

“Completeness, not reconstruction”: Forster’s Use of Letters in *The Hill of Devi* for “Part III” of *A Passage To India*

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In 1953, Forster published *The Hill of Devi*, his edition of the letters he wrote home during his two visits to India in 1912-13 and 1921, augmented by descriptive and analytical details. Ever since its earliest reviews, this book has been acclaimed as a rich reservoir of material for *A Passage To India*.¹ Though the letters are certainly not the only source for *A Passage To India*, many of the correspondences between them and sections of the novel are often so close as to argue an especial relationship. These correspondences range from paradigms in *The Hill of Devi* of situation, characters, and themes that appear in the novel to practically identical episodes and details. Most critics have noted the broader relationships, such as the fact that both books contain accounts of the dead tree/snake episode, the motor car accident, and *Gokul Ashtami*, while others have considered rather more intricate ties, such as the attitudes towards Hinduism.² Very little of this criticism, however, treats the question of what Forster did with his material, of how he handled the transfer of his memories into art.

Studying some of the correspondences between *The Hill . . .* and parts of “Temple,” Laurence Brander makes some suggestive, albeit critically characteristic, remarks. He notes that in this section Forster had “only to describe what he saw with the adaptations that art required.” Though some episodes and scenes were “changed by artistic necessity,” others “remembered differently,” and still others “recalled although not previously recorded,” the most fundamental alteration developed out of “the need to reorder memory so that the various parts of the festival could alternate equally” with the scenes of reconciliation between Aziz and the Englishmen.³ The issues raised here prompt analysis. Why did Forster’s art require “adaptations”? What were these adaptations and how were they handled? What were the pressures of “artistic necessity” and how did they affect his memories? How were the memories reordered? The search for answers to such questions reveals some interesting perspectives on the novel, and on Forster’s technique. On comparing sections of the novel with relevant portions of the letters, we find that the novelist, following his source quite extensively, makes only infrequent adaptations, i.e., his memories determine how certain scenes shall appear in the novel. These memories are not only descriptive but memories of tone and judgment as well, a fact that has some bearing on the place of Hinduism in the novel. When the novelist adapts or modifies his source, he does so for definite thematic or structural reasons, as well as for creating moments of irony. To illustrate these propositions, this paper examines the debt *A Passage To India* owes *The Hill of Devi* in the presentation of a particular situation often noted as evolving out of the letters, the *Gokul Ashtami* festival.⁴

The *Gokul Ashtami* festival is central to the third movement of the novel, and to the reconciliations, such as they are, that the work offers. The festival itself Forster found to be quite memorable. Of the letters describing its celebration in Dewas, he commented: “The following letters on the Gokul Ashtami Festival are the most important of my letters home, for they describe

(if too facetiously) rites in which a European can seldom have shared” (*HD*, p. 151). It is important to recall here that the festival Forster presented in *A Passage . . .* was the particular celebration of *Gokul* or *Janam-Ashtami* that obtained in Dewas; the “rites” were peculiar to that state. He explained that the occasion was celebrated all over India, “but I have never heard of it being celebrated so sumptuously. It had been appropriated and worked up by the Dewas dynasty. Priests took little part in it, the devout were in direct contact with their god, emotion meant more than ritual” (*HD*, p. 177). In this context, the unique details of *The Hill . . .* as they reappear in *A Passage . . .* are all the more significant. This examination of how Forster’s memories of *Gokul Ashtami* were transferred from *The Hill . . .* to *A Passage . . .* is conducted through four areas. The first area encompasses the setting of the festival, and includes the temple-hall and the idol. The second contains the celebration of the festival, and covers the duration, the singers and the bands, Godbole, the Birth, and the merriment. The third area involves the procession, and the fourth the atmosphere of the festival. Forster’s comments on the action, both direct and implied, are considered as they arise.

The description of the setting in *A Passage . . .* closely approaches that presented in *The Hill . . .* Some details of the original are used exactly as they were, others are introduced indirectly. The two basic divisions of the setting include the palace and temple-hall and their decorations on one hand, and the idol and its adornment on the other. The Old Palace at Dewas, scene of the celebration in *The Hill . . .* is described in one paragraph: “The Old Palace is built around a courtyard about fifty feet square, the temple-hall being along one side of the ground floor. The hall is open to the court and divided into three or four aisles by thick pillars. The singers stand at one end of the chief aisle, the shrine is at the other end, red carpet between. The public squats against the pillars and is controlled, of course incompetently, by schoolboy volunteers” (*HD*, p. 161). Accurate details of this description, rearranged “by artistic necessity,” reappear in the novel. Early in Ch. XXXIII, Forster writes of where Godbole “stands in the presence of God”: “This corridor in the palace at Mau opened through other corridors into a courtyard.” The “aisle” of *The Hill . . .* becomes a “corridor” with “pillars and vaultings,” a carpet down the middle, and a shrine “at the end.” “Hindus sat on either side of the carpet where they could find room. . . . Schoolboys kept inefficient order” (pp. 283-84). A little later, the carpet is identified as red. Lost in his devotions, Godbole “came back to the strip of red carpet and discovered that he was dancing upon it” (p. 286). The transfer of the detail to this point is carefully controlled to contrast the reality of the redness with the almost mystical transports of Godbole as his “spiritual” force seeks “completion” of all experience. The rather bizarre decorations of the hall weave in and out of the two descriptions. The letters tell us that “the walls are hung with deplorable oleographs, the chandeliers, draperies—everything bad” (p. 160), and we learn later of “the mottoes from English poetry that wouldn’t stick up” (p. 165). In the novel, the “pillars and vaultings could scarcely be seen behind coloured rags, iridescent balls, chandeliers of opaque pink glass, and murky photographs framed crookedly” (p. 283). The idol itself is “overhung by oleographs” (p. 285). Some details are here added, but more importantly, the artistic imagination is once again at work creating out of what was mere description the ironic juxtaposition of “idol” and “oleograph.” Such achievement in irony is triumphantly repeated in one of the famous invocations of the novel, the inscription composed in English, one of the many that “were hung where they could not be read, or had twitched their drawing-pins out of the stucco . . . God is Love” (p. 285).

As Private Secretary to the Rajah of Dewas, one of Forster's nagging concerns was the supply of electricity. The special arrangements made for the festival are chronicled in *The Hill* . . . Three weeks before the festival began, Forster wrote: "Electric light (£100 this) will be specially installed" (*HD*, p. 153). He was later "bothered over the electric lighting for the Old Palace which has to be temporarily installed" (p. 155). Ultimately, writing on the fourth day of the festival, he mentioned "the thudding of the old steam engine which we have tinkered up to drive our electric light" (p. 159). The engine and the lights appear in *A Passage* . . . , once again put to more than descriptive use. We learn "hundreds of electric lights had been lit in His honour (worked by an engine whose thumps destroyed the rhythm of the hymn)" (*PI*, p. 285). This same engine is also used to build a moment of black comedy, almost, around the dying Rajah who, having ecstatically "seen the Lord's salvation . . . grew fretful. The bumping of the steam engine that worked the dynamo disturbed him, and he asked for what reason it had been introduced into his home. They replied they would enquire, and administered a sedative" (pp. 288-89). Through the almost casual but quite pointed juxtapositions in these sentences, Forster extends the ironies in his presentation of the festival.

The idol of Lord Krishna appears briefly in both books, but a description of the figure, "Dolly" in *The Hill* . . . , appears only in that work. Forster saw the idol itself only for a moment before the procession got under way, and described "the thing" as having a "face like an ill-tempered pea: curious little lump for so much to centre round" (*HD*, p. 167). All we learn of the idol in the novel is that "the God to be born" appears as "a silver image the size of a teaspoon" (p. 283). I shall show below that in the other details of the procession, the novel follows the letters closely. Why then did Forster not present a more detailed picture of "the God Himself, in whose honour the congregation had gathered?" (*HD*, p. 285). The answer the novel provides is that the obscurity of the central divinity is typical of the "muddle" of Hinduism. Is it not also possible, however, that the inclusion of Forster's uncomplimentary memories of the figure would have upset irreparably the balance of description in "Temple"? I believe that the simile he chose of the teaspoon, displaced from the passage concerning the altar itself, is a compromise that offers a physical dimension of the idol even as it catches the tone of Forster's original analogy. Instead of the idol, then, we are presented with images of the altar and the processional palanquin upon which the idol sat. In these descriptions, *A Passage* . . . follows *The Hill* . . . closely. "The altar is a mess of little objects, stifled with rose leaves," Forster wrote in *The Hill* . . . (pp. 159-60). It was "as usual smothered in mess and the gold and silver and rich silks that made up its equipment were so disposed as to produce no effect. Choked somewhere in the rose leaves, lay chief Dolly, but I could not locate him" (*HD*, p. 164). The novel not only repeats the description, but carries over similar verbs. Krishna is "indistinguishable in the jumble of His own altar, huddled out of sight amid images of inferior descent, smothered under rose-leaves . . . entirely obscured. . . . His face could not be seen" (*PI*, p. 285). When we turn to the idol as it is prepared for the procession, we find once again that the letters have been exploited for material. Descriptions of the palanquin, shaped like a "gondola," with a "silver dragon's head," bearing the overwhelmed little image, appear in both works, the debt of the novel being expressed through clearly related vocabulary (*HD*, pp. 167-68; *PI*, pp. 304-05). One interesting example of common detail appears in the account of the "rich round banners that accompanied the palanquin (shaped like magnifying-glasses) and the pennons, and the fans of peacock's feathers" (*HD*, p. 168). In the novel, this observation is refined to a picture of the palanquin "flanked by

peacock fans and by stiff circular banners of crimson" (*PI*, p. 305). The lead elephant of *The Hill* . . . , "no one on its back, to indicate humility" (p. 167), becomes the elephants, "their howdahs empty out of humility" (*PI*, p. 305). Another little picture of "Gods, big and little . . . getting aboard" the palanquin probably harks back to Forster's recording in the letter that "a great many gods are on visit" for the festival (*HD*, p. 158). Overall, we may notice that *A Passage* . . . recaptures, in fact, the *tone* of the descriptions of *The Hill* . . . While the novelist does modify this tone, having noted even in *The Hill* . . . that it was perhaps too facetious, its recurrence suggests reinforcement of the negative strain in Forster's attitude towards Hinduism in *A Passage* . . . ⁵

Turning from the setting to the celebration of the festival, we find Forster making a subtle use of his records for structural purposes. Fundamentally, the novel recreates for the reader the celebration Forster described in a comment introduced later into *The Hill* . . . "Priests took little part in it, the devout were in direct contact with their god, emotion meant more than ritual" (p. 177). The focus in both accounts is primarily on the people involved, on their devotions, expressed long and loud, and on individuals, the Rajah in *The Hill* . . . , Godbole in *A Passage* . . . , on their parts in the ceremonies, and on their transports. We should first, however, examine the chronological evidence of both accounts. *The Hill* . . . informs us in a number of places that the festival lasts eight days, and we enter it through two letters, one written on the fourth day, the other on the day following the final rituals (pp. 158-63, 163-71). The latter letter of August 28, describing the last two days of the festival, is by far the lengthiest in *The Hill* . . . , and it is from this that most of the details in *A Passage* . . . are taken. Forster noted here that "things began to warm up at 11:30 p.m. on the 26th," and proceeded to describe the events of the Birth. A page later, he indicated that the merry-making following the Birth took place on the "final day," obviously not, therefore, on the 26th. The novel, on the other hand, offers no information on how long the festival lasts, plunging the reader directly into the midst of well-developed ceremonies which are revealed as leading immediately to the climax of the rituals, a climax itself followed by merry-making. Two moments in time are sharply distinguished, "eleven-fifty" on Godbole's wrist-watch (p. 286), and the three minutes leading to midnight (p. 287). The procession and immersion take place on the following day. In the novel then, Forster restricted his time-scheme to the last ten minutes of the Birth celebrations, indicating these as precisely as he had the last half hour in *The Hill* . . . , and telescoped the events of that day with those of the next, the merry-making in the novel following immediately the Birth. The revision leads to a dense ordering of material and to a structural composite of the mystical and mischievous such as Forster found lacking in Christianity (*HD*, pp. 181-82; *PI*, p. 289). It should be noted that this is a major instance of *A Passage* . . . altering the memories of *The Hill* . . . under pressure of "artistic necessity." Similar instances will be presented below. The restructuring of events allowed Forster to present the procession and the climactic end to the celebrations, along with the accident on the lake, as the crucial events of the day "after the great pujah." In isolating these episodes from the others in "real" time, he managed simultaneously to gather attention to them and to weave the Aziz episodes organically into the story. His decision thus served important thematic and structural functions.

Even though Forster manipulated the chronology of the festival to suit his purpose in the novel, in the descriptive details of events he kept close to the information of his letters. The groups of singers, one following another every two hours "that the chain of sacred sounds might be uninterrupted" appear in both (*PI*, p. 284; *HD*, p. 158). The many sources of music are

common to both, and quaint in both is "the small Europeanized band" playing "in the courtyard" outside the temple-hall (*PI*, p. 285; *HD*, p. 158)⁶ The very tune this band plays, "Nights of Gladness," comes to the novel from *The Hill* . . . (*PI*, p. 285; *HD*, p. 165). In addition, the major celebrants in each book are individuals, the Rajah in *The Hill* . . . , Godbole in *A Passage* . . . Whereas I am not suggesting that one character was modeled on the other, the accounts of the dancing of each propose an influence in this case. The Rajah, who, like Godbole, "manages not to be absurd" in "religious ecstasy," is seen "dancing all the time . . . jiggling up and down with a happy expression on his face" (*HD*, p. 160). Godbole discovers he is dancing "up and down, a third of the way to the altar and back again . . . his little legs twinkling" (*PI*, p. 286). (Unlike the Rajah, however, Godbole does not dance alone.) Another possible influence is preserved in *The Hill* . . . As he danced and sang, only a "tiny fragment" of Professor Godbole "attended to outside things" while, through his "spiritual force," he impelled all images "to that place where completeness can be found. Completeness, not reconstruction" (*PI*, pp. 285, 286). This experience is markedly similar to that of the Dewan of Dewas at the same festival, recorded in a 1909 letter of the Rajah, probably known to Forster prior to 1924, and printed in *The Hill* . . . : "It was very striking to see the Dewan singing [*bhajans*] with his austere but devoted face and an attitude of absolute unity with the Deities in front of him" (*HD*, p. 172).

The grand episodes of the Birth and merry-making are based firmly on the reports of *The Hill* . . . Writing home, Forster candidly admitted he had forgotten most of the details of the Birth (*HD*, p. 164). The few he remembered, the setting up of the cradle, the cradling of the napkin of crimson silk folded, in *A Passage* . . . , "into a shape which indicated a baby's" (p. 288), but, less charitably in *The Hill* . . . , "so that it looked like an old woman over whom a traction engine has passed" (*HD*, p. 164), the naming of the child, and the throwing of red powder are easily traced in both books. Otherwise, we are presented with sections in both works that deal not with the events that transpired, but with the noise and action that accompanied them, Forster having recorded and recollected the general atmosphere rather than the rituals (*PI*, pp. 287-88; *HD*, pp. 164-65). The scenes of merry-making include almost identical details. We learn in both works of the enacted "threshing and churning," of the game with butter, of the sticks with which the great, suspended urn, full of greasy rice and milk, was broken by the celebrants over their own heads, even of the flies that seemed to come upon them unawares.⁷ *A Passage To India* adds the charming custom of the fondling of the child, and also mentions setting turbans on fire, a detail curious until we recall Forster had witnessed such practical jokes performed in the court at Dewas. Of a Kholapur spy, he wrote: "Sometimes his turban is set on fire, which makes me wretched" (*HD*, p. 39).

The final stage of the festival, the procession, is perhaps the most intriguing subject of study. As elsewhere, some descriptions recur while others are adapted, but a most prominent mutation is effected in the ordering of events. In *The Hill* . . . , the three main incidents of the procession, the appearance of the woman, the release of the prisoner at the jail, and the final immersion of the model village occur in that order. In *A Passage* . . . , the order is changed so that the jail episode precedes the other two. One reason for the change seems to be the artist's need to build a climax for the scene. Forster repeatedly avows that Indian events do not tend to a climax. In the letters he wrote of the arrival of a great throng at a christening: "We swept

into the courtyard, then melted into nothing, as is the Indian spirit. There was no grand crisis or reception" (*HD*, p. 120). So too, at the end of the immersion in the novel he shrugs: "That was the climax, as far as India admits of one" (*PI*, p. 315). The events as *The Hill* . . . records them do not build to a climax; in the reordering of *A Passage* . . . , they do. This reordering also allows the novelist to fuse, not just "alternate," the two strands of his story. The great noise at the jail startles Aziz and Ralph with "rumours of salvation," breaking into their conversation just as the former completes a sarcastic reference to Miss Quested. On resumption of the talk, Aziz, "completely forgetting that they were not friends," extends his hand to Ralph, accomplishing one step toward reconciliation (*PI*, pp. 310-11). The two men then take a boat onto the lake and soon behold the last rite, of which the woman is made a part. It is, in fact, through the eyes of Aziz that we see the immersion ceremony. He catches sight of the throng of people, cynosure amongst whom appears the "wild and beautiful young saint with flowers in her hair" (*PI*, p. 314). The "lady fanatic . . . gaudily yet neatly dressed in purple and yellow, a circlet of jasmine flowers . . . round her chignon" of *The Hill* . . . (p. 169) is here transformed into an image of ecstasy and passion, the spellbinding forces that lead the boats into collision. The tension builds with the rush down to the water, until "a servitor . . . naked, broad-shouldered, thin-waisted—the Indian body again triumphant," detaches himself to perform his "hereditary office" (*PI*, p. 315). A quiet moment of suspense follows as he wades into the lake, a moment broken by the concurrent immersion, collision and tremendous noise of artillery, drums, elephants and thunder. Precedents may be found for all these details in *The Hill* . . . , with the exception of the thunder, though the whole account there is much colder, much more objective. The details are recorded, with none of the energy of poise and counterpoise, of carefully contrasted sentences of movement and stillness, of highly evocative language, of "completeness," that Forster's fictional imagination generated (*PI*, pp. 314-15; *HD*, pp. 169-70).⁸

Running through all these descriptions is a sense of "atmosphere" that itself owes to Forster's responses as he experienced *Gokul Ashtami* at Dewas. While much of this "atmosphere" has been suggested in the preceding account of the festival, a few significant facets should be noted separately. The festival is characterized primarily by noise, references to the continual din occurring frequently in *The Hill* . . . "The noise was too much at first," wrote Forster (*HD*, p. 159). It "was so appalling" with conchs sounding, children playing, officials shouting, bands playing, groups singing: "Noise, I need hardly add, never stopped—the great horn brayed, the cymbals clashed, the harmonium and drums did their best," while elephants bellowed and bands played (*HD*, pp. 164-65). Such details are initially reduced to gerunds in *A Passage* . . . : "The braying banging crooning melted into a single mass which trailed round the palace" (p. 284), the absence of commas within the series of gerunds recreating the "mass" of noise *The Hill* . . . only describes. Later in the novel, cymbals and drums are individually identified (p. 284), while the sounds accompanying the Birth recall those in the letters at the same moment: "The rending note of the conch broke forth, followed by the trumpeting of elephants . . . and clanging and shouts" (*PI*, p. 287). What the novel does add, to its great advantage, are the rumbles and claps of thunder. The people, too, produce similar effects in both works. "Only one thing is beautiful," says *The Hill* . . . , "the expression on the faces of the people as they bow to the shrine. . . . One can see from the faces of the people that idolatry touches something very deep in their hearts" (*HD*, pp. 160-61). When the villagers in the novel adore the silver image, "a most beautiful and radiant expression [comes] into their faces, a beauty in which there [is] nothing personal" (p. 284). In *The Hill* . . . ,

Forster tentatively judged the religious fervor of the devotees to be close to "ordinary mundane intoxication. I suppose that if you believe your drunkenness proceeds from God it becomes more enjoyable. Yet I am very much muddled in my own mind about it all, for H.H. has what one understands by the religious sense" (*HD*, p. 160). The comment recurs in the novel, Forster including his puzzlement parenthetically: "They did not one thing which the non-Hindu would feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form" (*PI*, pp. 284-85). Interestingly, the "muddle," earlier a quality of the author's response, is here also made characteristic of the objective event. The copula accomplishes the transfer even as the parenthesis maintains the perspective of the perceiver, here fittingly generalized by the plural pronoun. We are once again presented an instance of artistic "completeness."

A comparative study of *A Passage To India* and *The Hill of Devi* reveals much, then, concerning Forster's artistic reworking of source materials. In doing so, however, it also suggests a position relative to the place of Hinduism in the novel. Recent criticism is inclined to hold that while Forster intended to present Hinduism positively, he tempered his perspective realizing, perhaps, that the religion could not offer an easy solution. This paper has indicated how Forster, writing *A Passage To India* frequently caught the tone, essentially ironic though often admiring, of the descriptions of *The Hill of Devi*. Whereas one might hold that his memories dictated this attitude to the novelist, we have seen how Forster clearly controls his materials of character and event, tone and judgment. It seems more than likely, then, that the tone, determined but not necessarily dictated by the events and even vocabulary of his own records, was built deliberately into the fabric of the novel, certainly of "Temple." Such a position will not explain the ambivalence; it may, however, help us to understand it a little better.

NOTES

¹See Alfred Borrello, ed., *E. M. Forster: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Materials* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1973).

²For the broader influences see, for instance, Wilfred Stone, *The Cave and the Mountain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 314n, 327n, or the most recent account in Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India and the British Imagination, 1880-1930* (London: The Penguin Press, 1972), pp. 260ff. Of particular interest are Patricia A. Morley, "E. M. Forster's Temple: Eclectic or Visionary?" *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 39 (April, 1970), 229-241, and June Perry Levine, *Creation and Criticism: A Passage To India* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), Chs. 2 and 3. See also Brander and Shusterman, cited below, for other details.

³Laurence Brander, *E. M. Forster: A Critical Study* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1968), p. 38 and the chapter on the novel.

⁴All citations, incorporated into the text, are from E. M. Forster, *A Passage To India* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1952), hereafter *HD*, and E. M. Forster, *The Hill of Devi* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1953), hereafter *PI*.

⁵For some other views on this matter, see David Shusterman, "The Curious Case of Professor Godbole: *A Passage To India* Re-Examined," *PMLA*, 76 (Sept. 1961), 426-35, rpt. in *Perspectives on E. M. Forster's A Passage To India: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. V. A. Shahane (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), pp. 91-100; Wagner C. Roland, "The Excremental and the spiritual in *A Passage to India*," *MLQ*, 31 (1970), 359-71; Michael Spencer, "Hinduism in E. M. Forster's *A Passage To India*," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 27; (Feb. 1968), 281-95; and Morley, cited above. Morley finds "the tone . . . noticeably different in the novel," a "calm objectivity" displacing the facetious note of the letters, though "small touches . . . reveal that Forster's admiration for Hinduism is tempered and moderate" (pp. 232-33). I believe the original tone to be rather more persistent than these comments imply, and that Forster built into "Temple" his fascination with, facetiousness towards and, at times, bewilderment before Hinduism.

⁶The cryptic "Tukaram" of the chant (*PI* p. 284) is mentioned in *The Hill* . . . (p. 178), but in an editorial comment, not in a letter.

⁷Levine, *Creation and Criticism*, presents these and other similarities.

⁸Levine, p. 93, notes that the "five chapters that make up the concluding section, 'Temple,' are not, with one exception, worked over much. This smoothness is probably the outcome of Forster's relying on his letters and journal entries for the Gokul Ashtami Festival, which comprises a good deal of 'Temple.' The exception, the pages Forster labored over longest, is that part of Chapter 36 which records the meeting between Aziz and Mrs. Moore's son Ralph."