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RESEARCH NOTE



Trilling on Forster on Huysmans: A Case of Misunderstandings and Automatism

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In *Le Temps retrouvé*, Proust writes regretfully of how his work has been misunderstood. Even those who were favourable to the Proustian project, he complains, ended up congratulating him for achieving the opposite of what he actually intended. They praised him for discovering certain truths through a microscope whereas, Proust claims, he had used a telescope. Far from being a ‘fouilleur de détails’, he describes himself as seeking ‘les grandes lois’.¹ Proust remains among the most misunderstood authors of the last century. Beginning to read Proust, to borrow an analogy from Schopenhauer, is to look at the front-side of a piece of embroidery – it is quite beautiful, but, for the beholder, the dots have not yet quite been connected. Finishing Proust is to consult the back of the embroidery and to see how all the stiches have been worked together to form the images on the other side. But even when one sees the back of the piece of embroidery, numerous questions remain. Yes, Proust’s work undoubtedly lends itself easily to misunderstandings.

Changing gears slightly, misunderstanding is a major theme of the work (and life) of E. M. Forster, especially in *A Passage to India*. He writes that ‘[a] pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry’.² What about a written conversation, a text? Forster’s comments evidently hold true there as well, but there is one aspect to be added. In a text, misunderstanding can arise, quite unconsciously, from omissions – not on the part of the writer, but the reader. Without lapsing into cliché, what is not said is often more interesting than what is actually said. But also, what is not heard, or mistakenly heard (an inversion of the infamous Freudian slip), is often more interesting than what is actually heard, or accurately heard. It is perhaps fitting, then, that Forster, a maestro of misunderstanding, would find one of his sentences misunderstood by the eminent critic Lionel Trilling – and that, to curious effect.

Towards the end of his book titled *E.M. Forster*, Trilling cites a passage from an essay by Forster that recounts his time in Cairo during the war. Trilling introduces this passage by saying that it displays how ‘literature works to “help” us’. He cites Forster as having written that:

Huysmans’s *À Rebours* is the book of that blessed period [of the war] that I remember best.³ Oh, the relief of a world which lived for its sensations and ignored the will – the world of des Esseintes! Was it decadent? Yes, and thank God. Yes; here again was a human being who had time to feel and experiment with his feelings, to taste and arrange books and fabricate flowers, and be selfish and himself. The waves of edifying bilge rolled off me, the newspapers ebbed;

Professor Cramb, that profound philosopher, and Raemaekers, that inspired artist, floated out into an oblivion which, thank God, has since become permanent, and something resembling reality took their place. *Perhaps it was not real, but it was helpful*, and in 1917 that was enough to make me repeat after the muezzin in my minaret ‘Thank God’.⁴

The hedonism of *A rebours* seems then to serve Forster as a reality check in the face of the ‘edifying bilge’ of British war propaganda. Already, there is something deliciously paradoxical about conceptualising *A rebours*, a book of detachment from reality and nature, as a reality check. But that is not where the heart of this passage lies. The crux of the matter at hand, though barely perceptible, has to do with Forster discerning and rejecting, like Baudelaire (in ‘Assommons les pauvres’) before him, the tinge of patronising liberal disdain that is part of wanting to ‘help’ someone (something he calls elsewhere the ‘scent of utopia’). What is clearer is that Forster seems to have sought refuge in literature – ‘perhaps it was not real, but it was helpful’. One useful role of literature, it would then seem, is to provide refuge.

The problem is, as it turns out, Trilling omits one word from the otherwise (almost) accurately cited passage. E. M. Forster had actually written, ‘perhaps it was not real, but it was not helpful’.⁵ This additional ‘not’ plainly inverts the meaning of the entire passage! Interestingly, Trilling not only takes out the ‘not’ in ‘not helpful’, but, as mentioned earlier, introduces his excerpt about Forster, Huysmans, and the muezzin as follows: ‘This essay contains one of the best possible statements of how literature works to “help” us.’ That is, he again omits the ‘not’ in ‘not helpful’ and, as in the confusion over whether Proust used a microscope or a telescope, praises Forster for saying just the opposite of what he said! What does Trilling’s twofold error mean?

The obvious response is that Trilling had merely read what he had felt would have been the most logical sentence following the previous sentences that Forster wrote. Indeed, taking out the ‘not’ in ‘not helpful’ seems to harmonise this otherwise confusing passage – and it provides ammunition for academics of literature who often feel under pressure to justify the ‘value’ of literature. In any case, would literature not be helpful if it staves off ‘waves of edifying bilge?’ Forster sings praise of Huysmans’ *A rebours* right before the misread line, but how not to misread this line when the misreading comes so naturally, so – dare I say – instinctively? The word ‘but’ requires the following structure: (1) *unfortunate element*, BUT *redeeming element*; or (2) *redeeming element*, BUT *unfortunate element*. Therefore, the moment one reads ‘perhaps it was not real, but[...]’, one immediately wants to tie the sentence up with a redeeming statement. Trilling, in omitting the second ‘not’, seems to have instinctively taken not being real to be the unfortunate element, thus necessitating a redeeming element.⁶ Finishing a hanging sentence is a common phenomenon that has to do with automatism, by which I intend actions carried out hypnotically or unconsciously. Human beings might be creative, thinking creatures, but we nonetheless often succumb to automatism. When walking down an oft-trodden road, we enter a somewhat hypnotic state whose spell only breaks when we arrive at our destination or when we realise that we have walked too far and missed our destination. Additionally, whenever we encounter the familiar beginnings of a sentence, we automatically have in mind its continuation and end. When we hear ‘they are joined at the [...]’, we already hear ‘hip’ before the word is even pronounced. And those words hardly conjure up the image of two people physically joined at the hip; rather we simply understand that these people are particularly close. Just from these

two examples, which no doubt call to mind many others for the reader, we see the prevalence of automatism in daily life.

For Viktor Shklovsky, automatism deprives us of true feeling and art is what comes to break automatism by pursuing the experience, rather than the recognition, of objects. For instance, poetry, or poetic devices, often describes things (even mundane things) as if one were seeing them for the first time. That is in fact what Shklovsky considers to be the purpose of art:

And at that moment when the goal is to restore the feeling of life, to feel objects, to sense that the stone is made of stone, there exists what we call art. The goal of art is to convey a sense of an object as vision and not as recognition. The process of art is the process of making common objects unique – it is a process that consists of obscuring form and heightening the difficulty and time involved in perception. The act of perception in art is an end in itself and must be lengthened and drawn out. Art is a means to experience the coming-into-being of the object. What has already come-into-being does not matter in art.⁷

Perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to state that what Shklovsky describes above is, in some way, what Forster has done with his phrase ‘perhaps it was not real, but it was not helpful’. Only, it was so subtle that even Trilling missed it. *Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*. But perhaps Forster, like Aziz in *A Passage to India*, had found pleasure in (the prospect of) being misunderstood.

Before concluding, there are still two more details to approach regarding Forster’s passage and the question of misunderstanding. First, whereas Forster had written, ‘that was enough to make me repeat after the muezzin on my minaret “Thank God”’, Trilling had read ‘[...] after the muezzin *in* my minaret’ (my emphasis). What is the difference between ‘on’ and ‘in’ in this context? Perhaps nothing, although ‘*on* my minaret’ sounds more literal, while ‘*in* my minaret’ sounds almost figurative. At the very least, it further highlights our comments on automatism. The second detail to mention is that a muezzin on a minaret would hardly ever have the occasion to say ‘Thank God’. The closest thing he would say would be ‘*allāhu ākbar*’, which means God is the greatest. Either Forster unintentionally misunderstood the muezzin, or he intentionally inserted this misunderstanding into the passage to frame his reflections in Shklovskian terms of art being a response to automatism. Curiously, this passage, then, does become a statement of how ‘literature can “help” us’, albeit in a very different way than Trilling intended.

Notes

1. Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), 221.
2. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt, 1924), 262.
3. Square brackets from Trilling’s text.
4. Lionel Trilling, *E.M. Forster* (New York: Harcourt, 1964), 171. My emphasis.
5. E. M. Forster, ‘T.S. Eliot,’ in *Abinger Harvest* (New York: Harcourt, 1964), 89.
6. As a side note, it would seem that Trilling, in opposition to the philosophy of *l’art pour l’art*, considers, in his re-reading of Forster’s sentence, that which is not real (i.e. fiction) to be the unfortunate element, while that which is helpful/utilitarian occupies the redeeming position.
7. Viktor Shklovsky [Victor Chklovski], ‘L’art comme procédé,’ in *Théorie de la littérature*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 82. I have chosen to translate ‘le procédé de singularisation’, in Todorov’s French, by ‘the process of making common objects unique’, but it is worth bearing in mind that the original Russian term conveys not only the sense of making something unique or singular, but also strange and unfamiliar/foreign.