

reflection

## Another Modest Proposal

Inspiration by Jonathan Swift Perspiration by Woodrow W Denham

**B**ANGLADESH IS A POOR COUNTRY (BIAPC). Everybody tells me that, sometimes as often as three or four times a day. And each time it is presented to me as an explanation. Street crime occurs because BIAPC. Since BIAPC, corruption is rampant. The educational system is atrocious since BIAPC. Because BIAPC, power outages happen all the time in rural areas where newspapers have few reporters.

Two days after I arrived in Dhaka, a well-dressed young man fluently speaking English approached me in front of the university, his hand extended and a smile on his face, saying BIAPC almost as if he were chanting a mantra. Newspaper accounts of travels and speeches by VVIPs indicate that BIAPC is commonly said before TV cameras and donor agencies around the world.

I have some problems with this argument.

First, when I read that adequate medical services are not available to huge numbers of Americans, I am tempted to follow the Bangla model and say that America is a poor country (AIAPC), but obviously that doesn't work. When I hear that American students score very poorly on international science examinations, I say AIAPC and realize that I sound quite foolish. When I hear that drug abuse continues to be an enormous problem in America, I say AIAPC and am shocked by how stupid that sounds. I could say that America has inadequate medical

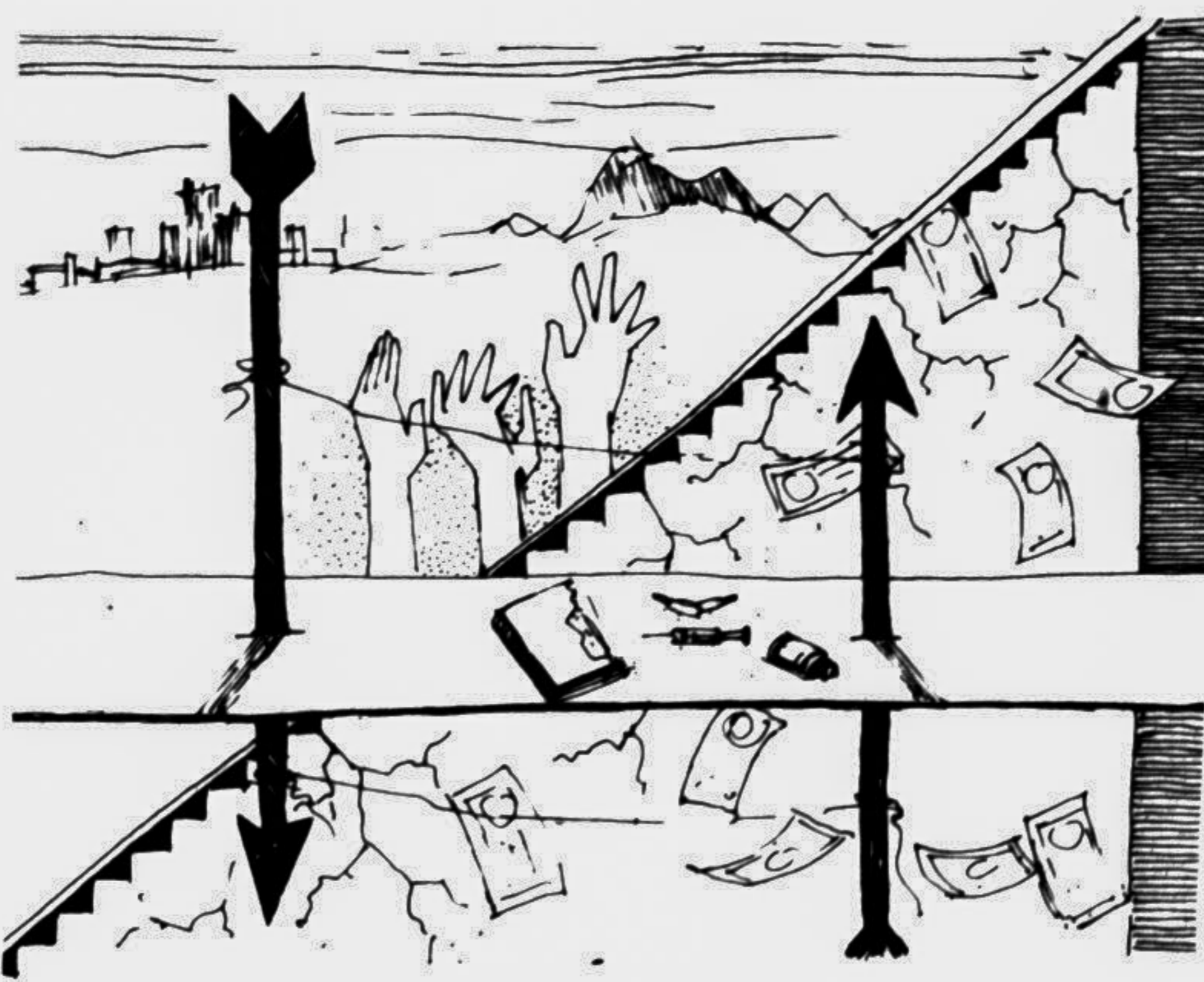
services, poor educational systems and drug abuse because America is a rich country, but that doesn't make much sense either, does it? Maybe money isn't the problem.

Second, I grew up in the State of Mississippi, which is America's own domestic version of Bangladesh. Unlike much of America, Mississippi really is poor as American states go, but nothing like Bangladesh. Mississippians too have a long history of saying Mississippi is a poor state (MIAPS) whenever somebody points to their corruption, their terrible health and education systems, and their appalling treatment of minorities. And Mississippians have said MIAPS for decades to squeeze money from the national government — just give us a few billion dollars and we'll fix the educational system; give us more billions and we'll provide better health care, etc.

And do you know what has happened to Mississippi as MIAPS has been repeated over and over, and as federal aid has flowed into the state for decades on end? Nothing much. In fact, similarities between Mississippi and Bangladesh are pretty interesting, except that the per capita amount of aid that Mississippi has received from donors is much greater than the per capita amount that has flowed to Bangladesh. Yet the results are about the same: nothing much has happened.

I'm neither an economist nor a mathematician, but I have enough

common sense to know that if problems are due to BIAPC and MIAPS, and donors pump billions of dollars into hundreds or thousands of programmes of every conceivable design in both regions for decades on end and nothing happens, then something is wrong



somewhere, and the most likely flaw is in the diagnosis.

Of course donors can argue that the diagnosis is basically right (BIAPC is the cause of all the problems) but that donors just haven't quite figured out how to treat it yet. Give them a few more

decades and a few more billions of dollars and many more millions of lives to experiment with, and they'll fix it. As Bob Marley said, "Every little thing is gonna be all right." Bob didn't believe that and I don't either.

My modest (perhaps obvious) proposal is that the diagnosis is fundamentally wrong, and that the causal arrow points in exactly the opposite direction. BIAPC does not explain why Bangladesh has poor health and education services and appalling crime rates. Rather the fact that Bangladesh has poor health and education services and appalling crime rates may explain why Bangladesh is a poor country.

How can BIAPC explain so much neglect and abuse of girls and women that millions of females who should be alive in Bangladesh today have simply vanished without a trace, as if females are being systematically exterminated here? Why would anybody argue that BIAPC produces corruption without arguing even more strongly that corruption produces BIAPC, or that BIAPC produces ignorance without insisting even more firmly that ignorance produces BIAPC? If Bangladesh truly is a poor country, why does my living and working in the Banani-Gulshan-Baridhara area place me amidst the kind of wealth that I experienced daily when I worked in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates?

My modest proposal is that people should stop citing BIAPC as a cause, and

instead should treat it as an effect.

My modest proposal is that when you hear a politician, friend or journalist use BIAPC to explain corruption or ignorance or illness, you should ask why you are being asked to disregard your own common sense understanding of what makes life so awful in Bangladesh and in my home state of Mississippi, where some leaders are beginning to admit that corruption in their own political parties produces MIAPS, that their own defective health care policies cause MIAPS, that their own misguided educational policies and incompetent managers will continue to yield MIAPS regardless of how much money is pumped into the state by donor agencies, and that more money will never solve the problems until the powerful people of Mississippi, of all political parties, stop misusing it the moment it reaches the state.

I understand that going before national and international television cameras and saying something like "Bangladesh is a corrupt country" or "Mississippi is a corrupt state" may not win as many votes for the party in power as saying BIAPC or MIAPS, but I modestly propose that somebody try it just to see what would happen. The clean air would be refreshing both here and in Mississippi, and the results could be surprisingly positive.

About the writer: Woodrow W. Denham is Associate Professor of Anthropology at North South University.

sic-tech

## The Computer Affects Language

by Andaz

*The hypnotic hold of the word processor and the rapidly developing interactive potentialities of computer network information retrieving facilities remind us of guru McLuhan, in that in this case also, the medium threatens to become the message, that is, the medium influences the message.*

**L**ITERATURE CHANGES WHEN a word processor (computer) is used. When technology touches a language, it touches us where we live. Therefore it has a revolutionary effect, as the machine radically alters the way we think and interact with language. A word processor converts creative output into information bits; although it attracts with its distractive user-friendly utility services.

In this information age, the overdose of high speed information makes us less sensitive, and erodes our capacity for significance and reading, because non-linear information is a unit of knowledge which by itself is only a trace of the knowledge with a pre-conditioned significant context, without the guarantee of delivery. Context does not come built-in, to match our limited human experience, which is biologically finite.

We tend to cling to incoming knowledge and, in the process, lose our wisdom behind the knowledge. The computer chases productivity, but is unable to give a kick to creativity, as the number of drafts and printouts do not diminish. In fact, more editing is necessary — a compensation for the speed, ease and comfort a word processor can provide. While the editors are becoming better writers, the reporters are becoming data entry clerks.

The receiving end of a computer is an intellectual swamp. The paperless office has more junk mail via the modem and the telephone lines. It is mindless productivity of networks and webs such as the Internet, rushing communication (and non-communication) garbage to 20

million screens around the world at the speed of light.

The end product of literature or culture is more than having high speed facts at our fingertips. Eventually we have to pay for this madness — it is the law of diminishing returns. We have to come back to the expressive possibilities of language in the service of thinking. The modern corporate offices are already suffering from IT fatigue — too much data chasing too few uses.

These notes were jotted down while going through a stimulating paper on the effect of the computer on literature and language, written by Michael Heim, Prof of Philosophy, California State University, in a book *The State of the Language*, edited by C Ricks and L Michaels, published in 1990 by Faber & Faber. This is the second edition of the book, the first having appeared in 1980. Here are contributions from sixty-two modern writers, thereby providing a scenario to appreciate the contrasts in the state of the language within a decade. Today's language, and usage, are more informal.

Another writer, a novelist, Michael Rogers, felt that ultimately computers would profoundly alter the way language is written. He drew attention to MIT Sociologist Sherry Turkle's warning that children introduced early to computers might start thinking that these man-made machines were a model of human thought, thereby devaluing the subtlety of their own minds (beware of the forthcoming neural computers). Rogers thought that the effect of the computer on the language was still

small, but the next century would bring about noticeable changes, as the next generation brought up on computer literacy made their presence felt.

Are the word processors going to be replaced by the new versions of 'idea processors'? A poetry processor has been developed by a New York poet. The electronic music synthesizers have already penetrated the developing countries, trying to keep beat with intimations from the infinite. The invention of writing did not destroy learning, nor television drove away the radio.

The hypnotic hold of the word processor and the rapidly developing interactive potentialities of computer network information retrieving facilities remind us of guru McLuhan, in that in this case also, the medium threatens to become the message, that is, the medium influences the message. Ultimately, the output of a computer is a slave to its input. To look at the situation in another way, in the same kitchen, with the same ingredients, the difference in the cooking by an ordinary cook and a master chef would be quite discernible at the dining table.

To come back to Michael Rogers: he uses the word processor for his journalistic pieces, but would not trust the machine when drafting his novels! As for myself, I am unable to state categorically that I am entirely satisfied writing this mini-essay on the computer; for two un-reasons: I am writing for the press; and, secondly, what is life, if we cannot find scapegoats!

— Dhartri Feature

profile

## E M Forster: A Writer of Distinction

By A S M Nurunnabi

**I**N ALL HIS WRITINGS E M FORSTER championed freedom, tolerance and individualism. From the start he discovered a wholly personal voice to express his view of life. Never attached to any literary school or movement, he achieved a symbolic importance for generations of readers and writers as the voice of their unofficial selves, the self refuses to be regimented or made to conform to social conventions. His writings celebrate the importance of beauty, personal relations, and the quest for harmony. They also expose the characteristic weaknesses of the English middle-classes, their neglect of the imagination and their distrust of emotion. Through an original blend of moral realism and poetic insight, he creates a vision of possible but elusive harmony.

Travel made Forster a writer. Italy provided the inspiration for several short stories, travel sketches and some novels. The short stories celebrate the spirit of place and the eternal moment. His two novels *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room With a View* contrast the instinctive life of Italy with the stifling conventions of English suburban life. Already in his early fiction can be seen what were to become his master themes: personal relations, money, salvation through love, imagination, and the wisdom of the body. The Italian novels have a Mozartine exuberance, a youthful zest in creation. Taking Jane Austen as his model and adding a malicious dash of Samuel Butler, he expands the form to accommodate the unconscious and the infinite. Beneath the shrewdly observed details of character and incident runs a mysterious subterranean life.

His three novels, *The Longest Journey*, *Howards End*, and posthumously published *Maurice* are all concerned



with the theme of continuity and future of England. In an unfinished social novel, *Arctic Summer*, Forster contrasted two types of men: the heroic and the intellectual.

*A Passage to India* is, however, his masterpiece. For making this masterpiece, Forster had intimate knowledge of the tensions between the rulers and the ruled and between Muslims and Hindus, as the result of his two widely separated visits to India, the first in 1912-13 and the second in 1921. Moreover, his Red Cross service in Alexandria from 1915 to 1918 expanded the range of his personal relations and knowledge of eastern thought. Later, as Private Secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas, he witnessed Hindu ceremonies, lived close to deeply religious men, and felt the terror and beauty of the Indian landscape. *A Passage to India*, Forster repeatedly insisted, "is not really about politics," but aspires to be "poetic and philosophic." Essentially, it explores the difficulties men face in trying to un-

derstand each other and the universe. The three-part symphonic structure of the novel, Mosque, Caves, Temple, the dominant pattern of promise and withdrawal, seen by the false dawn of the landscape and the elusive appeals of friendship, the recurrent imagery of caves and overarching sky, all serve to hold in tension the major polarities of man's existence. *A Passage to India* represents a great expansion in Forster's art and vision. By setting the quest for truth in an alien environment where the cherished ideals of Western humanism were challenged, he freed himself from the limited insular values of some isolated areas of his own country.

After *A Passage to India* Forster wrote no further novels. The reason for his silence was simply that he felt out of touch with the world that came into existence after World War I. He wanted to write, instead of novels, occasional short stories (posthumously) published as *The Life to Come* and *Other Stories*, numerous essays, reviews, and two biographies of a close Cambridge friend.

With the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of war, Forster achieved new success as a popular broadcaster when he distilled the essence of his liberal humanism in memorable fashion on home and overseas services. Our picture of Forster the man and Forster the artist is rapidly changing as scholars draw on new materials in the Forster Archive at Cambridge. Nothing can detract from his achievement in writing two of the greatest 20th-century novels in *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*. In the opinion of erudite literary critics, although Forster was not an experimental writer like Joyce or Virginia Woolf, it seems certain that he will survive with D H Lawrence as one of the two most original novelists of the first half of this century.

poems

### Development I

by Gonoful

"ON the shores of the world children gather pebbles and scatter them again"

Tagore's Gitangali a song of pious devotion to God and nature

ON shores of Jamuna engineers gather boulders and scatter them they will teach the mighty Jamuna — the largest branch of the mighty Bhramaputra to follow commands of European engineers and their billion dollar project

NATURE insulted is seldom just those who insult, torture, the great river tie-up the Jamuna in a madman's straight jacket will go home tanner, more experienced and richer.

but

When the plagues come who will suffer?

who will pay?

THE angry river cannot be tamed the Jamuna will neither give up nor die it has all the forces of nature at its side floods, rain, storms, sand  
Brahma's angry currents and swirling tides

and as in ancient Egypt, Ten Plagues will curse the innocent

Disease carrying insects shall haunt the night as kala-azar slaughters Children (1)  
naturally abundant fish species disappear (2)  
as vitamin and mineral deficient appetites grow restless (3)  
yielding a harvest of night blindness and total blindness (4)  
soils are improvised and undrained (5)  
water becomes scarce for drinking and bathing (6)  
diarrhoea, typhoid, cholera and skin diseases flourish (7)  
ground water polluted by arsenic and toxic chemicals (8)  
and charlands battered and flooded (9)

These Nine plagues are expected, The Tenth and perhaps most terrible is yet unforeseen and unnamed.

On the shores of the Jamuna, European engineers gather boulders and scatter them again.

Dhaka, March 10, 1997

### Temporal

By Shaikat Rushdee

Did anybody call me!  
May be, may not be

Though I return from the dead end of ruining  
With a jiffy hope of millions of probability

Whenever I wake up from a deep sleep, it seems  
A fresh life after a short death

The morning dew wipes out disgrace of shortcomings  
While the woodpecker continues her engraving of  
The writings for the destiny

As the kingfisher with a deceitful look  
Pierces its prey by diving in a deep water  
That penetrative competence is anticipated  
In uncertain nights of the new moon

A man, though, returns from the brink of frustration  
Imperceptibly, time and again

Does anybody call ever!  
May be, may not be