10 Kin Selection, Mendel's "Salutary Principle," and the Fate of Characters in Forster's The Longest Journey

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At the end of E.M. Forster’s *The Longest Journey* (1907), Rickie Elliot is killed by a train as he saves his half-brother Stephen by pushing him off the rails. It is, John Colmer exclaims, an “extraordinary” ending (“*The Longest Journey*” 63), and it has been criticized for too neatly resolving a convoluted plot and for cavalierly disposing of its protagonist. Even queer theorists, who have so radically reread and contextualized the plot’s apparent incoherencies, see Rickie’s sacrifice as a betrayal of the text’s queerness. Accepting these concerns, this chapter takes a new look at the novel, attending to its hitherto neglected engagement with genetics. *The Longest Journey* is obsessed, to quote one of its characters, with “hereditary business” (*Longest* 9). Examining Forster’s thematic and structural use of heredity, I suggest a new, enlarged outlook on the novel’s ethics, its treatment of character and its “overdetermined heroic ending” (Miracky, “Pursuing (a) Fantasy” 141).

To begin, a simple thought experiment. What can we learn about Rickie’s death from J.B.S. Haldane’s famous quip – that he would not risk his life to save his drowning brother, but would plunge in for two brothers or eight cousins (Marshall, “Ultimate Causes” 504)? In terms of evolutionary fitness, Haldane realized, the more closely related the rescuer and the drowning, the less it matters if the rescuer survives. Relatedness is, so to speak, overlap between individuals: identical twins overlap completely, being one genetic individual in two bodies; siblings overlap less (50%, on average), first cousins even less (12.5%, on average). Therefore, as Richard Dawkins updates Haldane, “the minimum requirement for a suicidal altruistic gene to be successful is that it should save more than two siblings ..., or more than four half-siblings ..., or more than eight first cousins, etc. Such a gene, on average, tends to live on in bodies of enough
individuals saved by the altruist to compensate for the death of the altruist itself” (100). There is strangeness indeed in this view of life. According to Haldane’s calculations, Rickie throws good genes after bad when he dies saving Stephen. It would take not one but “more than four half-siblings” to justify his sacrifice. Thus, Rickie’s cynical aunt Emily Failing appears to be right to eulogize him “as ‘one who has failed in everything he undertook’” (282). But then I have withheld some relevant details about Rickie and Stephen, details which complicate and reward a reading attuned to The Longest Journey’s particular genetic vision.

What follows is not, despite superficial resemblances, Literary Darwinism. I doubt this school of criticism can serve well outside its natural environment of social realism. A rigorous sociobiological reading would, I think, fail to register the modernist oddities that make The Longest Journey such a delightful read. My goal is neither to solve its “contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies” (Miracky 130), nor to take these as indicators of aesthetic failure (see Carroll, Literary Darwinism 145). My reading is, in fact, continuous with the ongoing revisionist approach to Forster, here summarized by Alan Wilde: “In forgoing some of our assumptions about the novels’ and stories’ aesthetic coherence we will discover heretofore unrecognized levels of complexity, which make of the books, if less perfect and autonomous creations, at any rate a more authentic record of Forster’s (and modernism’s) struggles” (69).

Seeking “unrecognized levels of complexity,” I pursue the analogy between Rickie and Haldane’s drowning siblings and discover in The Longest Journey a relatively coherent hereditary logic, one sufficiently informed by contemporary genetics to bring into play some strange implications of post-Darwinian biology. Upholding a vision of identity Forster found – or would find – congenial with Mendelism, The Longest Journey lives up to its reputation as a modernist Bildungsroman, demanding that we see beyond human characters to the tiny particles, now called genes, that “swarm in huge colonies … in you and in me” (Dawkins, Selfish Gene 21).” Thus, “the fate of characters” in my title plays on two planes of narrative action in The Longest Journey: on one, Rickie the developing human character; on the other, his inherited traits, or characters.

Such an estranging take on character confirms Forster’s status as a modernist, as does, more broadly, the cosmopolitanism of his biological engagements. Throughout his novels, Forster enacts cultural encounters to reveal the poverty of nationalistic or ethnocentric views of human nature. English prejudices and national myths are challenged by Italy in Where Angels Fear to Tread (1905) and A Room with a View (1908) and by India in A
Passage to India (1924). While The Longest Journey, by contrast, seems wholly English, its apparent insularity is deceptive. A pervasive but subtle German influence emerges, especially when we read it alongside Howards End (1910), which, despite many differences, rewrites the earlier novel (I will return shortly to their affinities). That is, Howards End exposes an indebtedness to German culture that is only latent in its predecessor. It challenges an English nationalism Forster abhorred by naming its heroine Margaret Schlegel and making her neither “English to the backbone” nor “German to the backbone” (26) but, rather, a composite of “the two supreme nations, streams of whose life warmed her blood, but, mingling, had cooled her brain” (198). Less overt in The Longest Journey, German thought occasionally surfaces: Hegel looms large both thematically and structurally, and the novel’s ethical centre, Ansell, is repeatedly associated with German aesthetics and philosophy.

For contemporary readers, moreover, the novel’s focus on genetics would have evoked a science that was still dominated by German names like August Weismann, Carl Correns, and Richard Goldschmidt. By the 1890s, Haeckel was more popular in England than in Germany (Holland, “Walter Garstang” 248). Such figures were, if not household names, familiar enough in England to give public lectures (Hans Driesch delivered the 1913 Gifford Lectures) and to publish in high-brow English periodicals like Fortnightly Review (where, in the 1890s, Weismann and Spencer aired their differences). If The Longest Journey was engaging with estranging scientific ideas, these would have struck its audience as strangely foreign to boot.

My focus on genes does not deny traditional views on character or human interest. Certainly, Rickie’s sacrifice is just that: an act of will and an expression of love, rather than a compulsion from his genes. And anyway, opposing human agency and genetic fitness is a bit of a straw man. Even Daniel Dennett, a most zealous neo-Darwinist, insists it is a mistake to think selfish genes survive because they cause us to act selfishly (Darwin’s Dangerous Idea 422–7); it is more accurate to say that the genes that survive appear to be selfish (by virtue of their having survived), which says very little about the nature of our own human choices. My point is not that Rickie is thinking with his genes when he sacrifices himself. The selection in kin selection does not indicate agency but, rather, the retrospective appearance of agency. Rickie’s choice in the moment makes sense to me only as a manifestation of agency, be it fully reasoned or partly instinctive. Insofar as he can be said to act on behalf of his genes, he does so only in the future perfect: at the moment of his sacrifice, he is not acting...
selfishly, but, rather, will have acted selfishly when his action is analysed in hindsight. In any case, I am simply proposing that attending to a genetic logic that Forster was evidently interested in allows us to uncover an additional dimension to the twin narratological problems of character and plot development. This doubling of plot trajectories sheds new light on queer Forster criticism and suggests a crucial role for contemporary biology, particularly Mendelism and neo-Darwinism, in Forster’s modernist ethics and aesthetics.

The great geneticist W.D. Hamilton, who formalized kin selection theory, believed an evolutionist must be endowed with “a fourth intellectual pigment of the retina capable of raising into clear sight patterns of nature and of the human future that are denied the majority of his fellows” (qtd. in Dugatkin, “Inclusive Fitness Theory” 1378). His theory certainly challenges received ideas, troubling conventional understandings of identity, family, altruism, heroism, and success—primary concerns of real life and fiction alike. Undoubtedly, any major scientific theory can, as Gillian Beer argues, “disturb assumed relationships and shift what has been substantial into metaphor” (Darwin’s Plots 1). Quantum mechanics explodes our most fundamental ideas about reality—but then it hardly demands a revision of daily life, or of the narratives we spin to comprehend it. By contrast, a new genetic theory is always a new vision of human nature, of our individual and collective potential for improvement, of our past and destiny, of our very make-up and identity. Formalizing Haldane’s anecdote of drowning kin (Dugatkin 1378), Hamilton opened up vistas as strange as Einstein’s or Planck’s. But his hit closer to home.

Hamilton’s kin selection model inaugurated the now orthodox framework in evolutionary biology, Inclusive Fitness Theory. In this view, selection acts not on groups or individuals but on genes; individuals are mere vessels for selfish genes. This is certainly unsettling. A theory that reduces bodies into “survival machines” for genes (Dawkins 21) and behaviours into “apparent strategies” for optimizing fitness (Buss, “Mate Preference Mechanisms” 263) cannot but deliver an ontological shock. Even a champion of post-humanism like Donna Haraway shrinks from it, though she recognizes its potentially productive challenge to the myths of identity: “the pov [point of view] of the gene gives me a curious vertigo that I blame on the god-like perspective of my autotelic entity” (Modest 133).3

This “curious vertigo” distorts the stories we live by and those we produce as art. It has been exploited thematically in Ian McEwan’s Enduring Love (1997) and David Lodge’s Thinks … (2001). More pertinent here, it
can shape narratives. Both Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galápagos* (1985) and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2001), for example, are structured by the randomness of survival and the discrepancies between individual merit and reproductive fitness (Vonnegut’s Captain von Kleist is a total failure who, as a new Noah, fathers all future humans). That these two novels feature multiple generations and emphasize reproduction is not incidental: we should expect to find Inclusive Fitness Theory associated with certain literary genres (the family saga, the Bildungsroman, cyberpunk, Naturalism). The features that make these genres amenable to the logic of inclusive fitness predate by decades or centuries its formalization in the 1960s; the genres were, so to speak, pre-adapted to intersect with selfish genetics. For this reason, we can speak of inclusive fitness at work in novels as old as *The Longest Journey*.

Anachronistic as it may seem, my claim is supported by historical precedents. Indeed, the basic insights of inclusive fitness inhere in the work of Francis Galton (1822–1911) and Weismann (1834–1914), who both distinguished mortal bodies from potentially immortal genetic lines (Olby, *Origins of Mendelism* 57). Kin selection originates even earlier. In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin explains the puzzling existence of sterile worker-bees by proposing that “selection may be applied to the family, as well as to the individual, and may thus gain the desired end” (237). Aspects of inclusive fitness are therefore latent in Darwinism itself. If its precise articulation demands statistical and genetic knowledge unavailable before the 1920s, its implications could nevertheless emerge from earlier fictional treatments of heredity.

In the context of fiction, this emergence requires that the narratives meet specific conditions: a plot structured by genealogy; character relations stressing reproduction and kinship; and, crucially, a model of heredity sufficiently consistent with the modern notion of genes. The first two conditions are easily met; the limiting factor is the hereditary model, partly because most novels have concerns other than generating coherent genetic theories. Clearly, inclusive fitness would not obtain in a plot dictated by Lamarckian, or soft, inheritance. In soft inheritance, the genetic material changes as the body reacts to experience and environment; genetic identity is too closely aligned with personal identity for genes to act selfishly. The Lamarckian vision so intertwines the individual with the hereditary that Samuel Butler uses the word “personality” to speak of both (*Life and Habit* 78 ff.).

What is needed, then, is hard inheritance, “the essential constancy of the genetic material” (Mayr, *Growth of Biological Thought* 755). Hard
inheriting decouples genetic from personal identity: the mother’s blue-eyed gene continues in her son – even if his eyes are brown – and it could be traced back along her family tree for countless generations. Hard inheritance is exactly what we find in The Longest Journey, whose implicit genetic theory, stressing inherited traits, genetic determinism, and shared descent, demands readings that discriminate between the fate of characters and the fate of their genes.

A brief précis of The Longest Journey reveals a plot dictated by genealogical events – births, deaths, marriages, fertile couplings. Rickie has a hereditary clubfoot; marries Agnes Pembroke; and fathers a severely crippled daughter whose death convinces him “no child should ever be born to him again” (184). He learns that Stephen Wonham, a rustic drunk raised by Rickie’s aunt Emily, is his illegitimate half-brother. More conventional than he would like to think, Rickie blames his hated father for the bastard and accordingly rejects Stephen; in reality, Stephen is the son of Rickie’s beloved mother and Robert, a farmer. The revelation should surprise no one, for the kinship had to be maternal: all Elliots have a clubfoot, and Stephen has not. In any case, Rickie has a change of heart, leaves Agnes, moves to the country and dies under the train as inevitably as Anna Karenina. The novel closes idyllically with Stephen, now married and living off the royalties of Rickie’s posthumously successful book, camping in the woods with a daughter named after his and Rickie’s mother.

My crude summary strips the novel of its charm, but it suffices for demonstrating the narrative’s structural reliance on genealogy. “We are expected always to bear the circumstances of [Rickie’s] parentage in mind,” as an early reviewer complained (qtd. in Gardner, E.M. Forster, 66). Like Howards End, The Longest Journey is shaped by genealogical events. Like Howards End, it enacts its drama and generates its values by having biological bloodlines overlap with and diverge from material or spiritual legacies. Like Howards End, it features the tortuously indirect inheritance of a country house and exploits the contrasts between legitimacy and bastardy, and between being “normal” and being cursed with “something congenital or hereditary” (Howards 285). Both novels resolve their notoriously complicated plots and give coherence to their unwieldy narrative structures by dividing the labour of inheritance between siblings.

Unlike his use of siblings, Forster’s engagements with heredity enjoy little attention. Yet the two issues are inextricable. In Howards End, for example, Margaret Schlegel inherits Howards End but, choosing childlessness, bequeaths the house to her sister’s illegitimate son. In “Tony and Ralph,” the titular males find a way to live together through Ralph’s
marriage of convenience to Tony’s sister. In *The Longest Journey*, the sibling relation is so important that the whole narrative hangs on the precise nature of Rickie and Stephen’s kinship and on the actions their kinship inspires.

*The Longest Journey* heralds its genetic concerns early. We soon learn that Rickie is “rather lame” and that his lameness is “hereditary” (6, 9). His difficulties are then summarized as a predicament reminiscent of Hardy’s Jude: “‘He says he can’t ever marry, owing to his foot. It wouldn’t be fair to posterity. His grandfather was crocked, his father too, and he’s as bad. He thinks that it’s hereditary, and may get worse next generation … He daren’t risk having any children’” (50). Consistent with such genetic determinism, Rickie frequently appears as a replica of his father. Even to his mother he is, unflatteringly, “the little boy who looked exactly like” her husband. At first glance, then, the novel seems to posit an inexorable hereditary curse, whereby “‘the sins of the parents are visited on the children’” (*Longest* 261). Nowhere is Forster more clearly indebted to Naturalism and its assumption of “absolute determinism in all human phenomena” (Zola, “Roman” 324). The Elliot curse recalls the “thrust of [the] hereditary lesion” in Zola’s *Germinal* (1885), which drives Étienne, “despite his communist theories” and “his moral education,” to drink and “end up an assassin” (566, 423). Determinism hangs as inexorably, if less heavily, over Rickie. So he is understandably annoyed when Aunt Emily tells him, “‘you are so like your father … It is curious – almost terrible – to see history repeating itself’” (*Longest* 92).

*The Longest Journey*’s hereditary vision is, however, more nuanced, and its complexity rests partly on Forster’s ability to use up-to-date theories of heredity. For historical if for no other reasons, Zola’s novels are vague about the hereditary operations that shape his Rougon-Macquart cycle. In the preface to *La fortune des Rougon* (1871), the families he “studies” are victims of hereditary energies and inclinations, of “the slow succession of neurological and blood symptoms that arise in a race following an original organic lesion and determine in individuals of that race, according to the environment, the emotions, desires, passions, all those human manifestations whose products are called virtues or vices” (“Préface” 302). This view, typical of mid-nineteenth-century science, assigns family resemblances to contending ancestral forces, habits, or tendencies. In the decades leading up to Forster’s novel, however, such models were being discredited by evidence for inheritance by material particles (Olby 63; Mayr 735). Galton’s *particles*, Weismann’s *biophores*, and Hugo de Vries’s *pangens* all require, in various ways, “a transportation of material particles...
which are bearers of the individual hereditary characteristics” (Vries, *Intracellular Pangenesis* 7).

The genetic theory implicit in *The Longest Journey* is of the particulate variety. This may be unexpected: Forster is typically considered a disciple of Samuel Butler’s theory of unconscious memory and progressive evolution (Heath, *Creator as Critic* 328). All the same, *The Longest Journey* contains a single explicit reference to genetics, and it foregrounds particulate inheritance, which is almost necessarily incompatible with Lamarckism. Thus, Emily mocks the pamphlets Stephen reads to support his evolutionism: “‘One of those sixpenny books tells [him] that he’s made of hard little black things, another that he’s made of brown things, larger and squashy. There seems a discrepancy, but anything is better for a thoughtful youth than to be made in the Garden of Eden’” (103). Emily references contemporary debates about heredity, but both sides assume physical units – “little black” or “brown things.” Her sarcasm could be read as a reliable indicator of the novel’s genetic vision, but this reading is unsupported by the text: *The Longest Journey* always sides with Stephen against Emily. Moreover, she knows enough about how Stephen was “made” – in a real-life imitation of “‘French comedy’” (236), complete with cuckoldry, elopement, and farcical hypocrisy – to raise the reader’s suspicions about the sincerity of her appeal to the “Garden of Eden.”

This passage must suffice, given the absence of Lamarckian or other such alternatives, to align the novel’s genetic theory with particulate inheritance. Particles, unlike forces, are highly conserved across generations, retaining their molecular identity despite the vicissitudes of their carriers’ lives. This conservatism has a weird corollary. Heredity is not about the person, or personal essence or identity, but about the particles housed within that person. Galton vividly illustrates this odd logic by likening the body to “a post office” and genetic particles to “heaps of letters” (qtd. in Olby, 63): the post office is just temporary storage space, and it is the letters and their movements that matter. If hereditary units are particles whose integrity and identity are conserved despite their carrier’s environment and actions, their fate is at least partly distinct from that of the carrier. As Galton and later Weismann argued, the hereditary line (Galton’s *stirp*, Weismann’s *germ-plasm*) is fundamentally distinct from the body (Galton’s person, Weismann’s soma). In Weismann’s words, “The cells of the organism are differentiated into two essentially different groups, the reproductive cells – ova or spermatozoa, and the somatic cells, or cells of the body … The immortality of the unicellular organism has only passed over to the former; the others must die, and since the body of the individual
is chiefly composed of them, it must die also” (Essays 111). This model, as retrospect reveals, approximates the gene-centred view of evolution.

The germ-soma division allows us to reassess Rickie and Stephen’s relation. They are, in this light, two somatic bodies whose germ lines overlap and whose genetic fates are therefore partially co-implicated. Rickie’s change of heart about Stephen thus appears to be justified by the novel’s genetic theory. When Rickie thinks Stephen is his paternal half-brother, he imagines they are competing for posterity. When his daughter dies, then, the outcome of the competition seems fixed: “There isn’t any future,” he tells Agnes, believing that “he, because his child had died, was dead” (190, 192). So he is rather upset by the prospect of healthy Stephen propagating the Elliot line. “As a final insult,” Rickie muses, his father

had brought into the world a man unlike all the rest of them, a man dowered with coarse kindliness and rustic strength, a kind of cynical ploughboy, against whom their own misery and weakness might stand more vividly relieved … For that Stephen was bad inherently he never doubted for a moment and be would have children: he, not Rickie, would contribute to the stream; he, through his remote posterity, might be mingled with the unknown sea. (192, my emphasis)

The metaphorical equation of stream and lineage remains after Rickie discovers his maternal relation to Stephen. But its connotations change for the better:

Something had changed … On the banks of the gray torrent of life, love is the only flower. A little way up the stream and a little way down had Rickie glanced, and he knew that she whom he loved had risen from the dead, and might rise again. “Come away – let them die out – let them die out … Let me die out. She will continue,” he murmured, and in making plans for Stephen’s happiness, fell asleep. (250–1)

Moments earlier, Rickie had saved his drunken half-brother from tipping over a banister, signalling his change of heart and foreshadowing his death. Knowing his true relation to Stephen, he finds his world transformed. Yet nothing structural has changed in the relation between them; according to the branches of a family tree they are still as closely related, half-brothers. The source of kinship matters more than its degree.

Significantly, Rickie, who resembles his father more than his mother, had already sensed fellow-feeling for Stephen “down in what they call
the subconscious self’’ (191) – in, it could be said, the maternal elements lying latent in him. In any case, with the revelation of their maternal relation, what began as competition becomes what behavioural ecologists call reciprocal altruism. By facilitating Stephen’s survival he ensures the survival of part of his own genetic makeup. Rickie believes himself “unfitted in body” and “in soul” (81), as he must remember every time he sings his school anthem, which begins, “Perish each laggard!” (158). This line, as implausible as it may seem, is lifted unchanged from Forster’s own childhood school anthem, and Rickie probably sings it, as did Forster, thinking he will “be a prisoner throughout life’s battle.” The way out, writes Forster, is having “the courage to become a laggard” (“Literature” 89). In Stephen, Rickie finds the courage and a reason to let himself perish.

It is not pure selflessness that moves him to “gaz[e] at the pure stream to which he would never contribute” and sacrifice himself so that Stephen might contribute instead. It is, rather, an “apparent strateg[y]” (Buss 263) for transmitting the maternal traits he considers the best of him, happily divorced from any Elliot element. Rickie has found a way to survive genetically, to live on in the next generation without contributing directly to it. The situation recalls Darwin’s early version of kin selection, designed to explain how traits in sterile individuals might nevertheless survive genealogically: “I have such faith in the powers of selection,” writes Darwin, “that I do not doubt that a breed of cattle, always yielding oxen with extraordinarily long horns, could be slowly formed by carefully watching which individual bulls and cows, when matched, produced oxen with the longest horns; and yet no one ox could ever have propagated its kind” (238). Voluntarily sterile as an ox, Rickie may be “a stream that never reaches the ocean” (246). But “streams do divide” (272): a channel of his mother’s stream is in him, combined with the Elliot line, but another channel, untouched by Elliot blood, has been diverted into Stephen. For Rickie, this makes his brother “the future of our race” (289).

The dividing streams offer Rickie a chance to correct a past mistake: his mother’s naive “marrying into the Elliot family” (235) – a choice aptly described, given the novel’s fluvial conceit, as “a plunge taken ... from the opposite bank” (22). By sacrificing himself for Stephen, he aborts the future of his paternal line without imperilling the maternal. This goal he cannot achieve as an individual; though he does symbolically manage to divorce his maternal and paternal selves when the train severs his (it is implied) crippled leg, the severance costs him his somatic life.

Instead, the effective division of streams occurs at the genetic level, in the future children that Rickie had previously begrudged his brother.
Helping Stephen now appears an interested act: Rickie saves Stephen so that Stephen can perpetuate the genetic particles they share. Reading Rickie’s sacrifice as reciprocal altruism is supported by a draft of the previously quoted passage beginning “Something had changed” (250). Having discovered his true relation to Stephen, Rickie kisses his brother as “the portrait of their mother look[s] down upon them both” and prophesies:

“She has risen from the dead … Living in houses, as I must, we forget Nature. But at times … she enters and makes her comment. She has commented on me. I daresay you have heard about my child … I can bear to die out now … I have seen just a little way up and down the generations, and I know there is a purpose in the tiny corner of the world that I have touched … I stand with my face to the night[, but] it is not really darkness, for [those] I loved are handing the torches on … Nothing greater could happen to me – not even a child of my own.” (376, my emphasis)

Rickie’s survey of both past and future reveals the role he must play in order to extend, despite his refusal to have “a child of [his] own,” his genetic existence. He must purge the Elliot from the extension of his mother’s line. In Rickie the two lineages coexist, but Stephen is not so burdened (he inherits, however, his father Robert’s alcoholism).

The determinism in The Longest Journey is less devastating than Zola’s, but not because Forster’s genetic theory is gentler. It is, instead, deterministic in ways that are neither simple nor linear. The Elliot curse is an irrevocable fact for Rickie, but it tells only half of his hereditary story; the other half is told by his mother. The genetic shuffling that accompanies reproduction belies any vulgar form of genetic determinism, by which we are copies of one of our parents. As we have seen, Rickie seems at first a copy of his father, who “resembled his son, being weakly and lame, with hollow little cheeks, a broad white band of forehead, and stiff impoverished hair” (22). His mother finds him to be “exactly like [his father] in disposition” (239). Yet the narrator insists they are not identical: Mr. Elliot’s “voice, which he did not transmit, was very suave … Nor did he transmit his eyes” (22, my emphases).

Rickie does not, in fact, exactly resemble his father in every trait; some traits, those the narrative deems desirable, descend from his mother. As in Weismann’s theory, Rickie’s inheritance involves recombination, the shuffling of genetic particles so necessary for introducing variation into procreation. Recombination on its own, however, does not allow Rickie’s genetic survival in Stephen’s daughter. As in most nineteenth-century
genetic theories, including Darwin’s and Galton’s (as well as Butler’s), Weismann’s model assumes the fusion of parental characters, producing in the offspring an indivisible blend (see, e.g., *Germ-Plasm* 239). If inheritance is blending, Rickie and Stephen still share maternal genetic material; but the material is altered by the paternal elements with which it is mixed, and there is therefore no real genetic identity between the half-brothers. To put it schematically,

Mr Elliot + Mrs Elliot → Rickie

Robert × Mrs Elliot → Stephen

The maternal element shared by Rickie and Stephen exists (○), to be sure, but its molecular identity has been modified. This blending model precludes the type of genetic survival I have outlined for Rickie, for in no sense would any part of him literally be preserved in Stephen and his daughter.

This outcome, which the novel appears to endorse, requires that maternal and paternal elements unite without fusing, retaining their integrity and independence:

Mr Elliot + Mrs Elliot → Rickie

Robert Θ Mrs Elliot → Stephen

If inheritance is non-blending, odds are good Rickie and Stephen share O, an atomistic genetic element unchanged by its combination with the complementary elements from different fathers.

The genetic theory in question must be Mendelism. Though formulated in the 1860s, Mendel’s discoveries failed to reach a substantial audience before 1900, when they were rediscovered by de Vries, Carl Correns, and Erich von Tschermak and then, in England, championed by William Bateson and popularized by Reginald Punnett in *Mendelism* (1905). Mendel would also find a champion in Forster.

Mendelian inheritance involves genetic particles (now called genes), each coding for a specific trait. Each gene is transmitted independently from the genes coding for other traits. This is the Mendelian Law of Independent Assortment (the other is the Law of Segregation, which states...
that somatic cells contain two copies of each gene-variant, or allele, e.g., Rickie’s Ourrence, but that each sex cell contains only one of the other, i.e., either O or occurrence (Morgan, Physical Basis 15–16). The independence of each allele from the others allows offspring to inherit idiosyncratic mixes of their parents’ genetic constitution.

Paternal inheritance is, in Rickie, the primary source of traits mentioned in the text, and it largely determines his development and life story. But the narrative clearly favours the maternal source, and from this valuation emerges a crucial system of narrative values. Knowing to consider what traits Rickie inherited from which parent, we find ourselves more attuned to the novel’s norms. Because we know Rickie inherited his eyes from his mother and his club foot from his father, for example, we can deduce a lot from metaphors like Rickie “shut[ting] his eyes” to the failure of his marriage or dying from the amputation of his crippled foot.

Rickie’s voice is especially significant. It is the special property and gift of his mother, “a girl whose voice was beautiful. There was no caress in it yet all who heard it were soothed, as though the world held some unexpected blessing” (22). Rickie even owes his existence to it, for it is what brought his parents together. We are never told explicitly that Rickie inherited his mother’s voice, but this is strongly implied by the negation of paternal inheritance: Mr Elliot’s “voice ... he did not transmit” (22). The maternal inheritance of voice is further supported in the metonymy that reduces Rickie to one of “the voices of boys who should call her mother” (240). The other boy, Stephen, does have her voice; when he asks Rickie to leave Agnes, Rickie has no real reason to accept, but he is persuaded by one crucial, hereditary reminder of his mother. Stephen’s words were kind; yet it was not for their sake that Rickie plunged into the impalpable cloud. In the voice he had found a surer guarantee. Habits and sex may change with the new generation, features may alter with the play of a private passion, but a voice is apart from these. It lies nearer to the racial essence and perhaps to the divine; it can, at all events, overlap one grave. (257–8)

In Stephen’s voice Rickie hears his mother and therefore, for the first time, can see Stephen as one of the “real brothers” he pined for when he was a boy (24).

Rickie’s lameness and voice have different sources, and they therefore exert separate influences on our understanding of Rickie as a character. Each of his traits must be considered independently. Reading Rickie’s fate
and relation to Stephen, we must follow Bateson’s Mendelian warning against seeing heredity at the individual level: instead, “the heredity of each character [trait] must be separately investigated” (Mendel’s 8). This allows us to disentangle and decouple the genetic material combined in his soma and to look beyond the individual and “a little way up and down the generations” (Longest 376). Decoupling the inheritance of paternal lameness from maternal voice, Forster allows the genetic overlap between Rickie and Stephen to perform a material, as well as symbolic, role in Rickie’s fate: genes identical to his, genes sharing a common history, literally survive in Stephen’s daughter, a possibility inconceivable under blending inheritance. Thus, Forster proposes a genetic escape from genetic determinism. Realizing he embodies not one but two lineages, Rickie finds an escape from the genetic curse that, he thought, led only to his extinction. “The son of his mother had come back,” the narrator says (Longest 249), referring to Stephen but using free indirect discourse and deictic shifters (“the son,” “his mother”) to include also Rickie. Agnes is right, though not in the way she imagines, to believe “he’ll come back in the end” (261).

This Mendelian solution, easily accommodated into the Inclusive Fitness framework, is rather neat. Too neat – for it cannot quiet a lingering doubt, which I must detail before venturing on to suggest how Forster uses genetics strategically to further his ethical and political beliefs and construct his queer and modernist poetics.

The narrative solution of making Stephen a maternal brother may satisfy a gene-centred reading, but it lends a troubling triumphalism to Rickie’s death. Some readers are, of course, untroubled and applaud Rickie’s self-sacrifice. To Frieda Lawrence, for example, “Rickie of course isn’t a bit dead, it’s only one of those many healthsome deaths one dies” (qtd. in Gardner, 97). My own reading is not innocent of such abstraction. Also troubling, Forster’s solution perhaps too starkly reduces the desire for one’s own children to the genetic rewards of procreation, and thus risks endorsing Rickie’s willingness to forgo the children he wanted. Unsettling is his realization of “the cruelty of Nature, to whom our refinement and piety are but as bubbles, hurrying downwards on the turbid waters. They break, and the stream continues” (192). At the human scale, the cost to him is too high and paid perhaps too readily. Is Rickie’s death not a little too convenient, an easy way to eliminate an “unfitted” character (Longest 81)? Is not Stephen’s inheritance of Rickie’s posthumous royalties the novel’s way of saying it “can’t stand unhealthiness” (49)? Does it not endorse Rickie’s self-loathing attempt to restore the status quo by offering
his (monetary) inheritance to Agnes and her fiancé Gerald, thus harmonizing good income with good heredity?

Let us register these important concerns, but without repudiating the genetic reading above. Abandoning the genetic perspective would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Indeed, a biologically informed reading of *The Longest Journey* proves not at all inconsistent with Forster’s career-long assault on prejudice or, for that matter, with recent queer interpretations of his work. In fact, by resolving Forster’s seemingly paradoxical investment in both non-reproductive homoeroticism and procreation, the model by which Rickie survives genetically in Stephen’s daughter grants the homosexual soma freedom from the genealogical imperative, without entirely closing off the genealogical future. It is telling that Edward Carpenter, whom Forster admired, would point to the “evolution of the worker-bee” from “two ordinary bee sexes” (*Intermediate* 11) – the very phenomenon that inspired Darwin to hypothesize kin selection – as a model of how homosexuals might contribute to a more harmonious future society.

Carpenter deplored the increasing differences between heterosexual men and women, a polarization he considered a symptom of unchecked progress. If individuals or societies are too forward-driven, he argues, their energies are dissipated and they become “woody” and “ossified” (*Angels* 244). The best hope for the future is, he suggests elsewhere, the mediating influence of “the intermediate sex or sexes” (*Intermediate* 12). Homosexuality thus contributes to Carpenter’s notion of “the Return to Nature,” “a reversionary process” or “counter-current” whereby “one … feels back within oneself for another point of departure farther down” (*Angels* 219, 246–7). Carpenter defines the return to nature both as individual and society tonic and as evolutionary reversion, illuminating how Rickie, who tends to settle for a bad lot, is awoken by his true relation with the child of nature Stephen.

The boost Rickie feels from glancing “a little way up the stream and a little way down” (*Longest* 250) signals how his kinship with Stephen might serve his own interests. In a maternal half-brother, he finds a genetic alternative to having “a child of [his] own” without sacrificing what he inherited from his mother (*Longest* 376). He recognizes a way to unmarry her from the Elliot family. Rickie’s reversionary return to nature is not only the theme of his stories (all “harping on this ridiculous idea of getting into touch with Nature” [71]): it is the fate of his genes. At a moral and genealogical impasse, Rickie is saved by a sort of strategic atavism – an artistic return to myth, a literal move to the Wiltshire countryside, and a
genetic step back that allows him to revive his mother’s line and simultaneously shed his paternal inheritance. It is a boost because he can fulfil this goal without yielding to the reproductive imperative.

Forster’s homosexual Maurice Hall finds happiness by accepting, despite his desire for children, “the way of all sterility” (Maurice 78). But in the formally if not substantively queerer Longest Journey, Rickie need not make such a choice, though he, too, resigns himself to childlessness. Nor must he follow Clive Durham and “become normal” in order to fulfil “the need of an heir” (Maurice 97). For Clive, procreation is the key to status and a conventionally good life, so he chooses to perpetuate the “visible work” of his forebears, who “handed on the torch their sons would tread out” (Maurice 78). Rickie, thanks to his partial genetic identity with Stephen, finds another means of “handing the torches on” (Longest 376), which demands not a pragmatic switch to heterosexuality and conventionality but a principled and deeply felt switch away from them. He must reject his loveless marriage and bleak suburban job and follow Stephen into the countryside. Clive compromises himself by accepting to let “Nature catch up this dropped stitch in order to continue her pattern” (Maurice 114), but Rickie, through Stephen, can remain a “dropped stitch” and yet still contribute materially to the genealogical “pattern.”

My brief excursion into Carpenter’s ideas suggests that Rickie’s sacrifice might avail itself of queer interpretations not yet envisaged by queer theorists. Forster studies have been profoundly reinvigorated by queer theory, thanks largely to Judith Herz’s identification of the “double nature of Forster’s fiction” (“Double Nature” 254). In this model, Forster’s fictions underlay the heterosexual surface-plot (darling of Merchant-Ivory productions) with a homosexual under-plot. This duality is often presented competitively, following Herz’s argument that “one [plot] is true, the other a lie. Finally one or the other is displaced” (257). Of The Longest Journey, for instance, Scott Nelson bemoans Rickie and Stephen’s kinship as a betrayal of the under-plot: “Forster displaces the homoerotic elements of the ‘friendship’ by making them half-brothers” (qtd. in Miracky, 141).

Herz’s model has helped uncover in Forster’s fiction a veritable wealth of ethical, ideological and aesthetic complexity. Yet such a powerful model inevitably brings its own blinders. An unfortunate consequence of focusing on the under-plot has therefore been the neglect of elements too easily attributed to the surface, heterosexual “lie.” Illustrating this neglect, John Beer argues that “homosexuality gave [Forster] an ‘outsider’s’ view of things, making him look at the world from a point of view which did not regard marriage or the procreation of children as central” (qtd. in
Martland, E.M. Forster, 20). Beer is not wrong, but his argument significantly underrates the importance, also noted by Elizabeth Heine (“Editor’s Introduction” xxi), of reproduction throughout Forster’s fiction. In Where Angels Fear to Tread, Gino and Lilia’s baby is part of the heterosexual surface-plot, but he also energizes, by his parentage and death, the homoerotic under-plot linking Gino and Philip (Herz 255). Forster often thus distances reproduction from a simple heteronormative ideal: parents are of mixed race or rank (Lilia and Gino; Helen and Leonard; Mrs Elliot and Robert), and their offspring tend to catalyse same-sex dynamics (Gino and Philip; Helen and Margaret; Rickie and Stephen).

A reading sensitive to genetics disputes the view that Rickie’s death is an aesthetic and political failure, on Forster’s part, to let his plot endorse the homoerotic bond between Rickie and Stephen. Contemporary sexology had established that homosexuality was at least sometimes congenital, as Forster knew (Heine xxi–iv). It is therefore important to examine how The Longest Journey coordinates its queer poetics with its complex treatment of heredity. A key dynamic here is, I think, the favouring of horizontal over vertical genetic transmission, which Stefani Engelstein discusses in her contribution to this volume. A pertinent example here would be how kin selection has been invoked to explain the otherwise perplexing evolutionary survival of the “gay gene” (Ridley 279–80), and in Forster’s novel it similarly bridges, tentatively, the apparently unbridgeable surface and under-plots. It allows different fates for the men and for their genes. On one level Rickie can follow Stephen “as a man” and “not as a brother” (257), thus preserving the homoeroticism some critics find incompatible with kinship (Miracky 141); on the other, genetic level the narrative exploits the precise nature of their kinship in order to further a seemingly contradictory set of interests.

This is not to say biology resolves everything. Indeed, The Longest Journey, like all Forster’s novels, features an absolutely central system of non-genetic connections, which space prevents me from examining (these include, most notably, the affinities between Mr Failing and his “spiritual heir” Rickie (195) and between Rickie and Ansell). Even so, a genetic reading challenges the facile equation of the hetero/homosexual, reproductive/non-reproductive, and biological/cultural dichotomies.

A genetic perspective transcends these categories largely because it complicates and revises what it means to be an individual. Critics who deplore The Longest Journey’s incoherence as “a confused and inadequate vision of life” (Colmer 64) are, one might say, too narrowly focused on the human level in a narrative that defamiliarizes what it is to be a
human. If, by contrast, we read Rickie as a bundle of independent traits with underlying genetic particles, a surprising parallel emerges between his self-inconsistency and those of the narrative itself. John Harvey might be writing about the character instead of the novel when he complains that “the disparate elements of which it is composed are never brought together into any kind of unity; at best they lie uneasily side by side” (qtd. in Colmer, 64). Sure, even the most post-humanist among us probably fails to be consoled by the view that our persons are evolutionarily disposable, and it is neither possible nor really desirable to be totally comfortable with Rickie’s death. But the discomfort is instructive, because it not only highlights the undeniable aesthetic and political compromises in Forster’s narrative solution, but also signals his attempt to reimagine character, and by extension humanness, in politically and ethically productive ways.

As a character, Rickie hardly coheres. He is, as Agnes tactfully ventures, “‘a little – complicated’” (104). At least one contemporary reviewer agreed: “Rickie is drawn with too much care, his broader tendencies obscured by too many minor touches” (qtd. in Gardner, 66). The minor touches are so prominent that Rickie never becomes a character in the sense of “a repeatable integrity of form” (Abbott, “Character and Modernism” 393) or “a compendium of traits … which gradually concatenate into a represented whole” (Levenson, Modernism 109). He has, as another early reviewer notes, “capacities for re-organizing himself” (Gardner 89) and even his name indicates his being “rickety” (“Mr. Elliot had dubbed him Rickie because he was rickety”; 23). To the end, he remains a more or less jumbled collection of physical features, ideas, attitudes, phrases, many of which survive, through genetic or other modes of transmission, his somatic death.

It is in this character incoherence that Forster carves out a future for Rickie – or rather for particles of Rickie. Recast as an archive of independent genes, Rickie avails himself of partial resurrection through what I have called strategic atavism, a biologically inflected development that is politically potent because atavism “punctures the modern idea of the self as individual and autonomous,” and, as such, “open[s] up liberal notions of the privatized subject to the genealogical record” (Seitler, Atavistic Tendencies 2). Excluded by his disability and sexuality from so much of his world, Rickie is given some form of hope in the failure to cohere, a failure allowing Forster to reclaim, as did Carpenter, the “reversionary process” (Carpenter, Angels’ 246) that was written off as pathology or perversion by contemporary racist, misogynistic, and homophobic pseudoscience.
Forster valued Mendel because his theory explained scientifically why humans, like peas, “keep throwing up recessive characteristics,” atavisms (“Racial” 19). Mendelism, in Forster’s view, confronts the human “desire to feel a hundred per cent” – the dangerous longing behind class-consciousness, nationalism and racism. From being “all of a piece” (ibid.), the self is reconstituted by Mendelism as a mosaic, each piece independent, some pieces lying latent until their reversion generations later.

Such atavisms participate rather subtly in The Longest Journey, in the genealogical structure of the narrative and under the cloak of symbolism worn by phrases like “risen from the dead” (Longest 251). But there is one intriguing hint of specifically Mendelian heredity: Robert, Stephen’s father, woos Mrs Elliot with “an armful of sweet-peas” (235), his plant leitmotif. Sweet peas were also, of course, a favourite of early Mendelians, yielding some of the first major discoveries of twentieth-century experimental genetics. As Punnett writes in the preface to the 1907 edition of Mendelism, “the sweet pea and the stock have yielded up their secret, and we are at last able to form a clear conception of the meaning of ‘reversion’” (vi). Later in the book, he notes that “the case of the sweet pea throws a flood of light upon a widespread phenomenon which has long puzzled the naturalist: the phenomenon of reversion on crossing,” whereby white-flowered plants give plants with “red, or purple” flowers (Punnett 53). When Mrs Elliot elopes with Robert, her husband finds the drawing room “littered with sweet-peas. Their colour got on his nerves – magenta, crimson; magenta, crimson. He tried to pick them up, and they escaped. He trod them underfoot, and they multiplied and danced in the triumph of summer like a thousand butterflies” (236–7). It seems that in the union that will produce Stephen, reversion has bested Mr Elliot, “‘a country man on the road to sterility’” (246).

The genetic vision behind such biological references is elucidated by more explicitly biological moments in Forster’s other works. In Arctic Summer, Venetia Whitby, who understands heredity as “Mendelism” (148), outlines how the “desire to feel a hundred per cent” induces snobs to overlook the “recessive characteristics” that inconveniently pop up as atavistic reminders of their true, mixed pedigree (“Racial” 19). “A genealogical tree that is genealogical would be valuable,” she admits; “but … people are so apt to make a fuss about their eminent ancestors … and to hush up those who aren’t. I know by my father. When he talks of ‘family’ he means only his grandmother’s family. On the other sides he was nothing, and this gives a false view … There’s no such thing as ‘family’ in England” (Arctic 151). A similar point appears in Where Angels Fear
to Tread. Accused by Philip Herriton of misrepresenting her fiancé as “a member of the Italian nobility,” Lilia strikes back: “‘Well, we put it like that in the telegram so as not to shock dear Mrs. Herriton. But it is true. He is a younger branch. Of course families ramify – just as in yours there is your cousin Joseph.’ She adroitly picked out the only undesirable member of the Herriton clan” (25). Forster probably did not have Mendel on the mind when he wrote Lilia’s reply, though such an intention is plausible: his theories were much talked about in the early 1900s. But it hardly matters either way. More importantly, Forster would later find in Mendel a kindred spirit, a scientist whose theories shored up his own principles.

Over thirty years after The Longest Journey, Forster would reiterate and develop Lilia’s and Venetia’s genealogical arguments. A remarkable appeal to Mendel appears in a 1939 BBC broadcast aimed at “the ridiculous doctrine of Race Purity” (“Racial” 18). His target, given the imminent war, is obvious; but behind his urgent anti-Nazism lies a broader attack on snobbery and its links to genealogy – an attack familiar to readers of his novels. Scientific racism and family snobbery differ, he implies, only in degree; both draw on age-old myths of origins and blood purity. Forster challenges his audience: “Can you give the names of your eight great-grandparents?” Family pride, he implies, stems from the same stock ideas as Nazi race policy, and both are wrong – ethically and empirically – for they always conceal something “mortifying” (“Racial” 17):

We can often get six or seven [great-grandparents], seldom the whole eight. And the human mind is so dishonest and so snobby, that we instinctively reject the eighth as not mattering, and as playing no part in our biological make-up. As each of us looks back into his or her past, doors open upon darkness … On such a shady past as this – our common past – do we erect the ridiculous doctrine of Racial Purity. (“Racial” 18)

The doctrine is ridiculous because, “whether there ever was such an entity as a ‘pure race,’” historical migrations and imperialism have ensured “there never can be a pure race in the future. Europe is mongrel for ever, and so is America” (“Racial” 18).

The doctrine is also ridiculous because it rests on “pseudo-science” (“Racial” 19), so Forster is canny to conclude his attack with an appeal to science. Freud and Einstein are mentioned – an oblique dig at the German state that demonized two of its own world-class scientists. But Forster's
real praise is for yet another German-speaking scientist whose theories inconvenience Nazi “pseudo-science.”

Behind our problem of the eight great-grandparents stands the civilizing figure of Mendel ... He embodies a salutary principle, and even when we are superficial about him he helps to impress it in our minds. He suggests that no stock is pure, and that it may at any moment throw up forms which are unexpected, and which it inherits from the past ... He has unwittingly put a valuable weapon into the hands of civilized people. We don’t know what our ancestors were like or what our descendants will be like. We only know that we are all of us mongrels, dark haired and light haired, who must learn not to bite one another. (“Racial” 19–20)

Forster may be simplifying Mendel’s contribution to science and ethics in concluding that peas, like humans, “keep throwing up recessive characteristics, and cause us to question the creed of racial purity” (“Racial” 19), but he is hardly superficial. His views on Mendel and Nazism are directly informed by Julian Huxley and A.C. Haddon’s We Europeans (Forster, Commonplace 301), and he clearly understands the Mendelian fact that “pure individuals may be bred from impure ones” (Bateson, Naturalist 183). In this remarkable phenomenon, Forster foresees the end of purity in any traditional sense of the word, and with it an end to scientific and genealogical apologies for prejudice. Insofar as purity survives after Mendelism, its applications have been evicted from blood or individual essence to single traits, where it bears the less catchy name of homozygosity. What looks like purity, moreover, often is not: seventy-five individuals that are pure for a given trait, writes Bateson, “are not all alike, but consist of twenty-five which are pure dominants and fifty which are really cross-breds” (Naturalist 176–7). As Forster would have read in We Europeans, “the picture of the hereditary constitution of human groups ... [is] very different from any which could be framed in the pre-Mendelian era”:

“Practically all human groups are of decidedly mixed origin” (103–4).

“The sense of purity is a puzzling, and at times a fearful thing,” says the narrator of The Longest Journey. “It seems so noble, and it starts at one with morality. But it is a dangerous guide” (139). But if purity is displaced from human characters to “unit-characters” (Punnett 22ff.), Rickie’s sacrifice appears not more justified but certainly more nuanced than previously recognized. Now, though combined with Mr Elliot’s lineage in the person of Rickie, his mother’s lineage is literally recoverable by future
generations, in the granddaughter who aptly bears her name (289). As Walter Sutton explains Mendelism, “while in the organism, maternal and paternal potentialities are present in the field of each character, the germ-cells in respect to each character are pure” (231–2, original emphasis). Still, purity at the genetic level says nothing about the organism. As Forster observes, “too many factors are involved” in human heredity (“Racial” 19) to say anything quite conclusively.

I am under no illusion of having solved the difficulties that disappoint and delight readers of The Longest Journey. But I hope that, by investigating its treatment of genetics, my reading has opened a window among the “million … possible windows” that Henry James imagined for “the house of fiction” (46). Other novels might offer similar views; but The Longest Journey is perhaps uniquely disposed to reveal that particularly strange implication of Mendelism, still relevant today in the age of selfish genes:

The individual is an aggregate of unit-characters, and individuality is the expression of a particular aggregation of such characters. Though often reacting upon one another, the factors on which these characters are based behave as independent entities during the hereditary process, and heredity in consequence we may regard as a method of analysis, enabling us to judge of the number and condition of the unit-characters which go to make up the individual. The facts of heredity provide us with a series of reactions, which, if read aright, reveal to us the constitution of the living thing. And in the constitution of the living thing we have the key to its behaviour, to its potentialities and limitations, to what it can become, and what it can produce. (Punnett 74–5)

Mendelism offers no skeleton “key” to Rickie’s “behaviour …, potentialities and limitations.” The Longest Journey permits no way to “connect up,” to borrow from Forster’s defence of homosexuality, “all the fragments [Rickie] was born with” (qtd. in Heine, xxiv). But the perspective of the gene reveals a different novel, shining new light on well-recognized patterns and opening the window on entirely new interpretations.

NOTES

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Throughout this essay, I favour general and anachronistic terms like “hereditary particle,” “genetic line,” and “genes” (in the colloquial sense) over, say, “biophores” and “alleles.” Contemporary biologists used a dizzying array of terms, most since abandoned, some misleading. My reading would gain little from terminological fastidiousness, for its resolving power is limited by the novel’s implicit genetic theory, which is, unsurprisingly, crude relative to its scientific counterparts.

As Haldane himself wryly notes, “On the two occasions when I have pulled possibly drowning people out of the water … I had no time to make such calculations” as the model would require (qtd. in Dawkins 103).

The genetic challenge to traditional notions of selfhood helps explain why I distance myself from Literary Darwinism, which assumes that readers share evolved “psychological dispositions” that “provide a common basis for understanding what is intelligible in … novels”; among these is “the idea of the self” (Carroll, Literary Darwinism xiv, 145, 126). But the very idea of the self is undermined by the genetic logic I find in Forster’s novel – incidentally, a great example of an “unsatisfactory and confusing” novel about a “sociobiologically atypical” character (ibid. 145, 132).

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