`

‘Connecting with India: E. M. Forster’s ‘Some Books’ and Louis MacNeice’s ‘India at First Sight”
Author: Jennifer Kenyon
Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol. 15, ‘Movement’ (2023-24)
DOI: 10.14324/111.444.1755-4527.1776

Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

Connecting with India: E. M. Forster's 'Some Books' and Louis MacNeice's 'India at First Sight'

Jennifer Kenyon

In 1942, in a radio talk broadcast to India on the BBC's Eastern Service, E. M. Forster noted that, while the time in the London recording studio was 'quarter to two', in India, the clock 'points to some other hour, which prompts in me the fancy that the connection between us is a connection outside time'.[1] Forster broadcast 145 talks on the BBC between 1928 and 1963, embracing radio's power to move beyond physical borders in order to explore the possibility of a deeper relationship between speaker and listener.[2] While critical studies initially focused on Forster's broadcasts for British audiences, the publication of a selected edition of his BBC talks in 2008 marked the beginning of a growing interest in his transmissions to India.[3] Most episodes ran under the self-effacing title 'Some Books', though they shared recommendations and reviews of a wide range of plays, music, and exhibitions alongside fiction, biographies, and histories. Forster was optimistic about the potential for 'connection' between Britain and India, yet his Eastern Service career began in 1941, just six years before the Partition of India and the dissolution of the British Raj. While this period was defined by volatility and political unrest, critics of 'Some Books' have tended to disregard the problematic power dynamics inherent in the act of broadcasting from the centre of the empire to a colony under British control.

Part of this critical blindness is due to a general lack of emphasis on the nature of Forster's talks as radio broadcasts. Initial critical responses to the 2008 edition of Forster's BBC talks tended to treat them as extensions of Forster's prose rather than a generic category in their own right. Zadie Smith's review for the *New York Review of Books* relegated the volume to prose that readers might leaf through during 'a lazy afternoon in an armchair'.[4] Similarly, William H. Pritchard credited the selected edition with providing a new explanation for the mysterious 'thirty-six years of silence' from Forster the novelist after the publication of *A Passage to India* (1924); describing the edition as a 'volum[e] of prose', Pritchard draws a link between the 'confiding ease' of Forster's broadcasts and his previous 'decades of shaping and cultivating a 'personal' voice in his novels' which risks interpreting

---

[1] E. M. Forster, *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster, 1929-1960: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Mary Lago, Linda K. Hughes and Elizabeth MacLeod Walls (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), p. 187. Further references to this volume are indicated in parentheses.

[2] Mary Lago, 'E. M. Forster and the BBC', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 20 (1990), 132-51 (p. 134).

[3] Forster, *The BBC Talks*. Studies of Forster's broadcasts to British listeners include Kate Whitehead, 'Broadcasting Bloomsbury', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 20 (1990), 121-31, and Todd Avery, 'Common Talkers: The Bloomsbury Group and the Aestheticist Ethics of Broadcasting', in *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 33-74. The *Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster* makes no reference to Forster's radio broadcasts, either to Britain or India; *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[4] Zadie Smith, 'E. M. Forster, Middle Manager', *New York Review of Books*, 14 August 2008, p. 8, reprinted in Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), pp. 14-28 (p. 27).

these radio talks as substitutions for novels, eliding the importance of their construction, performance, and mediation through the airwaves.[5]

Tellingly, by eliding such mediation, reviews of the selected edition also frequently disagreed in their assessment of the sincerity of Forster's professed intimacy of connection with his listener. For Smith, Forster's broadcasts reveal an 'anxious' character that stooped to 'empathetic condescension' of listeners in India and was 'apt to assume too much'.[6] For Judith Herz, conversely, Forster's manner is 'quiet, conversational, sometimes whimsical and a bit sentimental but never condescending'.[7] While the relationship between speaker and listener in Forster's broadcasts is far from simple, Forster worked to create a more deliberate narrative voice than Smith or Pritchard give him credit for. Forster's Eastern Service talks represent a developing, complex exploration of the interplay between radio communication and interpersonal connection at a time of immense political transition within Indian society.

Similar interpretative difficulties are a feature of the critical reception of Louis MacNeice's 'India at First Sight', transmitted in the aftermath of Partition on 13 March 1948, just a year after the final episode of Forster's 'Some Books' was broadcast. MacNeice was already an established scriptwriter and producer when he was dispatched to India by the BBC Features department in 1947 to report on and commemorate the moment of Partition. Jon Stallworthy's biography of MacNeice describes how, on arriving in Delhi on 9 August, scenes of political turmoil and violent upheaval prompted MacNeice to set aside the copy of Forster's *A Passage to India* he had been reading and turn instead to 'an armful of newspapers'.[8] MacNeice's experiences resulted in three dramatic radio features: 'India at First Sight', 'Portrait of Delhi' and 'The Road to Independence', broadcast to British audiences on the BBC's Third Programme between March and August 1948.[9] Like Forster's talks, MacNeice's features were concerned with the potential for radio to facilitate connections between Britain and India that might override geographical, political or perceived cultural differences.

Despite these far-reaching ambitions, MacNeice's interest in and experience of India has been placed within narrow limits, and a connection is seldom made between MacNeice and Forster's broadcasts. Though Melissa Dinsman's *Modernism at the Microphone* (2015) identifies MacNeice's 'need to forge communication and connection between the artist and society', her focus is on the poet's transatlantic broadcasts and voyages, and the volume makes only glancing reference to Forster's radio career.[10] Ashok Bery is one of the few critics to address MacNeice's relationship to India, identifying how his conception of life as 'dialectical' results in 'a productive instability', a 'consciousness of similarity and awareness of difference' common to both his experience of Britain in the context of his Irish heritage

---

[5] William H. Pritchard, 'Forster as Broadcaster and Critic', *The Hudson Review*, 62.2 (2009), 337-44 (pp. 337-38).

[6] Smith, p. 20.

[7] Judith Scherer Herz, 'Forster's BBC Talks', *ELT*, 52.4 (2009), 479-83 (p. 480).

[8] Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 356.

[9] Alongside the scripts for these features held in the Bodleian Library's MacNeice archive, a digitised recording of 'India at First Sight' is accessible at the British Library's Sound & Moving Image Archive. Recordings of MacNeice's other broadcasts on India, 'Portrait of Delhi' and 'The Road to Independence', have also recently been digitised by the British Library, and warrant further study.

[10] Melissa Dinsman, *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics During World War II* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 76.

and his impressions of India.[11] Aasiya Lodhi goes further, recognising MacNeice's attempt to evoke 'the space-binding nature of radio, its links to notions of imagined community' and its potential to convey 'a transnational, cosmopolitan post-empire vision of the nation'.[12]

This vision informs both broadcasts, despite their obvious differences. On the surface, MacNeice and Forster's broadcasts about and to India would appear to have divergent audiences and aims: Forster's talks speak to an Indian listener about culture, while MacNeice's dramatic feature attempts to share impressions of the country with a British audience after Partition. On closer inspection, however, both pieces are preoccupied with the potential for connection; while Forster uses the relationship between speaker and listener to explore the possibility of bonds that transcend borders, MacNeice employs a polyphony of shifting voices to communicate the subjective and changeable nature of human perception in the face of direct experience of a country and its inhabitants. Where 'India at First Sight' uses radiogenic sonic effects to call attention to the mutability of boundaries of space and time, 'Some Books' highlights the artifice and technological trappings of broadcasting to emphasise the distanced relationship between Forster speaking in London and his imagined listener in India. Although both authors are cognisant of the formal peculiarities of the radio medium, the issues they address continue to speak to—without necessarily being able effectively to speak about—the problematic nature of the colonial relationship between the two countries.

Forster's BBC career began on the Home Service in 1928, but it is the talks for the Eastern Service, commencing in 1941, that truly captured his attention. In a draft letter to George Barnes, then Director of Talks at the BBC, Forster explains:

> I can try my best overseas, and with hopes of ~~doing it with~~ freshness and ~~success~~ punch, because I'm ~~left to myself~~ let to rip and even allowed to be obscure if I want to be so.[13]

Forster's edits to the letter emphasise the creative and connective potential he saw in the broadcasts. Rather than being 'left to myself', he delights in the opportunity to 'let […] rip'. Forster sees being given free rein to determine his own subjects for the talks ('even' to be 'obscure') as freeing him from an obligation to select texts that might be considered required reading for listeners who were also subjects of British Imperial rule. Similarly, by revising his goal from 'success' (we may ask, as Forster himself seems to, what 'success' might have looked like here) to the more forceful opportunity of 'letting rip', Forster aspires to a far more vibrant, spontaneous communication style than the radio talk may have been thought to allow.

Since its inception, the genre of the radio talk has proved both difficult to define and the provocation of much debate. Hilda Matheson, the first BBC Director of Talks, who invited Forster to give his first series of broadcasts to British audiences in 1928, described how 'early experiments with broadcast talks' showed that 'it was useless to address the microphone as if it were a public meeting'. Instead, the listener demanded an intimate

---

[11] Ashok Bery, 'Louis MacNeice, Ireland and India', in *Cultural Translation and Postcolonial Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 74-100 (p. 86).

[12] Aasiya Lodhi, '"Countries in the Air": Travel and Geomodernism in Louis MacNeice's BBC Features', *Media History*, 24.2 (2018), 226-38 (p. 234).

[13] Forster, draft letter to George Barnes, c. 25 February 1944, quoted in Lago, 'Forster and the BBC', p. 149.

connection, 'expecting the speaker to address him personally, simply, almost familiarly'.[14] Todd Avery's account of the BBC Talks Department's style shifting from a 'personal mode of address toward a more impersonal style' after Matheson's resignation in 1931 does not tally with the continuation of Forster's distinctly personal approach.[15] Kate Whitehead's argument that radio played a significant role in cementing a 'cohesive image' of the Bloomsbury group draws a direct line from the genre of the written essay to that of the radio talk, 'a carefully scripted piece read out by the author', but this lineage does not allow either for the unique qualities of the talk nor the development of Forster's radio persona as distinct from his authorial voice.[16]

As noted above, Forster moved away from the novel form after the publication of *A Passage to India*, which has often led critics to assume that he turned his back on fiction in general.[17] Indeed, Forster's own reflections towards the end of his life imply as much: 'I can only suggest that the fictional part of me dried up'.[18] In his 2020 study of the Eastern Service, Daniel Morse has argued that, to the contrary, Forster's later work for radio 'pushed the boundaries of what was representable in fiction', though this 'has been overlooked because he did so from without the novel rather than from within'.[19] Nevertheless, in labelling the work as 'fiction', and in juxtaposing the 'inherited' genre of the talk with the 'maximalist' radio feature—itself a mix of documentary, news reportage and drama—Morse's attempt to reconsider Forster's broadcasts risks neglecting the creative potential of the talk itself.[20] Instead, I would argue that Forster continued to explore the radio talk for such an extended period because the genre offered a unique combination of creativity and criticism, a freedom of intimacy and connection, a tantalising combination of writing, editing, and speaking his own words aloud to be broadcast across the airwaves. The combination of convivial comment, instruction, quotation, and personal anecdote that make the radio talk so hard to define are precisely what gave Forster the freedom to 'let rip'.

Furthermore, by focusing on the perceived relationship between speaker and listener, I would suggest that a new mode of expression can be heard in these talks, one that falls between criticism and fiction, setting up a supposedly personal line of communication that Forster envisaged between himself and his imagined Indian listener that he used to explore his aesthetic, political, and ethical interest in connecting beyond geographical borders. As Morse argues elsewhere, foregrounding both the intimacy and the

---

[14] Hilda Matheson, *Broadcasting* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1933), p. 75.

[15] Todd Avery, 'Common Talkers: The Bloomsbury Group and the Aestheticist Ethics of Broadcasting', in *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 33-74 (p. 50).

[16] Kate Whitehead, 'Broadcasting Bloomsbury', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 20 (1990), 121-31 (pp. 131, 121).

[17] For example, Jesse Matz, "You Must Join My Dead": E. M. Forster and the Death of the Novel', *Modernism/Modernity*, 9.2 (2002), 303-17. Even as Gordon Bowker is reviewing the Lago, Hughes and Walls 2008 selected edition, he casts Forster's talks as limited, lesser creations than his prose. While Bowker acknowledges that 'the idea that Forster abandoned fiction simply because he dried up is only partly true', he concludes that during his radio career Forster 'became a creative writer restricted to reflect critically on the creations of others'. Gordon Bowker, 'Radio Reviews', *TLS*, 19 September 2008, p. 23.

[18] Forster, letter to Wilfred Stone (18 February 1966), in *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, ed. by Lago and P. N. Furbank, 2 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), II, p. 289.

[19] Daniel Ryan Morse, *Radio Empire: The BBC's Eastern Service and the Emergence of the Global Anglophone Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 93.

[20] Ibid., p. 22.

considered nature of Forster's Eastern Service broadcasts, Forster desired to establish 'a sense of personal connection, even as he acknowledged the physical and cultural distance between himself and his listeners'.[21]

Such distance was precisely what the Eastern Service was engineered to bridge or elide at the time. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 resulted in a 'wholesale reorganisation' of the British public broadcaster around the war effort.[22] By 1942, the success of Axis forces in Asia, alongside Britain's failure to secure Indian support for the Allied campaign, resulted in 'the strategic need for a strong voice—sympathetic to Britain—to be broadcast to South Asia and the Far Eastern theatre'.[23] While the Eastern Service was allowed to operate with a relative amount of autonomy, Ministry of Information memos to the BBC still instructed that overseas broadcasts should project 'the *democratic* character of British society' and 'the *Universal* character of British civilisation and culture'.[24] In this way, Ruvani Ranasinha interprets the BBC's output to India as deploying '"high culture" as an instrument of imperial didacticism'.[25] Until recently, criticism of 'Some Books' has tended to disregard the power dynamics inherent in broadcasting to and about India in the 1940s. Mary Lago identifies Forster's awareness of his 'cultural and political responsibility' as a broadcaster, while Stuart Christie aligns Forster's 'interests in freedom of expression and antifascism' with his move from the private sphere of novel-writing into the public sphere of radio.[26] Peter Fifield's analysis of Forster's talks does incorporate some of the broadcasts to India, and acknowledges radio's ability to enforce existing power structures, but does not extend this to examine the tension between Forster's anti-imperialist views and the ambiguities of BBC broadcasts to India.[27] I propose that Forster's work for the Eastern Service in particular presented not simply an opportunity for him to express his 'liberal politics and […] long-held ennoblement of personal intimacy and intercourse', as Fifield argues of Forster's broadcasts in general, but also a challenge to those politics and beliefs.[28]

From the start of his Eastern Service career, Forster called attention to the physical distance between speaker and imagined listener as a means of highlighting the possibility of more transcendent connections. From the first of his broadcasts to India, in October 1941, Forster frequently gives the impression of interrupting himself to clarify that this distance is geographical rather than emotional: he is 'talking to people as far away as you are—that is to say as far away in space, for it is quite possible that we may be close together in our hearts' (150). While the Ministry of Information's internal memoranda took pains to

---

[21] Morse, 'Only Connecting?: E. M. Forster, Empire Broadcasting and the Ethics of Distance', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 34.3 (2011), 87-105 (p. 102).

[22] Lago, Hughes and Walls, 'General Introduction', in *BBC Talks*, pp. 1-47 (p. 18).

[23] Ruvani Ranasinha, 'South Asian Broadcasters in Britain and the BBC: Talking to India (1941–1943)', *South Asian Diaspora*, 2.1 (2010), 57-71, p. 61.

[24] Lago, Hughes and Walls, p. 21. Italics in original Ministry of Information memo.

[25] Ranasinha, p. 57.

[26] Lago, 'Forster and the BBC', p. 132. Stuart Christie, 'E. M. Forster as Public Intellectual', *Literature Compass*, 3.1 (2006), 43-52 (p. 43).

[27] Peter Fifield, '"I Often Wish You Could Answer Me Back: And So Perhaps Do You!": E. M. Forster and BBC Radio Broadcasting', in *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era*, ed. by Matthew Feldman, Erik Tonning and Henry Mead (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 57-77 (p. 69).

[28] Ibid., p. 74.

emphasise the 'universal' nature of British civilisation as a tool to be deployed by the BBC in the interests of maintaining the cohesion of an empire under attack, Forster seems to be saying something more subversive here: that while Britain might control the airwaves, the possibility may remain for a more personal, emotional connection binding speaker and listener, one that might transcend the dominant colonial power dynamic. In March of the same year, the frustrations of physical distance and a one-way flow of information are again acknowledged, only for Forster to build alternative aural and imaginative ties:

> To-day its [sic] just my voice that goes East and reaches India: the rest of me stays sitting in a London Studio—worse luck—and it's only by an effort of the imagination that I can guess where you're sitting and what thoughts are in your minds. I often wish you'd answer me back: and so perhaps do you! (174)

By highlighting the inability for the speaker in the studio and the listener in India to see or converse with each other, Forster posits a shared sense of frustration, which, conversely, creates a sense of community. Forster extends this in the episode of 'Some Books' broadcast on 19 August 1942, where he imagines 'an Indian, aged about thirty, educated in India but interested in Western civilisation' (203). Forster constructs this specific persona in order to make a further imaginative leap, placing both speaker and listener together in a London theatre to watch the play *Watch on the Rhine* (1941). A mutual appreciation of culture across geographical and cultural boundaries is designed to be the antidote to Hitler 'trying to do us all in' (204). Yet Forster is also aware of the similarly totalitarian potential of Allied propaganda, especially when it is broadcast on the radio, and carefully destabilises his own rhetoric to expose this contradiction.

At the very start of the talk, the power of the broadcaster is criticised: 'you know how fond broadcasters are of employing the word 'you' […] 'you' ought to do this or that' (202). Forster aligns himself more closely with his audience by emphasising that he, too, is a consumer of radio: 'when I switch on myself, and become a listener instead of a speaker' (202). Similarly, while describing his Indian listener, he acknowledges alternate options at every turn, from the figure's likely age to their gender. Even when he deals directly with the play's message, Forster undermines his own authority by noting that, as an audience member, he 'fight[s] shy of propaganda plays […] I don't want to pay money to hear actors and actresses tell me this: they might just as well listen to me' (204). By highlighting the perspectival overlap between broadcaster/propagandist and listener/audience member, Forster demonstrates the complexity of interpersonal connection in the face of the threat of fascism, and the difficulty of broadcasting about cultural connection via the medium of radio, where propaganda was of the utmost importance for both Allied and Axis forces. Nevertheless, although Forster's attempts to break down the barrier between 'I' and 'you' and acknowledge the inherent power of his position are striking, they remain limited by the one-way flow of communication, and Forster's privileged status as a British intellectual broadcasting to, rather than listening to, Indian subjects.

While Forster worked to undermine his own potentially dictatorial position, in Louis MacNeice's 'India at First Sight', personal and social preconceptions prevent objective interpretation. As the introduction to the broadcast, penned by MacNeice and voiced by the BBC announcer, explains:

> The following is based on the author's own impressions when he visited Pakistan and India for the first time in 1947. It does not therefore claim to be objective. The sub-continent [...] is seen—or rather glimpsed—solely through Western eyes while the visitor is attended by

> the Western familiars of his mind. For it is only gropingly and fleetingly that any such visitor can cope with: India at First Sight.[29]

MacNeice prepares the audience for an experience characterised by uncertainty and shifting perspectives. The feature's protagonist, Edward, wants to 'forget all my own preconceptions, everything I've heard and read' in order to 'get my own impressions' (6). Nonetheless, MacNeice uses a polyphony of voices – Edward's 'Western familiars' – to destabilise this attempt. Edward's Nanny begins by voicing a judgemental, othering standpoint, suspicious of India: 'Oh, they're not like us, Master Edward' (1). Her perspective subsequently hovers between the reactionary views she would usually espouse and an implied deeper level of understanding:

> Now there are persons—and I'm one of them—that just can't stomach the way these Indians do things. And yet if one could see it from an Indian angle—which speaking for myself I can't—well, there's some method in their madness. (30)

Although Nanny claims to be 'speaking for' herself, MacNeice uses her to express not only opposing views of India but the essential instability and unreliability of any judgement or 'angle'. As Forster simultaneously affirms and undercuts the personas of speaker and listener, MacNeice destabilises his characters' identities and points of view to call into question the veracity of preconceptions about India.

In 'Some Books', Forster similarly uses the voices of others to refine his personal standpoint. A chance meeting with a 'young air-mechanic' is used to communicate Britain's desire to relate to India. We may wonder whether the character is a figure of Forster's imagination, fabricated in order to make his point. Indeed, Forster's initial quotation feels forced: the airman, apparently looking to read 'a cheap book on the Religions of India' exclaims "I want to know about them […] I've heard they're great!'". This jarringly jolly tone is soon abandoned in favour of a distinctly Forsterian register: 'I don't want to condemn anything before I've understood it' (157). The air-mechanic's comments affirm the links between conversation and interpersonal connection, the fight against fascism and the importance of literature:

> That seemed to be the true spirit of civilisation—the spirit the Nazis have missed. Not to condemn until you understand, and books help us to understand. (157)

Later talks employ more obviously fictional voices in order for Forster to position himself against their prejudices. In 1943, he can 'almost hear' the reactionary cartoon character Colonel Blimp 'saying "'ndian culture? Gad, sir, nothing but a few old curios'" only for Forster to retort 'but to some of us it means much more' (232). In Forster's 1946 talk 'India Again', originally broadcast during his second visit to India, Blimp has multiplied into a 'chorus of indignant colonels' who are 'overheard exclaiming "What next! Fancy sending out old gentlemen who fall ill and can do no possible good"'.[30] In the same way that earlier broadcasts deconstructed an imagined listener persona, Forster rebuts the colonels' exclamations: 'old I am, gentleman I may or not be, ill I was not'. Having dispensed with superficial physical and social judgements, Forster asks himself, 'did I do any good? Yes, I did.

---

[29] MacNeice, 'India at First Sight', Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS 10641/41 5(c), p.1. Further references to this script are indicated in parentheses.

[30] Forster, 'India Again', in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1951), pp. 327-35 (pp. 334-5).

I wanted to be with Indians, and I was, and that is a very little step in the right direction'. As the airman promotes companionship beyond boundaries of religion, race, and geography, Forster's response to the colonels reinforces his argument that 'the only thing that cuts a little ice is affection'.[31]

MacNeice similarly employs the figure of a reactionary, outdated colonel to demonstrate the unsupportable, unsustainable rigidity of these kinds of perspectives. When we first meet Edward's Uncle Howard, MacNeice quickly establishes his viewpoint—a totemic administrator intent on maintaining colonial power structures. Howard celebrates the 'fine old times we had' only to interrupt himself to clarify the separation of British and Indian communities: 'What! What's that! Was he an Indian? Good Lord, no! Didn't I say in the Club?!' (2). But the uncle is not just a figure for Edward to compare his own views against. As with many of the characters in 'India at First Sight', Uncle Howard's prejudices and presumptions undergo something of a transformation as the narrative develops. After grudgingly acknowledging that it may be better for Indians 'to run their own show', MacNeice uses Howard to link the 'atrocities' perpetrated by Hitler with the British occupation of India and subsequent violence during Partition (28, 29). While Forster enters into imagined dialogues with the reactionary colonels in his talks, MacNeice destabilises his characters' points of view from within their own internal monologues. Howard acknowledges that his more inclusionary ideas could only be realised with a deeper understanding of his own emotions: 'That's my opinion—or it would be if I could read my own heart' (30). By emphasising that, like Nanny, Uncle Howard is a fictional construct—a voice in Edward's mind and the listener's ear—that can be made to express a reverse opinion, MacNeice reminds the audience tuning in that their views, too, have the potential for change.

The (inter)changeability of our attitudes is conveyed in part by MacNeice's manipulation of radio's most basic resource as a medium: sound. By the time MacNeice travelled to India, he had already written and produced several successful experimental pieces that eroded some of traditional conventions of radio drama. Although Aasiya Lodhi argues that MacNeice's 'post-war broadcasts mark a departure in his feature-making through an explicit engagement with the concept of going abroad', the use of sound to transgress boundaries in 'India at First Sight' represents a development of MacNeice's style, rather than a total departure from it.[32] As in MacNeice's 1946 radio drama *The Dark Tower*, 'India at First Sight' uses the sonic opportunities afforded by radio to transport the audience. In *The Dark Tower*, MacNeice works 'a motif of self-consciousness into the actions of the characters', using orchestral sound to, for example, 'fling up' the four walls of a pub.[33] While 'India at First Sight' does not employ an orchestra, MacNeice still uses sound to signal changes in location. A combination of a sitar being played and the noise of aeroplane engines running announces Edward's arrival in India; the Islamic call to prayer, translated into English, establishes a scene in the mosque at Benares (3, 25). As in *The Dark Tower*, MacNeice's use of sound is not just a practical signposting device. Instead, in employing these radiogenic elements, 'India at First Sight' links the aural cacophony of travel with the shifting viewpoints of MacNeice's characters, and the merging of Edward's memories of home with his experiences in India. Sound has a destabilising effect: as Nanny sings the

---

[31] Forster, 'India Again', p. 335.

[32] Lodhi, p. 226.

[33] Paul Long, "'Ephemeral Work": Louis MacNeice and the Moment of "Pure Radio"', *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, 7 (2009), 73-91 (p. 81). MacNeice, *The Dark Tower* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), p. 39.

Christian hymn 'Shall We Gather at the River' her viewpoint shifts into that of an Indian nurse recounting stories about the Ganges (23). In this way, MacNeice inextricably aligns radio and sound with the possibility for associations that move beyond the boundaries of space, time, and an individual character's consciousness.

Forster, like MacNeice, consistently called attention to the artificial and technological aspects of his talks. A belief in the value of 'connection with India' is frequently expressed through destabilising allusions to broadcasting's technological, spatial, and temporal realities (187). In April 1942, Forster informs the listener that 'I have popped on to a seat lately occupied by a previous speaker and now I must vacate it in my turn' (187). The colloquial 'popped' belies the complex processes involved in broadcasting talks on the BBC during this period: scripting, reviewing, editing, rehearsal, and then broadcasting. Forster emphasises the clock 'on the wall of the studio' that dictates when he must 'stop', but even this reminder of the temporal constraints of the radio schedule is skilfully intertwined with Forster's ability to foster a sense of intimacy between broadcaster and listener. As quoted above, while it is 'quarter to two' in Britain, Forster acknowledges that in India the clock 'points to some other hour, which prompts in me the fancy that the connection between us is a connection outside time' (187). For Forster, a connection 'outside time' was not just a difference in physical location or hour of day. By highlighting how radio waves facilitate contact across time zones, Forster raises the optimistic possibility of mutual understanding beyond geographical, political, or chronological constraints. Similarly, in June 1943, Forster pejoratively describes how he is now required to record his talks in advance onto a gramophone disc: 'it seems to me to interpose an extra piece of machinery between us, between you and me' (227). This process is distancing and depersonalising: if the listener now wishes to 'visualise' Forster, he instructs them not to 'think of a human face. Think instead of a needle moving down a groove, in a studio, for that's what's making the noise' (227). Despite the 'impediment' of the gramophone apparatus, Forster still reaches out across the airwaves to connect with his listener: 'I salute you, and would remind you that civilisation rests upon direct personal intercourse [...] that broadcasting, even at its best and most intimate, is only a makeshift' (227). At the same time as Forster acknowledges the limitations and frustrations inherent in his chosen medium, he is able to take the listener into his confidence, emphasising the value of interpersonal connection.

Like the 'authoritative' clock on the wall in 1942 and the 'impediment' of the 'spinning black gramophone disc' in June 1943, in December 1943 Forster turns his arch, disparaging tone on the microphone itself to express the potential for kinship beyond the confines of the studio (187, 227). Forster notes that receiving books from his Indian listenership:

> remind[s] me that links between culture here and culture your end do exist, and that the microphone, which hangs before me now like a petrified pineapple, is capable of evoking a human response. (258)

By emphasising the potential for communication and cultural exchange between Britain and India, Forster reminds us that alliances are possible despite geographical or technological barriers. However, the exchange is not necessarily mutually beneficial, as exemplified by the image of the 'petrified pineapple' which teeters between the humorous and endearing and the condescending, as it recalls the distance between a freshly grown, tropical fruit and its petrified, transmogrified appearance in the London radio studio where Forster is speaking to subjects of the British empire using an object resembling a symbol of exported, exploited, exotic bounty. As Morse notes, the ribbon microphones adopted by the BBC in

the 1930s extended the frequency range captured by broadcasts, improving the verisimilitude with which Forster's talks could be transmitted.[34] The indented cover of the ribbon microphone is indeed reminiscent of the textured surface of a pineapple, but the simile also evokes the colonial transportation of goods. While the pineapple was not native to India, it was exported by Portuguese colonisers to India from the sixteenth century onwards and, despite British horticulturalists' best efforts to grow the fruit in cold-weather conditions, most pineapples consumed in Britain were imported from colonies including India.[35] While Forster intended to strengthen intellectual and cultural links, it is crucial to recognise the underlying power dynamics of his broadcasts from Britain to India.

'India at First Sight' also reinforces the unbalanced relationship between imperial centre and colony, between the privileged traveller and the foreign land he attempts to interpret. Although MacNeice gives India a voice, the act of attempting to represent the country as a character is an inherently distancing one—a disjunction reflected in the variance between the character being named 'India' in the version of the script held in the Bodleian Library's MacNeice archive but designated, strikingly, as 'the Other' in all three *Radio Times* listings for the original broadcast and its repeats.[36] Similarly, while MacNeice's dialogue can destabilise prejudicial viewpoints, it frequently reinforces them. When India/the Other asks, 'can you imagine how I felt' during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the Still Voice —the character that MacNeice uses to give voice to Edward's innermost thoughts—admits that Edward 'often thought of you as if you were an aborigine, a savage' (19). Instead of working against this offensive imagining, the voice of India/the Other reinforces it, affirming: 'Sometimes I am. There are many millions of me away in the forests and the bad lands' (19). While MacNeice touches on 'social, economic reasons' for 'the gulf' between Muslims and Hindus, he quickly moves on to describe two Indian 'sons who were poets. One was a Hindu, one was a Muslim' (36). But this allusion to Rabindranath Tagore and Muhammad Iqbal does not go far enough to address the breadth or depth of Indian culture, the complexity of Indian religious divisions, or the British exploitation of differences in the service of maintaining their dominance. For a broadcast that acknowledges its limitations and tries to vocalise a range of opinions, 'India at First Sight' often falls back on stereotypical characterisation and fails to recognise the impact of Imperial rule.

For Paddy Scannell, broadcast media's reliance on the listener or viewer creates a 'complex phenomenological projection which is unobtrusively but pervasively embedded in programme output'.[37] However, MacNeice's 'India at First Sight' and Forster's 'Some Books' explicitly call attention to the experience of listening. Through complex shifts between assertion and negation, these broadcasts aim to promote the value of human partnership beyond perceived geographical, racial, social, or cultural frontiers. MacNeice and Forster attempted to encourage 'more equitable relationships of exchange rather than exploitation'.[38] Moreover, both broadcasters use language and sound in strikingly similar ways to reveal both the power of communication to foster connection and the persistence

---

[34] Morse, *Radio Empire*, p. 25.

[35] Ruth Levitt, "'A Noble Present of Fruit": A Transatlantic History of Pineapple Cultivation', *Garden History*, 42.1 (2014), 106-119 (p. 107).

[36] *Radio Times*, 5 March 1948, p. 21. See also 26 March 1948, p. 19, and 23 April 1948, p. 13.

[37] Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television, and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 14.

[38] Morse, *Radio Empire*, p. 113.

of boundaries and prejudices it must traverse or transgress. As Forster reflected in 1931, at the start of his broadcasting career, radio talks:

> remind listeners that the world is large and the opinions in it conflicting, and they make the differences vivid and real to him because their medium is the human voice and not the printed page.[39]

However, both Forster and MacNeice frequently struggled with, or else failed to recognise, the inherent power of their position, broadcasting from the centre of the British Empire to a current or recently liberated colony. Both writers hoped to harness the ability of radio waves to transcend geographical borders in order to forge, in Forster's words, a 'connection outside time'. Entrenched power structures prove far more challenging to move beyond.

Works Cited

Primary Works:

Forster, E. M., *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster, 1929-1960: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Mary Lago, Linda K. Hughes and Elizabeth MacLeod Walls (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008)

—.'The Freedom of the BBC', *New Statesman and Nation*, 14 April 1931, pp. 209-10

—.'India Again', in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1951), pp. 327-35

—.*Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, ed. by Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank, 2 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985)

Louis MacNeice, *The Dark Tower* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947)

—.'India at First Sight', BBC Third Programme, 13 March 1948. British Library Sound & Moving Image Archive, shelf mark 1CE0003602

—.'India at First Sight', Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS 10641/41 5©

Secondary Works:

Avery, Todd, 'Common Talkers: The Bloomsbury Group and the Aestheticist Ethics of Broadcasting', in *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 33-74

Bery, Ashok, 'Louis MacNeice, Ireland and India', in *Cultural Translation and Postcolonial Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 74-100

Bowker, Gordon, 'Radio Reviews', *TLS*, 19 September 2008, 23

[39] Forster, 'The Freedom of the BBC', *New Statesman and Nation*, 14 April 1931, pp. 209-10 (p. 210).

Bradshaw, David, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Christie, Stuart, 'E. M. Forster as Public Intellectual', *Literature Compass*, 3.1 (2006), 43-52

Dinsman, Melissa, *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics During World War II* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)

Fifield, Peter, '"I Often Wish You Could Answer Me Back: And So Perhaps Do You!": E. M. Forster and BBC Radio Broadcasting', in *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era*, ed. by Matthew Feldman, Erik Tonning and Henry Mead (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 57-77

Herz, Judith Scherer, 'Forster's BBC Talks', *ELT*, 52.4 (2009), 479-83

Lago, Mary, 'E. M. Forster and the BBC', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 20 (1990), 132-51

Lago, Mary, Linda K. Hughes, and Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, 'General Introduction' in *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster, 1929-1960: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Lago, Hughes and Walls (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), pp. 1-47

Levitt, Ruth, '"A Noble Present of Fruit": A Transatlantic History of Pineapple Cultivation', *Garden History*, 42.1 (2014), 106-19

Lodhi, Aasiya, '"Countries in the Air": Travel and Geomodernism in Louis MacNeice's BBC Features', *Media History*, 24.2 (2018), 226-38

Long, Paul, '"Ephemeral Work": Louis MacNeice and the Moment of "Pure Radio"', *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, 7 (2009), 73-91

Matheson, Hilda, *Broadcasting* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1933)

Matz, Jesse, '"You Must Join My Dead": E. M. Forster and the Death of the Novel', *Modernism/Modernity*, 9.2 (2002), 303-17

Morse, Daniel Ryan, 'Only Connecting?: E. M. Forster, Empire Broadcasting and the Ethics of Distance', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 34.3 (2011), 87-105

———, *Radio Empire: The BBC's Eastern Service and the Emergence of the Global Anglophone Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020)

Pritchard, William H., 'Forster as Broadcaster and Critic', *The Hudson Review*, 62.2 (2009), 337-44

Radio Times, 5 March 1948; 26 March 1948; 23 April 1948.

Ranasinha, Ruvani, 'South Asian Broadcasters in Britain and the BBC: Talking to India (1941–1943)', *South Asian Diaspora*, 2.1 (2010), 57-71

Scannell, Paddy, *Radio, Television, and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996)

Smith, Zadie, 'E. M. Forster, Middle Manager', in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), pp. 14-28

Stallworthy, Jon, *Louis MacNeice: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995)

Whitehead, Kate, 'Broadcasting Bloomsbury', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 20 (1990), 121-31