

VERSIONS, PERVERSIONS AND SUBVERSIONS OF IMPERIAL DISCOURSE IN E.M. FORSTER'S «THE OTHER BOAT»

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Especially since the development of postcolonial and gender criticism, E.M. Forster's writing has been subject to conflicting readings as regards his treatment of race and of male homosexuality. In his description of an interracial homosexual affair in the posthumously published short story «The Other Boat,» Forster plays with the topics of British imperial discourse, questioning and subverting them to a great extent as they affect setting, character presentation and the role of language. However, the power of this discourse, together with the power of patriarchal discourses of gender and homophobia, prevents the subversion from being complete and ultimately determines an apparently inescapable tragic ending.

Critical evaluation of E.M. Forster as a writer seems to oscillate perpetually between sets of opposed visions, partly in relation to his status as a «traditional» or «Modernist» writer, but especially in relation to two crucial issues in his writing: his attitude to British imperialism and his attitude to homosexuality. As to the first issue, views range from a «liberal» Forster, remarkably free from racial prejudice and highly critical of the presumption and ignorance of British imperialism, to severe condemnation of his inability to escape stereotyping or to explore the full implications of imperial thought. As to the second, the accusations of cowardice and ambivalence (often from gay critics) and of lack of universality (mostly from straight ones) vie with attempts to validate his homosexual stories in the context of the whole of his fiction and to take into consideration the social limitations which precluded greater openness (Martin and Piggford 1997: 15-28).¹

Because of its highly explicit —and highly conflicted— treatment of both imperial and homosexual themes, «The Other Boat» (probably drafted around 1913, but posthumously published in 1972) constitutes an ideal site to explore both issues. From the very first lines of the dialogue that opens the short story, readers are at once firmly installed in an immediately recognizable imperial context and abruptly shaken in their expectations. The white children addressing their mixed-race playmate with a nickname and a peremptory command to «play at soldiers» do not receive cheerful acquiescence, but instead are met with a point-blank refusal based on an unexpected justification: «I am beesy» (202). In a few paragraphs, Cocconut will have become their leader in a different game, and many of the recurrent imperial topics on which this brilliantly constructed story is structured will have been introduced and reversed. The process continues in the second voyage alluded to in the title, about ten years later, on which the childhood acquaintance between Cocconut and Lionel March develops into a sexual relationship.

¹ Stephen Adams, reminding his readers that Forster was in his eighties at the time of the *Lady Chatterley* trials, puts it rather endearingly: «if amorous, heterosexual gamekeepers could still, in 1960, cause a public sensation, then one appreciates an old man's reluctance to launch his own less orthodox gamekeeper and upper-class lover into the fray» (1980: 107).

However, this questioning and reversal of the patterns that imperial discourse attempts to impose on the setting, the characters and the action of the story will ultimately prove powerless to avert the tragic outcome. In spite of the hints of other possible options, the recurrent images of entrapment underline the characters'—or the narrator's—incapacity to break away from the mesh of distorted perceptions created by this discourse, a mesh that becomes even more inescapable because of its entanglement with certain discourses of masculinity and homophobia.

As regards setting, the play between imperial topics and their subversion takes place on two basic levels: first, the symbolic significance of space within the ships, and secondly, the references to Britain and to imperial lands which punctuate the two voyages. To begin with, the ship itself is symbolic space. In specific terms, the name given to the second ship—*S.S. Normannia*—evokes the imperial order which it sustains and embodies, suggesting as it does both «norm» and «Britannia,» but also, as Dorland notes, the sexual order of patriarchy, through its «implicit pun on 'norm' and 'man' if not 'mania'» (1997: 215). That Forster's choice is not accidental can be proved with reference to *Maurice*, where *Normannia* is also the name given to the ship that Alec Scudder does *not* embark on, thus making the happy ending possible (188). The specific meaning of the ship as site and symbol of imperial order is extended when the narrator hints at the contrast between its security and predictability and the menace outside: «on either side of the players, violet darkening into black, rushed the sea» (208). Other traditional connotations of the ship are thereby suggested: the conscious mind defying the dangers of the unconscious; the ship of the Church, outside which there is no salvation; but also its connection with the «night sea journey» and death (Cirlot 1979; Hall 1980; Revilla 1995).

One of the basic sources of the power of imperial imagery lies precisely in its appropriation of traditional, «archetypal» meanings, thus establishing a series of connections that are made to seem natural. As Elleke Boehmer points out, imperial texts use «myth and metaphor» both to legitimate the system and to encover the suffering it causes (1995: 21). P. Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (1988) analyzes, among other aspects of imperialism, the creation of the image of Africa as «Dark Continent» by the use of this system of projections. By the same process that transforms Africa into a representation of the terrifying forces of the subconscious, the contrasts in Forster's story between the ship and the sea (consciousness and the unconscious, salvation and damnation) are inexorably linked to the contrast Britain/subjected territories, increasing the significance and power of this opposition. The foregrounding of the ship's symbolic link with the «night sea journey» and death—underlined from the beginning of the story through the children's references to «dying» as part of their game—constitutes one of the reversals of imperial mythology, anticipating the deadly nature of its power.

As to the meaning of space within the ship itself, P.N. Furbank, among others, points out the use of the contrast between deck and cabin on the second voyage to mark the difference between two worlds (1979: 12). This constitutes an apparently straightforward opposition, resting on the conventional linking of descent and inferior levels (the cabin) with emotion and secrecy, on one hand, and of ascent and superior levels (the deck) with intellect and openness, a meaning reflected in everyday language in the expression «above board» as «without concealment, dishonesty or fraud» (*Collins English Dictionary*). However, the irony, or the reversal, lies in the presentation of the space «above board» as ruled by the «dishonesty, concealment or fraud» necessary to exclude any possible transgression of social, sexual and racial boundaries. The cabin is also the site of reality, in contrast with the appearance of the order above deck; but the power of this order to control and exclude that reality will be made manifest at the end of the story, after Lionel «bursts

out of the stupid cabin on to the deck» and commits suicide: the cabin is then «sealed up for further examination» (233-34). Lionel's acceptance of the hierarchical division between deck and cabin, between intellect and emotion, and by implication between Britain and the colonies is one of the factors that will lead the characters to the final tragedy. In accepting this version, and attributing rationality to the «deck» world, to himself, and to the British order, and denying it to the «cabin» world, to Cocoanut, and to the colonies, Lionel succumbs to the power of this imagery in spite of all evidence that might suggest the contrary. As Furbank points out in his introduction, Lionel's «rationality» is doubtful, in contrast with Cocoanut's:

he [Lionel] really knows nothing at all about himself and is altogether deceived when he thinks he has thrown off his social and sexual inhibitions. In Cocoanut . . . a thoroughly unromantic practicality goes with insight and foreseeingness on a grand scale. (12)

To continue with symbolic space, the narrator's presentation of the relationship between the two men on a «voyage out» rather than on a voyage towards Britain strongly confirms imperial versions, to the extent that Mrs. March's premonitory remark about the friendship between Cocoanut and her children, «I would never allow it going to India,» seems fully justified (203). The places named as landmarks of the characters' growing intimacy unite the implications of ever-increasing distance from Britain with the well-established link between the territories of exoticism and homoeroticism: Sicily, Port Said and the Red Sea, as part of Richard Burton's «sotadic zone,» were both in fantasy and in reality places of male homosexual possibility (Hyam 1992; Boone 1995). However, the potentially hopeful nature of this movement towards greater freedom is again curtailed by the imperial appropriation of the established symbolic meanings of North and South. By making the relationship progress gradually as the ship sails southward, the narrator emphasizes the theme of descent, with all its infernal connotations; like heroes in general and imperial heroes in particular, Lionel can be seen to be entering a perilous underworld, but unlike the heroes of imperial adventure stories, he will not emerge from it alive.

There are all along hints of subversion in this area as in others. The possibility that the official image of remote lands may have nothing to do with reality is raised in the reported dialogue between the Moravian missionary and Mrs March, who is scandalized at the connections the minister makes between the «oriental» scenes they are contemplating round Suez and the scenes of the Gospel —«Is it likely that the apostles ever had a touch of the tar-brush?» (205). Towards the end, in what is perhaps the greatest single inversion of imperial language in the story, England is described as «the great blank country [Mrs March] inhabited» (231). Characterized in the same terms as the lands whose maps Britain was trying to «fill in,» England is by the same logic open to invasion, as has already been hinted at in several incidents. On the first boat, Cocoanut jumps into the circle of chalk drawn by a sailor round Mrs March's feet when she trespasses onto «dangerous ground» —the crew's quarters (206). On the second voyage he will fantasize over the possibility of «invading» Lionel's berth, «forbidden territory» to him, and later commits the fatal transgression of doing so in fact (229-30). The final image of reverse invasion appears in the northward direction taken by Cocoanut's floating corpse (234).² However, as Brantlinger points out, this very fear of the encroachment of «darkness» is in itself part of imperial thought, reflected in «invasion-scary stories, in which the outward movement of imperialist adventure is reversed,» and which constitute the «obverse side [of] the solipsistic fantasy of swallowing the world» (1988: 233, 246). Joseph Bristow comments that

² and not by Lionel's, as C. Lane wrongly suggests (1995: 174).

in R. H. Haggard's *She* (1885), where the invasion-scare component is strongly evoked in Ayesha's terrifying plans for establishing a world-wide empire under her rule,

[e]verything brutal about British imperialism —the wars, the massacres, the destruction of cultures— is displaced into the very heart of the Continent the Victorians sought to conquer. (1991: 140)

Such fears, latent in the ideology of Empire, have the effect of multiplying Lionel's personal fears of intrusion and of provoking a similar displacement. It is this complex relation between the personal and the political versions of reality, whose contradictory messages Lionel is incapable of sorting out, that is at the heart of the story.

The presentation of characters further develops this conflict, playing once more both with imperial topics and with their subversion. Particularly in the case of Cocoanut, in whose description there are many points that conform to imperial stereotype, an added complication is introduced by the fact that on occasion it becomes difficult to disentangle the narrator's perception of him from Lionel's. Like many other «faithful natives,» Cocoanut is identified by a nickname and seems to have no family background, no connections, no specific nationality, not even a surname that is definitely his. Besides, the cluster of monkey images centering on him is completely in line with the imperial topic of the «savage» as an intermediate step on the chain of evolution (Bolt 1971; Street 1975). The use of this animal imagery constitutes another example of the play between the specific meanings in imperial mythology and traditional, «archetypal» interpretations. The ape in Western culture has been taken to symbolize a distorted, inferior image of humanity, a shadow-figure which embodies «dark», unconscious forces, potentially dangerous to the extent that it is associated with the Devil (Cirlot 1979; Hall 1980; Revilla 1995). These connotations, projected onto Cocoanut as they are onto the subjected territories he is identified with, are reinforced by their contraposition to the qualities attributed to the lion, with whom the British character is associated in the first place through his name: the solar, regal, masculine animal that is not only the heraldic symbol of Britain but a representation of the nation's power as rightful «king of the jungle.»

There are, however, intimations of the dangerous nature of the lion, that also signifies, according to traditional interpretations, brute strength (the lion whose jaws are held open by Fortitude), arrogance, and uncontrolled passions. Cocoanut sees Lionel's berth as «the lair of a beast who might retaliate» (229). The clearest subversion occurs when the imagery is made explicit, as Lionel half-jokingly accuses Cocoanut of being «no better than a monkey» and receives the reply «Lion, he don't know anything at all. Monkey's got to come along to tell a lion he's alive» (218). In Eastern tradition, as Revilla explains, the monkey represents wisdom, prudence, generosity, and in some cases even happiness—in other words, many of the characteristics that Cocoanut's sentence implies, and which are attributed to him throughout the story, in spite of Lionel's fear. More specifically, through the conflicting connotations projected onto both characters by this use of imagery, the division that June Perry Levine suggests between «tame» and «savage» characters in Forster's fiction (qtd. in Lane 1995: 163) is in fact rather blurred.

The physical description of Lionel, following as it does on the «tiny masterpiece» of psychological description conveyed in the letter to his mother (Stallybrass 1988: 20), presents him, not surprisingly, as conventional. «Clean-cut, athletic, good-looking without being conspicuous,» so far Lionel March is the prototype of the adventure story hero of the period, fulfilling the expectations aroused by his name. Forster's perversion of the topic is achieved by the gradual sexualization of the description, first through the not-at-all innocent device of the female gaze, then by the physicality of the references to the

«springy, gleaming hairs» on Lionel's hands and to the too-tight uniform which sets off his masculinity. Ironically, the uniform will also serve to feminize him through Forster's choice of the expression used to describe its effect, more commonly applied to «the ladies,» as it will be on the following line (208).

The physical description of Cocoanut, on the other hand, is sexualized from the beginning, emphasizing immediate sensual perception through the reference to his nakedness and to the «brightly coloured scarf» and «aromatic smell» that envelop it (209). Within the «strongly homosocial» context of Empire (Boehmer 1995: 63) and especially before the development of awareness of the homosexual as a category, open admiration for male beauty in any race is admissible so long as this beauty conforms to the heroic.³ The strength, fitness and magnificence of Zulu warriors, for instance, is praised so often in turn-of-the-century adventure stories that Mannsaker identifies «the Black prince» as a distinct type (1985: 118). In being the sexualized appreciation through a white male gaze of a kind of non-white male beauty entirely free from heroic connotations, the description of Cocoanut certainly constitutes a perversion of imperial discourse. However, the issue is further complicated not only by the «feminization of the Other» that Boehmer points out as characteristic of imperialism (79-89), but by the complex discourses of gender, homosexuality and homophobia.

Cocoanut's «feminization» is of course especially marked by his passive role in the sexual act, indicated through the insidious phrase «put him where he had to be» (210). The phrase evokes the power relations that Andrea Dworkin defined as an essential part of the act of «fucking» in patriarchal society (1994: 23). Insofar as Cocoanut is depicted as feminine, or as «subtle supple boy» in opposition to Lionel's «Nordic warrior» (210), the hierarchy is kept both in terms of empire and of homoerotic mythology, where racial difference and the difference of age act as substitutes for gender (Badinter 1994: 116-17; Boone 1995: 100-104; Miles 1991: 187). However, subversions occur here too, as «the half-caste Cocoanut unmasks (or unmans) the latent sexual identity of the 'Nordic warrior'» (Dorland 1997: 211) and the threat these subversions mean for Lionel is crucial in determining the outcome of the story.

On one level there are occasional touches in the narrator's language that undermine the rigid hierarchical division by feminizing Lionel. The initial description of the English officer as sexual object is continued, for instance, in the reference to Lionel's granting «his favours» (213), and particularly in the almost «camp» account of their first sexual encounter: «That night champagne appeared in the cabin, and he was seduced. He never could resist champagne» (214). When all this becomes dangerous is when Lionel himself feels that he is being forced into a feminine role as receiver of presents and possibly of payment, «[h]e whose pride and duty it was to be independent and to command!» (227). The power of money, which according to Dworkin is one of the vital sources of male power (1994: 20), is in this story wielded by the one who should by the combined definitions of patriarchy and empire be powerless in all respects, and it has, at least to a certain extent, the effect of redressing the balance.

Secondly, the man/boy distinction which could serve as a substitute for gender hierarchy is also blurred, as both characters are in turn elevated to the status of «men» (218) and subsumed in the category of «boys,» as in the final account. This blurring is in itself

³ On growing awareness of male homosexuality in the late nineteenth century, and its effect on the perception and representation of the male body, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

characteristic of imperial mentality, which created a culture where the world of boys and that of men were closely related, especially through the extension of British boyhood imposed by the public school experience (Adams 1990: 30). In the context of the story, however, it is mainly relevant in relation to the theme of power and powerlessness. If as a general thing there are more references to Cocoanut as «boy» than to Lionel, the man/boy pattern is offset by the contrasted pairings of another recurrent opposition, that of work/play, that appears from the very beginning of the story. In contrast with the childishness often attributed to non-whites in this period, Cocoanut seems always to be working (and this work is also the source of the money which enhances his status as «man») while Lionel is associated with the language of play. The work/play metaphor is relevant too as it becomes applied to the characters' conception of their relationship. With one exception (210), Cocoanut sees their affair in terms of business, of something that has to be worked at, and his seriousness also appears in his mental use of the words «beloved» and «lover» to refer to Lionel (215, 219, 229).

For Lionel, however, —also with one exception, his spontaneous acknowledgement of affection during their long dialogue— the relationship is described in terms of play, at its most serious a risky game, initially «just a bit of foolery» (224-28). In this he conforms to the conception of homosexuality as «adolescent» that coexisted in Edwardian mentality with the satanization of homosexual relationships after the Oscar Wilde trial (Sedgwick 1985: 177). More importantly, Lionel's attitude reflects the usual male British view of interracial sexual relationships in general as «subordinate interests, subsidiary to the main business of life, divergent from the principal characteristics of a public persona» (Hyam 1992: 210). If Cocoanut's desire for serious commitment renders him more adult, it also, ironically, implies the gravest danger. As Hyam points out, it is precisely this commitment —«taking concubines seriously»— which constitutes the «unspeakable» option of «going native» (210).

«Unspeakable,» applied both to Cocoanut's initial advances and to the «dead secret» of Lionel's father, who has «gone native» in the sense just pointed out, is a crucial word in the text, as language is a central point of misinterpretation and misrepresentation in the story. In the literary tradition of imperialism, the capacity to formulate complete, accurate grammatical statements about reality is reserved to the British, and denied to «natives,» whether they are using English or speaking their own language. This is done in two basic ways: first, through the conventions that are employed to represent «native» speech, including, for instance, mispronunciations of English, broken grammar, and what Mannsaker has called «the sub-proverbial turn of phrase» (1985: 118). All of these appear in the representation of Cocoanut's speech, and reflect an implicit belief in the superiority of the English language, that cannot be mastered by speakers of other nationalities, and which parallels the superiority of British culture, also inaccessible to aliens. The second way of confirming this mastery of reality through language is by representing «extreme otherness» encountered in the colonized territories as «unscrutable,» «inarticulate,» «unsayable» (Boehmer 95).

To a considerable extent, the confidence in mastery through language that sustained imperial thought is challenged in the story. The childhood episode seems to establish the imperial convention by associating Cocoanut, the Eurasian «Other,» with the «M'm m'm m'm,» the unnameable creatures which according to the boy live in the bow of the ship. On the other hand, however, the episode also suggests the inadequacy of English, and of the Christian framework, to give a complete explanation for all experience: the m'm m'm m'm are previous to the Bible and thus have escaped Adam's control through naming. «'I suppose so,» Mrs March's slightly bored answer to her daughter's demand to know whet-

her everything has a name, seems to carry little conviction in contrast to the «offhand tones» of the Lascar sailor who offers assurance of the existence of the m'm m'm m'm (203-4). The reply confirms the possibility of unnameable beings and experiences (and also, of course, their association with the Orient) but also suggests an entirely different explanation of the whole affair of the m'm m'm m'm: a sailors' joke that an imaginative child has picked up and transformed into a story to impress his companions.

Similar deflations occur later in the story. While Cocoanut is again linked to mysterious speech and to the magical value of language, as in the «incomprehensible words» he mutters when throwing the butt of their shared cigarette into the sea (215), the next reference to words in «that unknown tongue» brings forth an acid little remark from the narrator: «Nearly all tongues were unknown to Lionel, and he was impressed» (220). What is more, despite all references to Oriental inscrutability and inarticulacy, it is made manifest at several points that it is the British who are incapable of using language maturely, especially as regards emotions, a point that Forster had already made half-humorously in his «Notes on English Character» (14). Lionel's inadequate language is repeatedly satirized, most often by the conversion of his thoughts into a reported speech which makes them sound doubly artificial and absurd (211, 212, 214, 228). It is Cocoanut who will be capable of articulating, of rendering «speakable,» at least temporarily, both their own relationship and Lionel's father's secret, and Lionel acknowledges this openly during their precariously perfect conversation: «I've never had anyone to talk to like you. Never, and I don't suppose I ever shall» (222).

«Wonderful, wonnerful...»(210). In spite of everything, the small difference in expression reflects a difference in the perception of their experience which is magnified out of all proportion precisely by this cumulation of imperial messages. The cabin and the voyage south evoking descent and danger, the animal imagery, the feminization of the Other which is not quite enough to keep the hierarchy of gender, but enough to arouse terror, the association of Cocoanut with passion and what is beyond articulacy, all converge in Lionel's sudden memory of the battle in which he was wounded, the image that will superimpose itself on reality and lead to their death. The final substitution of this image for the reality of the cabin is the outcome of the pressure exerted by imperial codes, in which the right relation between Britain and the colonies is reestablished in terms of dominion through violence.

What is operating here is not only the discourse of imperialism, although such stories as Rudyard Kipling's «Beyond the Pale» (1888) are vivid examples of the fears and tragic endings surrounding representations of interracial sexual love in imperial literature. As has already been pointed out, the discourses of masculinity and homophobia prove equally inescapable for the British character, for the narrator, and arguably for Forster himself.⁴ At one level, the discourse of homophobia acts as a literary convention, practically enforcing a tragic ending; Stephen Adams's book *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction*. (1980) includes a chapter heading, «Terminal Sex», which sounds like a more accurate description of the contents of the book as a whole than its actual title. How far the tragic ending is expected from the genre can be gauged from the critical debate on the publication of *Maurice*, where the happy ending whose possibility was for Forster himself essential to the novel is repeatedly attacked as artificial and improbable (Gardner 1973).

⁴ Already in 1915 Lytton Strachey remarked in a letter to Forster that Forster's moral attitude to homosexuality sometimes appeared unclear in *Maurice* owing to the difficulty of separating Forster's comments from his character's thoughts (Furbank 1979, vol II, 16).

Furbank's biography suggests that Forster actually rewrote the ending of «The Other Boat» increasing its violence, which invites reflection about the relative parts that deliberate choice and internal logic play in the construction of this or any other story (vol II, 303).

However, the effect of homophobic discourse goes further. Sedgwick, among others, points out the crucial role of what she calls «homosexual panic» as a way of imposing control on the social behaviour of all males, and preventing the development of any links between men which could threaten the established order; in her view, it is panic at this aspect of himself which drives Lionel to murder and suicide (1990: 249). Closely linked to this panic, and to far more complex links between the construction of masculine identity and violence than we can develop here, is the convention of war as a setting in which male bonding can be fully explored, to the extent that Susan Jeffords hypothesizes that a crucial function of war itself is precisely this possibility (73). The bonding extends to allies and enemies and is not broken by death; in fact, in death it finds its fullest expression, as violence has fulfilled the purpose of establishing a communication that seems impossible through any other means (Adams 1990: 151). By transforming a scene of sexual love into a scene of war, Lionel brings himself back into this deadly logic, where his murder is «part of a curve that had long been declining, and had nothing to do with death» (233).

Edward Said has noted that the power of empire lies not only in its capacity to elaborate its own narratives, but in its power «to block other narratives from emerging» (xiii). Imperial discourse, with its linked discourses of masculinity and homophobia, certainly exerts such power in the closure of this short story. The various «official» versions of what has happened—which include the medical report and the rumours on the ship apart from the account given to Lionel's mother—distort the truth of what has taken place, imposing narratives which are in accordance with imperial expectations: they either presume that racial boundaries, and all other aspects of the code, have been respected (as in the «accident» version), or that their transgression has been fittingly punished. There is a significant variation with respect to such well-known imperial endings as Marlow's lie to Kurtz's Intended in *Heart of Darkness* or the official reason for Trejago's lameness after his near-mutilation in «Beyond the Pale»: unlike what happens in these stories, Mrs March, the recipient of the account, refuses to believe it, thus opening a crack in the system. However, Mrs March herself will ensure its continuity by repressing even the most distorted versions of the narrative of what took place on the ship: «and she never mentioned his name again» (234).

The discourse of empire and of masculinity «blocked» more than Lionel's and Cocanut's story. Forster himself comments on the contrast between the closed endings of literature and the open endings of life (Furbank 1979: 148). It is more than slightly ironical that Forster never wrote his own story, a story that could have included the facts that «The Other Boat» was initially suggested by an incident on the ship in which Forster was sailing to visit his Indian friend and all-but-lover, Syed Masood; that the incident, a violent and unexplained quarrell between two cabin-mates on this ship, ended in an equally unexplained reconciliation; and that not long afterwards Forster would enjoy his first fully satisfactory love affair (homosexual and interracial again) in Port Said.

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