

# Forster's Self-Ironizing in "The Road from Colonus": A Response to Laura M. White<sup>1</sup>

SHENYOU MEI

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## Abstract

E. M. Forster's "The Road from Colonus" is a tale about the loss of inspiration. Its allusions to Sophocles' "Oedipus at Colonus" and, more recently, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," have been well recognized. But no attention has been paid to the relationship between the tale and the author's life. This essay first studies the extraordinary affinity Forster had for Coleridge because of the former's belief in the centrality of inspiration, then takes a biographical approach to investigate how the tale is derived from Forster's personal experiences, particularly his troubled relationship with his mother, who Forster feared would interrupt his writing in the same way the epiphany in his story is interrupted by the protagonist's youngest daughter.

"The Road from Colonus," probably the most famous tale written by E. M. Forster, is a well-known case of literary intertextuality. Its titular allusion to Sophocles's "Oedipus at Colonus" is obvious and has been frequently commented upon by critics.<sup>2</sup> But another allusion seems to have eluded critics for decades, until Laura M. White's 2006/2007 essay, which, as far as I know, is the first and only one to recognize Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" as another model for Forster's tale (see 184-89). Lucas's inspirational experience in the trunk of an enormous plane tree

in front of a country inn is similar to Coleridge's visionary dream after taking laudanum<sup>3</sup>; Lucas's fellow English tourists, notably Ethel, who interrupt Lucas's extraordinary vision, are comparable to the person from Porlock who interrupts Coleridge's dream. While Coleridge continually yearned for his lost poetic vision, Lucas is entirely unconscious of his loss, which makes the latter "suited only for irony" (189). White's approach is largely based on textual comparison and does not sufficiently expound the profound influence Coleridge had on Forster when it comes to inspiration; nor does she investigate the particular circumstances in which the tale was written, particularly Forster's ambivalent attitude towards his mother during this period. My essay is less a challenge than a supplement to White's argument, taking a biographical approach. It first demonstrates the extraordinary affinity Forster felt for Coleridge, and then reads the tale alongside accounts of Forster's journeys to Greece and Italy, viewing the father-daughter (Lucas-Ethel) relationship in the tale as a metamorphosis of the mother-son relationship in Forster's own life. Forster was a believer in the importance of human relationships, and this tale betrays his anxiety about his troubled relationship with his mother and her role as a potential interrupter of his writing when inspiration came.

Though mainly known as a novelist, Forster maintained a lifelong interest in poetry—even writing poems occasionally (as demonstrated in his posthumous *Creator as Critic* 724-41). From his many talks, lectures, essays and diaries, we learn that he adored Housman, Wordsworth, Whitman, Lawrence, Eliot, Auden, Tagore, Cavafy, and, particularly, Coleridge. He often mentioned Coleridge's name, and his views on Coleridge's literary career remained consistent throughout his life: as a great Romantic poet, Coleridge was accomplished both in poetry and criticism, like "a mountain with two peaks" (*BBC Talks* 62). The first peak "rises to an immense height but covers a very small area" (*BBC Talks* 63), and is best represented by the three visionary poems "Kubla Khan," "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "Christabel," the early drafts of which were composed in one year. But Coleridge very soon

discovered that he had lost the ability to write great poems. Opium inspired his writing, but meanwhile sapped his strength and spirit. Coleridge was destroyed as a poet at thirty—he had not yet reached the midpoint of his life. But he later reached another peak of creativity as a critic, his greatest accomplishments being his *Lectures on Shakespeare* and *Biographia Literaria*. Forster believed that Coleridge turned to literary criticism because his well of poetic inspiration had dried up: “Good as a critic because dead as a poet” (*Commonplace Book* 86).

In fact, Forster was talking about himself by way of commenting on Coleridge. Forster died at the age of 91, but his most productive period as a novelist lasted not more than 20 years, with a clear sign of decline after the midpoint of this period. His novels, six in total, were all conceived and mainly published before his middle age: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), *Maurice* (initially drafted in 1913-14 and published in 1971). His most acclaimed novel, *A Passage to India*, was not published until 1924. He had a dreadful apprehension that he “somehow dried up after the *Passage*” (*Creator as Critic* 318). As it turned out, with 1924 as the watershed (when he reached the midpoint of his life at 45), he stopped writing novels altogether. Except for some occasional short stories, he turned to memoirs, travelogues, reviews, broadcasts—largely works of non-fiction. He had lost his inspiration for creative writing, which he rued bitterly in 1930:

I am like C. in many ways, though heading for a different kind of crash. I have his idleness, diffidence, self-consciousness, gentleness, and am a gentleman. Consequently find it difficult to look at his work apart from the agencies that produced or curtailed it. I see him too much under the rule of Time. “And I the while the sole unbusy thing, / Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.” (*Commonplace Book* 85)

The two lines here are excerpted from “Work Without Hope,” a not very well-known poem by Coleridge, which indicates that Forster was quite familiar with Coleridge’s poetry in general. More than that, he was so fascinated with the latter’s life that he even wrote a character sketch based on Coleridge’s legendary experience in the army. The title

of the sketch is "Trooper Silas Tompky Comberbacke," the name Coleridge adopted as a trooper (*Abinger Harvest* 225-32).

As arguably the most famous dream poem in English, "Kubla Khan" is frequently cited by Forster as the best example of a piece of writing which was the result of inspiration. In the essay "The Creator as Critic" (1930), Forster states that the act of creative writing is comparable to dreaming in sleep, "I mean by Creation an activity, part of which takes place in sleep. [...] Dreams and poems have a common origin, [...] a dream actually *is* a poem" (*Creator as Critic* 65). He cites "Kubla Khan" as a remarkably involuntary poem which is inspired, or rather, is wholly written, in a dream: "'Kubla Khan,' composed entirely in sleep and under drugs, is from one point of view an abnormal production. From another point of view, it is more normal than most poetry, because it is a direct arrival from dreamland, without rearrangement or dressing up" (*Creator as Critic* 65).

In another essay, "The *Raison D'Être* of Criticism in the Arts" (1947), Forster further explains the relationship between writing, sleep and the subconscious: "What about the creative state? In it a man is taken out of himself. He lets down as it were a bucket into his subconscious, and draws up something which is normally beyond his reach" (*Two Cheers* 114). Once again, Forster takes "Kubla Khan" as an example. Its many images may come from Coleridge's voracious reading—Forster mentions in particular John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*, renowned for the author's indefatigable hunting down of all the possible sources for the poem's fantastical images. Coleridge's unconscious memory of his reading may have found its way into this poem, but the poet, says Forster, is by no means conscious of those images at the moment of its creation, because writing, like dreaming, takes place in a half-awake state and the writer becomes conscious only when the work is finished: "He had created and did not know how he had done it. [...] There is always, even with the most realistic artist, the sense of withdrawal from his own creation, the sense of surprise" (*Two Cheers* 114-15).

Once again, Forster is self-revealing through his commentary on Coleridge's poem. He believed his writing practice was dependent on inspiration. Having this belief, he wishes it to be a regular occurrence—as Frank Kermode put it: “pick up the pen and the flow begins” (44). In 1947, he published a collection of tales (all of which were written before WWI) with a preface in which he particularly emphasized the preternatural conditions under which three of his fantasies were written: while sitting in a valley in 1902, “suddenly the first chapter [...] rushed into my mind as if it had waited for me up there. I wrote it out as soon as I returned to the hotel,” which led to “The Story of a Panic.” On another occasion, while in Cornwall, “a story met me in the open air,” which later evolved into *The Rock*. As to “The Road from Colonus,” it was composed without much difficulty, for the whole of it “hung ready for me in a hollow tree near Olympia” (“Introduction,” *Collected Tales* vi).

Therefore, inspiration is not only central to the life of the protagonist of “The Road from Colonus,” but also to the life of its author. Since Forster's fictional works are viewed as closely connected with his personal experiences,<sup>4</sup> we cannot help asking to what degree “The Road from Colonus” is autobiographical.

This tale was written in 1903 when modern technological revolutions were sweeping across Europe. Factories, railroads, telegraph systems and cars were being developed at an unprecedented rate. Cities were transformed beyond recognition, whereas the countryside, along with traditional rural life, was on the brink of disappearance. Lucas, the protagonist of “The Road from Colonus,” is lost, for a moment, in the beautiful Greek countryside after drinking the water from a fountain near an inn. Later, when constrained in his suburban apartment after his return to England, he becomes disgusted with the running water in the plumbing. Lucas's aversion to modern plumbing seems to mirror Forster's own attitude towards the drastic changes in his time: “it has meant the destruction of feudalism and relationship based on the land, it has meant the transference of power from the aristocrat to the bu-

reaucrat and the manager and the technician. Perhaps it will mean democracy, but it has not meant it yet, and personally I hate it" (*Two Cheers* 273). In the spring of the year he wrote the story, Forster was travelling in Greece. As the fountainhead of western civilization, this ancient nation appealed strongly to him. Preparing carefully in advance, he even transcribed Pindar's Eighth Pythian Ode on a slip of paper as a charm. But to his disappointment, when he arrived, the scenery turned out not to be as amazing as he had expected: "Marathon was no more than a view, and 'Aegina by moonlight did not come off.' As for Troy, its ghosts were too military for his taste" (Furbank 1: 102). Not until he reached the old city of Cnidus on a rainy day did he feel overwhelmed by the country's beauty.

Something similar happens to Lucas.<sup>5</sup> When newly arrived in Greece, he thinks "Athens had been dusty, Delphi wet, Thermopylae flat" (*Collected Tales* 127). Not until he comes to the inn does he feel the journey is worth it. The key scene of the story is well known: Lucas is indulging in the mystical vision he has while sitting in the ancient tree when suddenly his fellow tourists come up, causing his vision to disappear once and for all. In contrast to the person from Porlock, who interrupts Coleridge's opium dream of Kubla Khan and who may be a personification of the censorious, repressive mind (the faculty of reason), interruptive of the imagination (see Wheeler 23-24), Lucas's interrupters represent, as White notes, "society itself and society alone" (187). White goes on to say that Forster's "modernist demythologizing" leads to "a reduced level of interiority in Forster's representation of inspiration and interruption" and regards Forster's achievement "less humanly plausible than Coleridge's projection of the person from Porlock" (187-88). Admittedly, there must be an element of hyperbole at play in the description of Lucas as a hollow man with no inward life who completely forgets his vision in Greece after his return to London (Coleridge, by contrast, goes on yearning for the return of his lost vision). But I would like to suggest further that Forster's description of Lucas as a benumbed curmudgeon is intended to show the importance of social re-

relationships and the irremediably disastrous effect of an unkind interruption by an outsider from the protagonist's immediate social circle. By contrast, the theme of social relations in *Kubla Khan* is kept to a minimum, if not left totally absent. The person from Porlock comes on business and his interruption is deemed as accidental, not as intentionally unkind.

Forster's writing always emphasizes the value of social relationships: "personal relations mean everything to me" (*Prince's Tale* 318). In his essay "Notes on the English Character," he describes the flaws of English people, by which he largely means the middle-class, as those with "undeveloped hearts": "it is this undeveloped heart that is largely responsible for the difficulties of Englishmen abroad" (*Abinger Harvest* 5). Both before and after his stay at the inn, Lucas's heart is undeveloped. In terms of dispassion, he is comparable to Henry Wilcox in *Howards End*, but Henry is lucky enough to meet the brave and imaginative woman Margaret Schlegel, who believes she can awaken his undeveloped heart: "She would only point out the salvation that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect!" (*Howards End* 159). By contrast, Lucas has no such person in his life devoted to personal connection: "His friends were dead or cold" (135). None of his fellow travelers truly understand him: Mrs. Forman does not allow him to air any opinions, and Mr. Graham looks polite but can be coercive, even brutal. Ethel is considerate and continually hovers over her father but is unmindful of his heart's yearning. She does not inquire about the reason for his decision to stay at the inn; instead, she teases him. Most ironically, when hearing news of the death of all the inhabitants of the inn, she congratulates him by saying: "Such a marvellous deliverance does make one believe in Providence" (143). She has no idea that her father has been deprived of his golden opportunity for spiritual redemption. She attends to her father only in a socially appropriate manner, making sure of his physical welfare yet ignoring his spiritual life. If he had been allowed to stay overnight at the inn, Lucas could have had a dignified death like Oedipus, but due to the lack of a person committed to connection, he is reduced to a soul-dead existence.

In Forster's real-life journey to Greece, there were his Cambridge teachers and friends. He particularly enjoyed the company of an undergraduate, R. B. Smith, and they even decided to ride a donkey (parallel to Lucas riding a mule in the story) for their sightseeing. Forster's mother Alice Clara Lily had meant to join him, but he made a point of sending her off to Italy, "leaving her there while he peeled off to join the tour" (Moffat 66). In the previous year, Forster and his mother had been to Italy, but had had a terrible time together. Forster was chronically forgetful: "missed trains, misread directions, lost gloves, mislaid guidebooks, left maps behind at every stop" (Moffat 59). To make the matter worse, he sprained his ankle, broke his arm and ended up bed-ridden in a hotel. It was Lily who bathed him (when Lucas means to stay at the Greek inn, the first question Ethel asks is "How would you get your meals or your bath?" [136]). By the time of the Italian journey, Forster was already a 23-year-old man. His mother was kind enough to look after him, but not without complaint. She not only found fault with him in others' presence, but asserted that she "never saw anybody so incapable" (qtd. in Moffat 59). In fact, Forster was not that hopelessly inept, but was made awkward by his mother's presence. As Moffat notes, "he might have done differently if he had not been traveling with Lily" (58). They looked amicable on the surface, but, deep down, Forster must have been displeased with his mother's excessive care and constant company: her presence in travel would inevitably unnerve him. The best alternative was to keep her away, which is what happens at the beginning of "The Road from Colonus": Lucas rides by himself, leaving Ethel far behind.

Critics tend to regard Forster's short stories as little relevant to his life. Even Nicola Bauman, one of his biographers, holds that Forster "mostly used imagination pure and simple for his short stories" (106), but, based upon the above analysis, we can clearly say that the tale is informed by Forster's travel experiences. The figure of Ethel is derived from Lily, whereas the senile Lucas is based on the young author himself. Forster said: "Growing old is an emotion which comes over us at almost any age. I had it myself violently between the ages of twenty-

five and thirty" (qtd. in Moffat 80). The tale was published in June 1904 when the poet had just turned 25. We do not know the exact reason for his fear of aging because he kept no diary, except a few pages of notebook between November 1901 and December 1903 (Beauman 99, 103, 142). We can only speculate that his fear might have come from his insufficient sense of accomplishment as a writer. In hindsight, we could say he was on the threshold of a creative outburst (1905-1910), but Forster himself was unsure at the time whether he was capable of writing truly great works. Assuredly, he could be proud of a few tales newly published, but at the same time must have been crestfallen about his failure to bring off more ambitious work: a *Lucy* novel was started as early as 1901, but abandoned in 1903, only to be restarted in 1904 (finished in 1908 as *A Room with a View*). On New Year's Eve in 1904 (his twenty-fifth birthday), he wrote a very dismal note doubting whether he would end up accomplishing anything: "My life is now straightening into something rather sad & dull to be sure [...]. Nothing more great will come out of me" (qtd. in Furbank 1: 121). As it turned out, things did not happen immediately in the way he dreaded. He published four novels within six years and became a famous novelist. It is curious that a promising young writer should sound so diffident and anxious about losing his writerly ability.

Anne M. Wyatt-Brown suggests Forster's literary career was shaped by and ended mainly for two reasons, both of which involved Lily (112). One had to do with his lifelong sense of inadequacy. Forster's relationship with his mother was both close and tense. He lost his father at the age of 22 months. With a moderate inheritance (£7,000) from the father, and later from a great aunt (£8,000), the son and the mother lived a comfortable, if not wealthy, life. Lily was, by nature, authoritarian and possessive, often reprimanding Forster for his awkwardness and timidity. When he failed to meet her demands, she would blame him, which led to his guilt and sense of uselessness. By 1912, he had become one of the most famous English novelists and enjoyed great critical acclaim, but he still wrote sulkily in his diary concerning his mother: "I know she does not think highly of me. Whatever I do she is thinking 'Oh that's

weak'" (qtd. in Furbank 1: 218). The second reason for Lily's influence on Forster's career as a writer had to do with his worry about loss. At the age of 14, Forster and Lily were driven out of the family home of Rooksnest due to Lily's failure to renew the rental contract. This old redbrick house was an idyllic place for the young Forster to grow up, embodying his fond memories of childhood. His happy time in the house provided rich material for his future writing. Among the concerns in his fiction are people's sense of belonging, rootlessness and powerlessness in the face of the will of others. The fact that Lucas is not allowed to do things on his own and is compelled to leave the inn—the locus of what he believes will be his spiritual redemption—can be viewed as an expression of the despair Forster must have felt in the years before.

Weighed down by Lily's suffocating care, Forster could only endure their existence together with brief escapes. He confessed: "Am only happy away from home. If only she would come away more...." (qtd. in Furbank 1: 204). Fond of social life, Lily "spent endless hours determining who was too 'vulgar,' who 'genteel' enough to visit or invite to tea" (qtd. in Moffat 83), prudishly critical of her son's works and insensibly unaware of his inner life. She disapproved strongly of Helen Schlegel's illegitimate baby in *Howards End*, as seen in Forster's diary: "Mother is evidently deeply shocked by *Howards End*... I do not know how I shall live through the next months... Yet I have never written anything less erotic" (qtd. in Beauman 13). When he was privately complaining about his decreasing interest in heterosexual love, she kept urging him to write a sequel to *Howards End*. Though living under the same roof as him, Lily, who did not die until 1945, probably never knew for certain why her son remained unmarried. Once prodded to publish *Maurice* by Joe Ackerley, who cited André Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt*, Forster replied flatly, "[b]ut Gide hasn't got a mother!" (qtd. in Moffat 244). In 1935, Forster, at 56 years old, had to undergo an operation. Before the operation, he wrote to Lily: "You sometimes say that I am bored at home—I am not at all, but I do get depressed [with] so much supervision..." (qtd. in Moffat 235). In 1938, he confided to a friend:

Although my mother has been intermittently tiresome for the last thirty years, cramped and warped my genius, hindered my career, blocked and bugged up my house, and boycotted my beloved, I have to admit that she has provided a sort of rich subsoil where I have been able to rest and grow. (qtd. in Wyatt-Brown 121)

As Wyatt-Brown suggests, the comparison of his mother to a mulch heap is quite a “sad commentary” on Forster’s predicament and indicates “how little Forster was able to give up the relationship in spite of the obvious restrictions that it caused him” (121). Just as Lucas could not live without Ethel (though annoyed by Ethel’s interruption, Lucas is happy with her visit afterwards: when she offers him “[s]ome more toast,” his reply is, “Thank you, my dear” [141]), Forster would never make a complete break with Lily. The complex relationship between mother and son haunted him so much that he even wanted to write a novel about it:

*Idea of Mother and Son.* She dominates him in youth. Manhood brings him emancipation—perhaps through friendship or a happy marriage. But the mother is waiting .... She gets her way and reestablishes childhood, with the difference that his subjection is conscious now and causes him humiliation and pain. [...] That’s the only serious theme worth treating.... (qtd. in Wyatt-Brown 121).

As we know, this novel about “a devouring mother and a weak son” (Wyatt-Brown 124) never materialized. But “The Road from Colonus,” written years earlier, centering on a devouring daughter and a weak father, could be considered as a veiled reflection of his anxiety about the fatal threat his mother might eventually pose to his writing. Though there is no record of Forster ever being interrupted by his mother when he was engrossed in writing a great work, in the manner of Coleridge being interrupted by the person from Porlock, we can say for certain that Lily’s demand for obedience must have made him raise his heckles, even sent shivers down his spine: “Mother freezes any depth in me. Alone, I can cling to beauty...” (qtd. in Beauman 240).<sup>6</sup>

Forster once said that there were only three types of character in his works: “the person I think I am, the people who irritate me, and the

people I'd like to be" (*Creator as Critic* 318). In view of the circumstances in which he was writing the tale, there is no denying his deft appropriation of his personal experiences. Lucas is modelled on himself, whereas Ethel is the younger representative of Lily, with the generations reversed. The tale demonstrates the enormous power of inspiration and the fatal results when such inspiration is disrupted by an outsider. The young Forster desired and cherished whatever flashes of inspiration came his way, but was deeply worried that the lack of an intimate person in his life committed to a more nourishing kind of relationship ("connection") would make his inspiration vanish for good. Given the fact that the tale was written at the beginning of his writing career and that his worry materialized into deplorable fact in the long term—he did lose his inspiration early due to Lily's prying eye—it is not an exaggeration to say "The Road from Colonus" is a sadly prophetic tale. Mr. Lucas, unable to live up to the heroic stature of Oedipus, is not only a laughable figure for the author's detached irony, but also a pathetic figure worthy of readers' sympathy, because he is an author surrogate.

Peking University

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This response is partly based on my previous Chinese paper entitled "灵感的忽至与永逝—'离开科罗诺斯的路'主题新探" ("The Dawning and the Vanishing of Inspiration: A New Thematic Approach to Forster's 'The Road from Colonus'"), published in the Chinese journal *Foreign Languages and Cultures* 5.4 (2021): 1-11.

<sup>2</sup>Having said this, we should note that the title of the tale is "The Road FROM Colonus," for Mr. Lucas is forcibly taken away from Colonus in the end and not given the chance of spiritual redemption as per Oedipus' example. Lucas's tale occurs not in Colonus, but in Plataniste, in the province of Messenia. Yet, on further reflection, the allusion to Oedipus seems so obvious that we cannot help doubting whether the author means it seriously. We are told twice that Mrs. Forman insists upon this obvious connection: "Mrs. Forman always referred to her [Ethel] as Antigone, and Mr. Lucas tried to settle down to the role of Oedipus, which seemed the only one that public opinion allowed him" (*Collected Tales* 126). Later in the tale, we see her teasing Lucas for wanting to stay at the inn: "Oh, it is a place in a thousand! [...] I could live and die here! I really would stop if I had not to be back at Athens!

It reminds me of the Colonus of Sophocles" (*Collected Tales* 132). Mrs. Forman, whose surname suggests her subscription to social formality, is a typical middle-class woman, endorsing the conventional virtue of filial duty. The titular Colonus looks more like a red herring deliberately deployed by the author, warning us not to fall into the trap set by the priggish Mrs. Forman. Given the fact that Lucas's heartfelt yearning for redemption is thwarted by Ethel in contradistinction to Oedipus' wish for death fulfilled in the absence of Antigone, Colonus seems like a salute to—but in fact is an ironic rebuttal of—Mrs. Forman's self-congratulatory comparison.

<sup>3</sup>Though there has been continuous controversy over the true identity of the speaker in "Kubla Khan," Forster never seems to have doubted that the speaker could be any figure other than Coleridge himself.

<sup>4</sup>*The Longest Journey* and *Maurice* were based on Forster's life at Cambridge; *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* were inspired by his travel experiences in Italy; the first few chapters of *A Passage to India* were written soon after his arrival in India, after which he balked and could not go on the writing until he revisited India ten years later. The estate of *Howards End* was based upon Rooksnest where he spent his childhood. Sometimes Forster represents himself via a gender reversal: Lucy Honeychurch, in *A Room with a View*, initially tries to conform to middle class social etiquette by suppressing her desire, which aligns with Forster's experiences at the time of the novel's composition. As his biographer Wendy Moffat said, Forster "based his complex characters on models from his life" (100).

<sup>5</sup>Lucas's visionary experience has been variously called "illumination," "revelation," "epiphany," and "inspiration"; see Abrams 1977; Herz 59; Moffat 66; Stone 145.

<sup>6</sup>It seems Forster loathed interruption from a young age. As a precocious boy, Forster taught himself to read as early as four years old. When summoned by a nurse to join the grown-ups (Lily included, of course) for conversation, he had the audacity to admonish her with the words "Tiresome to be interrupted in my reading when the light is so good. Can't you tell the people I am busy reading?" (King 12).

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