

Louis Armand, PhD
OPPONENT'S REPORT:

re "INSULARITY & CONNECTION IN E.M. FORSTER'S *HOWARDS END* &
A PASSAGE TO INDIA" by Jana Rezková
(BA dissertation, 2006, supervised by PhDr Zdeněk Beran)

This dissertation focuses upon the themes of insularity in two novels by Forster, elaborated across both private and social dimensions, with regards to the prevailing conventions of Edwardian England at the time in which Forster was writing and publishing—vis-à-vis divisions of race, class, gender, and ideology. With regard to *Howards End*, these themes are read within a domestic English context; with regard to *A Passage*, a colonial one. Ms Rezková structures her reading of Forster across two chapters, each dealing with historical and cultural contexts, and with the notion of "connections"—i.e. the various attitudes or stances affected by Forster's characters, either singularly or collectively, concerning various *prejudices*; these being taken to represent prevailing cultural norms in Edwardian England at the same time as constituting, on a thematic level, a well-established literary device employed for the purpose of supporting an effect of dramatic purpose and tension.

Measured against the limited task Ms Rezková has set herself in this BA dissertation, the organisation and treatment of her material appears coherent and stylistically competent. Her argumentation remains consistent, and her treatment of the theme of the individual's search for "harmony," within a broader quest for social "harmony," is plausible to the extent that we accept that this is indeed a predominant motive, and not merely a motif, in the texts of Forster. Considering the very significant nature of the prejudices dealt with by Forster, the question immediately arises as to whether "harmony" is in fact presented as a viable alternative, or solution, or even a desirable state of affairs, or if it is rather posed as a "utopian" palliative that can do nothing but mystify the real social, political, economic and cultural divisions that form the general material of Forster's texts.

This leads to my principle reservation about this dissertation: the absence of any critical or theoretical infrastructure supporting the treatment of these various themes. While adopting a paradigm of binary opposition as the basis for her thesis ("Insularity and Connection"), Ms Rezková provides no analysis of what is implied in such relations, let alone even a cursory reflection upon dualism or dialectics. Despite extensive reference to the body-spirit, nature-civilisation, real-imaginary dichotomies, no reference is made at all to the legacies of 19th century thought in this regard. Nor are there any references to the more localised discourses within England between 1910 and 1930, drawing upon the legacies of Owen, Marx, Adam Smith or even Fabianism. Instead, the dissertation remains largely descriptive and theoretically superficial, relying upon a schematic reading of Forster's texts informed largely by a set of critical stereotypes—yet without any analytical engagement with the idea of the stereotype as such, or Forster's own particular treatment of the logic of stereotypes (i.e. how "theme" and "character" function stereotypically). To Ms

Rezková's credit she does recognise the psychological and social complexity of Forster's treatment of the stereotype, but rarely the complexity of its rhetorical and narratological treatment.

Something that would have benefited this dissertation is a serious analysis of the *critical* element of Forster's engagement with domestic and colonial prejudice. That is to say, as a symptom not so much of class, or social, economic, cultural stratification or difference, but rather of *crisis*. Primarily the crisis represented by the end of the Victoria era, and the revaluation of the Pax Britannica and of British values generally—as elsewhere, in *Maurice* for example, Forster treats the crisis of morality as stemming from an institutional decadence, rather than from a sexual one. It would have been useful if Ms Rezková's research had been actively directed towards the work of a number of Forster's contemporaries—such as Lytton and John Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, G.B. Shaw, Bertram Russell and Maynard Keynes.

While the dissertation takes note of the general thematics of “insularity” in Forster's texts—the “differences in nationality, race and religion” that “form an insuperable obstacle”—little examination is made of the *logic* and *structure* of what is here called insularity. There does not seem to be any good reason for this omission. Moreover, it leads Ms Rezková to concluding statements such as “The quest for order is natural for all human beings ...” We are not given any reason for supposing that this is other than a mere generalisation, however virtuously intended. It seems that Ms Rezková identifies “order” (“harmony”) with an overcoming of insularity, without taking into account that order presupposes stratification, segmentation, and rigid denomination—i.e. a set of social, economic, cultural taxonomies according to which the rational world may be ordered. The Pax Britannia was, after all, a rule of order, according to which chaos resides not in the tensions perceived to arise from “insularity,” but rather in the erosion of e.g. structures of social “insulation”—the decline, that is, of the Victorian imperial system.

A number of avoidable errors detract from this dissertation's otherwise disciplined formal presentation. Ms Rezková ought to have attended more to the proper use of referencing style. Errors of this type occur on almost every page and could easily have been addressed at the draft stage. A number of trivial errors compound the effect of negligence: the repeated misspelling of the name of the publisher of *Howards End*; the multiple misspelling of the titles of Forster's texts (“Howards En,” “Howars End,” “Passage to Inida,” e.g.; along with an excessive tendency to fragment sentences.

With a greater degree of critical engagement, I do not doubt that Ms Rezková's dissertation would have been far more accomplished than it presently is. As a BA dissertation it achieves a high standard of organisation and presentation; the language is clear and the argument is consistent and lucid within its limited scope. In the absence of a critical apparatus, however, an overall grade of 2 (B-) is the most that I can recommend.

