

# Predicting the ‘New Normal’: Teleconnection and the Regime of Social Distancing in E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops”

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## *Abstract*

This paper investigates E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909) in connection with the symptomatic ways this visionary dystopian tale is being re-read in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Forster depicts a futuristic world-state where each citizen is confined to an underground cell and is only allowed to (tele)communicate through an advanced-technology network, with a deified Machine operating like a centralised computer system and service provider. Moreover, people are required to comply with drastic measures of social distancing in a seemingly prolonged state of health emergency. Such a portrayal of an eerily possible world cannot but raise crucial issues within our ‘new normalcy’ scenario.

*Key-words:* techno-dystopia, human community, pandemic, isolation.

## **1. Imagining a post-pandemic world**

In his recent study *Psychiatry of Pandemics*, Damir Huremović, a psychosomatic medicine specialist operating in New York, focuses on the topic of massive infectious disease outbreaks and the ways they can deeply affect mental health, fuel public fears and degenerate into a chronic state of tension and anxiety. In the volume’s preface, he quickly draws our attention to

how the public would react to an impending outbreak in their midst and how those public fears would emerge and spread like, well, an epidemic. A wave of public angst anticipating an outbreak would swell, crest, and then subside, very much like the wave of the infection outbreak itself. In the wake of both waves, relief would follow. (Huremović 2019: v)

Should we contextualise these crucial statements within the framework of the Covid-19 pandemic that started spreading on a

global scale and to alarming levels in the first months of 2020, we would, as yet, be unable to perceive any cathartic feeling of relief. Although vaccination programmes have fortunately since been launched, one infers that the time is not quite ripe for a full return to normalcy, so much so that the very definition of a normative domain is at issue. On several fronts, scientists continue to warn us of worrying (or mutating) trends and of the threat that potentially lethal pathogens still represent for humanity, irrespective of affluent strata or indigent groups. All this inevitably entails an open-ended process of gradual adjustments, a demand for suitable reforms and medium-term changes in habits, lifestyles, and mindset. As a consequence, the need to think and rethink ourselves and cope with uncertainty seems to be a psychological condition to which everyone is bound to respond, while looking forward to the end of the health emergency: to that chance for redemption through which “individuals and communities alike” may finally “return to their daily routines and banish *the plague* from their conscious thoughts” (Huremović 2019: v, emphasis in original).

‘Uncertainty’ is probably the word that best encapsulates a plight shot through with apprehension and conflicting forces, to the point that “our pandemic perception and response is a messy blend of epidemiology and culture, medicine and politics, science and society”, all of it woven together with “issues of public communication” and governance practices (Bjørkdahl and Carlsen 2019: 4). There is now general agreement that pandemics are more than a purely medical phenomenon, given the wide range of elements and variables to be taken into account, such as risk management, preparedness in the face of emerging evidence, and the search for a workable balance between multiple actors and interests. In order to achieve “a broader and more heterogeneous understanding of what a ‘pandemic’ is made up of”, clinical discourse might in this sense draw fresh inspiration from disciplinary fields relating to social science and the humanities (pp. 5-6).

As it turns out, a similar condition of unnerving suspension and fear – in the face of a growing implementation of mandatory rules, not least the stay-at-home prescript – was prophetically envisioned by Edward Morgan Forster in his dystopian tale “The Machine Stops”, first published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Review* in 1909 and then included in *The Eternal Moment and Other Stories*

(1928). Forster's only and yet enthralling foray into the genre, this novella has understandably attracted new critical attention, due to both its eerie intimations regarding the staggering performance of computer technology and artificial intelligence and its depiction of a regime of social distancing strengthened in the wake of a world health emergency. In the coronavirus era, these seem to be the dialectical poles of a theoretical discussion that tends to look beyond Forster's situated liberal-humanist creed and his democratic belief in "[t]olerance, good temper and sympathy". The same could be said of his idea of a connection being equated with the cultivation of "personal relationships" as opposed to an all-out commitment to a movement or cause (Forster [1939] 1951: 77-78). Nevertheless, even with his self-declared belonging to the "fag-end of Victorian liberalism" (Forster [1946] 1951: 67), Forster's imagination in "The Machine Stops" proves to be stunningly prescient and capable of conjuring up a vivid – indeed hyperreal – scenario which nowadays elicits a participatory response.

As might be expected, what is kept in sharp focus is the theme of survival and centralised control in the gloomy interregnum evoked in the novella, with the dramatically disruptive effects that a long-lasting state of emergency and institutionalised captivity can have on people's bodies and minds. All the same, considering that in this automated, sanatorium-like world threatened by an invisible environmental hazard citizens are only allowed to see, feel and speak *virtually* – by means of a computerised machine and an advanced-technology network – the old Forsterian motifs of the importance of freedom, individual choice and the sacredness of private life are again, if obliquely, thrust into prominence. In this light, the suggestive phrase that opens "The Machine Stops" – "Imagine, if you can" (Forster [1909] 1954: 109) – might also be read in a metaliterary perspective as an invitation to infringe the boundaries of received views and mainstream appraisals in order to reassess Forster's writings in more nuanced ways. To be sure, the late-Victorian liberal was a post-Edwardian avant-garde author, too: a personification of an elusive modern(ist) conscience who struggled to puzzle out meanings from the disquieting entanglements of 'muddle' and 'mystery'. In short, Forster should be addressed as "a more interesting and a more conflicted writer than of old", as an artist "with whom it is well worth spending time" and whose

relevance lends itself to being periodically “reconsidered and enhanced” (Bradshaw 2007: 6, 3)<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, Forster’s well-plotted narratives are often structured around dichotomies wherein the humanistic paradigm itself is tantalisingly challenged and pushed to the limit. His stories repeatedly cross the shadow-line between surface levels and subterranean currents, the solid terrain of publicly acknowledged codes and values and the darker regions of inward experience. What is brought home to the reader, including the contemporary one, is the author’s constant effort to grasp an ingrained wholeness within a fractured world. And this effort runs parallel to an underlying concern with independent thinking, intellectual honesty, true feelings and the inner life, which are generally set against ‘superior’ orders imposed from without. No matter how antithetical or detrimental such orders might be to their deeper needs, Forster’s central characters are called upon to grapple with them as a kind of rite of passage to adulthood and full consciousness.

When social systems give way to forms of oppressive regimentation and to a hegemonic “desert of uniformity” (Forster [1939] 1951: 82), as is the case with the technophile, apathetic community portrayed in “The Machine Stops”, the polarities mentioned above are compellingly brought to the fore. Some recent Forsterian ‘appropriations’ have pursued this edgy and thought-provoking line, offering insights into the semantic richness, intricacy, and dialogic potential of his writings. In particular, his 1909 techno-dystopia has gained relevance along two main trajectories, the former gathering momentum on the threshold of the third millennium, and the latter

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<sup>1</sup> A more dynamic line of interpretation of Forster’s work can be traced back to the first half of the twentieth century, as exemplified by such path-breaking studies as Trilling (1943) and Warner (1950). Here is an excerpt from the latter: “Sometimes one hears it said that E.M. Forster is, in literature, the last survivor of a cultured liberal tradition which is now being swept away [...]. Such a tradition is imagined as gentle, tolerant, and intelligent. It is the tradition of classical literature, enthusiasm for the arts, anti-imperialism, deep respect for the sincerities of personal relationships. I shall hope to suggest that, though E.M. Forster is in this tradition, he is also capable of standing outside it, that he is creative beyond the boundaries of a mild tolerance” (Warner 1950: 5). Forster’s writings are said to show “originality and pointedness”, so that it “is as true to say that Forster is in revolt from his tradition as that he is a part of it” (p. 5).

entering the slippery, still uncharted territory of the coronavirus disease.

On the one hand, various academic studies – such as those by Caporaletti (1997), Seabury (1997), Zimmermann and Morgan (2019), and Slocombe (2020) – have conducted a meticulous survey of the mechanical nightmare and apocalyptic drama through which Forster articulated a sharp critique of the pitfalls that a second or third Machine Age (i.e., the Digital Revolution era) would have in store for mankind. The topics of physical atrophy and spiritual vacuity, of a totalising dependency upon AI technologies in a networked society steeped in cyber culture, are all tackled and lent due weight.

On the other hand, a less structured but hardly insignificant chorus of voices began to crop up in rapid succession, in spring 2020, via online-magazine articles and web-based sources<sup>2</sup>. That was the time when the coronavirus contagion reached a virulent peak in western countries, which were forced to adopt containment measures culminating in stay-at-home orders and a two-month lockdown period. During the so-called 'Great Lockdown' – one of the most disconcerting features of a health and financial crisis whose worldwide sweep is still underway – journalists and commentators started to think deeply about the epidemiological impact and its serious repercussions in an emerging 'new normal' predicament. Heed was thus paid to sensitive issues like the creeping fear of death and isolation; forms of psychosis and depression; the management of daily life in home quarantine; nationwide impositions of border closures, with strict limitations on movement and physical contact as strategies aimed at curbing the virus spread. As anticipated, some of these commentators decided to tread a literary route by singling out "The Machine Stops".

Under the extraordinary circumstances of our days, Forster's novella has therefore been rediscovered and approached in ways that

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<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, these discussions are of a more informative nature and targeted to the general public. To date, I have come across a score of pertinent web pages, including single-author blogs, forums, and other social-media posts. For the purpose of my analysis, I have selected five of the most well-grounded contributions, published between April and June 2020. See Bellot, Gompertz, Pierini, Sacasas, and Wright in the References.

supply a befitting corollary to the Covid-19 outbreak. That is to say, not so much as a SciFi fantasy but as a survival and cautionary tale capable of triggering a jolt of recognition, of gearing our perceptions to the complexities, contradictions and perils of the current state of affairs. Being thrown into sharp relief are most of all the poles of a duality that pivots on a near-absolute reliance on digital tools – along with a deceptively smooth transition to teleworking – and a cloistered existence, marked by self-isolation and a dismaying withdrawal from physical reality and the natural world.

To cite a few examples, “The Machine Stops” has been hailed as “a breath-takingly accurate literary description of lockdown life in 2020”, where the members/followers of a digitally mediated community are committed to storing contacts with “thousands of people via machine-controlled social networks that encourage users to receive and impart second-hand ideas” (Gompertz 2020). The speculative and warning potential of the story would give one “the opportunity to better understand the challenges posed by our situation” and meditate on an ethics of living that, while upholding a high-tech Cartesian paradise, may induce hypoesthesia and a high “degree of dependence upon the network of telecommunications” (Sacacas 2000). In a nutshell, the Digital Turn is said to have its own irksome flaws, which are likely to bring about an atrophying of the senses, a loosening of affective ties, and an embracing of indoor seclusion.

Importantly, “The Machine Stops” also outlines a global health crisis – manifesting itself via a cold, ostensibly polluted air – during which bans on mass mobility are strengthened in an alleged attempt to contain the risk of biological annihilation. Further referential landmarks are to be found in the resort to propaganda, by means of a fetishised “Book of the Machine”, and in the endorsement of rules which encourage citizens to remain confined to their allocated shelters, stick to a daily routine and keep their minds busy, as though “in laborious separation from one another” (Pierini 2000). While saturating their brains with derivative ideas, or speaking through video interfaces, people spend their lives in underground cells superintended by a humming, deified Machine, which holds sway by performing a whole range of tasks, including decision-making ones. As if benumbed, these presumed last survivors on Earth never doubt “the general benignity of the system” and end up forgetting

both “the true meaning of ‘near’ and ‘far’” and the rich ontological substantiality of the outside world, which they are accustomed to pigeonholing as dangerous and uninhabitable, as a forsaken desert of dust and mud (Pierini 2000).

Hence the psychological *frisson* for an audience wrestling with the logic and backlashes of the 2020 pandemic, from a weakening of human intercourse and first-hand experience to tech addiction, from the obsession with making time ‘productive’ to the ‘stay safe’ mantra. A couple of longer excerpts will help to further attune us to these interpretative trends:

Stay inside long enough, the tale suggests, and the isolating home you once thought of as a little prison world may come to seem a utopia [...] [Forster’s] story didn’t aim to merely predict technologies of the future; instead, it was meant to serve as a warning about the dangers of such technologies when pushed to their extremes. What Forster foresaw was not so much the tech of today as what might happen if we become addicted to it—a situation exacerbated, of course, by orders to keep social distance in times of crisis. (Bellot 2020)

[M]ore than technology, Forster is probing the logical ramifications of a society obsessed with keeping people safe. [...] As with the locked-down society of “The Machine Stops”, all this has been done in the name of safety. We are told to “Stay Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives”. But in doing so, we are in fact jeopardizing the very thing we think of *as* life [...] we must with Forster ask whether the things we end up losing might be as valuable as the things we are trying to safeguard [...]. We must also recalibrate our desire for protection as it relates to our need for connection. (Wright 2020)

In essence, Forster’s experiment with critical dystopia is being re-read as an allegorical mirror *of* and *for* our times: as an apologue where Vashti and her son Kuno, the two main characters, respectively stand for a submissive compliance with a new normalcy that revolves around machine intelligence and indefinite self-quarantining, and the urging of complementary views, a dialectical questioning that opens up ways to a yearned-for paradigm shift. Kuno embodies the ancestral, intuitive, almost physiological need to cast a backward glance and probe into mankind’s chances of recovering the allegiances, mobility, and ecosystem acclimatisation of the old days. Against this background, Forster’s literary lens prompts us to figure out forms of creative re-positioning, resilience, and fruitful

interaction, along a path that stretches its boundary to a pre- or post-pandemic condition and towards mutuality and exchange.

## **2. Hyperconnectivity and psycho-corporeal distance**

A ‘long’ short story divided into three titled parts – “The Air-Ship”, “The Mending Apparatus”, and “The Homeless” – Forster’s work foreshadows the bleak future of a post-industrial society by concentrating on a female and a male protagonist who, in turn, provide a springboard for a seminal cluster of binary contrasts. A disaffected mother and an overly sensitive son, Vashti and Kuno epitomise two different worldviews and professions of faith.

Relevant clues are not far to seek. In the very opening paragraph of “The Air-Ship”, an omniscient narrator invites us to imagine a small hexagonal chamber – a hermetic cubicle reminiscent of the cell of a bee, although anything but natural – which makes for the ‘sweet home’ of a sickly, half-paralysed woman (Vashti herself). Her face is “as white as a fungus” and her body, similar to a “swaddled lump of flesh” (Forster [1909] 1954: 109), is sinking into an armchair beside a reading-desk. Emphasis is simultaneously placed on what our generation would bracket with a service-based economy featuring smart technology and automated provisioning. As is the case, the inhabitants of these artificially lit, climate controlled and acoustically regulated cocoons – Vashti as well as her fellow beings – have any material need effortlessly met by the sophisticated equipment of a gigantic Machine. And this literally happens at the touch of a button: while spending their days comfortably seated or lying, each of them in his/her separate enclave, residents are constantly catered for. Food, medicaments, clothing, light, music, and an assortment of commodities become available by the mere click of a switch, including requests for a bed or a bathtub to magically rise out of the floor. With all their demands easily fulfilled and a permanent exemption from physical work, the citizens of this futuristic world-state are spurred to immerse themselves in philosophical speculation and intellectual discourse.

This notwithstanding, the idea of an anonymous ‘smart home’ model produced in series is loaded with sinister overtones, especially when one reads that the huge beehive hosting the cognate dwellings is built underground, where the buzzing Machine reigns



supreme like an uncanny, proto-cybernetic queen bee. Forster's grim portrayal of a regimented capitalist/consumerist apogee in which peace and material equality are achieved at the expense of free will and emotional attachments, let alone cultural diversity, is definitely hard to miss. By laying claim to absolute conformity, this over-rationalised society intertwines "uniformity with perfection" (March-Russell 2005: 60).

A tightly-ordered system punctuated by immutable rhythms and rituals is thus identified with well-being and the ultimate essence of humanity. Accordingly, when a call from Kuno interrupts her scheduled music-listening activity, Vashti's pang of irritation appears to fall squarely within the Forsterian syntax denoting chaos and spiritual sterility. This is a condition of helplessness to which critics commonly refer via a repertoire of key phrases disseminated in the author's novels, such as 'muddle', 'panic and emptiness', or the impossibility to see life both 'steadily' and 'whole'. Visibly annoyed, Vashti accepts Kuno's invitation by ironically allowing him "fully five minutes" (Forster [1909] 1954: 109), this being the maximum time span she can bring herself to take away from worthier commitments. Namely, from tapping into the network in search of ideas that boil down to chunks of empirical data and factual knowledge, and from delivering (or attending) ten-minute virtual lectures on encyclopaedic subjects. Any form of "critical inquiry of true advancement" is doomed to be euthanised (Sultzbach 2016: 43). The gap existing between those abstruse meditations and the piercing cognitive insight is underlined by the narrator's pointing to Vashti's chronic sense of emptiness clogged with irritability: to her seeing life steadily but *not* whole, as it were. Added to this are her excruciating fear of wasting time and, in a seeming paradox, her frequent resort to the isolation knob, a symptomatic gesture that speaks volumes about her psychotic craving for solitude in a sealed, womb-like room.

If Kuno, a strong and tall man whose name significantly echoes the Germanic word for 'family' or 'clan' ('kuni'), is stigmatised by the enervate Machine people as a misfit – owing to his physical exuberance, filial attachment, socio-emotional impetus and defiance of rules – his mother rather strikes us as the browsing cybnaut wrapped up in a 'sticky' holographic world. It is in the labyrinthine tunnels of this liquid world that she inexorably loses hold on sensory

experience and humaneness. Divorced from “the rest of the human sensorium”, her mental life consists “in a kind of shuffling and rearrangement of a fixed corpus of ideas – the product of an etiolated mind in a flaccid body” (Kibel 1998: 130). By the same token, the paraphernalia of buttons jamming her otherwise blank microcosm turn into “prosthetic limbs” linked to a “techno-mediated body, a kind of posthuman machinic assemblage” (Lanone 2018: 6).

Viewed thus, “The Machine Stops” contains the seeds of a posthuman fable that, if not literally ushering in the cyborg figure, goes a long way towards anticipating the Internet era: from multifunctional laptops and tablets to online forums, tweets and video chats, from the trend of collecting friends on Facebook or Instagram to standing out as an ‘influencer’ in a community of ‘followers’. This passage implicitly brings such elements into play:

Vashti’s next move was to turn off the isolation-switch, and all the accumulations of the last three minutes burst upon her. The room was filled with the noise of bells, and speaking-tubes. What was the new food like? Could she recommend it? Had she had any ideas lately? Might one tell her one’s own ideas? (Forster [1909] 1954: 113)

Further forebodings of our Information Age and social-media apparatus regard the use of glowing two-dimensional plates, looking like primitive iPads, and a system of “pneumatic post” (p. 110) that, by substituting face-to-face interaction, closely resonates with email correspondence. However, we also learn that these transmissions at a distance – in which video intercoms and applications such as Skype claim a fictional precedent – convey no more than a blurred profile of the interlocutor. What one sees and hears is “something like” (p. 110) the real person, a disembodied simulacrum that is just “good enough” (p. 111) for the practical purposes of an audience broadcast and a ‘traffic in ideas’. When it comes to intimate conversation, the fact that one’s voice and countenance are bereft of nuances of expression prevents individuals from effectively engaging in dialogue. That is why Kuno asks his mother to physically set out on a journey and meet him, at last, face to face, so that they can talk about his ‘hopes’, a somewhat esoteric subject at the time.

In spite of the hyperconnected environment that has been encroaching on her life by virtue of thousands of (fake) contacts,

Vashti is terrified at the idea of boarding the air-ship. The flight in itself would be relatively short, although covering the distance from the ex-Australian territory, under whose soil her cell is located, to what used to be England<sup>3</sup>, the antipodal hemisphere where Kuno had been sent after a period of public-nursery attendance, as required by the state protocols. What actually makes Vashti's blood run cold is the prospect of relapsing into the psycho-corporeal proximity that was one of the deranged signs of the pre-mechanical age. This "horror of direct experience" (p. 117) is soon testified to by her panicking at crossing the threshold of her chamber towards the tunnel that leads to the station<sup>4</sup>. During the voyage, she will be so overwhelmed with repulsion for the Earth's surface and the starry sky as to erase them by pulling down the windows' metal blinds.

With a dash of corrosive irony, the narrator presses the point further by dwelling on the protagonist's shocked reaction to the 'barbarous' behaviour of the flight attendant. In an attempt to help Vashti stay balanced, the woman instinctively puts out her hand, thus reviving an obsolete form of body language in an era when people no longer "touched one another" (p. 120). The last acerbic note of "The Air-Ship" calls into question the eminent cultural heritage of Greece, that radiating source of intellect, beauty, and social life to which Forster looked up along the lines of the well-known Arnoldian ideal of 'sweetness and light'. For her part, his anti-heroine obliterates it all via a curt dismissal that speaks for

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<sup>3</sup> When Forster was writing his novella, a number of records involving machine-powered aeroplanes were set in a row by Anglo-French aviator Henri Farman. Tellingly, in October 1908 Farman made the first European cross-country flight over an astounding 27-kilometre circuit. The public echo of this feat probably contributed to inspiring Forster, besides his more evident dialogue with anti-utopian writing and scientific romances, as best exemplified by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Samuel Butler, and H.G. Wells.

<sup>4</sup> From the point of view of onomastics and in relation to this feeling of diffident reserve, Forster's protagonist recalls the homonymous first wife of Persian King Ahasuerus, in the Book of Esther (1: 9-22). In a drunken stupor, the king ordered Vashti to show her beauty before his male guests at a lavish banquet. When she refused, her gesture of defiance – whether triggered by sinful vanity or a noble sense of dignity – was punished with a sentence of exile. Although the parallels are essentially ironic (Forster's Vashti is misshapen and blindly submits to authoritarian rule), Kuno's mother similarly endures reclusion and does not "like others to see her, and she speaks imperiously" (Bellot 2000).

itself: “‘No ideas here,’ and [she] hid Greece behind a metal blind” (p. 122).

### 3. The collapse of the machine

By an intriguing twist, suspicions arise that the chthonic honeycomb which condemns its inhabitants to “cellular seclusion” – thus undermining the core notion of the bee as the “paradigm *social* insect” (Adams and Ramsden 2011: 723, emphasis in original) – was probably not built under the aegis of a compulsory health measure. Rather, it seemed to have originally developed as a concerted political/scientific experiment aimed at outwitting earthly and cosmic phenomena. As if “intoxicated by their own power” (Caporaletti 1997: 35), humans have consequently cut themselves off from nature while bowing to an anaemic semblance of life. And, over time, their immunological vulnerability and fears of biological impairment have impelled them to opt for a permanent “protective sequestration” (Huremović 2019: 90). Hence their metamorphosis into inert slaves of an ultimately deficient, man-made Machine which is to plunge them into a ruinous chasm and “evolutionary cul-de-sac” (Jonsson 2012: 171).

In this dismal scenario, Kuno emerges as a Cassandra-like dissenter who is at pains to give warning of disaster. When Vashti visits him in his cell, he both tells her about his daring escape from the stifling underworld and forcefully makes his point by asking: “Cannot you see [...] that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine?” (Forster [1909] 1954: 131). Later on, after being sentenced to banishment in the southern hemisphere, he calls her through the electronic plate and chillingly announces: “The Machine stops” (p. 139).

Briefly put, Kuno belongs to the Forsterian family of the muscular “challengers” who, if doomed to an early and violent death, raise cries of alarm in the hope of tearing down the wall of callousness erected by the “conventional world” (Land 1990: xxiv). Indeed, he has no qualms about refusing to ask for an Egression-permit and choosing a way of his own to explore the surface of the Earth (i.e. by climbing and walking). His subsequent falling victim to the euphemistically named “Mending Apparatus” (whose white tentacles resemble grotesque umbilical cords) and punishment

(possibly castration, followed by exile) are providently countered by a sensational discovery. Much as the stinging outer air makes it hard to breathe, Kuno personally ascertains that the atmosphere enveloping the planet is not crushingly toxic after all, as confirmed by the presence of a few humans who have managed to adapt to the environment. It is no coincidence that these forlorn neighbours now hide in the mist and ferns of Wessex, an ancient regional area placed in sharp contrast with the colourless world-state and a powerful index of national identity stretching back to Alfred the Great. As witnessed by Kuno, the ostracised Others are patiently waiting for the mechanical civilisation to slip away. Only then will it be possible to re-activate a life circle in which the false belief that hails a death-haunted present as a perfect and unchangeable condition might leave room for a trans-historical trajectory expanding backward to "the spirits of the dead" and forward to "the unborn" (Forster [1909] 1954: 127).

It is a tragic irony that the dreaded 'virus' should infect none other than the Machine, whose system starts vacillating until it totally collapses. The final implosion sounds the death knell for the dazed worshippers who have been trained to rely on it and must now face annihilation. This is the theatrical denouement of "The Machine Stops", which sees dying Kuno and Vashti finally embrace in full communion and understanding, just before being swept away by the apocalyptic havoc.

If the collapse of the Machine is of a piece with the defeat of a large part of mankind, it would not be preposterous to conclude that this colossal failure seals a victory for the surviving Others: the wrongly labelled "Homeless", who are in fact the Earth's children, the slice of humanity that "has learnt its lesson" (p. 146) and is ready to map out a vibrant, diversified geography. When transposed into the critical context of our days, such a lesson could be paraphrased as a victory of awareness: as a parable reminding us not only of the importance of biological laws and natural ecosystems, but also of the vital necessity to develop a "cybernetic ecology" (Slocombe 2020: 213). In the face of an 'Internet magic' gone viral, our commitment should be towards calibrating an often too-easily naturalised reliance on intelligent machines, whose capability to take on a life of their own has long ceased to be a whimsical fantasy.

In a wider perspective, Forster's tale offers us a key to figuring out a nascent post-pandemic scenario where, if people cannot escape taking the hits and sadly counting the dead, they may also start to "recapture life" through a participative, edifying rediscovery of their environmental surroundings and psycho-physical *ubi consistam*. If death is a reality, so is life, at least as long as humans are open to learning from their miscalculated behaviours and errors of judgment. The next step consists in a new deal – what we might venture to cast as a hypothetical moral gloss to the 2020 "Next Generation EU" agreement – involving the remnants of a Dark Age and a 'green generation' that awaits recognition. The image of mother and son "embracing in the chaos: touching, crying, and reassuring themselves with the thought" (Jonsson 2012: 163) of a long-term continuity is testament to the realisation that this is not a definitive end:

"We have come back to our own. We die, but we have recaptured life, as it was in Wessex, when Aelfrid overthrew the Danes [...]."

"But, Kuno, is it true? Are there still men on the surface of the earth? Is this – this tunnel, this poisoned darkness – really not the end?"

He replied:

"I have seen them, spoken to them, loved them. They are hiding in the mist and the ferns until our civilization stops. To-day they are the Homeless – to-morrow—" (Forster [1909] 1954: 146)

Instead of unearthing ancient roots of nationalism, however, such a 'recovery pact' should work as an alternative model, a blueprint for a just transition and a far-sighted response to the crisis: one capable of repairing damage, nurturing hospitality, and redirecting humanity's path towards a sustainable future.

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