

“The Marabar Echo: Forster and Jefferies,” by J.R.Ebbatson M.A. Reproduced, from *Notes and Queries* August 1978, by permission of the author, and with acknowledgements to the publishers.

THE MARABAR ECHO: FORSTER AND JEFFERIES

THE obscurity of the events in the Marabar Caves scene of *A Passage to India* is matched by the mystery surrounding the provenance of this cathartic sequence. In her analysis of the MS. versions of the novel June Perry Levine concludes that “the relationship between the data and the work of art is unclear.”¹ Forster knew the three main Indian cave groups, all of which are distinguished by either carving or painting. The key feature of the Marabar, by contrast, is their featurelessness: “Nothing, nothing attaches to them”, Forster writes, “and their reputation—for they have one— does not depend upon human speech” (p. 124).² Human speech, and indeed all other sounds, are reduced to “boum “ by the pervasive echo to which Adela and the others are exposed.

For this episode Dr. Levine claims that “no one has discovered any parallels”.³ There seem to be striking resemblances of language, imagery and meaning between the Marabar sequence and a passage in Richard Jefferies’ *The Story of My Heart* (1883). There is little doubt that Forster had read this famous spiritual autobiography. The warrant for such a statement lies in the scene in *Howards End* where Bast tells the Schlegel sisters of his night walk into the Surrey woods—a walk which he says had “all come about from reading something of Richard Jefferies”. Though Helen interposes that it “came from something far greater”, she cannot save the luckless clerk from a literary outburst which ends in “a swamp of books”. Forster comments, “Within his cramped little mind dwelt something that was greater than Jefferies’ books—the spirit that led Jefferies to write them”, and as Bast departs Helen adjures him to remember that he is “better than Jefferies”.⁴ This implies a fair degree of familiarity with Jefferies’ *oeuvre*, in which *The Story of My Heart* occupies the central place. Forster may also have discussed Jefferies with Lowes Dickinson, since he recounts how in 1885 Dickinson worked on a socialist farm in Surrey, and notes the proximity of H. S. Salt, the Fabian journalist who was to produce one of the earliest studies of Jefferies.⁵ However this may be, it would seem that some sentences of peculiar power in *The Story of My Heart* were subconsciously woven into the fabric of the Marabar Caves scene.

In the sixth chapter of his book Jefferies recounts how he used to stand near the Royal Exchange and watch the great crowds, asking himself rhetorically, “Where then will be the sum and outcome of their labour?” (p. 71).⁶ Then he switches to his central image of energy and power: “Burning in the sky, the sun shone on me as when I rested in the narrow valley carved in prehistoric time. Burning in the sky, I can never forget the sun.” “Is there any theory, philosophy, or creed, is there any system or culture”, he demands, “any formulated method able to meet and satisfy each separate item of this agitated pool of human life?” (p. 71). Jefferies reviews the cultures and religions of the past. In the “elaborate ritual” of Egypt he finds “Nothing; absolutely nothing”. After Nineveh and Assyria comes this passage which may have been seminal to Forster:

The aged caves of India, who shall tell when they were sculptured? Far back when the sun was burning, burning in the sky as now in untold precedent time. Is there any meaning in those ancient caves? The indistinguishable noise not to be resolved, born of the human struggle, mocks in answer (p. 72).

This is the noise of the city-dwellers, “an indistinguishable noise—it is not clatter, hum, or roar, it is not resolvable ... no attention can resolve it into a fixed sound” (p. 69), just as the Marabar echo “is entirely devoid of distinction” (p. 145). In the learning and religion of these diverse cultures from Confucius, through the Aztecs, to Polynesia, Jefferies finds “nothing. Nothing! They have been tried, and were found an illusion”. In the light of such learning “can aught be gathered which can face this, the Reality? The indistinguishable noise, non-resolvable, roars a loud contempt” (p. 73). Another passage follows which, despite its pantheist mysticism, may also have underlain Forster’s conception:

Burning in the sky, the sun shines as it shone on me in the solitary valley, as it burned on when the earliest cave of India was carved. Above the indistinguishable roar of the many feet I feel the presence of the sun, of the immense forces of the universe, and beyond these the sense of the eternal now, of the immortal (pp. 73-4).

Earlier, Jefferies had given a quasi-geological description of his Wiltshire meditations which parallels Forster’s evocation of India:

Burning, burning, the sun glowed on the sward at the foot of the slope where these thoughts burned into me. How many, many years, how many cycles of years, how many bundles of cycles of years, had the sun glowed down thus on that hollow? Since it was formed how long? Since its was worn and shaped, groove-like, in the flanks of the hills by mighty forces which had ebbed (p. 28).

From this eyrie he journeyed imaginatively,

“Travelling in an instant across the distant sea, I saw as if with actual vision the palms and cocoa-nut trees, the bamboos of India, and the cedars of the extreme south” (p. 23). Likewise, he visualizes the religion of the early cavemen: “At the mouth of the ancient cave, face to face with the unknown, they prayed” (p. 48).

The concatenation of imagery is remarkable : not only the vision of the Indian cave and the “indistinguishable roar “, but also the recurrent emphatic “nothing”, and the overwhelming presence of the sun. For Jefferies the sun symbolizes his “fourth idea” and opens the way towards that “soul-life” of which his diaries speak. He wishes to go “straight to the sun, the immense forces of the universe, to the Entity unknown” (p. 74), like Mr. Grace in *Maurice* with his “new cosmogony” whose “chief point was that God lives inside the sun”,⁷ or Forster’s Indian friends who “said they were descended from the Sun”.⁸

Yet the presence of the sun epitomizes the gulf of temperament, experience and history which separates the two writers. In Forster’s novel the sun returns to his kingdom “with power but without beauty—that was the sinister feature”, and through “excess of light, he failed to triumph”, no longer “the eternal promise” which excites Jefferies, the sun is “debarred from glory” (p. 112), and must bow to the dark truth of the caves which Jefferies perhaps inspired.

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Notes

¹ June Perry Levine, *Creation and Criticism, A Passage to India* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), 72.

³ *A Passage to India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966). Subsequent reference is to this edition.

³ Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁴ *Howards End* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 114-15.

⁵ E. M. Forster, *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson* (London: Edward Arnold, 1934), 53. Salt’s *Richard Jefferies* (1894; repr. 1905) gives a somewhat transcendental account of its subject; the stress on the connexions between Jefferies and Edward Carpenter would have interested Forster and Dickinson.

⁶ *The Story of My Heart*, ed. S. J. Looker (London: Constable, 1947). All reference is to this edition.

⁷ *Maurice* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), 127.

⁸ “Racial Exercise”, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 31. Jefferies was himself interested in Eastern thought. Edward Thomas found among his books translations of *The Assemblies of Al Hariri* and of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the diaries reveal acquaintance with the work of Anna Kingsford, the Buddhist explicator. Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* (London: Dent, 1938), 163; *The Nature Diaries and Notebooks of Richard Jefferies*, ed. S. J. Looker (London: The Grey Walls Press, 1948), 273-4.