

PEACE BY OTHER MEANS

Symposium on the Role of Ethnography
and the Humanities in the Understanding,
Prevention, and Resolution of Enmity
Part 3

*Maria DiBattista, Judith Beyer, Felix Girke, Jehangir Yezdi Malegam,
Edith Hall, Laura Rival, Kevin M. F. Platt*

Introduction: A Motto for Moral Diplomacy

“Only connect . . .”—is there any single phrase that offers a more direct and humane method of conflict resolution? This sensible exhortation serves as the epigraph for E. M. Forster’s 1910 “condition of England” novel, *Howards End*, in which Forster humorously, then desperately, plots to get people, classes, and even places (rural England versus cosmopolitan London) utterly opposed in character and in values to “connect.” The moral good of human connection, the central theme of all of Forster’s fiction, is a primary article of his humanistic creed, as expounded with great urgency and yet a certain wistfulness in his 1938 essay “What I Believe.” “I realize,” he confesses,

that all society rests upon force. But all the great creative actions, all the decent human relations, occur during the intervals when force has not managed to come to the front. These intervals are what matter. I want them to be as frequent and as lengthy as possible, and I call them “civilization.”

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190

Insofar as the novel succeeds in imagining those intervals when force is kept in the background, it is a producer and not just a product of civilization.

The moral efficacy of connection—whether it takes the form of creative action or of decent human relations—in containing and civilizing force is an idea promoted, then despaired of, and finally affirmed in *Howards End*. It is an idea that informs the novel’s conception of civilized life and fuels its utopian hopes that the outcast and the illegitimate might yet inherit the earth, or at least as much of it as encompassed by Howards End and its spiritual environs. Forster regarded propriety and convention as expressions of force and so applauded any assault on conventional feeling as an act of moral heroism. But Forster also recognized that the morally heroic can be besieged and vanquished by internal doubt as well as by external coercion. In *Howards End*, he personifies these misgivings as the “goblins” of panic and emptiness. These malign presences stalk the novel’s characters, undermining their morale and mocking their hopes by insisting that “there is no such thing as splendor or heroism in the world.” Forster is not interested in exorcising these goblins or exposing them as “phantoms of cowardice and unbelief” even if he could, which he cannot, since, the novel tells us, they, like the poor, are always with us.

In the novel, the conflict between connection and force, including all these skirmishes with the goblins of panic and emptiness, unfolds and revolves around the meeting and subsequent entanglement of the Schlegel sisters—modern descendants of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane Austen’s droll exemplars of sense and sensibility—and the Wilcoxes, robust agents and beneficiaries of England’s commercial and imperial enterprises. The Schlegels’ creed is that the inner life pays, a doctrine incomprehensible to the Wilcoxes, who trust to property and sound financial investments to guarantee their security from harm and immunity to emotional distress. Caught between and ultimately ruined by his involvement with both the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes is Leonard Bast, a working man who yearns for the spiritual “adventure” (as he and Forster himself deem it) offered by poetry and romance but who nevertheless cannot help fretting about the umbrella that Helen Schlegel has inadvertently commandeered on exiting a concert hall.

“Only connect . . .” is Forster’s motto for the moral diplomacy that might reconcile the conflicting interests of such ideologically and emotionally disparate characters. The injunction, inscribed on the threshold of the novel like a commandment, rhetorically aspires to the “command of admonition and of poetry” that so impresses Leonard Bast as he sits down to read Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*. But whatever Ruskinian authority Forster’s exhortation might channel is soon dissipated by those ellipses that disappointingly trail off into a vague or dreamy suggestiveness. We might be more inclined to heed the injunction had it been punctuated by an exclamation point, turning a gentle and kindly exhortation into

an urgent imperative. Forster's ellipses become more unnerving the more you consider them: are they meant to leave open the numberless ways of fulfilling the injunction, or do they hint at how unlikely it is we will ever succeed in doing so? This unsettling possibility elicits another even more disquieting thought: that the ellipses allow for the eventuality that our moral resolve may falter in the face of the intractable realities—poverty, prejudice, social hatred, and political enmity—that define the present, embattled state of things.

We have to wait until the second half of the novel before Forster will fill in those ellipses and expound on the benefits accruing to those who manage “only” to connect. His meaning is revealed, although not fully elaborated, in the “sermon”—a kind of wifely homily, really—that Margaret Schlegel inwardly addresses to Henry Wilcox, the bluntly virile but spiritually undeveloped businessman she has decided to marry. Henry is repeatedly, almost comically extolled as “a real man” who lives, not as comfortably as he pretends, in a state of spiritual-emotional impasse in which, Forster observes, he “could not be as the saints and love the Infinite with a seraphic ardor, but . . . could be ashamed of loving a wife.” Margaret hopes to repair this split in his nature by introducing and ushering him into the “Infinite” world of the spirit (here is where the German idealism evoked by her very name manifests and declares itself). “Only connect the prose and the passion,” she exhorts him,

and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height.
Live in fragments no longer. Only connect and the beast and the monk,
robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.

There is something exhilarating in the thought that the prose and the passion of life *can* be connected and that we will live in fragments no longer. To see human love raised to such a height is to be given a glimpse of sublimity, a moral summit seldom visible from the lowlands of ordinary life. Yet in elaborating this allegory of love triumphant, Forster has reduced rather than enlarged the domain of prose, which encompasses all the concrete realities—the body that hungers for food, money, property, class—that define and condition modern existence.

No wonder, then, that Margaret fails in her missionary effort to convert Henry, who has more faith in the moral efficacy of his own motto: “Concentrate.” An unreconstructed capitalist, Henry makes consolidation rather than connection his life's objective. But even though the novel grants Margaret victory in this battle of the mottos, Forster is too astute a psychologist not to recognize the moral appeal of Henry's public qualities and the emotional, indeed sexual, thrill in being taken up and taken care of by confident and more imperious wills. The novel makes little emotional sense unless you appreciate and concede, as Margaret does, the attractiveness of men and temperaments so fiercely concentrated. Forster is one of the few novelists of unapologetically liberal convictions

who acknowledges and indeed convincingly represents the charisma of the unreflective man who acts with such untroubled decisiveness. The scattered also fall into place when a strong will, impatient with dispersed or squandered energies, takes charge.

All the more reason, then, to connect with and harness such concentrated force. Forster, a meticulous accountant when it comes to tallying what “pays” in the moral life, reaches beyond his own civilized instincts to extol the “agreeable menace” in Henry’s eyes “whether they were turned toward the slums or toward the stars.” His eyes link Henry, the modern capitalist, to the “warriors and hunters of the past,” the defenders and providers of their homes and communities. Margaret yearns to see and arguably comes to love Henry in light of this historic connection. Her exalted view of Henry as a man who connects the romance of the past with the exploits of modern capital represents no sudden reversal in her estimation of him. Margaret had signaled her receptiveness to Henry when she proclaimed that “more and more do I refuse to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it.”

Margaret’s initial refusal to sneer at Henry’s character and values is a prelude to her accepting his proposal to share his fragmented, if richly appointed life. Their marriage was foreseeable and indeed inevitable in a novel that preaches the virtues of connection across class, moral, and ideological divides. And yet Margaret wonders whether, in accepting Henry as a husband, she may have compromised and even debased her vision of exalted love. Hence her troubling meditation on the fate of love once it descends, from the peaks where passion and prose connect and are exalted, into the lowlands where it must answer and conform to established customs. In the social commotion that results,

the foundations of Property and Propriety are laid bare, twin rocks; Family Pride flounders to the surface, puffing and blowing and refusing to be comforted; Theology, vaguely ascetic, gets up a nasty ground swell. Then the lawyers are aroused—cold brood—and creep out of their holes. They do what they can; they tidy up Property and Propriety, reassure Theology and Family Pride. Half-guineas are poured on the troubled waters, the lawyers creep back, and, if all has gone well, Love joins one man and woman together in Matrimony.

All this is what the novelist extolling the moral and social virtue of connection is up against when he hazards to reinvent, as Forster does here, the traditional marriage plot. Property, propriety, theology, and family pride clamor for their place at the altar, where love submits and at times is sacrificed to social form.

Forster knew better than to pin his hopes for a more humane future on the marriage of culture and capital. The union of Margaret and Henry may outwardly prosper, but it remains vulnerable to the forces of panic and emptiness

looming in the background, waiting to work their mischief like the “goblins” that Helen hears sounding through Beethoven’s Fifth whenever the heroic measures relax their vigilance. The union, moreover, is fated to be sterile. Helen has neither the temperament nor the inclination for a traditional marriage. Yet it is Helen who proves to be fertile, who brings new life—a child she conceives with Leonard Bast in a moment of romantic abandon—into the novel, thus ratifying her cherished and much-tested belief that only the inner life really pays. In her rashness, she sweeps through the outer life of telegram and anger, panic and emptiness, unsettling the very foundations that love, in its triumph, had laid bare. She defies propriety, challenges the rights of property, and divorces love not only from matrimony but from childbearing, scandalizing theology and insulting family pride.

But if the inner life pays, its triumph comes at enormous cost to those who do not or will not connect. Margaret’s success in transforming Henry from a “real man” to a man of feeling comes at the expense of the confidence and optimism that had given such moral luster to his habits of command. “Connecting” with the Schlegels proves an unmitigated disaster for Leonard Bast. First, he finds himself jobless, after acting on the “insider” tip that the Schlegels pass on to him and leaving his secure job with a firm he has been told is on the brink of collapse for a position in a firm that actually does go under. The “adventure” of knowing the Schlegels culminates in Bast’s discovery that his wife was once the mistress of Henry Wilcox. Even Bast’s death lacks dignity. He dies when Henry’s son, Charles, outraged at his presence at Howards End, strikes him (lightly) with a sword. He reels, topples a nearby bookcase and is buried under an avalanche of books. His death is too laden with symbolism to inspire pity or terror, even though Forster, straining for pathos, will petition whatever gods might be listening to consecrate the end of his pitiable life: “Let Squalor be turned into Tragedy, whose eyes are the stars, and whose hand holds the sunset and the dawn.”

This is Forster at his most poetic, giving full expression to Sensibility and silencing Sense, which otherwise would certainly object that the sunset and the dawn are in no one’s hands, nor do the stars see or care about anything that happens on earth. Yet with Sense momentarily quieted, we might hear more clearly the vatic strains in “Only connect . . .,” the central, luminous tenet of Forster’s social gospel. There is nothing new in the gospel—it can be heard, he tells us, in Jacopone da Todi’s “Ordena questo amore, tu che m’ami” (“O thou who lovest me set this love in order”). But Forster does suggest a new technique to help us set love in order:

In economics, we are told that if there was a new technique of distribution there need be no poverty, and people would not starve in one place while crops were being ploughed under in another. A similar change is needed in the sphere of morals and politics. . . . Not by becoming better, but by ordering and distributing his native goodness, will Man shut up

Force into its box, and so gain time to explore the universe and to set his mark upon it worthily.

The novel, by offering us models of distributive justice, advances the civilizing work of love, which connects, against force, which divides. Those who write novels that order and distribute our native goodness are prophets and architects of peace. “Only connect . . .” is their moral blueprint.

—*Maria DiBattista*