

Judith Scherer Herz. *A Passage to India: Nation and Narration*. New York: Twayne, 1993. pp. 160. \$23.95.

In Twayne's Masterwork Studies series, this introduction to E. M. Forster's last novel, *A Passage to India*, is number 117, a score so impressive as to suggest that at least one area of academic publishing must be recession-proof. To judge from the promotional blurbs on the back cover, strength lies as much in predictability as in numbers. Each volume discusses "key themes and concepts," "historical context," and "critical reception," contains a "chronology, bibliography, and index," and takes its place in a series that comprises "a necessary addition to collections serving high school and university students."

It is unfortunate that this makes the series sound rather like Coles Notes with pretensions, because if Judith Herz's volume is representative, much original and thoughtful analysis is missing its genuine audience and throwing itself before readers many of whom would not be too sure what to make of it. Ontario high-school English may have long since put its feet up in front of the television, at a safe distance from any threatening intellectual cutting edges, but I cannot believe things are *so* much better elsewhere as to offer a measurable high-school clientele anywhere in North America for Herz on Kermode on the Marabar Caves:

They are in Frank Kermode's words "a figure of that place [he is translating Derrida's term, *khora*] always already in place, without dimension or direction, not a realm, not a being present, yet not an absence, the rhythms are the rhythms of negativity itself." Thus positioned, they stand outside of human experience altogether, but, curiously, the "dead granite" from which they are formed is described in persistently anthropomorphic terms.

This is part of a sophisticated deconstruction of the caves as site of three recurrent motifs of colonial fiction (metaphysical horror, sexual fear, and India as woman) and leads to consideration of Forster's own equivocal relationship with colonial assumptions, which may not have been uninfluenced by the psychological legacy of his own exercise of sexual *droits de seigneur* over the Rajah's servants at the court of Dewas.

Such subtle interfusions of biographical, psychological, historical, and critical-theoretical modes of approach make this an original and invigorating discussion of a work so little neglected that one might have thought a relatively slim volume directed specifically to student readers could not have much of great novelty to offer. Herz's study fulfills the terms of the series without being restricted by them. The "literary and historical context" is economically reviewed in an opening 40-page section that considers Forster's modernist credentials, surveys the history of the British in India, outlines Forster's own experience of India and his attempts to write about it, and summarizes the critical reception of *A Passage to India*, from its publication in 1924 to the present.

Thus far, Herz attends knowledgeably to the necessarily somewhat formulaic demands of her project. But with the "Reading" that comprises the book's next 90 pages, she can address her subject more flexibly. After considering "some problems of interpretation," she begins by placing the novel historically and politically, while acknowledging the text's own tendency to invite symbolic and metaphysical readings. This leads to a somewhat amorphous discussion of the novel's "Beginnings," which, perhaps as a result of having been disabled by too unthinking a recuperation of Forster's own notion of prophetic song from *Aspects of the Novel*, seems far from certain what it wants to do with its analogic invocations of poetry and music.

A much more assured section on "Narration and Language" follows. This introduces its imagined tiro audience to the notion of focalization and probes the use Forster makes of free indirect discourse in a suggestive exploration of both narrative perspective and the paradoxical relationship between language and silence. While "words matter," they also point the way to the "nothing" that evokes the heart of the caves' darkness, a darkness that, as suggested in the subsequent "Caves" chapter, perhaps reflects Forster's repression of troubling aspects of his own sexual past.

This in turn leads logically into the chapter on "Trials," the titular plurality presumably designed to implicate the various defendants who might be said to join Aziz in the dock: Adela, Fielding, and a clutch of tautologically formulated near-synonyms styled "accuracy, precision, definition." "Trials" advances to "Endings," and a final epilogue on "Ghosts and Memory."

"Elusiveness" is for Herz a key Forsterian quality. The perspectival and tonal elusiveness of *A Passage to India* is read in structural, political, theological, and generic terms. It is a highly patterned novel that is resistant to patterning, an anti-colonial novel that declares its "own complicity with colonial assumptions," and a novel whose extended evocation of the Gokul Ashtami is used to reconcile friends while also providing "the occasion for their final separation." It moves between "the ratiocinative and supernatural modes," becoming mystery and ghost story by turns, evading clear generic definition in confirmation of its own "essential secrecy." The text's "doubleness," not to say duplicity, is epitomized for Herz in the split figure of Mrs Moore, who figures reconciliation while remaining absolute for despairing silence.

Despite its brevity and the restraints imposed by a prescribed series style, this is a probing and perceptive monograph that has much to offer both the general reader and the specialist.

KEITH WILSON