The Lord of the Universe and Professor Godbole stand at “opposite ends of the same strip of carpet” (Passage 283). The room is full of “coloured rags, iridescent balls, chandeliers of opaque pink glass, and murky photographs framed crookedly”; of effigies; of mild-featured Hindu men; school-boys; jasmine garlands; musics, multiple and indeterminate; an altar covered in rose leaves, golden tablets, silver dishes; a banana tree (283). God will be born at midnight—although he was born hundreds of years ago—although he will never be born. Sri Krishna, the Lord of the Universe, just like the music that fills the air with vibrations from choirs, cymbals, hand drums, a harmonium, the thumping of an electric generator, a Europeanized band playing a waltz in the courtyard, and elderly Brahmans singing a hymn, is multiple and indeterminate. The poets of the State have written inscriptions and hung them about the room “where they could not be read” (285). But evidently someone has read them, because we are shortly informed that one of them is in English “to indicate His universality,” and that a mistake on the part of the draughtsman has resulted in the inscription reading “God si love” (285). We are then treated to this sentence, set apart in its own paragraph:

“God si love. Is this the first message of India?”

And then the choir starts to sing again: “Tukaram, tukaram, thou art my father and mother and everybody” and mothers squabble over the children and the band in the courtyard plays “Nights of Gladness” and someone breaks cordon in an effort to get closer to the silver icon of Sri Krishna and Professor Godbole attempts to untangle his pince-nez from the jasmine garland around his neck (283).

But wait.

Who said that?
Look around the rafters, behind the columns, through the pink glass sparkling in the glow from the electric lights. From whence that voice, who asked about the “first message of India”? Was it Godbole? No, his attention was elsewhere; and anyway he has demonstrated that he cares little for messages, for India as a nation, as a unity, as a voice. Was it the congregation? They reportedly can’t see the inscription tacked to the stucco, and wouldn’t understand the English in any case.

Sri Krishna, was it You who spoke? You who read the inscription that “could not be read” and wondered what message India was sending to the outside world? Did You, three years ago and hundreds of miles west of here, in the bungalow of a red-nosed imperialist, hear an old lady insist passionately to her son that “God . . . is . . . love,” carry those words on the breeze of Your divine will to the scribe who so charmingly transposes letters (51)? You must have done it on purpose, Lord, for how else could the words have migrated so far, found a new purpose long after the death of the old woman who spoke them? You brought her along as well, for she enters Godbole’s mind in the middle of the ceremony, though he met her only once years ago, sang her a song about a milkmaid who desires Your divine love. You pushed the old lady to the forefront of the Brahman’s mind, so that he might “[impel] her by his spiritual force to that place where completeness can be found” (286).

What are we to make of this intrusion of the voice of the Lord of the Universe in this story, E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India? More than editorializing at odd moments, the deity even appears to be interfering with the plot, transposing a mantra, a woman’s face, the memory of a lone wasp on a stone, across time and space, across hundreds of miles, hundreds of pages. The “temple” of Forster’s final section is tied to the “mosque” of the first through His sorcery; we are granted coherence and unity by His divine grace.

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Sri Krishna has showed His hand here, during the ceremony of His birth. But we can find traces of His presence, or someone like Him, omniscient and omnipotent, throughout the novel; this lofty voice even speaks the very first words of the very first chapter. Before the earthy joy of chapter two, of the young doctor Aziz gallivanting around town on his bicycle and engaging in breathless verbal sparring matches with his friends, we are shown a grand view of Chandrapore from a vantage point far too close to the sky to make out anything clearly on the ground. We are assured of the supremacy of the
sky, who “settles everything—not only climates and seasons but when the earth shall be beautiful. . . . But when the sky chooses, glory can rain into the Chandrapore bazaars or a benediction pass from horizon to horizon” (9). Chapters often end by drawing sharply away from the human players and someone makes an ominous observation of the natural world, warning us (as the sky is not only omniscient but prescient too) of the impending crisis that builds throughout the first section: Mrs. Moore’s coo to a sleeping wasp “float[s] out, to swell the night’s uneasiness” (35); “Never tranquil, never perfectly dark, the night wore itself away, distinguished from other nights by two or three blasts of wind, which seemed to fall perpendicularly out of the sky and to bounce back into it, hard and compact, leaving no freshness behind them: the hot weather was approaching” (100). At the end of the novel, we hear the voice of the Earth instead, as it drives up obstacles to sever the friendship between Aziz and his English companion Fielding:

[T]he earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn’t want it, and they said in their hundred voices, “No, not yet,” and the sky said, “No, not there.” (322)

It must be more, then, than just the Hindu god who sees all this, from the stirring of a single leaf to the oncoming tempest, who speaks for the Earth and the sky. A Passage to India, after all, contains a virtual pantheon: in addition to the eternal rebirths of Sri Krishna in the temple, we have the ninety-nine names of Allah written in black on a white marble frieze in an empty mosque, Mrs. Moore’s “poor little talkative Christianity,” and the nihilistic “ou-boum” from the Marabar caves (149-50). While searching for the last word among all these divinities, we might forget the gaze that encompases them all.

Forster’s all-knowing narrator, who sees things as small as a wasp or a tin-tack and things as grand as human oppression, seems to rule over everything, even the Gods, even the Caves. This voice is a deity, more powerful or at least more active and agile than Allah, than Christ, than Sri Krishna, than “ou-boum.” Sri Krishna, after all, is not a supreme being, even in Hinduism; he is an avatar, a manifestation of one of the great gods, Vishnu, He of a thousand names. Still of the same essence, but with a more narrow purpose, avatars descend to Earth to accomplish some divine end, and dissolve back into their supreme deities when they are no longer needed. Third-person narrators in fiction act in much the same way: they are inseparable from the
ultimate Creator, but with a more specific function, earth-bound, page-bound, and are thus easier to find, to analyze, to assign intentions and opinions to, than the elusive Author-god.

To begin Passage looking down out of the sky makes any mortal who arrives on the scene thereafter shrink to nearly the size of the wasp; characters become diminutive and easily manipulated by Sri Krishna’s divine blue hands. In such a malleable world, we are not quite so bound by realism; though set in historical India, the world of the novel simultaneously exists in the universe of all the holy texts that are strewn throughout, and the allegorical logic borrowed from Moses and Rama smooths over some of Forster’s more fanciful narrative devices. The fact that he as author has won our trust enough to allow such intrusion makes him all the more powerful. In the world of the novel, the narrator, this avatar of the Great God Forster, is responsible for creating coherence and sowing discord, for making sense and leaving us baffled, for sending rocks up from the Earth and judgment down from the sky.

*al-muntaqim: the avenger*

But Forster isn’t the only one who populates the world with a pantheon of narrator-demigods. All authors of fiction are Creators who ultimately control the lives of their characters, and it’s so standard for third-person narrators to have divine knowledge that we even incorporate religious terms into the literary vocabulary, referring to them as “omniscient.” Forster is only remarkable in the way he allows his avatar-narrator to reveal itself to us instead of vanishing into the page, becoming transparent. Often, a narrating voice is so unobtrusive that we forget its role as mediator and become convinced that we have an unfettered, objective view of the characters. Forster won’t let us fall into that trap: the narrator in *Passage* is ostentatiously divine, displaying his power and reach for all to see. If he is visible, if he has a personality, he becomes a character. Characters, no matter how disembodied, are at least partially human. And with humanity comes subjectivity, and fallibility, characteristics rampant in pagan times but taken out of many modern, sterilized religious discourses. In polytheistic traditions, as of the Greeks or the early Hindus, devoid of mysticism and abstraction, Gods were essentially human beings with access to vast amounts of power that they could barely control, and they played games with humans the way Forster plays with Godbole, Mrs. Moore, Aziz, and Adela. Those gods were jealous, intemper-
ate, passionate, and vengeful. Forster’s narrator is not just any deity but a pagan one, an Old Testament God, a Titan.

The old gods spoke not through parables but through tempests and minotaurs. Their messengers were not soft-spoken itinerant teachers but raving oracles who predicted death and destruction more often than salvation. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Sula*, Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison both exercise their ancient divine will through the garbled mouthpiece of a mad prophet. Their characters, Septimus and Shadrack, whom today we would know as sufferers of PTSD, are largely ignored by their peers, but their declarations, brief and assured—“Always” (Morrison 62) and “Men must not cut down trees” (Woolf 24)—ring true and resound over the relatively petty clamor of the societies around them. The title character in each novel finds meaning in her prophet’s madness in the end: Clarissa Dalloway hears of Septimus’s suicide and discovers her own salvation; Sula, dying young and painfully, is reassured by a memory from decades ago, an incoherent rambling of Shadrack’s that she now interprets as a promise of peace, a “sleep of water always” (149).

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*Morrison’s narrator is earthy, like Forster’s. *Sula* begins and ends not with Sula herself but with the rocky soil out of which she grew and into which she is returned: the Bottom, a facetious name for the black community in the nearly un-farmable highlands around Medallion, Ohio. Morrison gives us the hills long before she fills them with people, and we are reminded of what James Hillman tells us, in “Peaks and Vales,” that mountains are archetypes of the spirit, the seeking, driving part of the human mind, that peak-related experiences convey “godlikeness and God-nearness . . . absolutism and intensity,” purity, coldness, virginity (114). Vales, meanwhile, are the domain of the soul, fertile and feminine, “regarded as the scene of the mortal, the earthly, the lowly” (115). But Morrison takes this imagery and literally flips it, naming the high ground the “Bottom,” meaning, supposedly, the bottom of Heaven. The soil still doesn’t grow crops very well, but its fertility is unmatched when it comes to producing characters, vivid, emphatic, and bizarre. Morrison’s peaks are full of women, matriarchies as firmly embedded in the soil as the roots of the trees, while the men come and go, weightless. The only man who leaves any kind of imprint is Shadrack, the first character we meet, who wakes up in a hospital in the second chapter a year after the end of the First World War. Despite his obvious instability, he is released,
and Morrison guides her prophet home to the hills of Medallion to preach from the Mount.

These two tragic figures have more than a hint of Christ about them, especially Septimus, who quite early in the novel becomes convinced that he is “taken from life to death, the Lord come to renew society” (25). Shadrack, in an attempt to conquer the unpredictability of death, institutes National Suicide Day, one day a year devoted to death, so that “everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free” (14). It’s not just authors, though, who beget Christlike characters; the allegory entices any artist who wants to tell a story of transformation, including the Avett Brothers in their album *The Carpenter*. The first song, “The Once and Future Carpenter,” begins with a banjo riff, twangy and winding. The lyrics tell of a drifter who was once a carpenter but abandoned his trade and “took to the highway / a poet young and hungry.” If the title of the song isn’t enough to make us think of the life (and return) of Jesus, the last moment of the song provides the eucharist in pure musical form: the earthy banjo riff has been transformed into a sparkling, celestial piano.

What are we to make of these literary Titans, who grow characters from the fertile earth of their inverted valleys, send prophets to warn us of ruin and beget sons to die for our sins, shout down from the clouds with voices so clear and distinct we can’t help but notice them? What drove these authors to display their divinity so openly, to reside in the peaks of “godlikeness and God-nearness” that dwarf their characters in comparison? Why attempt to speak with the voice of God?

*YHWH: I am that I am*

“Miss, they write Allah!”

A small boy, one of my sixth-grade students, comes running across the soccer field, holding wide a sheet of newspaper covered in curling, stylized script. The newsprint is cheap and translucent, and even the expensive advertisements only print in three colors: black, green, and red.

“They write Allah,” the child repeats. He points at the place where the swirling green and black lines loop into the word *mash‘allah*—*as God wills*.

“We cannot throw away,” he says, his large black eyes peering worriedly over the top of the paper. He gesturers at the other students who are gathering the scattered papers from the brilliant green astroturf, the closest thing to grass we can get out here in the desert, and stuffing them into a gray plastic trash bin. “We must . . . fire it?” He makes a gesture like flicking a lighter.
“Okay,” I say. I take the paper from him.

I remember in fifth grade history class when Maddy Sall taught me to write “G-d” so that I could throw away my papers with a clear conscience. I wasn’t Jewish, and she didn’t think I was. If you’d asked me at the time I probably would have told you that I didn’t believe in God, in the same way that I didn’t believe in Santa Claus. But I picked up the habit in the way that children assimilate all myths, parables, dogmas, and fantasy stories into one great indeterminate mass of superstitious feeling, and for a time wrote “G-d,” thinking it mattered with the same lukewarm faith that kept me waiting for my letter from Hogwarts that summer.

In Nicole Krauss’s *The History of Love*, a little boy called Bird learns the same thing, that you cannot throw away anything that contains the secret name of God (the Tetragrammaton), and because he’s angry that his mother threw away everything that belonged to his dead father, he scribbles the four Hebrew letters on everything he can get his hands on, desperately clinging to what remains, using God’s name as an invocation to make everything around him indispensable, and thus eternal. When the boy goes away, I fold the newspaper and throw it away with the others.

*al-hafiz: the preserver*

Are we all Bird? Our creations are fragile, perishable, destined to rust. And if they fade, mold, crumble, if they are discarded and forgotten, what becomes of us, their creators? Are we stuffed into a bin and abandoned like cheap green-and-black newsprint? If our little friezes of natural perfection, the small handful of times each of us is able to take the painfully ephemeral beauty of nature and make it into something permanent, something with form, something that fights the vast indifference of the universe (the ou-boum); if even that permanence can be once again lost, destroyed, forgotten, discarded—have we not lost? So we sign, instead of our own name, the name of God, in the hope that the divine letters will ensure permanence, our immortality.

But it can’t be quite so simple, because Bird becomes so obsessed with mystic Judaism that he begins to believe himself to be the Messiah, jumps off a building and breaks his arm because he wants so badly to fly and believes so much that he can. Another character, a long-suffering elderly Polish Jew, sees him throwing stones into a fountain one day, and guesses that “probably he believe[s] he wasn’t made for this world. I wanted to say to him, *if not you, who?*” (Krauss 222).
For we must not become so wrapped up in our own divinity that we forget that we were made for this world, for life; that we, and our pagan Gods, grew from the soil. Bird forgot that before the Messiah can ascend to Heaven, he must walk among the salt of the earth, be a drifter, a poet, a carpenter. Another of Forster’s avatars writes in “Cnidus” of a cold, dark, muddy pilgrimage across a forgotten Greek island to visit a crumbling temple to Demeter, who “alone among gods has true immortality” (176). Millennia after the fall of that ancient civilization, the Earth goddess survives because she is the progenitor of the others; she is all we need. In “Winkelmann,” Walter Pater argues that, regardless of era or culture, out of the “soil” of human nature grows a “universal pagan sentiment” that transcends any higher religious philosophy placed atop it (201). This sentiment is “the broad foundation, in mere human nature, of all religions as they exist for the greatest number” (200). It is “ineradicable, like some persistent vegetable growth,” much like the slums of Chandrapore with all its “inhabitants of mud moving” and its outline persisting “like some low and indestructible form of life” (Pater 201; Forster 7). From the fertile soil of our human nature, the valley of the soul, we raise temples to Demeter, and then our rituals and art decorate them; other shrines follow, other gods, stories, songs, poems, mantras, novels, prophets. For as Forster shows us with his pantheon, we have as many names for God as we have uses for him, in Arabic, in Sanskrit, in Hebrew: 99 names of Allah, 1,000 names of Vishnu, and 7 names of God over Israel. And though they look down from the clouds, each came from the Earth, just as we did.

In “February Seven” and “Through My Prayers,” The Carpenter lifts us to Heaven on gently strummed strings, celestial piano and pentatonic melodies of harps eternal, as allusions to death and ascension surround us: “And as the last of breath was drawn from me / the light broke in and brought me to my feet.” In the penultimate song “Paul Newman vs. The Demons” we have also been to Hell, incongruously full of screeching guitar feedback, stiff-armed cymbal crashes, and wailing backup vocals. And now we are back on Earth for the last track, “Life.” Without ever pronouncing the word “life,” the singer gently extols it: “One comes of it, love it, love it / Let go of it, love
comes from it / We’re not of this world for long.” The melody neither soars nor dives, but steps up and skips down, alternating regularly, keeping us firmly planted in the soil of the soul. If not us, who?

Forster, Woolf, and Morrison, despite their lofty, powerful narrators, build their worlds out of color, texture, and character, keeping the world close at hand, drawing the life force of their novels from it. “Keep it, use it, build it, move it,” advise the Avett Brothers, still gently stepping and skipping up and down the hills of the Bottom, of the Marabar (The Carpenter “Life”).

We still might try to fly, like Bird, to make a racket as we crash to the ground, just to prove that we exist: “Watch us fly as loud as we can,” sing the Avetts, defiantly (The Carpenter “Life”). But in the end we know that no matter how fervently we believe in the power of the name of G-d, someone still might throw that newspaper away. The name remains, though, not in Heaven but here on Earth, for whenever we might need it, to borrow when we need to write a novel and want to begin from on high, looking down out of the sky.

The stepping and skipping ceases, the melody wavers and settles on a single note, a C#, the third, the sweetest of all, halfway between the celestial floating fifth and the bedrock root of the chord, and the Carpenter sings: “Oh, you and I know all too well / about the hell and paradise / Right here on earth.”

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