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**“We can only interpret by our experiences” –
Nature/culture in Forster’s ‘Cambridge’ Novels**

This essay offers a reading of E. M. Forster’s two ‘Cambridge Novels’, *The Longest Journey* (1907), and *Maurice* (1971), that recasts Forster’s engagement with nature as one more directly interpretable through a phenomenological lens. The reception of these two novels often focuses on the redemptive quality of Cambridge as a ‘heaven for young men’, a notion based on Forster’s personal history. This underrepresents the evidence of Forster’s ethics of attending to nature. This essay, therefore, offers a fresh analysis of the fate of the main characters in the two novels. It considers the shifting values of the environment in the narratives at the beginning of the twentieth century, and their ramifications for Forster’s moral concern with lived experience and immanence connected to the natural environment. The resulting evaluation posits that entanglement with nature results in the complete subversion of human character into natureculture.

‘Keywords: E. M. Forster; Phenomenology; Ecocriticism; Education’

**“We can only interpret by our experiences” –
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E. M. Forster’s *The Longest Journey*, published in 1907, and *Maurice*, published posthumously in 1971, his favourite novel and his most exigent one, are loosely connected through the *Bildungsroman* genre (Booth 2007, 173), which points to a preoccupation with culture and social transformation. The ‘Cambridge novel’, labelled as such by Mortimer Proctor (1957), refers here to the fictional representation of Forster’s *alma mater*, King’s College Cambridge, which features prominently in both novels as a *genius locus*. George Steiner allows, for example, in *Maurice* that “the university chapters are the heart of the book” (1973, 476).

The importance of the natural environment as immanent in the phenomenology of every-day life, rather than as a ready-made external world, however, deserves more exploration in these novels. Immanence is here understood as indeterminate material vitality of the environment, neither preformed nor spatialised. As Diana Coole proposes, the conventional sense of the environment as merely reactive to human agency is uprooted by the “immanent generativity of existence”, which is self-transformative through eternal shifts, loops and slippages (2010, 106). Merleau-Ponty considered immanence “being prior to reflection” (1968, 65), which can be understood as the undetermined flux of lived experience. It is an embodied awareness that rejects the obvious subject – object positions of cultural imprinting onto nature. It, instead, problematises the relationship to one of multiple dynamic interactions, which leads to a different type of *bildung*, a becoming, or, as Neil Evernden (1996) suggests, a knowing rooted in the experience of place.

The novels are, however, mainly studied as autobiographical pointers to Forster's own unhappy childhood and perceived redemption at university. It has become somewhat of a doctrine in Forsterian scholarship that Cambridge symbolises the 'good life' (Colmer 1975, 6), a place of light and liberation that compares with ancient Athens (Macaulay 1938). This paper, however, takes issue with the idea that the university alone is responsible for instilling an ethical response to the world, and instead proposes that being-in-the-world is already an ethical performance through its living participation wedded to an authentic existence. Specifically, a sense of 'being-in' rather than 'being-of' the world, in the sense of a more-than proximal relationship, saves Forster's protagonist entangled with the environment and is disastrous for him who fails to achieve such oneness, who regards the natural as the 'other' that must be suppressed. This inquiry, therefore, links Forster's interest in the wholeness of human experience – illustrated famously in his advice to 'Only Connect' – to a perspective that ponders the interplay between the human and the nonhuman material world in *The Longest Journey* and *Maurice*. As Kelly Sultzbach notes, the desire to 'only connect' extends not only to humans, but also to the environment (2016, 28).

Entanglement is understood not simply as introspection, where the body acts as the dividing line between interior (mind) and exterior (nature), but as an agentive, ongoing and iterative reconfiguration of the world (Barad 2007, 160, 181). The degradation of Clive Durham and Rickie Elliot, characters who fail to commit to such agentive entanglements, is to flunk effervescent performance of the world for a 'tragic and enduring' quality of life, as Forster termed it in *Aspects of the Novel* (1974, 90). They represent the ontological gap between appearance and experience, as they erase nature from their being in a crisis. Rickie, for example, senses that nature represents a password to life, but that "the heart of all the things was hidden" to him (Forster 2006,

144). Clive Durham, similarly, is “unable to distinguish matter from spirit” and faints (Forster 1977, 107).

In contrast, the ‘emotional thrill’ of lived experience in nature, as described in the preface to *The Longest Journey* (2006, xxii), provides the motivation for a critical understanding of Forster’s rendering of a ‘good life’, or *eudaimonia*, where the flourishing of life occurs as an entanglement of ‘natureculture’, rather than as philosophy studied at Cambridge. Natureculture, a symbiotic concept of entanglement (Haraway 2003, 17), speaks to the non-discreteness of ecologies that are *both* materially and socially formed. As Barad notes, “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world” (2007, 185). Forster’s material philosophy of lived experience in the two novels questions the moral philosophy entrenched in a liberal education that encourages introspection and provides an alternative reading of ethical relationships with the world.

Previous commentaries on Forster’s Cambridge novels, nevertheless, focused on the benefits of liberal education in view of Matthew Arnold’s exalting notion of Hellenism as an expediter of integrative experience (Jacobowitz 2004). Forster, who ‘knew his Arnold’ (Kermode 2009, 133), certainly appreciated a humanistic conceptualisation of education. The university, as a “popularised form of liberal education”, inhabits the role of ‘master educator’ in the Arnoldian sense (Bogen 2006, 17). Simply breathing the university atmosphere educates (Proctor 1957, 154). These “emanations of the Oxford spirit” (Proctor 1957, 157) may also be applied to Cambridge, even though, Bogen argues, the so-called “puritanical ethos” of this university worked to a degree against the liberalising atmosphere of Oxford with its champions, Matthew Arnold and Cardinal Newman (2006, 15).

Formal education was also formulated in response to a colonial narrative, in which culture was the distinguishing factor of what is good and valuable, in opposition

to the 'natural' or the 'native'. Forster was highly critical of the "beneficent machine" of King and country (2006, 153) and, according to Quentin Bailey, showed a deep concern with formal education as expediter of moral agency (2002, 329). It is important, however, not to flatten the complexities of this discussion in favour of the hoary nature/culture divide. This paper does not, therefore, position the environment as a place of atonement against the shortcomings of the university. It argues instead that Forster not only stakes a liberal and humanistic view of education – what Lionel Trilling (1965) labelled Forster's "liberal imagination" – against the repressive conformity and authoritarianism of formal education, but that he can be read as offering a phenomenological response to this issue of ethical development directly through living the natural environment. After exploring further the idea of immanence and entanglement, this paper will apply these concepts first in *The Longest Journey* and then in *Maurice*. Their different realisations highlight Forster's phenomenological stance.

This analysis backs Forster's most famous epigrammatic interjection 'only connect', which belies a simple anthropomorphic humanism, and instead delineates a relationship between humanity and the environment that hinges on the intersubjectivity, or immanence, of existence within the world. Immanence relates to all possible becomings, and the entanglement of nature and culture is the performance of one such becoming based on the open-ended naturecultural practices that create the world-body space (Barad 2007, 172), for example, in the gaze. In so doing, it encourages an appreciation of Forster's embodied sense of place that has been showcased in many of his early stories, albeit in a more conventional and paternalistic sense, as nostalgia for a green retreat. Elizabeth Ellem posits that the 'greenwood' denotes Forster's ideal of a refuge from cultural and intellectual life (1976, 89). Wilfred Stone considers this

environmental engagement to be mainly aesthetic (1996, 184). Kelly Sultzbach, however, suggests that Forster drew on the pastoral tradition of conservation against the threat of urbanisation, but that he later engaged in more complex manner with the environment (2016, 39). Forster's shift in environmental ethics, however, – one in which being-in-the-world is pitched against nostalgic pastoralism – is not a later historical development, but, as will be discussed, already part of his consideration of the natural world in *The Longest Journey* (1907).

This consideration suggests a phenomenological response to the world – a growth of mind that develops not as a sense-making instrument of the other, but as entangled with the environment. Forster's address of Cambridge can thus be understood in the context of his growing interest in “consciousness immanent in the universe” (Langland 2007, 101), and his appreciation of nature as ‘annex of the school’ (Forster 1951, 369). Forster's characteristic ‘double vision’ – what Wilfred Stone calls his “symbiotic dualisms” (1966, 43) – works here not on the basis of the dichotomy between culture and nature, but on the basis of an intra-action between self and environment that is reflected in the dynamism of doing and being (Barad 2007, 170).

Forster's view on *eudaimonia* is, therefore, considered here through its insistence on lived experience for the development of moral character. Maurice Merleau-Ponty states in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) that formal education belongs to the “cultural apparatus” that forms habits of consciousness, but that it is the lived experience of the body that mediates the world (61). He declares: “there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (xi). This phenomenological approach to learning is, therefore, diametrically opposed to the reductionist position of the *corps d'esprit*, the adoption of the individual into the system so disdained by Forster.

Importantly, however, a phenomenological stance, and particularly Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body, highlights the tensions between a reproductive 'formal' education, and a creative 'liberal' education that foregrounds self-individualisation and self-development of the mind. In Kiymet Selvi's words, a phenomenological approach to education equals transformation (2008, 46), but such practices must be lived in relation to nature. Only then does transformation combat the disciplined, emotional economy of gratuitous self-denial that is enhanced by cultured responses to nature. The transformative power of the university remains ineffective when contrasted with being-in-the-world. The nexus of immanence as timeless being, and transcendence as a use of reason to make meaning of the world, dissolves in the direct experience of environment – the constant becoming that is underwritten by the inherent dynamism of existence.

In simple terms, Cambridge cloaks lived experience through its liberal heritage and classicising form of humanist education, whereas phenomenological approaches to knowledge hinge on knowing in direct (intra-)action with the environment. As phenomenology, the university is “an artificial world answering to the total intention of [one's] being” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 341). This, in Merleau-Ponty's framing of phenomenology, is not lived experience but merely a hallucination of the world.

The “Cambridge of G. E. Moore [...] that sought for reality and cared for truth” (Forster 2006, xxiii), is, therefore, a problematic ideal. This is evident in the way the protagonists in *The Longest Journey* and *Maurice*, Rickie Elliot and Maurice Hall, forge a similar yet divergent path through Cambridge and into the world. Whilst it is legitimate to flag up the essential differences between Rickie and Maurice in terms of disposition and background – for example, Rickie's hereditary physical blemish in contrast to Maurice's organic vigour – the important difference between the two characters lies in their phenomenological entanglement with the environment.

Rickie's cultivation at Cambridge is portrayed largely as rejecting the materiality of his body, an endeavour that results in his deterioration and death. His understanding of the world is determined by boundaries, which stand in the way of lived experience. Such failures also trouble Maurice at first. However, contrary to Ricky, Maurice's growing embodied awareness is part of, not separate from, the material world. His increasing performance of his being-in-nature, for example, when he questions whether he belongs to the "life of the earth" (1977, 188), results in what Michael Bonnett (2009) has termed 'phenomenological self-hood' and enables him to subsume boundaries. In sum, *eudaimonia* is responsive to a phenomenological, embodied entanglement of the world that collapses the human/nature divide, as is the case in *Maurice*. Failures in lived experience are due to the separation of the human from nature, as will become evident in *The Longest Journey*.

The Longest Journey follows Rickie Elliot, who cherishes his Cambridge experience and his friendship with philosopher Stewart Ansell. He abandons his writerly aspirations to his doomed marriage to Agnes Pembroke. He also learns he has an illegitimate half-brother, Stephen Wonham, and these associations serve as the crucible in which Rickie's relationship with the environment is forged. Due to the autobiographical topos of "escape" to university, it appears reasonable to look on *The Longest Journey* as an exaltation of academic life informed by Forster's own experiences at King's College. But, to adopt David Craig's phrase, Forster's perceived "idolization of Cambridge [...] gives rise to unrealities" (1973, 470). The treatment of phenomenology in *The Longest Journey* hinges instead on the way Rickie Elliot draws boundaries between Cambridge and what he calls the world. Throughout the novel, Forster indicates how Rickie's ontological and epistemological stance precludes direct knowledge of his environment. Looking at the elm trees outside his college room

window, he can only perceive them as “Dryads – so Rickie believed or pretended” (Forster 2006, 4). Rickie’s almost continuous state of epistemological bewilderment will scarcely improve throughout the novel. His self-criticism of “all the confidence and mutual knowledge that is born in such a place as Cambridge” (Forster 2006, 64) shows how he has some self-knowledge, but his refusal to become materially involved in his environment, and instead remember nature as symbol, paves the way for his deterioration.

Forster depicts Rickie as someone who lacks the aptitude to heal the rift between him and the environment through lived experience. Rather than taste the “teacup of experience” to reach the moment when he can claim “I will create. I will be an experience” (Forster 2006, 61), Rickie looks at experience as a distorted romantic vision of the “splendours and horrors of the world” (Forster 2006, 59). The distortion, however, means that the heart of things remains hidden to him. As Merleau-Ponty states, perception “must at the present moment so organise itself as to present a picture to me in which I can recognise my former experiences” (1962, 19), but Rickie’s perception is physically and mentally closed off, because he uses Cambridge as the door to shut himself off from the environment. Rickie’s story, therefore, is one of separation, rather than integration.

Ansell reminds him that this is a separation “which does not exist and never has existed” (Forster 2006, 63). In this instance, Rickie’s unidentified physical disability may, in fact, contribute to his unsuccessful performance of the world. Chiasmic ontology, as proposed by Merleau-Ponty, envisions an intertwining between flesh and the world. As Louise Westling notes, the body “is a nexus in a web of significations woven throughout a world full of immanent meaning” (2014, 118). Rickie’s faulty flesh, its singular ontology, acts as a shield from reciprocal interactions with the world.

This may be why his link to the environment is pure(ly) vicarious, even when he dwells amidst it. Instead, Rickie reads Romantic poets for their perceived transcendent powers of nature description. The “Romantic inward turn” as Paltin sees it, favours a life of mind in which the external world is eventually abandoned to inward anxieties (2013, 790). Hence, Rickie succumbs to the ‘pathetic fallacy’ and overlays his own physical anxieties onto an anthropocentric landscape. His dell near Madingley is, for example, “*paved* with grass” (Forster 2006, 18, my italics) and within it he found his ‘Church’. When he visits he leans against a tree, engrossed in Keats “he thought he had been reading” (Forster 2006, 19), illuminating the lack of connection between him and the tree, but also between him and Keats. His anxieties are metonymically circumscribed by the man-made dell, whose “green bank at the entrance hid the road and the world” (Forster 2006, 27). Rickie falls short of nature that, in Paltin’s words, cannot be represented but must be experienced (2013, 792).

This separation from the world, first championed by Rickie at Cambridge, is further challenged by the open countryside at Cadover in Wiltshire, which is portrayed as the ‘life pastoral’ (Forster 2006, 85). Owned by Rickie’s aunt, the estate and its surrounding countryside adumbrates Rickie’s material failure. On his forced ride with Stephen Wonham, who lives on the estate, Rickie progresses through Wiltshire in a half-trance and finally falls asleep (Forster 2006, 108 – 9). This inaction towards the infinite space of the countryside separates him from lived experience. He is denied the productive practices of entanglement and instead swerves apart not only from his fellow human beings, but also from his environment. In fact, whilst he considers himself to be skilled “in the principles of human existence, [...] he was not so indecently familiar with examples” (Forster 2006, 111).

A similar entrenchment occurs at the Cadbury Rings, which also arbitrates for separation. The hill fort, presented as a symbolic imprinting of human history on passive landscape, becomes a direct critique of Rickie's inaction. Initially it challenges his attention as it arranges the "whole system of the country" before him (Forster 2006, 126). Then, as he did in the dell at Madingley, Rickie draws out a book – this time he reads Shelley – which rejects this intra-activity of hill fort, history and self. Similar to the dell, the earthen rings eventually configure boundaries that diminish the view of the world, because Rickie conceives of them as 'ramparts'. As Rickie penetrates to the interior, the familiar world disappears, and a possible entanglement, a social-material enactment, is set in motion. Apocryphal vanishing narratives, in which the earth swallows the intruder and strips away all culture, highlight the agency of matter in theories of entanglement. In this instance, the tree in the middle of the inner ring revolves before his eyes, and Rickie faints, then awakens, level with the "structure of the clods" (Forster 2006, 130). He is, however, quickly whisked away from tactile earth and rustling turnip leaves, victim to the human intrigue to which the countryside is now considered an accomplice. This moment of a possible gliding beneath, a moment of entangled, lived experience, is rejected and Rickie spends the rest of the year confined to bed with a "curious breakdown" (Forster 2006, 140).

The tree at the centre of Cadover Rings is a phenomenon, a dynamic topological reconfiguration of sedimented histories of intra-actions (Barad 2007, 141, 151). Rickie's relationship with trees is, however, symbolic, not material. His many encounters with trees that reveal themselves as nothing but 'trees' are, therefore, stepping stones towards his degradation. On the train to Cadover, Rickie looks out of the train window but sees nothing but a "tumbling wilderness of brown" (Forster 2006, 271). He is not able to discern nature as immanent, as he is blind to the horizon of unseen things. The horizon,

as Merleau-Ponty suggests, is not only the distance at which pure being exists, but simultaneously integrates the ‘thickness’ of experience at close range (1968, 84). Instead of integrating the thickness of these native verlands in his life perspective, Rickie only sees them as ‘other’ to the “gray fluxions” of the city (Forster 2006, 270). In the climactic scene in which he comes upon his drunken brother Stephen, Rickie cries out, “not yet remembering himself” and he “stood by the elm tree, clutching the ridges of its bark” (Forster 2006, 281). The clutching of the tree connotes the conflict between skin and bark, a failed chiasm that lacks immanence. Rickie rejects the encroachment of the world onto his flesh and denies the act of transgression that Merleau-Ponty considers central to this chiasmic reversibility of meaning (1968, 248 – 9). Even though trees represent “perhaps the most glorious invitation to the brainless life that has ever been given” (Forster 2006, 47), Rickie’s blind seizing of the elm occasions his final condemnation. Rickie dies in a state of disillusionment and despair, separate from the natural life force that is unending.

Merleau-Ponty states that “the essence of death is always on the horizon of my thinking” (1962, 364), recognising the idea of death and decay as another form of life. He talks about life as ‘atmosphere’ that shrouds the horizon, and death may erroneously be thought of as breaking the inextricable involvement of the body in life. The pure being of the horizon, however, is not negated by a perceived ‘non-being’ after death (1968, 84). This ‘hyper-empirical’ immanence of all possible becomings is, nevertheless, out of Rickie’s reach, as he has clearly not learned the ‘lesson of incompleteness,’ even in his last moments (Forster 2006, 327). Experience, ideally, has no definitive limits. It is continuity within the stream of life. Entanglement, as Barad notes, is continuously ongoing (2007, 180). Yet in his last moments before his death,

the stream, a place of symbolic relevance where Rickie had watched “the black earth unite to the black sky” at the horizon (Forster 2006, 272), means nothing now.

David Sidorsky notes that a superior private moral code must always work in commitment to reality (2007, 248), but Rickie never commits himself fully to the materiality of the world. His sense of relation of his self to his environment is thus not a virtuous one, even though he claims that the reason for existence is to “do good! [...] make people happier and better” (Forster 2006, 152). In fact, he seems to personify his own rebuke to a schoolboy that “[y]ou can’t be good until you’ve had a little happiness” (Forster 2006, 187). Happiness, a *eudaimonic* oneness with the world, is outside his reach, because he rejects the materiality of being, as he wearily, half-heartedly heaves his failing body out of the train’s way (Forster 2006, 282).

While Rickie’s failure is an indictment of maturation in a moral vacuum behind man-made ramparts against ‘the world’, Maurice Hall finds himself deeply entangled in nature almost from the start. *Maurice* is the story of a young man’s growing understanding of his own sexuality. He attends Cambridge, where his deep friendship with Clive Durham accompanies an inner struggle for harmony. After recognising that Clive has conformed to society’s pressures, Maurice himself finally accepts his being and vanishes into the ‘greenwood’.

The Cambridge chapters in *Maurice* have, so far, yielded contradictory interpretations as to their value. Glen Cavaliero was one of the first to note that Cambridge represents the “innocent idealism of the adolescent”, conflicting with the epistemological challenges with which Rickie has to contend (1979, 136). Matthew Curr’s perception of Forster’s “ethical pedagogy” in *Maurice*, which develops through the themes of beauty and love, nevertheless skirts the issue of formal education and

lived experience (2001, 63). Also, as noted by Howard Booth, the *bildung* of Maurice is actually inverted (2007, 183). Forster shows how Maurice effortlessly steps “into the niche that England had prepared for him” (Forster 1977, 53) and how suited he already is to the bourgeois life. Yet, Maurice’s conventional life thread begins to unravel when he starts to question his separation from experience. Whilst he at one point comes dangerously close to Rickie’s fate of ‘not-remembering’ himself in the hypnotist’s chair, he manages to reassert himself, not in opposition to, but in unison with nature.

Maurice is aware early on in his schooling that formal education does not tally with his experiences. The defiant tone at the end of the beach section (Forster 1977, 20), in which the horrors of ‘the facts of life’ are hurriedly scratched into the sand, but as swiftly erased by the tide, conveys a preliminary sense of misappropriation of the environment, in which culturally defined shame overrules the inherent oneness of human nature and the natural environment. Forster’s phrase “We can only interpret by our experiences” becomes a leitmotif for Maurice’s further development (Forster 1977, 113). Unlike Rickie, whose mental development is arrested, and whose moral “equilibrium” is never seriously disturbed, Maurice’s advancement happens despite or, perhaps, because of his initiation as a “mediocre member of a mediocre school” (Forster 1977, 25). Maurice’s entanglement ultimately leads to new realisations and acceptance by means of what J. H. Stape calls “reconciling the absolute with the actual and contingent” (1990, 144). Maurice, therefore, ultimately flourishes whilst Rickie deteriorates, because he recognises himself immanent with the environment.

Forster opens *Maurice* with the statement that “(t)here is much to be said for apathy in education” (Forster 1977, 15), signalling his inherent pedagogical stance as one of ongoing self-realisation. He uses ‘muddle’, a synonym for ‘getting into a tangle’, which is conventionally seen as a negative, opposed to the unclouded clearness of mind

advocated by Hellenistic Cambridge. Both Ricky and Maurice are implicated in this muddle, but Forster plots divergent routes for Maurice's 'torpid brain' to Rickie's continual bewilderment. The theme of 'muddle', 'trance' and darkness informs all early references to Maurice's thinking, in which he, similarly to Rickie, displays the typical obtuse public-school mentality deplored by Forster. References to clouded vision and muted sounds depict Maurice's character as if in stagnation. It is, however, a darkness and a silence in which lies the potential for immanence, as it portents the nothingness at the bottom of a unified existence, the invisibility within the visible (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 142). On finishing his public school, a "check, a silence, fell upon the complex process" (Forster 1977, 27) of education. On entering Cambridge, Maurice "stood still in the darkness instead of groping about" (Forster 1977, 31). *Maurice* thus avoids reference to the dichotomies of a clear 'other' and promotes a hybridity, in which the mind is able to expand beyond defined boundaries into a deterritorialised environment.

In contrast to Rickie, whose bewilderment never lifts, Maurice's mental performances become increasingly ethical. For example, in his second year he understands "by no process of reason" that his classmates were "human beings with feelings akin to his own" (Forster 1977, 32). This development is a direct reference to phenomenology as mental growth, a process of clarification that eventually allows Maurice to cast judgement. Whilst it would be premature to assign to Maurice mental precocity, his query – "Was this the world?" (Forster 1977, 29) – resonates effectively as an ontological quandary throughout the novel, and contrasts with Rickie's futile notion of the 'great world' outside the gates of Cambridge.

The question posited by the narrator at the beginning of Maurice's university career – "What hope for Maurice who was nothing but falsities?" (Forster 1977, 39) – is, therefore, not rhetorical. As the plot develops, it becomes clear that there is, indeed,

great hope for him. Bret Keeling (2003) makes a valid point, when he suggests identity in *Maurice* does not require articulation, only realisation. These realisations are the causal and non-arbitrary intra-actions of material agencies. His nightly vigils in the college quad, for example, are intra-actions of attempts at self-knowledge, trees and rain.

It has been widely argued that Cambridge is a “place of youthful romance” (Rahman 1998, 433), and, as Henry Alley suggests, facilitates “the flesh educating the spirit” (2010, 212). (Sexual) nature is interpreted as opposite to culture, and Claude Summers considers nature, in the form of the greenwood, humanistically as providing healing and wholeness (1985, 110). The greenwood is understood as an escape from social sanctions at a time when homosexuality was a serious criminal offence. The ‘queering’ of normative discourses on what is natural is, therefore, an important contribution. Forster, as Sultzbach indicates, creates a queer pastoral retreat for Maurice, in which the natural impulse of homosexuality is depicted as wild and free (2016, 53). But this perspective limits the impact of Maurice’s entanglement with nature, which extend far beyond the ‘greenwood’. His entanglement serves his mental and moral development, *as well as* his sexual being. It is a holistic development, a waxing and waning of capacity in relation to the environment. Every period of growth represents a step further towards the point of clarification, the embodied knowledge of the environment.

His real growth peaks, therefore, at Clive Durham’s country house, Penge. Despite Ellem’s contention that references to nature are few in *Maurice* (1976, 95), there are persuasive stages in Maurice’s surrender of his separate being that are directly linked to its natural environment. Penge is, like Cadover, embedded in the historical landscape of southwest England. Unlike Rickie’s detachment to Wiltshire, Maurice’s

engagement with Penge unravels the fabric of his cultural being, and he becomes more and more attuned to an environment which, although man-made and man-aged, shows signs of neglected husbandry and dilapidation, a semiotic pointer to nature's unconscious existence and agentive potential. In its disordered and inassimilable way the environment has become estranged and playful (Paltin 2013, 786). Maurice's initial irritation with the perceived 'incompetence' of nature ceases when Alec's face appears amongst the dog roses (Forster 1977, 156). This encounter signals the immanent erasure of boundaries and initiates a new 'rearrangement of being' in terms of lived, embodied experience.

The relation (rather than discrimination) of Penge to Cambridge is evident in the "[g]hostly but perfect" primroses (Forster 1977, 161), which Maurice first encountered in Risley's room, and which represent a tangle that foreshadows Maurice's embodied oneness with nature. Maurice ventures outside to "listen to the dripping trees" (Forster 1977, 161) at Penge, something he had frequently done at Cambridge. The ubiquitous primrose pollen daubs his hair, the scents of the apricots – "the tangle of flowers and fruits wreathed his brain" (Forster 1977, 166) – are all instances of the ongoing topological dynamics of enfolding "spacetime matter" (Barad 2007, 177). Maurice is entangled with a thriving ecosystem of lopsided flowers that "swarm with caterpillars and bulged with galls" (Forster 1977, 156), a materiality beyond a spiritual green place.

The vital connection to nature's enigmatic powers is more than a foil to a merely humanist 'othering' of nature as the opposite of culture – either to be managed or to be worshipped. Instead, the bodily intertwining of human and environment is expressed in the ecophenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm (1968, 142), or, as Sultzbach conceives it, the reflexive sensory (2016, 68). In chiasm, Maurice's mental

realisation is preceded by the bodily impression of entangled matter of flowers, fruit and brain.

Merleau-Ponty privileges nature's power to vanquish all claims to a unique human conscious agency and interrogates how "things form and undo themselves in a gliding beneath the yes and the no" (1968, 102). This defiance of binaries embeds ethics in a framework of uncertainty. Rickie was unable to glide, and instead opted firmly for the 'no'. However, Maurice's several 'rearrangements' of being within the narrative each contribute to his 'gliding beneath' the certainties of fixed values of selfhood. He begins to know himself as being-in-the-world. This does not mean that difference is eradicated, but that knowledge requires fluidity and uncertainty. It signals an immanence that does not resolve the straining oppositions in his being, but instead opens up possibilities of biophilic being that embraces the many agencies of nature.

Initially desperate to erase the memory of his sexual nature in the hypnotist's chair, Maurice is now open to the ether. This non-deterministic attention may be considered evidence of 'unbecoming' rather than becoming (Matz 2002, 317). In the end, therefore, Maurice dissolves into an eternal present, because "[h]is whole life he had known things but not known them" (Forster 1977, 180). This timelessness and unconsciousness is, in fact, a phenomenological process, as he is entering a unity of spacetime that erases and enfolds at the same time. His final acceptance of his immanence is intimately connected with the natural environment, but not just in the form of the 'greenwood', as critical convention dictates. The "forests and the night were on his side", but Maurice is now able to dispute with his old self whether the "life of the earth" is separate to or immanent in his life (Forster 1977, 187) and the primroses and the dog roses that are entangled with him.

The key dichotomy between Cambridge and Penge (or Cadover) is not that one is a symbol of cultural expectation and the other a sign of sexual nature, but that one could be conceived as prioritising separation from lived experience, and the other as encouraging surrender to it. Maurice, however, understands the reciprocal parallels between the two places, linked, as they are, explicitly through cultivated flowers (Forster 1977, 180).

At their last interview, Clive leads Maurice outside into the “deserted alley behind the laurels, where evening primroses gleamed” (Forster 1977, 211), unaware that this will precipitate Maurice’s unbecoming. In the darkness Clive can only discern him, like some astronomer deduces the transit of a planet in front of a distant sun, by the disappearance and appearance of the luminous primrose blossoms in his observational field. Maurice’s hair, previously yellow with pollen, now signals its affinity with stars, and the flowers “embossed with faint yellow the walls of the night” (Forster 1977, 211). Natureculture is here evidenced by the inseparability of Maurice from his environment. Clive’s sole application of cultural norms only provides an imperfect understanding. His abstracted and indirect knowledge of Maurice “amid darkness and perishing flowers” challenges Clive’s final epiphany (Forster 1977, 213). All that is left of Maurice after their conversation is a pile of primrose petals, and Clive is not sure whether Maurice is not, after all, still there, “beckoning him, clothed in the sun” (Forster 1977, 215). His flow of perception is contrived by imperfect recollection of the star-like quality of the primrose pollen. The spectral impression of Maurice exists only in relation to what Clive had already gathered in his consciousness. But even Clive recognises Maurice’s affinity with stars, sound and scent.

Lois Cucullu proposes how Cambridge, “intellectual, secular and insular”, is represented in *The Longest Journey* by Rickie (1998, 35). In *Maurice* it is Clive, as

Forster states in his *Terminal Note*, who “is Cambridge [...] The calm, the superiority of outlook, the clarity and the intelligence, the assured moral standards” (Forster 1977, 218). More truthfully, however, it is Maurice’s immanence with both Cambridge and nature that takes an ethical stance. Forster suggests that the key themes of integration and immanence are not equally effective in the two novels. They prove, in fact, to be deadly to a subject that insist on its separation.

No critic has so far speculated on Forster’s oft-mentioned set of ‘triadic’ leitmotifs in these two novels, which are shown here to underpin the development of character as a process of mental clarification, lived experience and finally immanence in nature (Christie 2005, 30). Forster proposes in *Maurice* an alternative discourse between self and ‘the world’, which is conducted by embracing the intra-actions of being-in-the-world. This reading of *The Longest Journey* and *Maurice* has argued a productive material perspective, in which the dynamism of being-in-nature offset simplistic notions of nature as a spatial configuration, e.g. the greenwood as escape.

Forster’s sense of nature has been considered mainly within a framework of the ‘neohellenist pastoral’, especially his short stories that act through covert romanticism, such as ‘The Story of a Panic’, or political interpretations of countryside, as, for example in *Howard’s End* or *A Passage to India* (Sultzbach 2016). These writings are interpreted as reflecting an unease at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which landscape was threatened by modernisation, alienation and reproduction. I would argue that Forster’s commitment in *The Longest Journey* and *Maurice* to nature as rooted in lived experience adds a phenomenological angle to his engagement with landscape. The material turn in thinking that underpins Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, is also evident in Forster’s ontology, in which characters like Maurice encounter an active

world, and not just the cultural imprint of it, to which they surrender their being. This paper utilises what Bailey has termed the “discursive intersection between literature and education” (2002, 325) to suggest that the protagonist of *Maurice* thrives because of his phenomenological self-knowledge, whilst the one in *The Longest Journey* dies because of his failure.

In both *The Longest Journey* and *Maurice*, Forster develops a vision of life that involves attention to the natural environment, an entangled ‘seeing the world as it is’, as a first moral step. As Iris Murdoch notes, this seeing frees the self from prejudice against the materiality of the world (2007, 82, 89). This position informs also Forster’s implicit aim of moral education. As one frees oneself from prejudice and attends to the world without blinkers, one also frees oneself from the imposed character that Forster deplores as a product of formal character education. The act of seeing nature is central to this process, as it promotes attention – the way to penetrate to the root of things, not solely by transcending experience, but by immanence. Instead of focusing on ‘shapeless lumps of experience’ (James 2009, 105), which are selectively presented through the self-interested lens of a character like Rickie, Forster shows how Maurice’s gaze is at once undirected, yet attentive, allowing nature to resonate deeply within his being. Seeing becomes a performance of the world.

By attending to the phenomenological lens through which the two novels are examined, Forster’s well-known charge against the *corps d’esprit*, led by his insistence on immanence in nature, gains complexity. One can go a step further and suggest that at a moral level, Maurice finds himself “involved in a world in which [he] inhere[s]” (James 2009, 21), whereas Rickie chafes against the world with his self-conscious will. The issue at hand is that phenomenological foundations of existence bring humankind closer to a breaking down of reified barriers upheld by cultural institutions. The

misleading world of appearance that finishes off Rickie, dissolves in Maurice's seeing of nature, and triggers his own immanence within the world. In Rickie's case, the symbol of the tree-nymph highlights the separation of nature and body that cannot cross over the skin/bark chiasm. The 'spirit of the body' remains reified and separated, it does not 'connect'.

Culture is transcribed within nature to form the often-ridiculed notion of natureculture (Reinertsen 2016). Yet this concept, nevertheless, allows for a recalibration of our attention to hybrid relationships that inform our moral senses. Forster's two novels affirm a complex affiliation of identity, landscape and ethics that will eventually become, in the shape of the Marabar caves, utterly unknowing. In the unknowing of our being-in-nature lies our deepest relationships with the world, to which we can only attend with a mind entangled in the materiality of our planet.

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