

# E. M. Forster, Lionel Trilling, and the American Turn, 1942-1953

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon previously unpublished correspondence, my essay documents how the transatlantic crossing of E. M. Forster's literary corpus, from a Europe devastated by war to America, challenges one of Perry Anderson's key claims about the postwar "contraflow" between the United States and England: that the sea change "modified Anglo more than American culture" (*English Questions* 204). Rather, the New York intellectual and literary critic, Lionel Trilling, succeeded in resituating Forster's fiction cogently in terms of exigencies recognizable to a mass American readership in wartime and after, thereby securing Forster's after-life in the American academy. Additionally, Trilling's success imparted scale to the transatlantic turn, by making Forster's newly transformed body of work amenable to ideological re-export, back again across the Atlantic, to England. As such, the pairing offered a historically significant corrective, during the decade following Pearl Harbor, to more reactionary critical formations within literary Modernism, at a time when both T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had returned to nationalist bases when endorsing literature as a vehicle for culture. I conclude by affirming that the Forster-Trilling transatlantic combination served uniquely sociohistorical, interpretively occasional, and yet critically significant scalars beyond the nationalizing function of English literature and its criticism at that time.

**KEYWORDS:** E. M. Forster, Lionel Trilling, liberal humanism, scale

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But for your book on me, I should have had no revival in the States.<sup>1</sup>

—E. M. Forster

[I]t will perhaps seem strange, even perverse, to have involved Mr Forster in polemic, but I did just that—I had a quarrel with American literature as at that time it was established, and against what seemed to me its dullness and its pious social simplicities.

—Lionel Trilling (*E. M. Forster* 4)

By the time E. M. Forster arrived, for the very first time, in the United States in May 1947—it was only his second-ever journey on an airplane—the timing could not have been any better.<sup>2</sup> He was already famous in the American academy, probably more so than in his own country. Lionel Trilling's *E. M. Forster* (1943) had already (and fairly recently) re-established Forster's reputation in America in the form of a somewhat equivocating, if also masterful, rebuttal of the pre-war crisis within European liberalism. Similarly re-minted for the postwar order, Forster's canon offered, at least as far as Trilling saw it, the best prognosis for bourgeois liberalism's renewal abroad in those many nations recently liberated from totalitarianism.

Attending the Harvard Symposium on Music Criticism that late spring of 1947, Forster came to embody, from the perspective of his North American audience at least, the philosophy of postwar "liberal imagination" Trilling had invented for him. The term had been coined as part of the title of the introductory chapter in Trilling's monograph, *E. M. Forster*; the concept would be broadened (and diversified in application) in Trilling's subsequent and successful popular collection of essays, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster to Lionel Trilling, 9 November 1948. *Lionel Trilling Papers* (MS# 1256) Box 6, Folder 5; Series: II (Undated, 1927 Mar.-1974 Aug.). Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of E. M. Forster (King's College, Cambridge).

<sup>2</sup> The first time had been in a biplane in the skies over Alexandria, Egypt, where Forster had been stationed as a volunteer "Searcher" for the British Red Cross during the First World War. Forster's account of his first flight appears in one of his occasional contributions (signed "Pharos") to the *Egyptian Mail* (5 May, 1918: 2), "Alexandria Vignettes: Higher Aspects." See Kirkpatrick 115.

<sup>3</sup> Quoting Kirsch's data, Collini reports that *The Liberal Imagination* "sold 70,000 copies in hardback" and another "100,000 in paperback" (Collini 101; Kirsch 14). Such sales, for a work of literary criticism no less, constituted a hugely successful impact for a genre "most mainstream publishers and booksellers now regard as virtually unsaleable" and "hardly credible" today (Collini 101, 103).

Having achieved an altogether different kind of fame than that *A Passage to India* had given him a generation earlier, in 1924, and in no small part due to Trilling's efforts, Forster's brief career in the United States (also following upon his second, and final, visit to the US in 1949) was a notable success. The man D. H. Lawrence had once referred to as "the last Englishman" emerged as an exemplary figure of the postwar, transatlantic traffic in literary personality.<sup>4</sup>

## I. Forster in Flight

In what follows, I cite previously unpublished correspondence between Trilling and Forster to document how Forster's crossing from a devastated Europe back to America challenges one of Perry Anderson's key claims about the postwar "contraflow" between the United States and England: which is, "in the standard hyphenation," that the sea-change "modified Anglo more than American culture" (*English Questions* 204). Of course, Anderson's overall project in *English Questions* nuances the "standard hyphenation," too; but I will suggest here not only (as Anderson does) that there was an "increasing erosion" of boundaries between the two cultures formerly held, at least to some extent, as distinct; or, that the mutual impacts were clearly "asymmetrical" (204). Rather, I suggest that at origin the Trilling-Forster tandem presents a clear instance of how a particularly well-crafted and scholarly caricature of Englishness not only demonstrated forms and functions of the transatlantic trade in letters and culture then becoming prevalent, but also capably anchored characteristic features—tolerance, humanism, freedom of thought and action—as determining features of an American centrist, liberal philosophy at the dawn of a globalized age.<sup>5</sup>

Trilling's illustration of specific, ruling ideologies by means of literary rhetoric or filigree was hardly new. But his popularization of literary culture in wartime, by the means of "branding" foreign literary celebrity and propounding the battle for hearts and minds, was most certainly original.<sup>6</sup> By

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<sup>4</sup> See Moffatt, Chapter 11; and Jaffe, "Introduction."

<sup>5</sup> My use of a transatlantic tandem or "dyptich" of historical figures approximates the method pioneered by Paul Giles in his foundational study, *Transatlantic Insurrections* (2001). Of course, any given pairing also offers, by impicature, a spatial triangulation—the transatlantic—which is revisionist of "nation-centripetal literary criticism" (See Buell 66, 68-69).

<sup>6</sup> See Jaffe, "Introduction." Once applied in the United States, Trilling's theory enabled mainstream critics to redirect and sublimate, in the arena of social critique, still alarming tendencies that had

citing Forster's literary example as the welcome corrective to pressing exigencies within the domain of American political ideology, Trilling aimed to stabilize the political center at home. He did so effectively—during the dark days of early 1942 he had written *E. M. Forster* “in a concentrated rush . . . benefited by the special energies that attend a polemical purpose” (3)—especially because the eventual outcome of the war against fascism was far from decided. Partially an exercise in wish-fulfillment, partially an astute reading of the collective psychology of the American polity, Trilling's reinvention of Forster as a celebrity icon of public intellectualism also provided a new outlet for university-based academics seeking to redefine and rejuvenate their own roles as stakeholders in a broader, more relevant struggle for the future of the humanities and its canons (Christie 1-2).<sup>7</sup>

E. M. Forster's new-found status as a “literary modernist” man of letters—as the English exemplar of an *American* liberal imagination—raises interesting questions about the critical-canonizing operations Trilling performed as that modernizing critic who first ensconced Forster in the American literary canon without any apparent dissonance. Trilling's literary-critical exegesis imparted scale to the transatlantic turn, by resituating Forster's canon beyond the confines of *belles lettres*, and by making it amenable to ideological re-export, back again across the Atlantic, to Europe. Once Americanized, Forsterian ideology, now re-packaged as “liberal humanism,” became a potent force in the emerging global struggle with those nations, particularly in Europe, facing the threat of the Warsaw Pact. As such, the Trilling-Forster transatlantic tandem was an historically significant corrective, during the decade following Pearl Harbor, to even more reactionary critical formations within literary modernism, at a time when both T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had turned “back” to nationalist bases (English Anglicanism and Italian fascism, respectively) when reaffirming literature as a vehicle for culture (Kirsch 45).

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culminated in Stalinism and other extremist ideologies.

<sup>7</sup> By the time of the publication, in paperback, of the second edition of *E. M. Forster* in 1965 Trilling could claim, quite rightly, that Forster's popularization was “especially marked in America” where his works had become “required reading for educated people” and one of the “approved subjects for the university scholar of literature” (1-2).

## II. Celebrity

As early as 1942, Trilling's good offices had resulted in Forster's work and criticism achieving a foothold in the American literary academy during the darkest days of the war. Philip Blair Rice, managing editor at *The Kenyon Review*, had accepted Trilling's article on Forster, "The Liberal Imagination," for publication in March 1942—the essay that eventually became the introduction to *E. M. Forster*—with the grim (and, as it turned out, unfounded) prediction that "This issue will very likely be our last, unless a god hops out of the machine waving several grand."<sup>8</sup> That Trilling's famous "liberal imagination" moniker, like the theory that evolved from it, was originally subsumed within Forster studies is not sufficiently acknowledged by Americanists who tend to minimize Trilling's reach beyond the United States; or, for that matter, Forster's reach into American literary consciousness. In an interesting reversal, John Lehmann (then with Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press) had to apply to James Laughlin at New Directions in March 1944 to acquire republication rights to Trilling's *E. M. Forster*, in order to repatriate to England a newly Americanized property only by then better known to the English: namely, the significance and impact of Mr. E. M. Forster's canon. Forster's legacy had not only achieved the passage to India but, even more importantly for the consolidation of transatlantic literary consciousness, to America. And now, via Lehmann's good offices, it was travelling back again, re-packaged anew as a commodity in postwar transatlantic literary discourse.

In February 1943, Trilling also received a letter from his colleague at Columbia University, the economist Harold Barger who, like Forster, was a graduate of Kings' College, Cambridge, and the nephew of Forster's close friend, life-long correspondent, and confidante, Florence Barger. In his letter to Trilling, Harold Barger transcribed portions of a second letter he had recently received from Forster thanking him (Barger) for "Trilling's interesting and gratifying [*The Kenyon Review*] article on self. . . . Literary criticism, anyhow, has gone to your side of the Atlantic now: Edmund Wilson is another instance of it. Indeed, I think that most things have gone."<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Forster was not oblivious to the increasingly one-way traffic between British

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Blair Rice to Lionel Trilling, 3 March 1942. Columbia University Libraries, *Lionel Trilling Papers* (MS# 1256), Box 11, Folder 2; Subseries: II.2 (Undated, 1941 Jan.-1942 Jun.).

<sup>9</sup> Harold Barger to Lionel Trilling, 21 February 1943. Columbia University Libraries, *Lionel Trilling Papers* (MS# 1256), Box 11, Folder 3; Subseries: II.2 (Undated, 1942 Jul.-1943 Mar.).

and American literary critics, reversing the cultural flow Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot had made paradigmatic in previous generations. One has the impression that Forster witnessed the exodus to America wryly, now knowing that he too was a part of it, just as his *erstwhile protégés*, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, had done some years prior.

Upon first arriving in New York in May 1947, Forster arranged a visit to the offices of Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, the publisher handling the American portfolio for his London publisher, Edward Arnold. (He was also following up a lead on how to place his biography of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson for the American market).<sup>10</sup> In 2000, the publisher Robert Giroux recalled for George Plimpton in the pages of *The Paris Review* that:

[Forster] turned up at the Harcourt Brace office one day in 1947, just off a plane. He had never been in the United States. Harvard had invited him to do a lecture in a series they were doing. Very affable. I took him to lunch at the Marguery Hotel on Park Avenue. We sat out under the canopy, in a sort of courtyard. He was wearing a backpack, which he never took off. When I asked him about his bags, he touched the backpack and said, I travel light. I never check baggage if it can be avoided. . . . Suddenly there was a terrific rumble of a train coming down under Park Avenue. I didn't really notice it, but he sat up. Earthquake? I said, that's the train coming into Grand Central Station. He was relieved. He talked about how he always wanted to visit America. Harcourt Brace gave him a big cocktail party at the Ritz Carlton. Forster had said, I must meet Mr. Lionel Trilling. Trilling had published a new book for New Directions, a little book about Forster, which sort of revived his reputation. When I introduced them, Forster said, This is the man who made me famous! (Giroux n. pag.)

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<sup>10</sup> In an interesting twist, Trilling lobbied for Columbia University Press to publish the Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson biography, Harcourt Brace apparently having cooled on the Forster list. (See Giroux). Forster agreed to the idea, and invited Trilling to write the preface on the grounds that what the book needed was "a preface from an American. Pointing out that although G.L.D. was an English don who has been dead for fifteen years he has nevertheless something to say to Americans" (E. M. Forster to Lionel Trilling [26 Oct. 1947]. *Lionel Trilling Papers* [MS# 1256] Box 6, Folder 5; Series: II [Undated, 1927 Mar.-1974 Aug.]. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of E. M. Forster [King's College, Cambridge]).

Forster's acknowledgement of his debt to Trilling was just: not since the critical success of *A Passage to India* across 1924-25 had he known such acclaim; and this time, it was attributable to the advent of literary transnationalism, on behalf of a newly resurgent anglophone culture, which bridged national differences rather than accentuated them. Notably, Trilling and Forster had a love for Matthew Arnold in common: by the end of 1947, it was clear that a newly-minted "Forsterian" criticism of culture (in terms and vocabulary Trilling had usefully provided) could be counted upon to challenge the anarchy of a new world order. And was not the new world order being ushered in by Forster's American critical patrons, Trilling chief among them, and a potentially vast new domain of readers? Constituting the demand side of such an emerging readership, the American market for English novels represented an important after-life, if not a life-line, for British writers such as Forster (Giles, *Global Remapping* 12). The promise this emerging readership supplied was psychologically bracing, as well as potentially remunerative in practical terms, even for long-standing titles on the back catalogue such as *A Passage to India* and *Abinger Harvest* which, by the late 1950s, had been in print for over twenty-five years.

### III. Scarcity

Forster was keenly aware of the economy of scale America represented by the light of his new-found fame. He astutely leveraged one American publisher against another in the effort to capitalize upon the race to reprint his works. This point was made clear to Harcourt Brace when its new director, Spencer Scott, errantly sent Forster a form letter asking for a reduction in royalty payments. Giroux recalls:

I almost lost Forster as an author. Harcourt Brace got a new president in the late 1940s, the late Spencer Scott, who not only looked like a banker but thought like one. . . . He came into my office one day after his promotion looking unhappy, and laid on my desk a letter in English mandarin handwriting—which I recognized as E. M. Forster's—and said, 'Tell me what I should do about this', and quickly left the room. Written on King's College letterhead, it read,

My dear Mr. Scott:

I do not know who you are, because I've dealt only with Donald Brace since 1924 and more recently with Robert Giroux, but I cannot accept your suggestion of reducing my royalty on *A Passage to India* and *Abinger Harvest* to ten percent in order to keep them in print. The books have been selling steadily for over twenty years at a royalty of fifteen percent. If you feel that you cannot continue to reprint them under the original terms, I'll arrange to transfer them to another publisher in America.

Faithfully yours,

E. M. Forster. (n. pag.)

The tetchy tone of the letter reveals Forster's own awareness of the enlarged capacity he now possessed. Among the earliest supporters of the Society of Authors back in Britain, Forster had for many years established himself as a ferocious defender of any author's inherent prerogatives, legal or otherwise, against the business interests of publishers deemed predatory.

Clearly, Forster is leveraging against his present publisher the threat of a "quick out" the large, American readership presented by playing Harcourt Brace off against another (probably still notional) American publisher, one who might offer more generous contractual terms. Even so, the exchange cues more deeply rooted assumptions about postwar "America" Forster shared with his fellow Britons, including fecundity and "supply," philistinism, as well as anxieties about the impact of mass culture as epitomized by the large-scale influx of films made in Hollywood which, by 1947, had resulted in the British imposing a 75% import tax (Pells 217-18). Alongside his fellow countrymen and women, Forster had faced real privation during the Blitz and after, as a consequence of extensive commodity rationing which, to the surprise of some, not only extended but tightened for years after the war had ended. Strict rationing was exacerbated, at times to Britons' great frustration, by the repayment terms of the Lend Lease act.<sup>11</sup> British debt to the Americans after

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<sup>11</sup> Consisting of legislation entitled "An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States" (Pub. L. 77-11, H.R. 1776, 55 Stat. 31), the Lend Lease Act was enacted by the United States Congress and signed by President Roosevelt on 11 March 1941 in support of its beleaguered European allies, Britain and unoccupied France. It provided essential commodities such as food, oil, and other materiel including armaments. (Eventually, Lend-Lease also sought to provide aid to unoccupied China and the Soviet Union after Hitler's invasion in 1942). Viewed at the time by the Churchill cabinet as timely and necessary assistance, everyday Britons eventually came to view the



the war put the pinch on British government, which was forced to curtail amenities for its citizens, even as the welfare state was in the process of being planned.<sup>12</sup>

Americans not presently in uniform (or recently demobilized) were hardly aware of such privations of the peace facing Britons of all classes. Petrol rationing was firmly in place, everyday food items were newly discovered as luxuries—dairy, fresh fruit and other daily commodities were particularly scarce—with food rationing not being formally suspended until July 1954, nearly a decade after the end of the war. Even when rightly supposing that Forster needed convertible cash far less than other, less-well-heeled Britons, he also felt the impact of rationing and contemplated the happier prospect of American supply.

Shortly following his return to England, upon the conclusion of his first American trip, in July 1947, Forster had moved into his chambers at King's College, Cambridge. (He had been appointed to a life-tenure fellowship and would stay there, more or less continuously, until the very last years of his life.) Still, as the letter to Spencer above indicates, he was willing to fight for his margins where he could. And he was also hit meaningfully by the rationing—especially cheeses—as his letter to the Trillings (dated 15 January 1953), thanking them for their posted care package, attests:

The wonderful present arrived the day after my birthday [1 January], and I have been eating it almost always since. On the whole, food here is much easier, but *every* single item in the parcel is a local difficulty. The score of eggs made me gasp: some of them went to invalids but the rest I had for lunch in my room: I ate the last yesterday. The cheese I am still having for lunch. The bacon, tinned ham, and some of the butter are waiting a little. The sugar has released some inferior sugar which I give to the wives of dons. Knowing no better, they receive it with of delight, making it into jam, and then they give me presents of jam. So this way and that it goes.<sup>13</sup>

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repayment of Lend-Lease as onerous and even impeding the pace of postwar recovery.

<sup>12</sup> See Sked. The Lend-Lease package, consolidated along with postwar recovery loans, was repaid by the British government in fifty annual installments, combining outstanding balances and compounded interest. The debt was not fully discharged by the British government until 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis in orig. E. M. Forster to Lionel Trilling, 15 January 1953. *Lionel Trilling Papers* (MS#

The Trillings' gift of a "score" of eggs, presumably sent via air freight, rests quaintly against the backdrop of a much more intractable and complex relationship existing between the two powerful literary economies, always linked by language and cultural affinity; but now, for the first time in history, by transnational debt and structural interdependence.

British privation, American supply: the personal exchange between Forster and Trilling instantiates the macroeconomic developments which required fulfillment of the obligations incurred under the Lend Lease Act. Unlocking the promise of American munificence, British and American economies merged to deploy economic liberalism across the Atlantic. Their literary cultures, private informing public, also occasioned a degree of correlation by way of exigency. Paul Giles cites Trilling's contributions, in particular, to the globalization ("deterritorialization") of American culture and literature after the war, his "liberal imagination" ideally suited for export, at once local and global, flexible and tolerant.<sup>14</sup> Still, if Trilling was only too happy to serve as Forster's patron (in order to co-opt for American culture the liberal premise both men had inherited from Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*: "the best that has been thought and known" [70]) there were others among Britain's literary-critical elite who were more resentful of the seeming dissipation of British cultural capital outward.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, Forster, like many other Britons of his class, happily obliged "Americanization" in exchange for a degree of celebrity and all (or most) expenses paid.

The Trilling repackaging of Forster that began in 1942, and which was fully achieved by 1950, was in line with the generally affirming liberal critique of democracy victors usually propound. (Forster had famously coined the credo that democracy was still worth two cheers, if not three, in his anti-Nazi propaganda piece, "What I Believe," aired on the BBC during the war). Trilling's ideological wrapper on Forster's critique, now theorized for an American audience as "liberal humanism," capably served the Allied victory over fascism, as well as symbolically guaranteed the postwar order in peacetime under the global custodianship of American capitalism. Largely the

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1256) Box 6, Folder 5; Series: II (Undated, 1927 Mar.-1974 Aug.). Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of E. M. Forster (King's College, Cambridge).

<sup>14</sup> See Giles, *Global Remapping* 256, 300. Giles overlooks the essentially British basis, via Forster, of Trilling's newly globalized "American" liberalism.

<sup>15</sup> In *Americanizing Britain*, Genevieve Abravanel has argued persuasively that F. R. Leavis's anti-American viewpoints, in particular, were inevitably conditioned by "twin processes" of Americanization and the advent of the transatlantic (110-11).

result of Trilling's own efforts and increasing prominence as a critic, Forster emerged as the unlikely champion and icon of the mainstream, post-1945 transatlantic literary establishment. Arguing for tolerance and centrism, his writerly example served to deconstruct polarizing tendencies, totalitarian red versus Anglo-American blue.<sup>16</sup> Before turning to a closer analysis of Trilling's *E. M. Forster*, a brief review of Americanist criticism about the transatlantic turn bears further scrutiny, including Trilling's role in its formation which, although seldom addressed, bears the weight of my analysis here.

#### IV. The (Neo)Liberal Transatlantic

The bilateral origins of transatlantic literary modernism, prefigured at least since Hawthorne, Emerson, and Whitman, have been the source of on-going debate. In a helpful overview of this bilateral relation, Marietta Messmer has suggested the importance of geographically centrist, European (primarily British, French, and German) literary discourses. These provided a discernible counter-weight to polarizing tendencies impacting otherwise unobstructed traffic between Anglo- and American literary modernisms. Messmer notes that the resulting wobble was of considerable interest to Americanists after 1920, who sought to refute contrasts between this or that anglophone modernism in favor of more integrative and spatiotemporal models—including Europe, ex-England, as a crucial and yet neglected part of the overall dynamic (47-50). Such a decentered genealogy for the transatlantic, as well as the narratives of “interdependence” Messmer extracts from it, likewise have informed Kadir's rejection of an “American American studies”—literary production, that is, produced by and for the ruling American literary establishment in a kind of white echo chamber. For Kadir, the “American American studies” has persisted in countering a presumably more salutary American literary “translocality,” responsive to different kinds of Americans, with these persons and their stories to a great extent excluded from institutions of power (13). Giles concurs in arguing the debt the transatlantic frame owes to the period of globalization of Americanist

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<sup>16</sup> In the art deco-influenced dust jacket of Lionel Trilling's *E. M. Forster*, published by New Directions in 1943, Alvin Lustig's image of the writer's hand occupies the center of a bifurcated field, red and blue halves joined in the same creative gesture.

ideology which imposed “liberal uniformity” upon all other dissenting spaces and positions within the American and European Atlantic and beyond its perimeter (Giles, “Transnationalism” 73). In the era of Trump, John Carlos Rowe’s interesting adjective for contemporary Americanist literary-critical discourses of the transatlantic, “neonationalist,” offers an almost prescient warning about how extreme ideologies may also be seeded in reaction to the mere fact of literary values exchanging and crossing (82). Sounding the voice of collective caution, Messmer, Kadir, Giles, and Rowe all admonish us not to lose sight of the ways in which the discourses of transatlantic interdependence have also served capably when securing the hegemony and institutional violence of elites wherever British and American literary interests were established.

Kadir’s argument targets Trilling, in particular, as betraying the contradictions within an ascendant American postwar political ideology filling the vacuum left by the demise of the British empire. Kadir argues convincingly that Trilling’s rhetoric argued on behalf of a fictive, liberal consensus of democracy, even as his work has capably achieved the reification of dissent within the American polity across the decades:

[A]t a point of America’s headlong careening into the ideological battles of the cold war, [*The Liberal Imagination*] sought to delineate a *divide* between ideology and imagination, once again seeking to exorcise ideological sectarianism from the Americanness of American culture, literary culture especially, thereby disassociating liberality and imagination from the fray of ideological commitments that might compromise national imagination, the myth of consensus, and the capacity of America to continue on its perennial course of self-engenderment as the unique and unitary conception of its own mythology. (13-14, emphasis in orig.)

Kadir focuses here upon *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) as instrumental in severing the liberal imagination from ideological critique, and particularly effective at laying the groundwork for the more general silencing of “translocal” dissent within America at the dawn of a post-war order. In these terms, the evolving Trilling and Forster relationship (Forster had read the

published version of Trilling's dissertation, *Matthew Arnold*, as early as 1939) would seem to offer ready evidence for the advent of liberal quietism Kadir deplores, all under the guise of championing transnational, global capitalism after the Second World War.

Kadir's claim should be taken seriously, particularly with regard to Eisenhower-era attempts by the American right to co-opt key tenets of liberalism—autonomy, imaginative freedom, individualism—in the fight against communism. Post-dated still further, Kadir's underlying assertion that Trilling was instrumental when dividing a socially-activist liberal imagination from its now quietest political ideology finds an echo in Giles who, astride his own contemporary position embracing divergent, “transnational” literary formations, makes the argument that Trilling's work made the Fukuyama thesis declaring the end of history at the conclusion of the Cold War possible. For Giles, Trilling's work serves (perhaps somewhat conveniently) as liberal prophecy for the eventual fact of American-sponsored globalization (read “Americanization”) and its many sorry consequences. As we have seen, Giles equates “liberal uniformity” with the “intellectual unwillingness to move laterally” (“Transnationalism” 73). If Kadir and Giles are right, then the implication of their revisionist narrative is to elevate Trilling as the seer, if not outright proponent, of contemporary neoliberalism as a driver for contemporary neocolonialism.<sup>17</sup>

While persuasive, these various critiques benefit considerably from hindsight. They do not give adequate account of the personal affinities Forster and Trilling shared with a felt regard for the girding literature and philosophy provided in times of mutually recognized peril. Amanda Anderson rightly points out, for example, that the tropological “bleakness” of classical liberalism, Dickensian in origin, persisted as far as Forster's Edwardian fictions, and beyond, in keen witness to the types of nearly cyclical

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<sup>17</sup> Kirsch points out that Trilling's construction of the term “liberal” was ideologically elastic over time (11). Trilling's initial adherence to a conflict-driven dialectic in the 1920s and 1930s gave way to his critique of the “illiberality” of anti-Communist uses of liberalism (“narrow, single-minded, and bellicose”) during the 1950s (62). Giles' claim about Trilling's unwillingness to transculture American liberalism as laterally, or as liberally, onto other shores in the 1960s may accordingly be attributed to the “hardening” of Trilling's later style, as the refusal to mimic global anti-Communism. His later stance became more “adversarial” and defensive; and also responded, at least in part, to attacks on the literary establishment from the left. See Amanda Anderson for a convincing treatment of how Trilling's association with the New York Intellectuals was uneven and at times discrepant (23-29), even as younger thinkers in his circle, like Irving Kristol, tacked decisively toward neoliberalism and its successor, neoconservatism.

catastrophe global economic liberalism at once invited and dispersed in the run-up to each of the world wars. As Amanda Anderson would have it more generally, and as I am arguing here, the Forster-Trilling tandem confirms liberalism's willingness to rise up to face "enduring challenges, often born of crisis, that exerted their pressure on the internal dynamics of liberal thought" (2).

Indeed Trilling arrived at Forster fortuitously, responding to the European crisis of the late 1930s, primarily by virtue of their shared interest in Arnoldian criticism. Trilling's effective repackaging of Forster upon the American scene indicates the relative permeability, at least with regard to English and continental influences, of the "American Americanist" position in the years of its earliest formation. Trilling repurposed Forster's philosophy in defense of a transatlantic liberality that had—at least not yet—lost its imagination, in reaching back to as-yet restorative British influences in the face of the "pious social simplicities" of a still provincial American mindset. The urgency and tone of *E. M. Forster* breaks upon that simplicity like a storm.

## V. Relaxed Champion

Trilling begins *E. M. Forster* not with the imposition of historical context as conventional or obligatory, but imperative: "It gives me special satisfaction to write about him now, for a consideration of Forster's work is, I think, useful in a time of war" (7). From the outset, Trilling sets himself the task of correcting scholars who misread Forster's art as diffidence, otherworldliness or timorousness. Already, then, one sees how the "Americanization" of Forster occurs exegetically: as giving backbone and cogency, in the context of war, to a softer critical tendency. Trilling applies this lacquer, this veneer, via his own tendency—equal parts combative, equal parts aloofness—to enter the fray on behalf of a resurgent moralist criticism militating against the baser tendencies of an emerging popular culture, a position he would perfect, by the mid-1960s, as a leading theorist of the adversarial culture.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In 1965, Trilling published *Beyond Culture* (1965) which made current the notion of an "adversarial culture" serviceable, incidentally, to both Left and Right critiques of prevailing cultural orthodoxies. Much as his *E. M. Forster* over one generation earlier, *Beyond Culture* proved singularly adept at synthesizing and propounding, rather than originating, tendencies of reaction found in the wider culture: "It seems to me that the characteristic element of modern literature . . . is the bitter line of

Trilling's deep-rooted ambivalence about popular culture, with its capacity to exalt and to throw down ephemeral movements and personalities in equal measure, matched Forster's own. Both were students and admirers of the corpus of Matthew Arnold as well as the eternal verities projected from its residual neo-Platonism; both appreciated, as Arnold had taught, that the battle for "sweetness and light" muscular (Christian) liberalism wages in its struggle with modernity was far from milk and honey. To this Arnoldian scaffold Trilling fixes one crux of his unfolding argument (the first among several) he calls "moral realism": "not the awareness of morality itself but of the contradictions, paradoxes and dangers of living the moral life" (*E. M. Forster* 11-12). And, suddenly, long before he formalized adversarial culture for the humanities and culture wars of the 1960s, Trilling here ensconces Forster as liberalism's best champion because he is ambivalent in its critique: "For all his long commitment to the doctrines of liberalism, Forster is at war with the liberal imagination . . . [because of its] inadequacy of imagination: liberalism is always being surprised" (13). Ultimately, Forster the novelist must ride to the rescue of liberalism because it cannot fend for itself adequately on merely an imaginary—ideological—battlefield.

In Trilling's redescription, Forster's step toward adversarial iconicity is resolute: Forster is waging the struggle, no more and no less, for truth in narrative form (Kirsch 49, 51). Forster's lack of surprise concerning liberalism's inherent weakness constitutes, in turn, a martial posture and war-readiness in defense of art as transcending politics. If Forster is diffident about whichever political posture, he is also profoundly protective of the right to dream, of aesthetic autonomy, as art inevitably engages with worldly realities. (Liberalism is accordingly worth two, not three, cheers; it is the preferable alternative to extremism but also unreliable). Trilling's great gift to Forster criticism was precisely this identification: of the latter's commitment to the co-optation of political will to artistic freedom, in whichever measure or scope, as the best means of attenuating lurking extremist tendencies *within liberalism itself*.

For all its brilliance, Trilling's caricature is nonetheless odd. Forster emerges as liberalism's revenant, the incarnation of Matthew Arnold minus the piety, waging battle triumphant during America's darkest hour by virtue of never being surprised by humanity's failure to meet its better nature.

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hostility to civilization which runs through it" (qtd. in Kirsch 34).

Unseemly and small, the owlish and “donnish” (*E. M. Forster* 21) novelist from Abinger Hammer is neither weak nor spinsterly (as Leavis had once called him [186]). In Trilling’s rendering he is, rather, a hero of the adversarial culture whose diffident posture Trilling believes to be a highly effective put on; even as Forster, revealing his true colors, refuses to play the binaristic game the public culture all too often imposes whereby “if one of two opposed principles is wrong, the other is necessarily right. Forster will not play this game; or, rather, he plays it only to mock it” (15). Forster is a better moralist because he is a realist; he is a better champion of the American way because he is never surprised by liberalism’s failure. And yet, still, Forster champions on.<sup>19</sup>

Following on from the founding equivocation Forster’s “moral realism” presents to his readers, Trilling presents another even more curious and challenging one: that of the “relaxed will.” The strain manifest in this paradoxical combination is, in fact, tensile. Being neither fully willful nor fully relaxed, the “relaxed will” disperses tension along the substantive middle of whichever continuum Trilling claims to be treating. Such a “middling” of force is inherently constitutive, Trilling argues, of Forster’s ideologically centrist enterprise; it also wreaks havoc upon any extreme interpretation—any terminal narrative or creed—on the verges of reality:

[A]ttachment to tradition [forms Forster’s] . . . belief in the present. He has learned not to be what most of us are—eschatological. . . . [For us] the past has been a weary failure, the present cannot matter, for it is but a step forward to the final judgment . . . in the name of a superior and contemptuous posterity, we express our self-hatred—and our desire for power. (*E. M. Forster* 22)

In Trilling’s formulation, the “relaxed will” conveys Forster’s corrective to the “desire for power.” Its impulse towards distension is modified by its perpetual enemy, the ardent will. Mediating both types of will is lassitude, which asserts “the order of art set against the order of force” (179) to the point of

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<sup>19</sup> Collini’s otherwise fine and thoughtful analysis of Trilling overlooks Forster entirely as a pivotal influence. See Collini 106. The term “moral realism” was created by Trilling for Forster in particular, and prior to its more supple diversification in application to the broader ideology of liberal humanism in *The Liberal Imagination*.



conundrum; or, again, that “where the will is not everything it will be a better and a more effective will” (181).<sup>20</sup>

Hence the plasticity of Forster’s commitment: to the narrative “middle” of life (and its characteristic muddles). Such plasticity inveighs, equally, against prurient beginnings inherited from the past and the idealist positing of alternative futures, utopias, which all too readily harden into tyrannical ends. Committed to the attenuation of narrative middles, Forster’s novels are famously characterized by the implausible casualties attending improbable circumstances—the death of Harriet and Gino’s baby (*Where Angels Fear to Tread*), the murder in the piazza which awakens Lucy’s desire (*A Room with a View*), the off-stage expiry of Ruth Wilcox (*Howards End*). With particular reference to *A Passage to India*, Trilling notes the eschewing of teleological commitments, otherwise conveyed by standard plot, as a hallmark of Forster’s style (*E. M. Forster* 147). According to Trilling, even the tried and trusty *Bildungsroman* fails Forster because, as with Stendahl’s characters, only the unplotted brutality and suddenness of actual experience can ennoble humanity:

The life that Forster provides for Rickie [Elliot in *The Longest Journey*] is not a school; it is the real thing, like the life Stendahl provides for Julien [Sorel in *The Red and the Black*]. We know that life for these two young men is real and serious if only because it kills them both. For both authors have said: Experience be damned—life either pays or you die. And pays in hard, tangible coin. (*E. M. Forster* 79)

Of course, Forster’s brutal unplotting is a kind of plotting, too. This, then, is Forster’s relaxed militancy on behalf of the middle of life—even a killing life—rather than the quaint and cosseted coziness of a teacherly *Bildungsroman* we all, really, ought to learn from.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma, Trilling’s definition of Forster’s “relaxed will” delights in attenuating its object: “The paradox is greater still: in Forster’s belief in the relaxed will, in the deep suspiciousness of the rigid exercise of the intellect, there lies the deepest faith in the will and the intellect” (*E. M. Forster* 180).

<sup>21</sup> In a novel pairing—in the field of Forster criticism unique—Trilling attributes Forster’s (anti)heroism, his rallying imperative to defeat willfulness, to the influence of P. B. Shelley. Trilling is most certainly right when noting that the title of *The Longest Journey* (1906) is culled from Shelley’s *Epipychidion* (1821) and that its theme to some extent informs Forster’s treatment of

In the exegesis of Forster’s “moral realism” and the “relaxed will,” we encounter signature Trilling touches at once adumbrating and clarifying the Forster corpus as it was reminted for its American audience. Adumbrating, because—and long before the advent of poststructuralism—Trilling is all too clearly using deconstructive method; clarifying, because Trilling equivocates in order to anchor centrist moral philosophy (and its muddle) for an otherwise barbaric age that had already produced Auschwitz and, in a few short years, nuclear weaponry. For example, Trilling is clearly being deconstructive when he refers to Forster’s “double turn”: that is “the something else that lies behind, is sometimes taken for ‘tolerance’ but . . . it almost as often makes the severest judgments. And even when it suggests forgiveness it does not spring so much from gentleness of heart as from respect for two facts coexisting” (*E. M. Forster* 16-17).

Accordingly, the final chapter of *E. M. Forster* amounts to Trilling’s summa concerning the necessity of the deconstructive Forsterian example for the American mind; and, with its provision of masterful rhetoric, indicates how the function of American literary criticism, as it made the transatlantic turn, extended and transformed the canonical credentials of British writers:

Forster, then, is a critic with no drive to consistency, no desire to find an architectonic for his impressions. We might say of him that he is a critic without any desire for *success*. . . . Forster [in contrast to T. S. Eliot] asks us to relax. (165, emphasis in orig.)

I might disagree, at least in part, with Trilling’s asserting Forster’s aversion to structure (“architectonics”)—a key claim of this essay has been that Forster and Trilling constituted an historically significant tandem enabling scholars of subsequent generations to better understand one such structure or heuristic, the literary transatlantic, as it emerged. Indeed, as the 1940s came to a close the transatlantic absorbed tension productively—equally relaxed and willful—as part of its expanding mandate. Such was the case when Forster took issue with Trilling, his great rehabilitator, when defending the Master

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Romantic subjectivity in the novel (*E. M. Forster* 81-82). Also implicit in Trilling’s treatment of Shelley’s influence, perhaps, is Forster’s critique of the Shelleyan stance in the novel along the lines Trilling’s own vocabulary of the “relaxed will” provides. Forster’s posture reliably militates against the nobility of despair.

himself, Henry James, that great pioneer of the transatlantic's Angleward tilt.

## VI. A Return to James

After his rediscovery by an American readership in the 1940s, Forster continued to be surprised by America and provoked by American literary criticism. Most surprising of all, Forster eventually changed his mind about Henry James. Forster had famously irked an entire distinguished lineage of Jamesian critics, from Percy Lubbock to Sir Frank Kermode, when, in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), he had described the Master's use of pattern as "Beauty has arrived, but in too tyrannous a guise" (210). And, in the present context, it is important to recognize that it was Trilling's famous essay, "*The Princess Casamassima*" (1948) which had prodded Forster initially toward his rereading of James's work and a more positive reassessment. Initially, however, Forster's own view of Trilling's particular essay was averse:

I have let myself go to [Lionel] Trilling on the subject [of *The Princess Casamassima*]. I wish that I had kept a copy of my letter to him, but his wrong-headed article in *Horizon* will remind me of my points.<sup>22</sup> It is an avenue which H. J. ought to have pursued. It would have done him no harm to develop the journalist in him, and to get up scenes and characters from the life. Imitating Balzac, disastrous to most authors, would have benefited him. (*Commonplace Book* 178)

Here, in fact, was a signal instance of the transatlantic literary formation reorganizing the thinking of its otherwise diverse constituents. For Forster, the emerging transatlantic offered a double turn: not only back toward a new-found appreciation for James; but, also, toward his sudden recognition of the power of quality literary criticism, like Trilling's, to connect the inspired knowledge of academic specialists in the universities to the living canons of actual novelists. This emerging distinction, between the academic specialist and writer-practitioner, didn't necessarily grate: Forster appreciated being viewed as a writer more than he did being viewed as a critic. There remained a "lurking nervousness" in his mind about the advent of the "academic"

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<sup>22</sup> As reproduced in part below, Forster's original letter to Trilling survives.

criticism, even as he rightly perceived that Trilling possessed its gifts.<sup>23</sup>

There's more to be said about Forster's exchange of letters with Trilling on Henry James, but before doing so it's noteworthy that Forster rises to the defense of James's novel *in principle* against Trilling's contrary (or wayward) interpretation as Forster viewed it. In the *Commonplace Book* entry above, Forster recuperates James's interest in "journalism": not as a basis for critique—as he had done, via the contrast with H. G. Wells in *Aspects* twenty years earlier—but, rather, as evidence for the effective application of realism in the interest of depicting Victorian social issues that matter. As such, Forster's preference for *Casamassima* amounts to his endorsement of James's one-off experiment in the socially-inflected school of Balzac, an experiment James never repeated.<sup>24</sup>

Among the least critically subscribed of James's novels, *The Princess Casamassima* was, by far, Forster's favorite.<sup>25</sup> Describing it as "startling and attractive" (*Commonplace Book* 178), Forster allowed that this James novel achieved for him what no James novel had ever done before: it had caught him off his guard. So inspired, Forster read early James at a clip during the early months of 1948, a burst of interest which occasioned his reading (or re-reading) of a significant number of James's earlier novels—*Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1877), *Washington Square* (1880), and *The Bostonians* (1886) along with *Casamassima* (1886)—all in one batch.<sup>26</sup> What seems clear is that Forster set himself the task of revisiting James honestly, and that he did so with the brief of seeing what comparisons might be drawn between the earlier novels (which he knew less well) and James's later, more magisterial, style which, presumably, had soured him on James as a whole. To this end, Forster drew up a reading list.

As Forster's biographer, P. N. Furbank, rightly pointed out, Forster's worldview allowed for such salutary surprises. Indeed, he welcomed them. Furbank elaborates:

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<sup>23</sup> Personal correspondence, P. N. Furbank to S. Christie (letter, dated 3 May. 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Following H. G. Wells, Forster's reading of *The Princess Casamassima* as "journalism" is, at least, an oversimplification. Citing *The Art of Criticism*, Reid argues that such techniques, influenced by the philosophies of Taine and Sainte-Beuve, imparted greater confidence to James's fiction in the effort to convey a "statistical worldview" ("Jamesian Naturalism" 112).

<sup>25</sup> Wayne C. Booth cites the example of *The Princess Casamassima* as conveying a notable and different kind of "intensity" apart from scene, an "ironic tragedy" uncharacteristic of "late" James (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 47).

<sup>26</sup> Several pages of Forster's *Commonplace Book* are filled with passages transcribed directly from these novels, plot summaries, under the heading of "*Princess Casamassima* and the people" (177).

[Forster] would write James off as a futile cobweb-spinner; then he would pick up a new [edition of a] novel of his and be astonished at its marvelous power and solidity. The thing [James's variability] seemed a great mystery to him; it never occurred to him that James might have wanted to do one thing in one novel and another in another. ("Personality" 66)

The advent of being surprised by James was not perhaps in itself a surprise for those familiar with the turn of Forster's mind. Rather, the willingness to keep one's mind open about the Master (via the provocation of an American critic) suggests evidence of Forster's trademark discernment, his own willful version of imposing order on the worldly chaos around him. For Alan Wilde, like Trilling, the oscillation in Forster between joyful surprise and the corresponding urge to order is dialectical (*Art and Order* 13-14); for Furbank, Forster's discernment in the interests of a moral is decisively and finally undone by virtue of the pleasure of the surprise itself.

So, in the context of the transatlantic turn, it is perhaps surprising to see Forster take a stab at Trilling's interpretation of James's *The Princess Casamassima* in a polite, if nevertheless feisty, letter dated 18 April 1948:

Dear Trilling,

I had just been reading *The Princess Casamassima* but how differently.

"Some may remember she was Christina Light" you say. Some indeed do, and much of my excitement in the novel arose from her new experiment of being serious. She never gives herself wholly to the cause—her gloves keep good, some of her things are warehoused . . . she learns some . . . truths about herself and will chew them over when she resumes domestic life with the Prince. Her hatefulness to Hyacinth is in key with her treatment of Roderick [Hudson]: he had shown her all he could so [she turns to Paul Muniment] and commits her second murder.

This doesn't invalidate your fascinating article, but I do put the stresses differently. Hyacinth dies simply and humanly,

as we all might, because the two people he loves let him down. . . .

The part that moved me most—again not mentioned by you—was the early scene in the prison. Here James is for once writing with the skin off and oh how well he does it and oh that he had continued to do it: towards the end start the gloving and fumbling, which so qualify my pleasure in him. . . .

I must read your article again—it *was* a good experience—and I must read again in the book: whose title, I must point out, is *not Hyacinth Robinson!*<sup>27</sup>

Apart from the astuteness of its reading of James's novel, Forster's letter (as corroborated by the cattier *Commonplace Book* entry cited above) takes issue with the substance, and perceived omissions, found in Trilling's treatment as it was published in Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*. Forster's critique is more or less collegial, however, unlike his frustration at the "spit and shit" of the emerging Leavis school at Cambridge upon which he also reports in the same letter.

The correspondence between Forster and Lionel Trilling on Henry James may seem slight, or of a merely private and disputatious sort. Nevertheless, calling it so privileges biography (or personality) at the expense of the larger gesture the exchange actually represents, as one particular node of a more engaging and emergent transnational criticism, its newly bilateral assessment of canonicity linking American critics to British writers as they made the transatlantic turn together. Such jointly conducted, or collaborative, reinterpretive acts constituted what one may think of as an increasingly vigorous critical occasionalism. In aggregate, such acts of occasionalism energized the role of modernist literary criticism as more elite modes of interaction shifted toward the more popular and geographically expansive. Trilling's "American Americanist" criticism may not have moved as laterally as the critics of subsequent decades might have preferred, but it did look beyond the United States to reinvent itself.

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<sup>27</sup> Emphasis in orig. E. M. Forster to Lionel Trilling, 18 April 1948. *Lionel Trilling Papers* (MS# 1256) Box 6, Folder 5; Series: II (Undated, 1927 Mar.-1974 Aug.). Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of E. M. Forster (King's College, Cambridge).

## VII. The Minor Transatlantic

In closing, I turn to an anecdote. Some years ago, I recall that a senior colleague of mine, prolific and proud, referred to E. M. Forster as a “minor” writer. I reacted equivocally to the comment, with equal parts pique and equal parts understanding what he meant. But for Lionel Trilling’s having revisited Forster’s corpus in a time of war, Forster’s career might well not have achieved its transatlantic crossing. That Trilling did so, and that Forster’s corpus crossed back to England again, reinvigorated, and of greater ideological consequence a second time, suggests not only how the transatlantic frame served the exigencies and contingencies of its own historical moment. Rather, the advent of the postwar transatlantic also demonstrated how a purportedly “minor” writer like Forster could achieve a major repurposing for American thought and culture, as the belletristic aims of literary achievement found renewed purchase in a wider domain for public and transnational thought. By virtue of its sustained after-life in the United States, such “deterritorialization” of Forster’s work, and the renewed fame it brought him, also signals, perhaps, a significant pivot in the history of the globalized emergence of “world” (anglophone) letters overall, as the privileged canon of English literature threatened to become displaced by the advent of decolonized literatures.<sup>28</sup>

In this essay, I have documented briefly how the transatlantic turn in modernist letters served uniquely sociohistorical, interpretively occasional, and yet critically significant functions of literary criticism beyond the national frame. If so, and occurring as it did at the dawn of a newly globalized purview for English literature, such depreciation of an otherwise proprietary national tradition might well mean its re-appreciation and effective reapplication elsewhere. The transatlantic turn has only continued to expand into the twenty-first century, aided and abetted by newer disseminating technologies, as all of the major “world” literatures (written and enjoyed in any powerful

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<sup>28</sup> In an insightful and widely overlooked essay, Deleuze and Guattari argue that “the first characteristic of minor literature . . . is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” (16). Presumably, they mean to signify specific histories of language shift: as Kafka’s Czech-influenced (Bohemian) German inches closer to *hoch Deutsch*; or, indeed, as American English formalized eighteenth-century usages absent from modern usage in England. Still, the “deterritorialization” globalization imposes upon any language would also seem to derive from any major language its minor key, travelling through attenuating space and time and reaching far more readers thereby.

language) arrive at a deterritorialized “minor” status. Much as Forster’s example seems to suggest, such may actually have served to increase the volume of readership. Within such an expanding frame, global literary production loses nationalist focus, at scalars still expanding, as it is drawn along a deterritorialized perimeter. Acts of original or authorial creation become outstripped, in time and space, by the translations attending critical genius, in whichever language, and absorbing the interpretive faculties of any one good critic. All are subsumed. The essays of Lionel Trilling, the writings of Forster, and perhaps any canon anywhere become fully immersed in the global metadata revolution, fighting for air and time, mere motes floating among the massive dataflow.



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