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Failing to Connect: Dialogue and Love in E.M. Forster's *The Life to Come*

Upon being informed that a piece of his posthumously published homoerotic literature was being used as a device for reigniting a productive dialogue of love between the gay and the Evangelical Christian, E.M. Forster would assuredly bristle with skepticism and doubt, if not outright disgust. Readers and critics who have reserved an iconic position for Forster in the chronology of gay liberation literature would likely evince a similar knee-jerk reaction. Admittedly, the writer's lifelong tendency to chafe uneasily against what he most often depicted as a doctrine of hypocrisy appears to be an obstacle which precludes utilizing his text *The Life to Come* as an instructional on breathing fresh air into the relationship between faith and homosexuality. In the face of this considerable set of roadblocks, however, one would be wise to recall the carefully optimistic desire to "only connect," a hope posited in the author's novel *Howard's End* which has now become his defining credo. Forster's bibliography is essentially a meat-grinder running interpersonal connection through its jaws, yet the author could never dismiss human communication's foremost position in his ideology. It was the most direct avenue to love, an area of unlimited potential. *The Life to Come*, a messy tale on a constant downward spiral, fails to arrive at such a plateau. In fact, the narrative expends its last gasp of energy toppling the emotion. Reading the short story against a collection of theoretical voices highlighted by Terry Eagleton, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Madeline

L'Engle, *The Life to Come*'s weeds of disintegration may be identified and uprooted. Consequently, praxis for Evangelical Christian action that both honors Forster's reverence for human connection and addresses the present day conflict between faith and homosexuality may be planted.

The tense correspondence between faith and homosexuality is no more tidy and polished today than when Forster was personally struggling through what has been a historically dichotomous relationship pitting polarizing values against each other. If anything, the battleground between the two ideologies, while certainly more visible and easy to encounter in the present environment, is now more nebulous and resistant to categorization. The stringent codes of Victorian morality entrenched in English society at the time of Forster's birth attempted to confine homosexuality to the underbelly of society (with varying degrees of success, considering the growing network of 1890s gay figures in art, the most distinguished being playwright Oscar Wilde), permitting gay ideology/propaganda to seep through to the surface mostly as a means of stamping it out: Forster was all too familiar with the 1895 conviction of Wilde in accord with the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, "which penalized the commission of 'gross indecency' with another male" (Fone 307). In the present, however, the lifestyle and its values now permeate culture. Rather than daring "not speak its name" (288), progress in gay rights and, particularly trenchant to literature, the advent and rise of queer theory have given homosexuality a voice which is impossible to ignore.

In accord with its increasing cultural visibility, the running dialogue between faith and homosexuality has grown into an absolutely unavoidable feature of media, finding its way into print or onto the television screen on a nearly daily basis. It is perhaps the

leading feature of what has been dubbed “the culture wars,” a phrase that has recently become nearly ubiquitous in describing public power plays over politics, religion, economics, and the like. A running tab of homosexuality-concerned news items in the *New York Times*, compiled during the first three months of 2005, speak to the issue’s level of cultural saturation; journalist Clifford Krauss’ article “Church Fights Gay Marriage Bill” serves as an apt microcosm for the war of words, as a pending bill permitting same-sex marriage across America was attacked vehemently (and ascribed with the potential for “cultural upheaval”) by a coalition of religious groups including Catholics, Muslims, and Orthodox Jews. The battle knows no boundaries, as the first quarter of the year has also witnessed a triumvirate of cartoon characters come under conservative Christian fire, as both latent (according to some, nonexistent) and conspicuous gay themes on the programs *The Simpsons*, *Sponge Bob Squarepants*, and *Postcards from Buster* resulted in widespread condemnation, even drawing the ire of Focus on the Family’s James Dobson, one of the nation’s most visible and powerful evangelicals (“Nautical”, “Out,” “Culture Wars”). Finally, pouring salt into the wound of the conflict was the multiple convictions of former church leaders for homosexual acts of abuse. A disappointing gauge of progress dating from Forster’s production of *The Life to Come* (1922) to the present was illustrated in a Feb. 17 report in which “a defrocked Baltimore priest was convicted [...] of molesting an altar boy who a decade later shot and wounded him on the street in a fit of rage when the clergyman refused to apologize” (“Priest”). The incident’s eerie similarity to *The Life to Come* gives the short story another coating of prescience and relevance. Cataloging recent episodes in the conflict between Evangelical Christianity and homosexuality is essential prior to approaching

Forster's text because it serves to construct a picture of the muddy landscape in which *The Life to Come* must be recontextualized, highlighting the seeming inability to establish an arena for open exchange between gays and Evangelical Christians. The aforementioned current events depict a modern environment which is deeply obsessed and focused on the clash but often lacks a tangible interest in reconciliation. In essence, it has become more attractive to throw logs on the fire than to consider extinguishing the flames.

In addition to current events, there are a growing number of books and opinion pieces accumulating, from both conservative and liberal camps, which are banging their heads as constantly changing ideas of value and ideology collide. Whether for crass or productive purposes, the publishing industry has essentially managed to create a genre out of the conflict. While not comprehensive, a few particular examples will provide the reader with a well-rounded view of the cluster of books available. Several works, such as Don Schmierer's *An Ounce of Prevention*, aim to dig out the "constellation of factors" (56) which result in homosexuality in order to prevent what is defined by the author as a lifestyle choice. Editor Jeffrey Siker's collection *Homosexuality in the Church* is indicative of the opposite approach, compiling articles which revise traditional interpretations of the Bible in order to justify homosexuality as an acceptable biological function. In between the poles lie two-pronged works such as *Homosexuality: Opposing Viewpoints*, edited by Auriana Ojeda, which are structured to include rival monologues (for instance, "The Bible Condemns Homosexuality" versus "The Bible Does Not Necessarily Condemn Homosexuality") but often lack interaction between those writers positing disparate views. Writer Richard Hays, however, with his article "Awaiting the

Redemption of our Bodies,” proves that the landscape is not entirely barren. Hays manages to address homosexuality from an Evangelical position that focuses on the gay individual’s struggles and takes into account the difficult, often agonizing process of laying aside one’s sexual desires in order to commit to Christ. The writer asserts that his personal involvement and intimate relationships with gays provides the framework for his ideas.

The upshot of the attention provided to the relationship between faith and homosexuality is that a pursuit of resolution remains entirely crucial and timely in the current social climate. Versions of truth are being issued in tracts, books, news statements, and from the pulpit; too rare do rays of light like Hays’ article appear and allow gainful dialogue to coalesce. Forster’s *The Life to Come* latches onto a layer of value left undiscovered and unaddressed by critics in that the work, despite its being composed more than eight decades ago, contributes to the searing conversation in progress, providing a case study of failed discourse which the Evangelical Christian may use as a tool to address an issue which spills into religious, social, and political boundaries, refusing to be ignored.

*The Life to Come* was born out of frustration and personal struggle, a fact which links it to all of Forster’s overtly gay fiction. Several critics have isolated a diary entry by the author, submitted on June 16, 1911, as indicative of the writer’s exhausted attempts to suppress the homosexual emotions dominating his private life for sake of public approval and financial stability. Coming on the heels of his novel *Howard’s End*, a work lauded by the public, Forster’s personal journal confessed that he was “wear(y) of the only subject that I both can and may treat – the love of men for women and vice

versa” (Dellamora 84). Negotiating with his inner conflict, Forster began to produce literature focusing primarily on gay characters and values. Still, he remained anxious over the controversial subject matter and displayed virtually no interest in seeing his new brand of fiction published for public consumption. As a result, Forster’s homosexual works became an entirely personal pursuit, resulting in endless deconstruction and revisions. The second-guessing which defined his editing process is a plausible corollary to his internal wrangling: *Maurice*, which is now regarded as his most successful and orderly work treating same-sex desire, was begun in “1913, finished in 1914 but (tinkered) with at intervals, up to his death” in 1970 (King 57). *Maurice* oozes with carefree optimism and idealized love, distinctly separating itself from the gloom and conflicted emotions lacing *The Life to Come*. Containing distinct autobiographical elements, the former work is most often interpreted in a manner close to critic Parminder Bakshi’s following evaluation: “*Maurice* is written in a tone of affirmation, and Forster steers his narrative away from the note of sadness that exists in his other novels” (192). Just as *Maurice* essentially served as a mode of wish fulfillment for its author, allowing Forster to achieve a clarity and happiness through text that was unavailable in real life, the remainder of his gay fiction plugs into other nagging emotions in his psyche. Forster’s work *The Torque*, included in same posthumous volume of short tales which featured *The Life to Come*, levels a mocking attack against Christianity and provides the writer with an outlet for anger and condemnation; the narrative “transgresses traditional morality in representing an affair between a Christian and a Goth. The sexual union of the two men is extremely liberating, and complete wipes out Christianity” (22). *Maurice* and *The Torque* are somewhat frustrating because they shrug off conversation, hardening

into impenetrable shells of starry-eyed bliss (the former) and vitriolic anger (the latter). *The Life to Come*, however, opens a door to dialogue; behind its text one may locate a confused and sad Forster challenging Evangelical Christians to confront the ill effects of perverted discourse and faulty love.

Whatever stance one chooses on the text's final jarring conclusion and its implications on the tale's overriding suggestions as to the possibilities for genuine human connection, it is necessary to understand that *The Life to Come* begins with a neutral position on the quality of love. The opening paragraph does not allow the narrative voice to swing the reader's emotions into either productive or destructive boundaries; rather, it unfolds with an ambivalence which pits adjectives with positive and negative valences against each other ("trivial or immortal [...] for good or evil, for a long life or short" Forster 2583), allowing them to arrive at a standstill. The ambiguous mood can be best described in what critic Stephen Adams has suggested is a characteristically "Forsterian 'muddle'" (120). What *is* clear, however, is that "love had been born somewhere in the forest" (Forster 2583). Beyond this assertion, one can make no concrete statements as to the form it will take as *The Life to Come* unfolds. This is, of course, not indecision on the part of the author, but a reminder that love is a fluid and malleable concept easily manipulated by its owner. Love demands to be handled with genuine care. Keying on love's ambiguities and its distinct power opens the door to Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*, a text which becomes increasingly valuable in suggesting solutions as the narrative's crisis unfolds. Eagleton holds that love is as fragile as it is steely; it involves a selflessness that logically results in human connection ("To try to see the other's situation as it really is is an essential condition of caring for them" 131). Love is a self-sustaining



and self-rewarding principle, and thus it need not be tied to a specific purpose or final end goal. Correctly realized, it is both a means and an end. With Eagleton's theory in tow, one may continue to approach *The Life to Come* and confront its fragmentation.

Although the short story begins in a neutral position, the deterioration and breakdown of connection that runs throughout the text begins to rear its ugly head in the second paragraph. Prior to examining *The Life to Come's* implications on current cultural issues and its potential to address the present difficulties in Evangelical Christian dialogue with the gay community, one must methodically navigate the text in order to locate the impetus for fragmentation and witness its totality in the tale. The tale's second passage begins with nature imagery that suggests peaceful beauty ("A stream sang outside, a firefly relit its lamp also. A remote, a romantic spot...lovely, lovable") and the reader is shown Paul Pinmay, whom Forster introduces with generous and elegant diction: "golden ruffled hair of a young man [...] calm and dignified" (Forster 2583). Pinmay's satisfied demeanor disappears immediately when he notices his Holy Bible lying next to him on the floor of his hut. The sight of the holy text fills Paul with the "agony of grotesque remorse," driving him into a frantic search for his pistol in hopes of ending his life and erasing his guilt over an act which Forster has not yet divulged concrete information. The stark change in imagery and tone, coupled with one's inability to locate an objective cause for comprehending Pinmay's consuming regret, create a single-minded focus on disintegration. It lies in the diction, it lies in the character's physical actions ("he hurled the flowers through the door [...] he scuttled back for his pistol"), and most importantly, it lies in Pinmay's failure to communicate his suicidal desire to the natives living alongside him in the jungle village. The natives misinterpret

his desire to locate his firearm as a sign that an adjacent village is launching an attack (“In spite of all he could say, they concluded that an attack was impending” 2584); thus, rather than contribute to his death drive, the villagers make an effort to rush Pinmay to safety and preserve his life. The passage concludes with an “unhinged” Paul petitioning the forest to hide his secret as he is too embarrassed to communicate his sin to God. Within the span of a paragraph, *The Life to Come* has slid into destructive territory, forecasting the results to come and revealing its first instance of communication breakdown.

As the story creeps forward Forster begins to fill in the gaps missing from the first two passages, providing background for Pinmay’s anxiety and edging closer to an explanation for *The Life to Come*’s traumatic opening. The man was a young missionary sent into the Indian forest with the unenviable task of converting Vithobai, a native described as “the wildest, strongest, most stubborn of all the inland chiefs.” The goal of winning the chief for Evangelical Christianity had developed into somewhat of a contest as the text notes that both Pinmay’s colleagues and the more experienced Roman Catholics “had failed to convert Vithobai.” The looming feeling of compromised intentions suggested by the description of competing missionaries has worked its way into Pinmay, whose brash self-confidence leads him to believe he will succeed where others have failed. Paul’s primary obstacle is his own willful ignorance of the complexities of language (“impatient and headstrong, he knew little of the language”) and his reduction of native civilization to a single type (“declaring in his naïve way that human nature is the same all over the world”). Though one of his colleagues reveals that Pinmay’s goal was “to get into touch with this unapproachable Vithobai personally,”

Paul's descriptions of his primary encounter with the chief smack more of disconnected lectureship (he debates with Vithobai's retainer) than genuine interpersonal dialogue (2584).

The intimate encounter which gives birth to the story and finally explains to the reader Pinmay's emotional distress is carefully recounted in the text's seventh paragraph. A vulnerable Vithobai ("(His) only ornaments were scarlet flowers. Vithobai had laid all formality aside" 2585) enters Paul's hut late one night; according to the young chief, his intention is to "hear more about this god whose name is Love." As Paul struggles to explain the Christian faith to Vithobai, it becomes increasingly clear that his inability to achieve understanding is due to his preference for what is previously described in the text as "a mixture of missionary jargon and slang" (2584). The idioms of Paul's Western dialect are incomprehensible to Vithobai, whose tendency towards literal interpretation causes concepts such as "the Mercy seat" to fall flat and lack meaning. Nonetheless, the native is still adamant that the missionary continue their dialogue. Paul proceeds to expound the love of Christ explained in the scriptures ("he had opened the Bible at 1 Cor. 13"), yet the selflessness of his intentions begins to fade as he finds himself physically attracted to Vithobai. He initiates sexual contact with the chief as physical actions begin to bleed into religious diction, creating a haze where lust and love converge:

"determining to win him there and then imprinted a kiss on his forehead and drew him to Abraham's bosom" 2585). As the personal experience becomes merely sexual, both men appear to "fall into the trap of exoticism," a problem writer Sonia Oltalvaro-Hormillosa suggests was a common problem in erasing a true understanding of one's identity and creating a boundary to connection (89). Although Paul clearly controls the dialogue and

his physical presence lords (“the couch that was almost a throne”) over that of the native, who is twice referred to with the juvenile designation “boy,” one must admit that the missionary’s intentions are more immature than they are predatory (Forster 2585). His mistake, then, is not only cutting off dialogue for eroticism, but also abandoning his concern for Vithobai as an individual and exchanging the possibility of love and mutual connection for personal fulfillment. The human body becomes an instrument for pleasure rather than a symbol indicative of humanity’s equality and interconnectedness (“The impersonality of the body is related to the anonymity of love. Love [in the] sense of *agape* or charity, not the impoverished meaning which narrows it to the erotic” Eagleton 167). The chief once again becomes a prize (“win him” Forster 2585) and the encounter ends with Paul horrified and Vithobai confused.

The men’s perplexing affair results in disastrous consequences which begin to permeate all aspects of the inland community. The first to be drastically affected is Paul, whose character immediately undergoes a negative transformation. Ruminating on the omniscient quality of God, he begins to allow his guilt to consume him (“At first he assumed that all the blame was his, because he should have set an example”). Rather than confront his own weakness, however, he displaces his anguish by re-imagining the fateful encounter as a deliberate attempt by Vithobai to ruin Paul’s character: “Vithobai had shown no reluctance to be tempted [...] why had he stolen up from the village if not to tempt [...] to attack the new religion by corrupting its preacher, yes, yes, that was it.” He begins to console himself by imagining that he was victimized in the encounter and he embraces colonial discourse on native psychology that he had previously dismissed as counteractive to Evangelical Christianity’s message of equality and brotherhood in

Christ. His new rhetoric fits his hardened shell of bitterness, easing his distress and comforting his conscience by demonizing the native people (“He remembered all that he had heard of the antique power of evil in the country, the tales he had so smilingly dismissed as beneath a Christian’s notice”). Perhaps most indicative of Pinmay’s change is his willingness to trade in a language of love for one filled with bile and disdain for Vithobai: “he condemned, with increasing severity, the arts of his seducer [...] having begun by recommending the boy to mercy he ended by asking that he might be damned” (2585).

Paul learns that the chief and his entire village have converted to Evangelical Christianity (proving that Vithobai was genuinely deceived by the encounter and has put stock in its authenticity) and therefore he must take charge of the inland district; his new position of authority ensures that any remaining traces of his concern and zeal for disparate people are drained. Initially wary of accepting the position because it will force him to work alongside his “seducer,” Paul begins to batter his vulnerability by abusing those he oversees: “He who had been wont to lay such stress on the Gospel teaching, on love, kindness, and personal influence, he who had preached that the Kingdom of Heaven is intimacy and emotion, now reacted with violence.” His interest in imperial logic, ignited and energized his early feelings of self-hatred, crystallizes and becomes a force of nature. He becomes an “expert” in such literature and speaks “more like a disillusioned official than a missionary” (2586). Pinmay’s retreat into a comforting power structure coincides with the hatred of his own weakness. He takes a hard-edged stance to failure and cannot learn from it. According to Eagleton, power which cannot “recognize” failure will be caught “fearfully defending itself against the victims of its own arrogance” (176).

Such is the missionary's condition as he turns his subjects into victims. Paul's former belief that all humanity shares a common bond is left by the wayside as the suggestion that the native people are similar to him leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Rather than rejoice as the number of conversions rises under his harsh technique, Paul maintains that "these people are so unlike ourselves that I much doubt whether they have really accepted Christ" (Forster 2586).

While Paul forfeits his idealism and potential for love, Vithobai is essentially forced to hand over his identity in exchange for a false promise. His conversion and baptism are accompanied by a name change. The chief becomes the obedient "Barnabus" and, although the missionary's doctrine has yet to be fully explained ("He made mistakes, and his theology was crude and erratic" 2586), he is eager to please Paul and does his best to follow the district's new set of rules. His English improves and begins to take on the polite and "courteous" (2587) features of Western dialogue. The chief's transformation follows a trajectory typical of the colonial subject under imperial rule: he is "rendered [...] mute and inert, a tabula rasa onto which 'Europe,' equally reified, inscribed its desires, demands, determinations" (Bhabha and Comaroff 22). Barnabus makes each concession to colonial demands in expectation of renewing his prior intimacy with Paul; the chief does not yet understand that the missionary has no intentions of honoring Barnabus' trust. Each time the native broaches the topic of love he is demeaned and his desire is delayed. He questions why Paul refuses to love him ("How can that be, when God *is* Love?") and receives an offhand dismissal that reeks of superiority: "I have served him the longer and I know." Pinmay's technique of delaying explanation and allowing Barnabus to constantly be deceived by his crafty language continues as the text

moves forward; each time it serves to placate the chief (“The boy was reassured”) and maintain the missionary’s power hold (Forster 2588).

As Barnabus continues to wait on Pinmay’s promise of love, his personality continues to warp. The missionaries guide him into marriage and he acquiesces to their suggestions without incident: “his bride a native catechist [...] a girl inferior to him by birth, but the missionaries had selected her.” The chief’s wealth has also dissipated as imperialism takes root and the district’s growth demands that his land ownership be reduced. Barnabus’ former concerns, tied to his unique heritage, are discarded as he becomes solely focused on what he understands to be a command from God to love Pinmay physically. Barnabus’ desire, delayed so long and left unaddressed by Paul, has grown into somewhat of a monomania: “God continues to order me to love you. It is my life, whatever else I seem to do”). When he finally learns that Paul had never intended to make good on his word, the formerly healthy chief becomes both physically and verbally unglued; he undergoes a seizure and indicates that he has been stripped of his humanity and will to live (“First the grapes of my body are pressed. Then I am silenced. Now I am punished [...] What remains?” 2590).

The consequences of Pinmay’s decision to abandon a dialogue of love for that of adversity and superiority is further fleshed out in the men’s conversations with each other. Whereas their encounter in Pinmay’s tent appeared to embark on an approach to connection, both men’s subsequent estrangement causes the potential for communication to slowly but steadily disappear. Their first meeting finds Paul giving the newly christened Barnabus stern orders to dress more decently, demeaning his heritage (“God is greater than all chiefs” (2587), an demanding the native discontinue referring to him as

an equal in Christ (“And do not call me your brother” 2588). In addition, Paul makes it clear that his role is to teach, not be taught (“We do not want your kingdom. We have only come to teach you to rule it rightly” 2587). True to the reductive spirit of colonialism, Paul and his missionary colleagues act as agents of what theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has dubbed the “monoglossia,” an autonomous and authoritarian form of language which is willing to allow only one voice to establish norms of discourse. Each instance in the text that finds Paul brushing aside Barnabus’ voice is a denial of language’s true status as a heteroglossic form welcoming different voices: “a unitary language is not something given but is always in essence posited – and at every moment of its linguistic life opposed to the realities of heteroglossia” (1198). He abhors and avoids dialogization; the possibility that his words may be confronted and reckoned with is frightening. Operating as an agent of state-directed discourse, Pinmay cannot afford to share equal linguistic status with the chief because it creates the possibility for balance and parity. As Bakhtin notes, “linguistics, stylistics, and the philosophy of language – as forces in the service of the great centralizing tendencies of European verbal-ideological life – have sought first and foremost for *unity* in diversity” (1201).

Paul handles language in much the same way that he handles love. Similar to love, language has unlimited potential: postcolonial critic John Marx asserts that “language in this sense is not a passive object. In representing peoples and places, it has the capacity to make and remake them” (92). Therefore, Paul may use discourse for productive or destructive means. With communication lies the potential for connection; the missionary, however, no longer desires to connect. His mindset is now infected with



an obsession for control and this continues to manifest itself in his dialogue with Barnabus.

The second conversation between the men begins affably, primarily because Paul no longer feels a dangerous tinge of temptation when in Barnabus' presence. The two congratulate each other on their pending marriages and discuss rote considerations of the district's mining enterprise. The dialogue gains tension when Barnabus suggests that his land and people were healthier before the advent of industry. His concern is wiped away by Paul, who annoyingly demands why the chief cannot grasp "that under God's permission certain evils attend civilization, but [...] if men do God's will the remedies for the evil keep pace" (Forster 2589). The disconnection runs deeper when Paul scolds Barnabus for mentioning their act in the hut. In what immediately follows the native's aforementioned seizure, the missionary interrogates Barnabus with rapid-fire questions, each time receiving only a "No" in response. The passage's complete breakdown in conversation leaves the chief with an internal wound of sorrow that plays a distinct role in the narrative's final, climactic dialogue.

The short story's final conversation is preceded by a textual update on both men's conditions as *The Life to Come* enters its final stretch. Barnabus' previously discussed seizure begins to weight on Paul's mind, slowly contaminating the hard-earned peace and contentment he earned at the chief's expense. The missionary's preoccupation with the convulsions which seized Barnabus appears to mark the native as a "dislocated soul." Mired in self-delusions, Paul cannot understand why Barnabus has strayed from his Evangelical doctrine: "The dark erotic perversion that the chief mistook for Christianity – who had implanted it?" (2590). Pinmay's search for answers leads him back to

Evangelical Christianity, but he now finds that the faith he had sewn “lacked personality and beauty and emotion and all that Paul Pinmay had admired in his youth.” As Paul copes, Barnabus melts and shrinks away from the community he formerly governed with passion and energy. His conversion, which had initially created such excitement and happiness amongst Pinmay’s colleagues, is now passé, a dusty trophy ignored by the district’s missionaries (“he had served their purpose, he began to pass from their talk”). No longer tangibly profitable, the Europeans largely exclude him from communication, disallowing him to participate in their discourse. Barnabus’ mental weakness hastens his physical collapse and when he contracts tuberculosis, Paul begrudgingly (“They had little time to devote to individuals, so wide was the scope of their work”) decides he must visit him on his death bed (2591). The missionary’s attitude prior to his final encounter with Barnabus all but guarantees his failure because it still reeks of self-motivation and lacks legitimate concern: “to be concerned for another is to present to them in the form of an absence, a certain self-forgetful attentiveness. If one is loved or trusted in return, it is largely this which gives one the self-confidence to forget about oneself” (Eagleton 131). Paul, despite his attempts to construct a congratulating world of power and dominant autonomy, lacks any tangible faith in himself or his ideals. Ironically, his inability to forget himself has precluded his own self-knowledge.

The conversation sparked by Pinmay’s visit drives the tale to its tumultuous conclusion. True to character, Paul begins the dialogue by intruding on Barnabus’ customs. He demands that the chief, who is lying naked on the rooftop of his house, “have some covering” (Forster 2592); Paul continues to complain that the chief has refused to lie on a mattress and has adorned himself with flowers. In his selfish haste to

eradicate his nagging guilt once and for all, the missionary attempts to run through an explanation of why the men's sexual encounter necessitates repentance. Understandably, Barnabus (who Paul begins to again refer to as Vithobai) accepts the missionary's account with anguish, asking "why do you wait until I am ill and you old?" Rather than acquiesce as he has been conditioned to, Vithobai delivers a nihilistic speech on the binaries which have collapsed as a result of Paul's hypocrisy and selfish disregard for other's concerns: "I forgive you, I do not forgive, both are the same. I am good I am evil I am pure I am foul, I am this or that, I am Barnabus, I am Vithobai [...] I lie here empty, but you fill me up with thoughts [...] But it is deeds, deeds that count, O my lost brother" (2592). The chief's reminder that actions count marks another shortcoming in Paul's watered-down doctrine; he has forgot that "love for the Judao-Christian tradition means acting in certain material ways, not feeling a warm glow in your heart" (Eagleton 146).

As Vithobai slinks closer to death, Pinmay feels his chances of securing his own forgiveness slip away. In essence, Paul begins to display what Eagleton has called the "Death Drive." The Death Drive results from the inability to accept death as a means by which one may learn to better value his or her own life, as well as gain greater self-awareness (213). Pinmay detests his natural advance toward death ("he pleaded, distressed because he himself had been called old" Forster 2592) because it reminds him that his lifelong attempts to control his life, and those of the natives under his rule, are in the end futile. Eagleton posits that the fundamentalist "anticipates death, but in all the wrong ways. Far from the reality of death loosening his neurotic grip on life, it tightens it to a white-knuckled intensity" (213). This tendency surfaces in Paul in his race to secure eternal life. Realizing that "he had forgotten how" to "do something human" (Forster

2593), the missionary lays his head on the dying chief's chest and assures him that they both can know one another "with all spiritual knowledge" in the afterlife. Clinging to Paul's promise that there will be "real and true" love awaiting them after death, Vithobai brings the narrative to an abrupt close by stabbing the missionary in heart and hastening his own death by leaping from the roof of his home. At the same time, the chief confirms Robert Young's statement that "colonialism begins and perpetuates itself through acts of violence, and calls forth an answering violence from the colonized" (85). Having defeated his master after years of submission, Vithobai passes away in elation, convinced that "love was conquered at last" (Forster 2593).

The fact that love must be subjugated and defeated signals the text's final note of sadness. Beginning with ambivalent, unlimited potential, *The Life to Come* drags love through the mud, allowing Paul Pinmay to abuse it until it becomes villainous and destructive. As love is repressed, dialogue weakens, transforming into one-sided discourse which strays from language's natural heteroglossic function. The fragmentation unfolds in a logical, causal manner: no dialogue, no understanding, no potential for love, no spiritual life, no physical life, no end gain. Several critics have assessed the ruins of Forster's works and decided that they are "narratives that spell not connection, but separation, frustration, alienation, brutality, and despair" (Stone 371-372). It would be incorrect to suggest these elements are not present in *The Life to Come*, yet one should not assume that because Forster does not regularly allow connection that he does not truly believe in its possibility. To file away the narrative as simply a exhalation of failure would be a disservice to the problems Forster is sketching out in *The Life to Come*. In discussing his creation of the story, the author admitted that his original

intentions were to construct the work as a “purely obscene fancy” for his personal amusement. Placing a missionary in a compromising situation soon evolved into a tale filled with, according to Forster, personal passion and sorrow (Roy 124). How, then, does *The Life to Come* offer itself as praxis for Evangelical Christians to connect meaningfully with gays in the boiling cultural climate of the present day? It does so by providing a case study of disconnection reminding Evangelicals of how easily the gifts of language and love are perverted, and the disastrous consequences of such mishandling. Therefore, as a means of beginning to right Forster’s text and apply it to a present communication crisis, the Evangelical Christian must submit to truth, be willing to celebrate unique attributes, and practice love as a means to its own end.

Christian theorist Madeleine L’Engle’s *Walking on Water* is an entirely useful reference in attempting to build praxis for productive Gay/Christian dialogue. L’Engle holds that “there can be no categories such as ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ art because all art is incarnational, and therefore ‘religious’” (19). That is to say, an author who identifies himself or herself as an Evangelical Christian is no more likely to produce truth in literature than one who rejects all forms of religion: “there is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred” (51). Forster, a gay man who wrestled with the faith and rejected it, has the same opportunity as any Evangelical Christian to act as a vessel for God’s truth. The notion that God may only use Evangelicals to convey reality is in itself arrogant, selfish (“We would like God’s ways to be like our ways, his judgments to be like our judgments. It is hard for us to understand that he lavishly gives enormous talents to people we would consider unworthy” 26), and has the potential to shield one from a great deal of knowledge. As *The Life to Come* unfolds, Paul forfeits his craving for personal

connection, trading it in for authority. He snaps at Vithobai, declaring that “we do not want your kingdom. We have only come to teach you to rule it rightly” (Forster 2587). Because he has equated the chief with the ugliness of sin, he denies that Vithobai has anything useful to teach him. A similar tendency bares itself in the Evangelical Christian’s approach to homosexuals. When they become useful only as means of evangelism, their potential to share truth is snuffed out. One must not approach the homosexual simply to teach, but also to be taught. The failure to do so warps language, denying its thirst for interaction that continually reconstructs a more thorough form of truth: “If we feel that we already know something in its totality, then we fail to keep our ears and eyes open to that which may expand or even change that which we so zealously think we know” (L’Engle 48).

In a discussion of recent evangelical attitudes towards gays in his work *Homophobia*, Byrne Fone offers several troubling statements on homosexuality from individuals professing to be Christians. A particularly disparaging example notes that a Kansas minister (left unnamed in the text) “praised God for the murder of” a young gay man, Matthew Shepard, “on his Web site, godhatesfags.com” (413). The degree of linguistic abuse heaped upon homosexuals by Evangelical Christians ensures disconnection. L’Engle notes that the power of naming is a celebration of uniqueness in a world that increasingly desires to reduce the individual to statistics (125). Opposed to naming is labeling: “to identify is to control, to limit. To love is to call by name and so open the wide gates of creativity. But we forget names and turn to labels” (128). Paul relies on labeling to reduce Vithobai to a docile character type. Fitting him with a Christian distinction severed him from the elements of his culture in which he was

formerly able to thrive, and more importantly for the missionary, it made the chief pliant and manageable. Evangelical Christians commit the same crime when such slurs such as “fag” slide out of their mouths. Even the Evangelical who attempts to find a reasonable middle ground may unintentionally do as much damage as those operating from the raging fringe. Thomas Schmidt provides an example, as his work *Straight and Narrow?* approaches homosexuality from a cautious position, asserting that “people matter, one at a time, as beings both spiritual and physical” (22). As the book progresses, however, it becomes largely filled with in-depth, detailed lists of statistics on gay sexual activity. In drifting from people to numbers, Schmidt allows fruitful dialogue to stall and appears to abandon one of his own guiding statements on the issue: “if we neglect faces, we neglect the Gospel” (11). Reducing humans who are made in God’s image to ugly tags and statistics denies their unique capabilities. Evangelicals often err towards painting the homosexual a single shade of black, failing to consider that he or she may offer a multiplicity of valuable, singular qualities. Paul Pinmay’s conception of Christianity strays from heart issues and becomes a legalistic mess tied to colonial demands and progress. Accordingly, Vithobai is not only expected to change his outlook on the world, but is also forced to purge elements of his culture that solidified his sense of self and represented his unique position in relation to the Europeans. The chief abandons his traditional dress (“He had silver armlets, and a silver necklet, closed by a falcon’s head which nested against his throat” Forster 2587), finds his traditional preparations for death attacked, watches his people’s customs dissipate (“The cause of Christ progressed greatly [...] dancing had been put down” 2588), and even must abandon his unique language.

The Evangelical Christian must guard himself against falling into the trap of associating ornamental preferences with crucial heart issues.

A final step in establishing productive dialogue relies on the following statement from L'Engle: "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it" (141).

Evangelical Christians too often approach gays in hopes of producing another affirming and self-congratulatory story about an ex-gay scrubbed clean by irrefutable doctrine; by doing so, the Gospel is distorted into a contest not unlike competition between Paul and his colleagues to "win" Vithobai. What is truly a labor of love becomes muted by an imperialist tendency to remake the world in one "correct" discourse, according to one specific image. It is dialogue and interaction for the sake of an end goal, not as an extension of selfless love. One must be willing to offer homosexuals a reason to enter conversation, realizing that language is at once a privilege, gift, and tool. The true Evangelical Christian will push to create a community where open dialogue is a personal affair, a manner of continually excavating truth and love by prizing interaction. Only when one refuses to interact will truth fail to renew itself. This is the problem at the root of *The Life to Come*. Shifting the blame to monoliths such as religion and colonialism denies that these institutions are carried out by human hands and mouths. At its base, the crisis in dialogue between gays and Evangelicals is an interpersonal matter and it is on this intimate level that it may be altered and fixed: "When language becomes exhausted, our freedom dwindles – we cannot think" (37).



*The Life to Come* communicates the effects of aborted interaction between Evangelical Christianity and homosexuality. It confirms that one cannot separate love and dialogue, because in their true essence, they must go hand in hand. Without love anchoring it, discourse loses its objectivity and risks degenerating into narcissistic bluster. Developing a workable praxis guarantees no results, of course, but it provides a skeleton to which increasingly fleshed out ideas can be constantly added. Thus, truth can gain momentum and grow. Several skeptics may balk at such an approach to locating reality, suggesting it is mere touchy-feely fluff which ignores the unavoidable idealistic conflicts percolating between Evangelicals and gays. True, interaction must not become a byword for masking Biblical truth and tucking it away momentarily in order to achieve rapport with the gay community. That would be doubly deceptive. Nonetheless, expressing positions in an open forum moderated by Christ's spirit of love is not the same as ducking hard political and social questions. It is simply a manner of approaching issues wherein the focus is on another's personhood in place of one's own personal interest. In addition, the Evangelical Christian must not be so egotistical as to believe that his or her reading of the scriptures is stamped with a guarantee of truth. One's willingness to submit their biblical interpretations to a secular crucible ought to strengthen his or her reasoning through outside evaluation. L'Engle asserts that "the great artists keep us from frozenness, from smugness, from thinking that the truth is in us rather than God" (155). Forster acts out this role, and to shy away from interaction for fear that Truth will be attacked is a cowardly stance to assume.

Recognizing the inevitability of contentiousness should not sway the Evangelical from personal dialogue, but rather magnify its crucial importance; trading opinions in

mutually respectful conversation is much different (and honoring to Christ's emphasis on personal interaction) from firing them back and forth through media outlets. In addition, a rift in values need not necessitate a relationship breakdown. The Evangelical is not commanded to love only those who comply with his or her collection of beliefs. Perhaps the soundest solution to the muck of the short story, as well as to the present culture war, is included in the scripture reference which is provided in *The Life to Come*. Despite his firm position as a skeptic, Forster chooses to hide the message rather than negate or demean it. The verse is glossed over in the haze of panic which initially seizes Paul, suggesting that he has already abandoned his potential for productive contact: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13.1).

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