

The De-Composition of Writing in *A Passage to India*

Tony E. Jackson

University of North Carolina Charlotte

Most contemporary literary scholars will likely have at least some awareness of the ways in which Jacques Derrida, most famously in *Of Grammatology*, helped initiate poststructuralism through his discussions of alphabetic writing in relation to speech. But there has existed, almost exactly contemporaneously with poststructuralism, another scholarly understanding of writing in relation to speech. This understanding has tended to be much more historically and empirically based. Since the nineteen sixties a substantial group of scholars—the most famous being Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan—has investigated the nature and effects of writing as an invented human technology.¹ Though this line of thinking about writing is well-supported and has many intriguing implications, so far it has had only, at best, a minor impact on the study of literary texts (Ong, *Orality* 139–55; Goody, *Power* 83–85). And yet, as we shall see, if we understand writing as a specific kind of historical invention we open different doors to literary interpretation.

To create a material representation of language is a truly revolutionary act. Writing powerfully augments features of language and memory such as storage capacity, preservation, and accuracy, and as a result it promotes all manner of change in human life. We have, for instance, convincing arguments that the technology of writing in a fundamental way produced modernity itself (Eisenstein, *Printing Press, Printing Revolution*; Olson). Walter Ong writes that: “One consequence of [writing] was modern science” (*Orality* 127). Jack Goody has argued that “the very nature of formal reasoning as [literate cultures] understand it (that is, in terms of Aristotelian ‘logical’ procedures) is not a general ability but a highly specific skill, critically dependent upon the existence of writing and of a written tradition” (*Interface* 256). Roger Chartier

has argued for the intimate connection between writing and modern concepts of individuality and privacy (*Order*).

All of these scholars agree that the invention of writing has one most fundamental consequence: writing transforms spoken language, the heretofore purely aural-oral means of communication, into a visual object. As a feature of human being, language itself comes with the organic human package and is a crucial element of the species-unity that distinguishes humans in general from other species of animals. Writing ruptures that organic unity by making language into an external object, a thing no longer simply inherent in the body. But while this is true of all writing, we find the revolution carried an order of magnitude further with the invention of “the most radical of all scripts, the alphabet” (Ong, *Orality* 77). Alphabetic writing marks an epochal turn in human history because rather than using visible signs to represent meaning, as had other writing systems (hieroglyphics for instance), alphabetic writing uses visible signs to represent individual sound-units, most importantly of speech, but in any case of sounds the ear can hear. All manner of consequences follow this revolution, but one paramount result is a change in the relative weighting of our sensory domains. Before writing, the voice and the ear together form the sensory nexus of the definitively human body-mind (Ong, *Orality*; Havelock, *The Muse*; McLuhan). For humans, voice and ear together form the primary interface between interior and exterior, between input from and output to the specifically human world. The other senses and systems, though of course necessary, do not carry quite the defining weight of the voice-ear. But with the emergence of alphabetography the eye necessarily becomes indispensable to language—and therefore to human being—in a way that it had not been before. Further, the more important writing becomes in human life, the more the eye is augmented and the voice-ear diminished as elements of our body-mind systems (Ong, *Presence*).

If writing has the general kinds of effects and consequences outlined above, it may be expected to have significant effects on that specific kind of discourse we call literature, and even more so on that kind of literature that we call story. All literature of any kind will have been changed by writing, but any literature involving story matters in a singular way in human knowledge and affairs. For story in the most general sense has come to be seen by many scholars as built into the human cognitive apparatus, functionally on much the same level in fact as language.² Given the importance of both language and story to human being, and given the effects of writing upon language in general, we are led to ask: what might be the effects of writing on story?

To answer this question we begin with the analogy that written story relates to oral storytelling in the way that writing relates to spoken language. We clearly have on the one hand the paradigm of all storytelling: the corporeal communication of a narrative by one or more flesh and blood human

beings immediately to one or more other flesh and blood human beings, none of whom need ever have had any idea whatsoever of writing. It follows that all written story ultimately presumes oral story. Given this oral paradigm and given what we know of the effects of writing as a technology, we can examine specific genres of written story in order to understand how a particular genre can be related to the oral paradigm. And then within a particular genre, we can examine specific cases in order to understand the writing/orality interface in more detail.

LITERATURE AND ORATURE IN *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

Though we have written story one way or another since the beginning of alphabetography, I take a novel as my exemplary text; for as a genre the novel is surely one of the most, if not the most, writerly of all written stories. And I will turn to Forster's *A Passage to India* as my sample novel. Not surprisingly, some of what we shall find will be related to other readings of this novel, readings for race and class for instance. But while the technology of writing may be linked to crises of race and class, we shall see that it operates independently of either, and in fact at times gives us more precise views of the latencies that "underwrite" such crises. I choose this great novel in part because it has so often been examined in terms of its concern with the nature of language. To name only a few examples, essays by Malcolm Bradbury, Molly Tinsley, David Dowling, Doreen D'Cruz, John Colmer, Michael Orange, and Robert Barratt have one way or the other focused on language in the novel. And it hardly needs arguing that Forster himself was thinking deeply about issues of language as he wrote. But typically, in critical discussions writing and oral speech are lumped together with little regard for the significance of their empirical and historical differences, and in nearly every case the poststructuralist understanding of writing frames the interpretation. For this reason *A Passage to India* provides a rather perfect starting point for a demonstration of what we may learn by considering the effects of writing as a technology.

To begin, we look for the most likely evidence: any thematic, imagistic, or structural elements that are one way or another bound up with orality and literacy, orature and literature. Right away we find that in Forster's novel one of the primary distinctions between British visitor, Anglo-Indian, and Indian appears in two opposed notions of the public and the private. On the surface this opposition simply has to do with senses of physical space: by British standards domestic privacy, for instance, hardly exists in India. But in fact Forster gives this opposition most notably as two different understandings of "literature." In Chapter Two we meet native Indians in their own environs, apart from the physical presence of the British. Right away, Aziz, the main Indian character, is characterized as enthralled by the ancient poetics of the

Indian subcontinent. He spontaneously launches into a verbal recitation before his friends, who

listened delighted, for they took the public view of poetry, not the private which obtains in England. It never bored them to hear words, words; they breathed them with the cool night air, never stopping to analyze. (12)

Historically tightly aligned with music, chant, and the speaking voice, poetry is in some ways the pre-eminent form of orature: the originally written stories were after all transcriptions of chanted, versified tales. So the association of Aziz with poetry automatically sets him in opposition to writing and all the more so with the stress on hearing “words, words.” Conversely, the British are associated with prose (160, 256). Further, it has been well-established that the technology of writing has been instrumental in bringing about certain forms of interiority, individuality, and privacy, especially with the advent of print. By the eighteenth century, reading had come to be more and more a solitary and silent act; Roger Chartier has argued that this “privatization of reading is undeniably one of the major cultural developments of the early modern era” because it is fundamental to the nature of the modern individual (“Practical Impact” 121, 125). Privatization would imply the loss or diminution of certain corollary forms of the communal and the public. “Primary orality,” Ong has written,

fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself. (*Orality* 69)

We can see how these ideas are at work in the passage from Forster. Though Aziz recites from ancient oral poetry that is now committed to writing (the Indian equivalent of Homer), Forster favors this kind of oral, communal speech-act to the silent, private reading of poetry associated with the British. Aziz and his friends are not examples of primary orality—all are literate and in fact have been educated in British-style schools—but Forster clearly associates them with oral culture. In line with this, the “literature” in question is pointedly not something to be analyzed (in fact Aziz is later described as a writer of “illogical poems” [329]). One of the key qualities of written texts is their materiality. Unlike the spoken voice, which dissipates immediately, writing lasts. It can be (in fact, of its nature asks to be) re-read, examined in slow, meticulous detail. Though orature can lead to fruitful discussion, it cannot possibly be analyzed in the way of written literature, nor need it be.

Later, Aziz is on his sick-bed, being visited by his Indian friends. Once again he recites a poem. It has “no connection with anything that had gone before” in their conversation, “but it came from his heart and spoke to theirs” (113). Writing induces its own standards of linearity, coherence, and

organization, and from the perspective of those standards the vast bulk of everyday speech, which is conversation, looks hopelessly muddled. In speech we can shift topics rapidly for any reason or for no reason at all beyond personal whim. We can leave a topic and return to it, or not. We can begin and not finish, etc. etc. None of this means that conversation is without form. As with any discourse whatsoever, conversations are governed by rules, but except for very special situations (more about which later) the rules are much looser and more ad hoc than with writing. The physical context of living human beings and material surroundings can act to change rules rapidly and without need for explanation. For these reasons, only a tiny percentage of actual spoken language will ever be amenable to written story. So Forster's emphasis on the random emergence of Aziz's recitation again pushes the association of the Indians with orality. And because the recitation is oral, Aziz achieves the kind of communication that is simply impossible for writing: his very "heart," the central organ of his physical body, "speaks" to the hearts of his friends. "The oral word [. . .] never exists in a simple verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body" (Ong, *Orality* 67). Such "speaking" then—not just words, but voice, face, body, physical space, the infinite, immediate richness of the human here and now—cannot be achieved by writing (though of course writing achieves other successes unavailable to speech).

And though, except for Hamidullah, Aziz's listeners have no particular appreciation for poetry, nonetheless

they listened with pleasure, because literature had not been divorced from their civilization. The police inspector, for instance, did not feel that Aziz had degraded himself by reciting, nor break into the cheery guffaw with which an Englishman averts the infection of beauty. (114)

Since the normative imperialist attitude would be that only things British have to do with civilization, we can see that Forster here presents a contrary perspective. In India, unlike England, civilization and literature still form a kind of matrimony, a sacrosanct union, as if one could not exist fully without the other. (This same twist on "civilization" occurs later as well [280].) The implication is that at some time in the past this was also true of England. And once again, the "literature" is in fact orature and so directly pleasurable that even the representative of the law (who, as we shall see, embodies a certain limit case of orality) responds. Further, this "literature" retains the kind of sheer fleshly sacredness of the oral Word. The poem does "no good to anyone" beyond a kind of communal rapture inspired directly in the listening audience (114).

In the above examples Forster has given us a classic case of a definitive writerly nostalgia, a nostalgia that underwrites certain romantic and modernist images of the primitive. We have a straightforward positive valuation of the

kind of communality and intimacy that literate cultures perceive as what-has-been-lost in becoming, precisely, literate. But it matters to see what creeps into his value judgment just at the end. The very beauty lost to orature and by extension oral culture must be perceived as an “infection,” an aesthetic disease. From the literate perspective, orature and the oral are at once both mythically positive and mythically negative. In other words a kind of psychic ambivalence is built into writing as a technology. Historically, the first response of literate culture to orality is disgust and condescension, the next response is a romanticization, and lastly we discover a distinct fear. It is this fear of orature that most securely links Forster’s novel to issues of writing and orality. Why, we may ask, should the culture of high literacy fear orature at all? Since orature of its nature is as evanescent as the speaking voice, why would literacy, which of its nature lasts and compounds, see any serious threat to its pre-eminence? It would seem much more likely that literature would “infect” orality than the other way around.

In pursuing this question, we may turn to signs of the orality/literacy rupture, located in the key passage concerning one of this novel’s major themes: “invitations.” Once again Indians are physically apart from the British. Turton, the Collector, has sent written invitations to a select group of Indians to attend a “bridge party.” The Indians, without Aziz this time, discuss the meaning of, and possible responses to, the invitation. The setting is a “little room near the Courts” (32). In considerations of orality and literacy, any courtroom in a written story will always be an overcharged space. For if we consider a continuum from pure orality to most writerly speech, we discover that the crossover case of speech that is most like writing occurs paradigmatically in a court of law. Court testimony depends on speech, but both the form and content of speech in that context are strictly constrained, formalized, and punishable by the written laws that sworn statements are required to serve. Not surprisingly, everything said in court is recorded in writing, for this is the only way in which a witness’s speech can be assessed in the way that writing is normally assessed.

The Indian men are speaking, then, just outside the site of what we may call the most writerly speech. They are

in the little room near the Courts where the pleaders waited for clients; clients, waiting for pleaders, sat in the dust outside. These had not received a card from Mr. Turton. And there were circles even beyond these—people who wore nothing but a loincloth, people who wore not even that [. . .] humanity grading and drifting beyond the educated vision, until no earthly invitation can embrace it. (37)

The Courts in this case are of course British. At the center of the “circles” of Indians sit the Courts. Only those Indians (the pleaders) given a voice in and by the Courts are qualified to receive invitations, as if of all the English-speaking Indians only these are allowable, or even knowable. Away from the center we gradually lose all sense of individuality, as if there is no speech at all

and therefore no individual identity outside the center of writerly speech. Since we know those outside the center do in fact speak but are utterly apart from the Courts, the great mass of un-includable Indians becomes a kind of figure of orality as such. We hear and see named pleaders (Ram Chand, Mahmoud Ali, the Nawab Bahadur), but then are given a lump of anonymous “clients,” and then “people,” and then just “humanity,” which in fact means Indian. Away from the legal center, everyday speaking human beings become perceived as speechless and therefore invisible to the “educated vision,” which in this context must mean the literate British way of seeing. This great nebulous “humanity” finally becomes so disembodied that “no earthly invitation can embrace it.” Now, “earthly” would most likely seem to be opposed to heavenly, and the paragraph immediately following will take it this way. But again given the context, earthly must in fact mean written in English, because as Forster makes very plain only the British have this particular educated vision and only the British send out written invitations.

We must pause to wrap our minds around the word “embrace,” for it leads us into two of the novel’s key thematic issues: the unsatisfiable desire for unity, and the threat of what I will call nihilistic relativism. It would appear that there exists some desire on the part of the center of writerly speech (the British Courts) to gather into its figurative arms (embrace) all the infinitely retreating circles of those who have been dis-voiced. The last words of the passage lead us directly into the next paragraph in which we read the novel’s definitive statement on invitations, and it too involves an unsatisfiable desire for unity. “All invitations must proceed from heaven perhaps; perhaps it is futile for men to initiate their own unity, they do but widen the gulfs between them by the attempt” (37). And following this, Forster gives us in specifically Christian terms the religious dilemma over what portion of the material world will be invited, “welcomed and soothed,” by “divine hospitality” into heaven. As with the unembrace-able circles expanding away from the Courts, this maximal desire to be inclusive—argued over by the missionaries, Mr. Graysford and Mr. Sorley—gets confounded by an ever-retreating earthly limit: from human beings to “monkeys” to “jackals” to “wasps” to plants and finally to “mud [. . .] and the bacteria inside.” But then a limit is reached, at which point we read: “No, no this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing” (38). It turns out that the stronger our desire to embrace inclusively, the more we inevitably approach (a certain understanding of) relativism, as a result of which the basis for certain kinds of value-judgments is lost. And this entails, at least from the literate perspective as presented in this novel, that we are left with nothing at all.

Any image of unsatisfiable desire in *Passage* must be considered in terms of the theme’s primary example: the “religious song” Godbole will later sing at the tea-party. In the song, which echoes from beginning to end of the novel

(alluded to directly or indirectly at least seventeen times [85, 93, 114, 124, 146, 150, 151, 166, 198, 217, 266, 273, 298, 299, 326, 358]), the earthly maiden yearns for the heavenly Krishna to come to her, but he never does (85). This song, in a real sense the primeval form of poetry, is the pre-eminent example of the orature regularly associated with India as opposed to the writerly British; and in conjunction with the “Temple” section that concludes the novel, the song makes of Godbole and his Hinduism the maximal images of orality. Because at the end the maiden is left with nothing, the song’s content disappoints the British audience’s sense of a rational meaning, and its form—the uncertain rhythm and the “illusion of a Western melody”—violates their aesthetic sense. It baffles what the narrator simply calls “the ear” (84). Once again, the context forces this to mean only the European or British ear. Apart from Godbole, “[only] the servants” can understand the song (84). Further, the song mysteriously leads to the illness of all the participants except Fielding, and Adela will later specifically credit the “haunting song” (86) with inaugurating the catastrophe that climaxes the trip to the Marabar caves (266).

Taking all this into consideration (the Courts, the vanishing circles, the attempted embrace, the song of heavenly refusal), we find emerging in the novel a figuration of the desire built into written story. When we write stories, we always (consciously or not) strive to equal or better what must be our paradigmatic source: oral story. In a sense all written story wants (in the twin senses of “wishing for” and “lacking”) the communicative efficacy of oral story as speech act. But writing disembodies language: therefore this desire cannot be satisfied. Non-dramatic written story comes closest to orality when it includes quoted speech. But since actual speech is always dependent on context, written story has no choice but to try its best to create a context that will enable the efficacy of actual speech. Unfortunately, such a context, while it can be roughly delimited for the purposes of discussion, is in fact always infinitely rich. Only an infinitely descriptive written text could hope to represent oral story in all its paradoxically material and infinite fullness. Thus, the “heavenly” fullness of orality and orature retreats infinitely from writing’s attempted embrace (Ong, *Orality* 104). So we see that literature so far in the novel has been seen as constituted by an earthly desire for a lost heaven of orature. But then there is still that bit of “infection” slipped in as well, and that will lead us to the other side of the psychic loss of writing; for the infection will spread and worsen to a suppurating maximum with the expedition to the Marabar caves.

ECHO AND DE-COMPOSITION

If our understanding of the technology of writing is to prove truly useful, it will, as would any approach to this novel, have to provide insight into the trip to the Marabar caves and especially its aftermath, which Forster calls “the

decomposition of the Marabar" (287). His choice of words is perhaps more exact than he knows. The "of" refers both to what happens to the event as it fades into the past, as well as what the event does to those who experience it; and with this latter meaning, decomposition begins to shift to de-composition, as in de-writing. First, the caves are pre-eminently places of the aural-oral, and not the eye. Though there are two images of light connected to the caves, both in fact undermine the primacy of sight. The one mythical highest cave "mirrors its own darkness in every direction infinitely" (138). And the one instance of actual light—the striking of a match—inverts the normal relationship of seeing eye to seen object. The match produces a glow that is itself "eternally watchful," as if it is the subject rather than the object of vision. The one most marked sensory experience of the cave is the "terrifying echo" (162). In fact echo, which is directly or indirectly mentioned at least nineteen times across the novel (43, 54, 104, 126, 155, 162, 163, 185, 211, 214, 215, 221, 222, 228, 233, 236, 265, 307, 325), comes to be a natural-world acoustic counterpart to Godbole's song. As we have seen above, the song reveals the disconnection between the earthly British literacy and the heavenly, but infectious, Indian orality. And since Forster so strongly associates literature with civilization (as in the image of the divorce of orature from civilization), we may generalize that the strand on orality and particularly Godbole's song reveals the disconnection of the writerly British from the heavenly culture of orality. With the caves we find a parallel disconnection, only this time from the nature of orality rather than from its culture.

In terms of literacy and orality, echo holds a unique, intermediate position between the speaking voice itself and the technological representation of that voice in writing. Echo repeats the spoken word apart from the actual body, but this occurs as a function of the natural world: no technology is involved. Echo is a bringing-back to the ear of speech rather than a representation of speech through another medium, and therefore echo remains within the oral-aural sensory domain. So we may say that echo disembodies the voice, estranges the voice from its original source; but because it returns within the oral-aural realm from which it departed, it also affirms the voice: the otherwise evanescent, instantly dissolving voice is not so evanescent after all. Strictly speaking, an echo is an echo only if we recognize the returning sound as a repetition and affirmation of the original.

In first introducing echo, Forster's narrator makes sure to mention "some exquisite echoes in India" (163). These are the kinds of echoes that have always fascinated human beings. We have the echo that whispers "round the dome at Bijapur," making a circuit of sound (163). And then even more definitively we have the "long, solid sentences that voyage through the air at Mandu, and return unbroken to their creator" (163). Though echo always involves elements of both estrangement and reassuring recognition, Forster here gives us only the

latter. The repetition of echo, unlike writing, does not break the voice out of the circuit of orality. Echo in general is not “terrifying” at all.

But the echo in the Marabar caves is of course something else. We must notice that, although Forster writes as if there is only the one kind of echo in the caves, in fact only Mrs. Moore and Adela seem to hear it, at least in any remarkable way. Fielding hears it, but is, at least in his conscious mind, unimpressed (175, 185). So far as we can tell none of the Indians notices it, and we know that Godbole, the man most familiar with the caves, “had never mentioned an echo” (163). Mrs. Moore being the original respondent to the echo, we turn to her first. Unlike the normal echo, the one Mrs. Moore hears is “entirely devoid of distinction.” The “same monotonous noise” replies, no matter the originating sound or voice. So in this case Mrs. Moore hears only the estrangement of the sound’s departure. The affirming return does not happen. Again, strictly speaking, this is not really an echo, and yet we have just this word for the event.

Our framework of the orality-literacy distinction can help us see in a rather precise way what to make of this. Strictly speaking, the issue is not as it is commonly taken to be, “the equivocal and uncertain nature of language” in general (D’Cruz 195). For next we read that “‘boum’ is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it” (163). This first climactic moment in *Passage* (the second will be when Adela retracts her charges in the courtroom scene) reveals the failure of the technology upon which written story absolutely depends. The echo is such that even alphabetography, which again imitates sounds, not concepts, fails at its essential task. The actuality of the real-world sound, at least as heard by Mrs. Moore’s ears, remains outside the embrace of alphabetic writing. And in this way the moment of the echo takes up its correlation to the infinite regress we have examined above. Why emphasize “human” alphabet? What other kind could there be? Because of the way literacy and orality have operated in this particular novel, and because of the way alphabetography appears at this particular moment, the human alphabet becomes another figure of the general writerly failure to embrace orality and parallels the figure of the earthly maiden who constantly fails to embrace the infinitely retreating god. The British are again linked, not just to writing, but now pointedly to alphabetic writing, and alphabetic writing is linked to the theme of unfulfillable desire.

With an echo, if the secondary sound is anything other than the originating sound, then you are left with the estrangement pumped up to the uncanny, much as it would be to look in the mirror and see someone or something other than oneself. If this kind of event occurs in the natural world, then it must mean either that the natural world is no longer natural in the way that it had been, or that the perceiver is no longer a part of that world as had previously appeared to be the case. Since the echo is apparently normal to everyone else, it must be Mrs. Moore who has been removed from the natural world. The echo comes to

her not as a repetition but as a “comment” (165). The content of the comment may be explained in more than one way, but certainly it most straightforwardly makes the statement that nihilistic relativism—the negative understanding of the absolute lack of absolutes—is the factual nature of human life. “Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value” (165). Now, the realization of this understanding of relativism need not in general be peculiar to literacy as opposed to orality, but Forster presents it that way here. He has specifically prepared for this moment in the earlier argument between Mr. Graysford and Mr. Morely, discussed above. Whereas earlier, relativistic nothingness loomed only as a conceptual shadow at the retreating limit of logical disputation, now it becomes quite real. For Mrs. Moore, the moment of being detached from aural-oral nature decomposes the literate world and all its complex social, aesthetic, moral, and religious forms by revealing that they are just that: forms, rather than essences. Therefore there exists no solid basis by which meaningful distinctions of value may be made.

Not coincidentally, the full effects of the echo come upon Mrs. Moore only when she sits down to compose letters to her children back in England. Above, we have seen how courtroom testimony is the speech most like writing. Conversely, we find that the writing most like speech is the personal letter. We have but to think of how we read a letter from an intimate friend or family member in order to understand how distinctly different this kind of writing is from all others. Because we know the writer intimately, the written words seem to come across as spoken directly to us, even though the writer will of necessity not be simply duplicating actual speech. Mrs. Moore manages to write only, “Dear Stella, Dear Ralph” before the echo begins to surge over her. She finds that she can forget the actual sensory “crush and the smells” of the event in the cave, “but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life” (165). The normal repetition of the voice as echo has failed, and now the writing most like speech begins to fail her as well. Later, Adela tries to get Mrs. Moore to explain the nature of the echo. This, the older woman refuses to do, and the talk turns to the upcoming trial. Mrs. Moore angrily rejects anything to do with “the witness-box.” “I have nothing to do with your ludicrous law courts,” she says (222). In the end the echo undoes her investment in both the writing most like speech and the site of speech most like writing.

But the effects of the uncanny echo go further still. Mrs. Moore is characterized with two primary traits: being the only British character in the novel with any true sense of spirituality, and being a mother most thoroughly committed to her children. From the early scene with Aziz in the Mosque, Mrs. Moore has been a uniquely spiritual figure in the midst of the otherwise prosaic, pragmatic British. When the echo first strikes her as she begins to write to her children, she tries to shirk off the feelings of “despair creeping over her,” tries “to go on with her letter,” but she cannot. For the echo goes on to undermine

“poor little talkative Christianity” (166). Now, Christianity is one of the world’s three great religions of the book (along with Islam and Judaism), and yet just at this moment the single British character associated with spirituality thinks of Christianity in terms of the voice. And the voice is represented as having no power: it is poor and little and merely talkative as opposed to the oracular Word typically associated with sacred texts by the believers in those texts. She goes on to think that all Christianity’s “divine words from ‘Let there be light’ to ‘It is finished’ only amounted to ‘bom’” (166). The originary sacred texts of the religions of the book attain their unique status in part because they consist of the only writing that represents non-human, that is, supernatural language. Whereas from the beginning, the technology of writing both succeeds and fails because it disembodies language, “holy writ” (again, to its believers) differs from all other writing because it does not originate from a fleshly body. Of all writing, sacred writing is taken to be uninfected by the vicissitudes of the natural, material world. But the revelation of the echo has abruptly reduced even the uniquely powerful writing of the divinely-spoken words to mere talk.

At the same time that she loses Christianity, Mrs. Moore is also separated from her other great connection to life: her children. For at the end she realizes that “she didn’t want to write to her children, didn’t want to communicate with anyone, not even with God” (165). Finally, the echo detaches Mrs. Moore from the oral-aural world in the maximum possible way: as she failed to hear the affirmation of the echo, now she finds that her own voice has become detached from her body. At the last, all “the affectionate and sincere words that she had [earlier] spoken to [Aziz] seemed no longer hers but the air’s” (165).

To summarize what the orality-literacy distinction has so far shown us about the decomposition of the Marabar: the echo has revealed literate culture’s disjunction from oral nature; the revelation of this disjunction so dislocates the literate self-identity that the writing closest to speech, the writing that most connects literacy to lost orality (the personal letter) fails; the social speech that is closest to writing, the speech over which writing can most assert its representational power (court testimony) must be rejected; the writing of the divine word falls to the lowly level of everyday conversation; and the very voice itself seems to become literally, not just representationally, disembodied. De-composition has become de-writing with a vengeance.

Adela’s response to the echo also links directly into the oral-literate matrix, though this time the Marabar decomposes British rationalism rather than British spiritualism. Adela is rational to the point of being a kind of polar opposite to the emotional, poetic, oral-aural Indians, and especially to Aziz. Having associated with “advanced academic circles” in England, she has come to India in order to make a “reasoned conclusion about marriage” (88); and it seems to occur to her only by chance that matrimony should possibly have something to do with love (168). She considers any tears of emotion to be “a negation of her

advanced outlook” (215). She has, at least till her trip to the Marabar caves, been nearly all mind and no body: “Hitherto she had not much minded whether she was touched or not: her senses were abnormally inert and the only contact she anticipated was that of the mind” (214). Clearly enough, the Indians as figures of orality are in direct contrast to these qualities.

Though Mrs. Moore tends to represent British spirituality, and Adela British intellectuality, still we find many strong parallels between their experiences of and responses to the cave. For instance, when Mrs. Moore is in the cave, she feels attacked by “some vile naked thing” (162) that turns out to be an innocent baby. When Adela is in the cave, she is “assaulted” by an Indian man who turns out not to have been there at all. Whatever actually happened in the cave, as with Mrs. Moore the echo is from the beginning the effect that most remains with Adela: “the echo flourished, raging up and down like a nerve in the faculty of her hearing, and the noise in the cave, so unimportant intellectually, was prolonged over the surface of her life” (215). The irony here is that it is exactly the intellectual unimportance (akin to the earlier unimportance of “poor, little talkative Christianity”) that most gives the echo its weight. Again as with Mrs. Moore, the echo comes as a “comment” (215). And it specifically undermines Adela’s sense of her intellectual self. Of the consequences of the echo, she says that all “the things I thought I’d learnt are just a hindrance, they’re not knowledge at all” (219). Most ironically, especially in light of what we have seen with Mrs. Moore, “after years of intellectualism” the echo leads her to resume “her morning kneel to Christianity,” though she does so purely for practical reasons (234). Before the scene of her testimony in court, Adela explains that in the cave she created the echo, “and before the comment had died away, [Aziz] followed her, and the climax was the falling of her field glasses” (215). With this event which as it turns out is purely acoustic, the oral-aural nature of the caves now decomposes the primary physical sense associated with Adela: seeing. It is Adela’s original desire “to see the real India” that initiates this entire story (22). Given the promotion of the visual sensory domain in the literate world, and given the tensions between literacy and orality in this novel, it makes sense that Adela, the figure of maximum literate rationality, would also be the figure most associated with this particular idea of “seeing.” Further, the association is powerfully reinforced by two physical objects, each from opposite ends of what we may call the technology of seeing. We have the binoculars in the cave. Later, we find Miss Derek and Mrs. McBryde spending hours and hours examining Adela’s skin “through magnifying glasses” (214). Adela, then, becomes as maximal a figure of literacy as Godbole is of orality, for now her association with scientific rationalism—one of the truly world historical outcomes of the technology of writing—gets compounded by her distinct association with the technology of seeing. It is not surprising, then, that she is particularly upset when the echo ramps up the “faculty of her hearing.” Most revealing of all, she

describes the “falling of her field glasses,” not the (imaginary) assault by Aziz, as the “climax” of the event in the cave.

Taking all this together, we can see that Adela has experienced the figurative collapse of her literate self, and the novel has represented the sickening of writerly intellectual culture through a kind of demonic infection by oral nature. And here again the specter of nihilistic relativism looms up at a key moment. It had come upon Mrs. Moore as she sat down to write letters to her children. It comes to Adela during her court appearance. There, she and McBryde speak in the rigorously “monotonous” tones of testimony, both of them “employing agreed words throughout,” as if speech in this context is a kind of hireling, instead of an authentic human expression (254). In the courtroom, the main figure Adela notices is the punkah puller, the “humblest of all who were present,” and yet the one who “seemed to control the proceedings” (241). “Opposite him,” both literally and figuratively, we find Mr. Das, the Indian embodiment of the British court of law. Though physically placed in the site of speech most like writing, the punkah puller in his “aloofness” (242) is absolutely apart from that space and acts by his sheer presence as a kind of negation of the unimpressive social “categories” according to which the courts are constructed. This figure causes her to wonder: “In virtue of what had she collected this roomful of people together? Her particular brand of opinions, and the suburban Jehovah who sanctified them—by what right did they claim so much importance in the world, and assume the title of civilization” (242). The echo has left the figure of British intellectuality, like the figure of British spirituality, with nothing.

Lastly we must consider Fielding in relation to our examination of *A Passage to India*. Fielding is rather precisely positioned as a mixed case in terms of orality and literacy. He is the teacher in the British-style schools, and so is the primary purveyor of British literacy and literature. Yet apart from his obvious sympathy and alliance with the Indians, he is specifically praised by Aziz as “a celebrated student of Persian poetry” (67). As mentioned above, of the participants in the tea-party only Fielding does not fall ill after listening to Godbole’s song. Similarly, we have shown that Fielding does hear the echo, but is unimpressed. And yet for him, too, echo becomes the sign of decomposition. In his final summation of the situation of the British in India, he concludes that, unlike in the past, “Everything echoes now; there’s no stopping the echo. The original sound may be harmless, but the echo is always evil” (307). Clearly, this statement perfectly describes what both Mrs. Moore and Adela experienced in the Marabar caves. At first sight it would seem that Fielding possesses a superior insight into all this, a conscious awareness of what the two women experienced but could not really comprehend. But the narrator immediately tells us that this “reflection about an echo lay at the verge of Fielding’s mind. He could never develop it. It belonged to the universe that he had missed or rejected” (307). The universe that he has missed or rejected takes us directly

back to an earlier key moment in the book, when we get Fielding's primary response to the Marabar hills as a natural phenomenon. At the end of the climactic day of the outing, he stands on the club's verandah, looking at the hills in the distance. Just at dusk they are "exquisite"; but rather than pleasing Fielding, the beauty leaves him feeling incomplete and dissatisfied and sounding like another version of Adela:

After forty years' experience, he had learnt to manage his life and make the best of it on advanced European lines, had developed his personality, explored his limitations, controlled his passions . . . A creditable achievement, but as the moment [of the hills at dusk] passed, he felt he ought to have been working at something else the whole time,—he didn't know at what, never would know, never could know, and that was why he felt sad. (212)

Related to this moment, we find Fielding, too, being assaulted by nihilistic relativism. When Aziz speaks of demanding monetary retribution from Adela, Fielding suddenly loses

his usual sane view of human intercourse, and felt that we exist not in ourselves, but in terms of each others' minds—a notion for which logic offers no support and which had attacked him only once before, the evening [. . .] when from the verandah of the club he saw the fists and fingers of the Marabar. (278)

Interestingly, Fielding, who would seem to be the most generally aware character in the novel, is not fully conscious of what has happened to himself. For the narrator's comment refers to Fielding's experience of seeing the hills at dusk, quoted above, and nothing overtly like this occurs in Fielding's conscious thoughts. It must be that Fielding experienced the assault of relativism only unconsciously in the earlier moment. Is this the means by which, compared to Mrs. Moore and Adela, he is saved from the devastating consequences of relativism? In any case, we are left with all three major British characters having a negative, relativistic understanding thrust upon them by the echoing "decomposition of the Marabar" (287). We may conclude, then, that in a sense *A Passage to India* is "about" the ways in which literacy and literature come into conflict with orality and orature.

My argument has tried to show with a specific text how the established claims about the technology of writing and the orality-literacy distinction can open up new angles of interpretation. Though I have concentrated on one canonical novel, the theoretical grounding based on such an important technology conjoined with certain fundamental elements—language and story—of human being provide what should be a generally applicable approach. What I have not tried to do here is historicize. In other words I have read *A Passage to India* as embodying the theoretical issues and conflicts in general, rather than as

embodying them in a particular historical way. But the obvious next application of the theory would do just that. For instance, the significance of the recurrent threat of relativism in Forster's novel could be explained in terms of how the technology of writing has changed the nature of written story in such ways as to have produced modernism; for although we can find the rupture of writing in novels from the beginning, only at a certain point in the history of the novel does relativism appear in just this way. Another obvious historicizing use of these concepts might explain the functioning of the orality-literacy conflict in the emergence of the novel as a genre. Clearly enough, the whole issue of epistolarity is ripe for such an examination: what may be said about the novel's emergence as the written story that imitates, not the real world in general, but rather personal letters, the writing that is most like speech? We can historicize with this theory because as the writerly attempt to get at the authenticity of oral story always necessarily fails, the technological nature of writing—apart from conscious understandings or intentions of any given writer—will constantly drive written story to change. And yet no matter how much change occurs, the orality-literacy conflict will always still be at work. Its appearance and entailments will change, though, and explaining them will historicize these interpretive concepts. Further, we may gain new insights by considering not just the technology itself, but who uses it in what situation. If a tension always exists generally between literacy and orality, then it would take on all the more weight in writings by those who have been historically denied literacy. We may expect the orality-literacy distinction to show itself differently in texts by women and most certainly in texts by African-Americans. Significant work has already been done with the latter, most famously by Henry Louis Gates (*"Race," Figures in Black, The Signifying Monkey*). But he has discussed literary texts as a means to demonstrate a theory of African-American literature. There still remains relatively little interpretation of African-American texts in their own right through the lens of writing. To conclude, then, there is considerably more writing on written story yet to be done.

Notes

1. Though the list of works on writing and orality has now grown quite long, the following are essential to the field and directly support the claims of this essay: Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*; Ong, *Presence, Interfaces, Orality*; Olson; Havelock, *Literate Revolution*; Goody, *Domestication, Logic, Interface, Power*; Chartier, *History*; McLuhan.
2. See for instance: Bruner, Turner, Damasio, Dennett.

Works Cited

- Barratt, Robert. "Marabar: The Caves of Deconstruction." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 23.2 (1993): 127–35.
- Bruner, Jerome. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.
- Bradbury, Malcolm. "Two Passages to India: Forster as Victorian and Modern." *Aspects of E. M. Forster*. Ed. Oliver Stallybrass. London: Edward Arnold, 1969. 123–42.
- Chartier, Roger. *A History of Private Life, Volume 3: Passions of the Renaissance*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1989.
- . *The Order of Books*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994.
- . "The Practical Impact of Writing." *The Book History Reader*. Eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 118–42.
- Colmer, John. "Promise and Withdrawal in *A Passage to India*." *E.M. Forster: A Human Exploration: Centenary Essays*. Eds. G. K. Das and John Beer. New York: New York UP, 1979. 117–28.
- Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes' Error*. New York: Avon, 1994.
- Dowling, David. "*A Passage to India* through 'The Spaces between the Words.'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 15.3 (1985): 256–66.
- D'Cruz, Doreen. "Emptying and Filling Along the Existential Coil in *A Passage to India*." *Studies in the Novel* 18.2 (1986): 193–205.
- Dennett, Daniel. *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1991.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1979.
- . *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India*. 1924. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.
- , ed. *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- . *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.
- . *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- . *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- . *The Power of the Written Tradition*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.
- Havelock, Eric A. *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.
- . *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1962.
- Olson, David. *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

Ong, Walter. *The Presence of the Word; Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1967.

———. *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.

———. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.

Orange, Michael. "Language and Silence in *A Passage to India*." *E.M. Forster: A Human Exploration: Centenary Essays*. Eds. G. K. Das and John Beer. New York: New York UP, 1979. 142–60.

Tinsley, Molly. "Muddle et Cetera: Syntax in *A Passage to India*." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 9.2 (1979): 191–98.

Turner, Mark. *The Literary Mind*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.

*This essay demonstrates how theories of writing considered as an invented technology can open new interpretive doors into the study of literature. First I briefly explain the effects and consequences of the technology of writing in relation to speech, the primary effect being the disembodiment of language. I explain in a similar way the effects and consequences of written story in relation to oral story. Then I examine writing and orality, literature and orature in Forster's *A Passage to India* in such a way as to show how the theory of writing as a technology can actually produce interpretations.*

Keywords: writing / literacy / orature / orality / E. M. Forster