

E.M. Forster in Africa

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Abstract

The paper presents a less known episode of E.M. Forster life – his African voyage in 1929. The paper retraces Forster’s trip through references in his published and private non-fiction writings, essays and letters, as well as its influence on his late short story “The Life to Come.”

Keywords: Forster, Africa, travel writing, colonialism

From his early attempts, foreign travels played an important part in Forster’s writing, whether fictional or not – essays and papers he wrote for newspapers or magazines, the latter mostly after the publication of *A Passage to India*. As a theme running through his work, travelling has enabled Forster to develop several elements at the root of his humanism as well as shedding light on what is for him the best and most enjoyable in life. In its most superficial form, tourism, it enables the Forsterian characters to marvel at the sight of Nature, in the best of romantic tradition, or at the works of Art as illustrations of the century-old human genius, in the best of classical tradition. It also gives the novelist the opportunity to express his satirical skill in comical scenes based on cultural misunderstandings and ignorance. Underlying such literary uses of the theme, travelling, also in the best tradition of the Grand Tour, plays a more important part in Forster’s vision, since

the fundamental gist of the experience is to make his characters more fully human and mature, more understanding of themselves and others, more tolerant and open to life.

If travelling played such an important part in Forster's literary world, it also played an important part in his own life and development.¹ This biographical perspective is central to the understanding of his art, as, beyond the personal, it also feeds the literary life of a very humane writer. After India and war-time Egypt, many of these travels brought him to various European countries, while more exotic destinations seemed to have disappeared from his mental horizon.

So, interestingly enough when, in the late 1920s, his friend George Barger and his wife Florence, Forster's *confidante* for years, offered him to accompany them on a long tour in sub-Saharan Africa, the rather jaded Forster accepted willingly. George Barger, a chemist, was going to take part in a lecture-tour to last for several months in various African countries. It seemed a good idea to make most of this expedition by getting the three good friends together. On Forster's side, the tour is well documented thanks to the writer's "Africa Journal" now in King's College Archives (published in 2011) and a sizeable number of letters to several people including Joe Ackerley and Forster's mother now respectively at the Humanities Research Centre at Austin, Texas² and at King's.

So far Forster's experience of Africa had been limited to Egypt, which, beside the part it played in his personal life, was at the source of two works, important in different ways. Apparently, *Alexandria, a History and a Guide* is still highly considered as a guide-book while the memoir "On the Condition of Egypt" is a valuable historic document to this day.³

Now a whole new world opened to him and it is interesting to see what fruit this experience bore in the end. If the diary and the letters make very lively reading, in literary terms the result was much more limited and rather belated. "Luncheon at Pretoria" appeared in *The Abinger Chronicle* in January 1940, and – in my view – the posthumous short story, "The Life to Come" was inspired by the conditions of the black population

¹ "This £ 8000 has been the salvation of my life. Thanks to it I was able to go to Cambridge [...] After Cambridge I was able to travel for a couple of years, and travelling encouraged me to write" (Forster 2000, 289).

² Ackerley had secretly sold Forster's letters to the H.R.C. in the early sixties. The Center became known as the Harry Ransom Center in 1985.

³ Cf. Forster 1920.

in the South African mines.⁴ However small this output may seem, it still reveals the same constants in Forster's creative process and writing throughout his work as has been demonstrated.⁵

The cruise started in June 1929. To the writer it was to reveal a native culture so far unknown to him and to revive his bitter denunciation of the evils of colonialism on a much larger scale and in a different context than what he had witnessed in India or even in Egypt, at a time when the British Empire was still a force to be reckoned with.

The friends left Tilbury on June 26, calling in Tenerife, Ascension and St Helena, before reaching Cape Town on July 17. Then the travellers went North inland, to the Transvaal and Rhodesia. By mid-August they reached Mombasa via Zanzibar. On their way to Nairobi they visited the wildlife reserve at Athi. They saw the Rift Valley and the Victoria Nyanza before entering Uganda and visiting Kampala and Entebbe. On their return to Nairobi they took the famous Kenyan train back to Mombasa and they boarded their steamer for Aden and Egypt where their ways parted – Forster visiting some wartime friends before reaching Marseille where he was to meet Syed Ross Masood – and thence to St Rémy de Provence to see the Maurons. He was back in England on October 4. Obviously, the three-month tour had been placed under the sign of discovery as well as long-lasting and steadfast friendships.

Reading and comparing the documents now available enable us to highlight how Forster, now fifty, continued to react to culturally exotic places both in his daily life and his thought. Intact are his taste for natural, picturesque sights, for History and human nature, his satirical touch for comic situations, and also his social, political, even philosophical preoccupations as perceptible in his more recent writings. Such reading also enables us to see what he considered as private and what he was willing to share with his readers in his fictional or essay writing. The published part of this travel writing may appear somewhat paradoxical since what is highlighted is both the comical, perhaps even the ridiculous aspect of travelling incidents, as in "Luncheon at Pretoria," and the tragic impact of colonialism in "The Life to Come." The private documents offer a much

⁴ I do not share Oliver Stallybrass's view who, basing his estimation on a letter to Siegfried Sassoon, dates the composition of the short story as 1922/23 (See "Introduction" to Forster 1972). A first version already staging Vithobai the native chief and Paul Pinmay may date from these years, but the two typed, and hand-corrected, versions that have survived are of a later date. Several details in the story indicate in my view that its "definitive" version is posterior to the African tour.

⁵ See Hanquart 1986, 383.

wider span of colours and emotions, and a greater thematic variety. So much so that one may wonder why the author decided to restrict the vision of the man to such an extent.

It may be somewhat surprising to see a trivial comic incident brought to the front of Forster's reminiscence of his African trip. Why, ten years later, did he deem it worthy of a newspaper article?⁶ But this may precisely be due to the superficial and mundane character of the episode clashing with the semi-official capacity of the occasion. Forster's humour and self-irony is at work, debunking the pretence of the British colonial middle class. The whole paper is based on the trivial accident of the black servant of the rich Pretoria hostess upsetting a plateful of food on Forster's smartest suit during a fairly formal lunch. The comic banality of the scene is enhanced by the fact that at the time Forster was well-known for his usually inelegant attire.⁷ The semi-official capacity of the luncheon guests is also deflated, as the focus is moved on the menial person in the room, the boy serving at the table, who normally should hardly be noticed. The boy thus becomes the master of ceremonies since his clumsiness compromises his own masters' organised social life and that of their prestigious guests. The way Forster stages his part in the comic episode wilfully stresses the ridicule of his own character:

Our hostess lent me her husband's sky-blue Japanese dressing gown. Though not of the best period it was a sumptuous garment, and clad in it I hopped like a tropical bird, now taking a sip of coffee in the dining room, now putting in some work at the pantry sink. (Forster 1972, 326)

Pretoria and the purpose of the visit are only evoked in a short sentence without any further comment: "Pleasant it was to walk by her side into Union Buildings, and in my blue serge suit too" (Forster 1972, 326). Beside this brief mention linking the visiting to the incident, the historical and touristic interests of the place only appear as a mere evocation of the excursion from Johannesburg:

We were to drive over and see the sights, and, after lunch attend an official reception at Union Buildings. [...] Pretoria turned out to be a dear little place, with a touch of

⁶ Forster must have considered it important enough since it was also published in *Two Cheers for Democracy* in 1951.

⁷ Such reputation apparently led his friends to say that he could have passed for "the man who comes to wind up the clocks."

two civilisations upon it. Down below were the straight lines of quiet modest Dutch houses, and the statue of Oom Paul at the railway station. Up on the hill was a fine imperial effort: Union Buildings, with its pavilions, its long terraces, its two domes. An agreeable morning was spent, the sights were indicated and viewed with complaisance, and then it was time for lunch. (Forster 1972, 324)

Why this very bland style? Does it express the traveller's indifference to the newly discovered sights, to the monuments seen for the first time? This comes in sharp contrast with the "Africa Journal" and an unpublished letter to Ackerley. There the emphasis on the themes is reversed. The lunch incident is mentioned in a phrase in the former and not mentioned at all in the latter thus excluding any touch of the comic in the telling. What prevails is the visitor's aesthetic reaction to the sights and the affective reaction to what they imply or say for South Africa's past and present.

Diary August 3:

Pretoria: a good day and most definite the most [?] for I saw Kruger's statue and the Union buildings, and had an enormous dish of chicken emptied over me while lunching with a banker's wife. First city I've seen in S.A. and Stellenbosch has been the first town. Except for the domes it's a stunning success and think of it with Copenhagen Rathaus as great modern buildings. (Forster 2011, 36)

Letter to Ackerley, August 7:

I was moved – tears coming – by the nobility of the Union Buildings at Pretoria: such a splendid gesture. English and Dutch participating, and such an empty gesture, for beneath and beyond both English and Dutch are these millions of blacks whom one never speaks to and whose existence one assumes as one does electric bells.⁸ That was why I nearly cried at Pretoria. It is Valhalla, and the dwarfs haven't been paid. You cannot imagine what things really are like out here. India gives no idea. In the Transvaal and Orange Free State it is now illegal for black and white to marry, or even to live together: the government aims at the complete separation of the two races.⁹

⁸ Like, f.i., the clumsy boy serving at table.

⁹ In the whole of South Africa, the *apartheid* (separateness) legislation was passed in 1948 by the Nationalist Party.

Compared with the published paper, this moving letter may appear to hold promises of more interesting literary development in terms of Forster's humanism. But nothing came of it. Which is both surprising and disappointing, given the writer's usual stand against racism and given the date of the paper in *The Abinger Chronicle*, a time when he was denouncing Nazism and its racial policies elsewhere.

If one now considers the other work which, according to me, owes something to the African tour, we are now looking at a work of fiction. *The Life to Come* was only published posthumously in 1972 but the manuscript shows that it had been written much earlier and amended several times. It does not deal with racism strictly speaking but more generally with the evils of colonisation, and there one can find many of the emotions and feelings inspired by what Forster had witnessed during his stay in the African countries he visited.

First of all, the theme of the natives' innocence, regarded as amorality, even immorality by Western standards, which is at the heart of the short story's plot and enables Forster's mischievous variations on the gist of the word «love», already stands out in in his letter to Ackerley dated July 13 from St Helena:

A loveable loving population, everyone says so, all hues from coffee to ink, and as gentle as their climate. I had expected scum as one does at a port of call but their only fault, says the resident dentist, is immorality. They do all the tempting, and many a Union Castle passenger has been led into sin and increasing the population. [...] Have seldom seen such a touching island – all this volcanic sternness and the live things perched about it, longing for kindness and company, some day we will go and give it them.

The story's plot then tackles the destructive part played by colonisation, corrupting the natives' surroundings, exploiting and enslaving them in the mines. Then the role of Christianity in its development with the intervention of missionaries destroying their ancestral society and their personalities to leave only impotence and despair. All this emerges from the travel writings since in South Africa Forster had also seen more sordid aspects than the sights of Pretoria. He had visited "District 6," a township in Cape Town as well as three others near Kimberley before seeing the quarters in which the De Beers Company lodged its miners.

Letter to Ackerley, August 7:

I saw (it's always 'see') a great deal of native life in the slums and compounds of Johannesburg. [...] The mine compounds are even more attractive. All the miners live in

dormitories, by tribes, and grinning at them was pleasant and easy. They are well fed, and happy, and their bathing-halls would have ravished you, and incidentally caused them not to smell [...] Do read a story (called Ula Masonga) in William Plomer's *I Speak of Africa*.¹⁰ It isn't bad; but the life in the gold mines is better now than he describes: the owners find it pays to treat the chaps well.

Previously, he had been horrified by the enormous diamond mine which symbolised the whole region and Western imbecile cupidity in his eyes.

Diary July 29 and 30:

Kimberley or the kingdom of the Antichrist [...] great Kimberley mine «the biggest» hole in the world. Women, fair women, particularly prostitutes have dug it – 2000 feet to where the grey-green shaft of the water lies, and that goes down another 1000. Hell is not even alive.

Letter to his mother, July 29:

It was most impressive to see the whole countryside turned upside down for the sake of diamonds, barbed wire everywhere, black convicts working, police, rubbish heaps like mountains, holes in the ground 3000 feet deep; one of them, the Kimberley mine proper, it's the biggest hole in the world – acres wide and narrowing pit after pit, the lowest pit being full of water. They have stopped working it as the edges keep falling in. It is the most imbecile industry in the world I suppose. (Lago and Furbank 1985, 851)

This, apparently, led him to sell his diamond shares on his return (Furbank 1978, 161).

Despite his horrified reaction, he was disappointed not to have been down the diamond mine. So, he was later thrilled to be allowed down one of the gold mines:

Letter to Ackerley, August 7:

I have been down a gold mine (3000 feet) but it's the compounds that are really worth seeing: every race of the south and east run grinning at you and playing upon musical instruments to you.

¹⁰ Plomer 1927, n.p.

However, after going to Rhodesia, Kenya, and Uganda throughout August and arriving in Zanzibar, his point of view somewhat changed, and the diversity of the experiences led him to more pessimistic conclusions. These are staged in the short story as it draws to its end and Vithobai's awareness of his own debasement through his religious conversion and of his failure towards his own people, leading to his final despair, murder, and suicide. This tragic ending echoes the letter to Ackerley on September 9:

The expedition's been much what I expected – interesting, distressing and elderly. I went right into Africa and saw the Nile coming out of the Victoria Nyanza. This was beautiful, but here too was all the horrors of the European impact: corrugated iron, filthy clothes. Most of the African peoples seem heart-broken, they wander about as if their lives were lost; trade and Christianity together have done them in.¹¹ Zanzibar, Aden and the northern parts have been saved by Islam.

Beside these thoughts and feelings which reverberated years later in his works, Forster's travel impressions sustain his correspondence throughout. There are private jokes among friends, some of a more or less homosexual nature. But more interesting in literary terms in the journal and letters are the references to aesthetic emotions generated by natural sights or human activities.

Like several of his characters Forster had a taste for sunsets.¹² His description of one of them off the African coast between Tenerife and Ascension shows that despite the years he had not lost any of his enthusiasm or sense of observation:

Tropic sunset then developed, eastern sea salmon and purple, western sky pale apple green and Cambridge blue in patches on orange and grey. Why 'tropic'? Because of the sharp mosaics of the western bank. This made the difference between it and the wildest sunset of the north. After darkness cloudiness. Sky will clear and cloud in half an hour in these latitudes because of heat of water – 82° – which evaporates at the least change. Sky chief interest. Sea a bore. No fish or birds.¹³ (Forster 2011, 27–28)

¹¹ Cf. Forster 1972, 74–5.

¹² See Forster 1977, 12, 71 f. I.

¹³ The sources of the White Nile were discovered in 1858.

Nor does he lack irony though, in his Coleridgean depiction of the sources of the Nile, thus showing both his emotion and his refusal to be too much moved by such a symbolic sight for an Englishman born in 1879, that is two decades only after their discovery by Burton and Speke, a sight ranking high too in the list of international tourism.

Letter to Ackerley, August 7:

This tour is a success. I have been intensely interested and seen many remarkable things. I don't know about these Falls. They are almost too sight-see-ish and grand: a river several times the size of the Thames falls into a chasm deeper than St Paul's, and what with the spray and the double circular rainbows and lying on one's stomach on shiny rocks over bottomless cauldrons – well, words fail, and I think that when they do one isn't greatly moved.

At the end of August, Uganda and Kampala in particular offered a slightly different point of view in terms of native culture. His visit to Kabaka, the king of Buganda, was a great opportunity, and his court which slightly amused him, before going to see the tombs of the royal ancestors. It seems rather a pity that such material did not get further development.

Diary August 27:

Kampala a foolish but unusual town, fatuously compared to Rome because two of its hills support cathedrals, palace of Kabaka¹⁴ on another, got permission from Ass. Prov. Commissioner to go (in car for prestige business). [...] the gentle earnest officials – Prime Minister, Chief Justice, Parliament itself – were pleased to see us. Parliament even applauding. The king's sister also greeted us, tall and elegant in a dark mauve dress and picture hat;¹⁵ [...] Eschewing the cathedrals, we went to the tombs of Mtesa and Mwanga¹⁶ a solemn lofty hut supported by pillars and aisled. Proof enough of what has perished. Entrance hut also fine. This – and Zanzibar – are the only architecture of Africa that I've seen. Pillars coloured red and white and dark blue, an old woman at each side, a gay and ugly child too who took my hand, a stuffed cheetah at the entrance. (Forster 2011, 42–43)

¹⁴ Daudi Cwa II (1896–1939) Kabaka of the Buganda (1897–1939)

¹⁵ In Buganda culture Kabaka's sister holds a particularly honorific position.

¹⁶ Mtesa was the Kabaka when Stanley arrived in 1874. His son, Mwanga succeeded him in 1884.

The previous port of call, on August 20, had been Zanzibar, which is usually mentioned with flattering notations. Another luncheon party took place there that may seem more memorable and picturesque than the Pretoria occurrence; it did not find its way in any publication, however.

Diary, August 20:

Happy all day; landed at Zanzibar [...] We stopped at the Summer Palace. New but poetic, overhanging the beach and drank milk of special coconut. [...] Through heat and high green clove trees via Bu-Bu-Bu to Dongo. The Sultan arrives and gives us dullish food except for the turtle soup but under a long booth of bamboo and palm made for the occasion and overhung by nutmeg trees and tiny oranges. Birds flew into the high decayed stump of coconut and chattered during the speech, one of the servants had fallen backwards into the curry or something, gang of retainers looked on from under the trees. After lunch the Sultan showed the more important ladies how cloves dry. Marvellous vegetation, the real tropic at last, huge super-banana leaves, good drive back, got hold of Allen¹⁷ and bought two mats in the bazaar. (Forster 2011, 38)

It seems to me that all the episodes of the African expedition that Forster wished to keep in his memory, either in the diary or the letters sent to friends and family, without reviving them in his published writing – such as sunsets, remarkably beautiful or ugly landscapes, pleasant or distressing human experiences – all have in common belonging to the exotic or more or less sentimental note. They are all sketches that in a few words, sometimes even telegraphic phrases, manage to create a landscape with its particular atmosphere and light, testimonies to Forster's eye for the meaningful detail as to the permanence of his literary skill.

The mature writer's choice to keep private the episodes of a fundamentally affective nature and only transpose into his published work those capable of creating a more or less profound social reflection in his reader reveal his own thoughtful development. Both the apparent off-handedness of "Luncheon at Pretoria" and the grave tone of "The Life to Come" in their different ways, have the same purport, to denounce a deeply unfair interracial situation to which the traveller wanted to bear witness. And what he underlines then is also what he will repeatedly denounce during the dark years of the two following decades.

¹⁷ Unidentified.

However, the bitter awareness of the poisoning effects of colonialism on human relationships which many times marred Forster's enjoyment during the African tour, did not prevent him from appreciating the joys of travelling to foreign places in the years to come. His correspondence and his essays show his never-ending ability to marvel at the beauty of landscapes, or situations and people that he met. Europe in the thirties, with his visit to Romania, India at the dawn of independence, the U.S. just after WW2, Austria in the fifties, or the Bayreuth festivals of the sixties have a positive echo in his essays and letters (Hanquart-Turner 1979). Travelling to more or less exotic places brought out his *joie de vivre* throughout his long life. As he confided to the audience of his "Three Countries" conference in 1962.¹⁸

I like to see the face of the world and to think about it. I enjoy travelling and am indeed a confirmed globe-trotter, though a trotter upon a rather quiet world, none of my travels having been adventurous. (Forster 1983, 289)

In the light of his African writings, one begs leave to differ.

¹⁸ "Three Countries that Influenced me" (England, Italy and India), one of his last conferences, given in Rome in the Summer of 1962.

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