service of friendship and understanding. As he argued in the *New Statesman*:

the talks, although they may not be listened to widely, and although they may not leave much that is definite behind, do promote tolerance, which is education’s crown; they do, by their very variety, remind listeners that the world is large and the opinions in it conflicting, and they make the differences vivid and real to him because their medium is the human voice and not the printed page. (“Freedom of the BBC”)

Forster suggests, with his emphasis on the human voice, that the presence of conflicting voices, rather than postponing friendship as in *A Passage to India*, could now be seen as a necessary precondition to it; one that could partially be met by the medium of radio.

¹ Thanks to Priya Joshi for directing me to Said's broadcasts. My indebtedness to the many startling insights found in Joshi's *In Another Country* are clearer in longer versions of this paper, but will have to be relegated here for the present.

² At the conclusion of many of his Talks, for example, Forster made notes to himself to read the titles of books and authors slowly, sometimes even spelling out difficult names. Largely because of a BBC policy discouraging recording, audio copies of Forster's broadcasts are few and far between (for example, only five of the seventy Talks in the *Selected Edition* were recorded). All but a few excerpts available on CD are housed in the National Sound Archive in the British Library.

³ Thanks to Todd Avery for kindly directing me to the later collection.

⁴ For a particularly rich account, see Todd Avery's *Radio Modernism* (2006) which challenges the presumed divide between modernist writers and mass culture while looking more specifically at how the Bloomsbury group, including Forster, "challenged the BBC's cultural politics from behind BBC microphones in the sound booths of Savoy Hill" (36). Although Avery is able to insightfully examine the role that early twentieth-century writers and intellectuals played in the formation of the medium, *Radio Modernism* shares, with other studies of Forster's broadcasts, an almost exclusive focus on British domestic broadcasting. Mary Lago's "E. M. Forster and the BBC" (1990) paints a fascinating picture of Forster's behind-the-scenes battles with the administration over both censorship and the inclusion of more cultural programming, his influence on the genre of the "Talk," and the struggles of various programmers to get Forster to contribute to the Home Service. Although Lago mentions Forster's Eastern Service broadcasts, correspondence between various BBC administrators and him concerning programs for the Home Service forms the bulk of Lago's primary material. Her later biography, *E. M. Forster: A Literary Life* (1995), presents slightly more material on his Indian broadcasts, including a short analysis of a broadcast from November of 1940 concerning an exhibit of photographs of Hindu temples. Nonetheless, Lago's work, as well as the introduction to the *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster: A Selected Edition* (2008) by Linda Hughes and Elizabeth Walls, while touching on certain details of Forster's overseas broadcasts, deal primarily with the place of the broadcasts within the development of the BBC in England or within Forster's oeuvre.

⁵ B. J. Kirkpatrick identifies 145 "Talks" in her Forster bibliography; see Kirkpatrick, "E. M. Forster's Broadcast Talks." Not included in this tally are collaborative broadcasts such as the discussion "Efficiency and Liberty" with Captain Anthony Ludovici in 1938. For more on these broadcasts, see Lago, "E.M. Forster and the BBC" (135); see also Lago, *E. M. Forster: A Literary Life* (92-130).

⁶ Forster similarly acknowledges the receipt of N. G. Jog's *Onions and Opinions* on December 19, 1944. The BBC library was a major source for the titles reviewed by Forster-- although he occasionally bought or received books published in India in the mail, for the most part he selected from the BBC's collection of publications for material to review.

⁷ Forster apologizes for promoting Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar's *Literature and Authorship in India* saying, "I oughtn't strictly speaking to be praising this book, for the reason that I have contributed a forward to it over here, and professional etiquette demands silence. But perhaps you will pardon the lapse, and allow me to repeat that I think it a good book" (SE 239).

⁸ Coupland was chosen by the Colonial Office to give a talk on the BBC's Home Service in 1933. The talk, "The Commonwealth of Nations as It Is Today," was part of a concerted effort to promote the imperial project to the British populace. For more information, see August, *Selling of the Empire* (98).

⁹ Forster's argument somewhat anticipates Jacques Lacan's argument that Joyce represents the "sinthome," a voluntary symptom, in his seminar on Joyce. See Lacan, *Le séminaire: Livre XXIII: Le sinthome*.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, the script for this Talk, "Turning over a New Leaf: Indian Novelists Writing in English" does not appear to have survived.

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