

The
Achievement
of
E. M. Forster

by John Beer

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The Achievement of E. M. Forster

John Beer

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Chapter 1

Aspects of a Novelist

THE account of E. M. Forster which has reached more readers than any other appears on the cover of a paper-back edition of his works:

He is one of those rare authors whose books are kept and re-read, not only for their stories, but for the wise sayings which crowd their pages and the gentle humanist philosophy which they reveal.

A general comment like this, addressed as it is to the reader who likes a good story, seasoned with occasional wisdom, might be allowed to stand. It is more disquieting to find the author of the *Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, which ought to have a different audience in view, writing of the ‘shy, unworldly quality’ of work ‘almost diffidently presented’ by a man who is ‘at heart a scholar’.¹ As Lionel Trilling points out, the author of such a comment has taken an irony literally and has misinterpreted a manner.²

One reason for the diverging views of critics in dealing with Forster’s work is a basic uncertainty as to how the novels ought to be read. There is a deceptive directness about them—a concentration on events, which encourages the reader to read them ‘for the story’.

Forster himself has never forgotten the truth which he reiterated painstakingly in his Clark Lectures: ‘Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story.’³ Yet it would be foolish to see in this statement more than a basis on which to build. For example, there is a good deal of attention to plot in the novels: but it is evidently not aimed at creating

(In the case of Forster’s novels, the page reference is to the pocket edition but the text is normally taken from the first edition. A list of abbreviations appears in the Bibliography.)

1 G. Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* 1941, p.969

2 L. Trilling, *E. M. Forster*, London, 1944, p. 9.

3 AN, 40-1; 62.

the normal relationship between author and reader. An author whose main concern is to entertain his audience will sometimes surprise them—but he will also take care not to jar them. At the point of surprise, the reader will begin to recognize that preceding events contained the seeds of the surprise. Forster's surprises, on the other hand, do sometimes jar—particularly those irruptions of death or violence which break suddenly into a prevailing atmosphere of domestic comedy. On examining the context of such passages, indeed, one sometimes discovers that Forster has been deliberately leading his readers in a different direction: that the irruption of violence has actually been preceded by a letting down of tension in the narrative. The result is that sudden death enters the novel with the jarring quality that it has in real life. The harmonic pattern within which we were comfortably established suddenly gives way. There is a moment of unreality which we then recognize to be in point of fact a moment of reality—but the reality of everyday life, not of art.

Such intrusions of an unartistic 'reality' should in themselves convince the reader that this is no ordinary storyteller. If he is used to reading detective stories he may well draw the same conclusion still more strongly after reading *A Passage to India*. A novel which has the air of a good mystery story, with a succession of exciting events and promise of an unexpected dénouement, turns out to be nothing of the sort. Long before the novel ends, the woman around whom the plot revolves suddenly withdraws the charge that she has been assaulted by a young Indian doctor. The case is dropped, and apart from desultory discussion, we hear no more of the events that gave rise to it. There is no final twist of events, no sudden revelation. Many readers must have laid down the novel with feelings of disappointment or even of disgust.

Nor is it enough to read Forster for his social comedy alone. The late Rose Macaulay produced a critique of the novels which dwelt mainly upon these features. She had shared and knew well the background from which Forster came and described, with an assurance touched by nostalgia, his natural ancestors—'philanthropists, bishops, clergy, members of parliament, Miss Hannah More'. But her familiarity with the scene and her enjoyment of Forster's skill in evoking it also blinkered her. It was the natural corollary of her views that she should conclude by preferring the earlier novels, 'the three commentaries on then contemporary life that appeared from thirty to forty years ago—and have, with the years, taken on a delightful period flavour— *The Longest Journey*, *A Room with a View* and *Howards End*. . . .'⁴

The reader who comes to Forster looking for social comedy, however, will also meet with disappointments. He will be put out by the fact that the novels are not only

4 R. Macaulay, *Writings of E. M. Forster*, 1938, p. 9; *The Listener*, 12.12.46, p. 847.

serious in basic intention but sometimes deliberately flat in their immediate effect. The attractiveness is there, but it has a habit of disappearing round the corner at moments when one most expects it to be present.

A more promising line is taken by those critics who look at Forster's work against the moral traditions of the English novel. While acknowledging the high quality of plot and characterization, they see that the author is not simply aiming to make his readers turn the pages. He is inviting them to pause and reflect from time to time: to see in the events as they are described patterns which constantly recur in our world and to judge them by moral principles which are sensitive to the full implications of each particular situation.

For many critics this is a very satisfactory art-form, combining a number of virtues. There is a concentration on actions, presented in some sort of serial continuum, which gives an immediate reference to reality. The element of universality in the action makes for seriousness. And the fact that the reader is at one and the same time being entertained and reacting morally provides the work with a complexity of effect which challenges analysis.

So far as Forster's work is concerned, however, there are drawbacks to a strictly moral approach. For one thing, the social issues which are being discussed in moral terms are now somewhat dated. Forster's examination of the British Raj in India may attract American critics by its relevance to their persisting anti-colonial tradition. For British readers, the novel loses some of its point in a world where India is independent. Similarly, the unexpected eclipse of the old middle class and its power, to be replaced by a more amiable but less principled attitude in society at large, makes one less inclined to laugh at the absurdities of Sawston. It is too much like hitting a man when he is down.

Of course, this is not the whole story. So long as people have to live together in social relationships the sort of problems which come to a head in Sawston or British India will continue to exist. The moral element in the novels in fact burrows beneath particular issues towards ultimate human problems.

The 'moral' approach at its best can be found in Lionel Trilling's study. In his examination of Forster's work, he has been concerned with two objects: to test the novels by the touchstone of human experience and to match them against the best that has been thought and written during the period. The result is a highly intelligent evaluation of the novels in terms of the liberal humanist tradition. His concluding judgment has the weight of the whole book behind it:

Forster reminds us of a world where the will is not everything, of a world of true order, of the necessary connection of passion and prose, and of the strange paradoxes of being human. He is one of those who raise the shield of Achilles, which is the moral intelligence of art, against the panic and emptiness which make their onset when the will is tired from its own excess.⁵

For many readers, this sums up certain positive effects of the novels with economy and deftness. It defines the 'singleness' of them.

But if there is a singleness in the novels, there is also a complexity: and that complexity is not simply, shall we say, the result of interweaving prosaic and passionate elements. It is a complexity which reminds us that Forster is ultimately a romantic writer and that his work reflects some of the tensions and conflicts peculiar to romanticism.

Nothing has yet taken the place of romanticism in the West. We are still romantics by birth, however much we may disguise our romanticism by devices such as cynicism or understatement. But since 1914 much of the original impetus of romanticism has been lost. It has lost its innocence in the face of Freud, its idealism in face of the events and policies of two world wars, and its positiveness in face of a world that becomes steadily more complex. It is not dead: most modern attitudes are romantic attitudes. But the fact that we describe them as 'attitudes' betrays the difference. The peculiar forces which drove romanticism between the French Revolution and the First World War, enabling it to inspire a whole way of life, have gone. They will hardly combine again in a similar pattern.

To understand Forster fully, one has to see him at the end of that earlier phase, the spiritual heir of Blake, Coleridge and Shelley, of Beethoven and Wagner. He shares their aspirations and their struggles, while counterpoising them with his grasp of human affairs. The fact that both factors are present in his thinking inevitably affects his work. The straightforward run of the plot is not usually disrupted, but is sometimes diverted or distorted by this very individual attitude of the author's.

The exact nature of his romantic struggle will emerge later. It is sometimes critical, but rarely agonizing. His sense of reality is always vigilant, curbing his inward vision: and this sense of reality includes certain inbred attitudes which mediate between warring elements or damp their effect.

Forster was brought up within that stratum of the upper middle class which prides itself on its sense of humour and tends to view human affairs with an amused detachment. At its extreme, indeed, it might be said to cultivate the wit of Jane Austen while

5 Trilling, *op. cit.*, 158.

ignoring the serious purpose behind her humour. Forster himself, who is a master of ironic comedy, admires Jane Austen particularly when her humour is directed to a moral end, as when it points to a failure of love. For example, he likes the description of Mr John Dashwood in the opening chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*:

He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold-hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed: but he was, in general, well respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties.

Those who sit down to read Forster in the comfortable frame of mind that they associate with Jane Austen, however, are due for a shock. For instance, his developed moral seriousness emerges at times into direct utterances which she would not have used and which are calculated to attack the reader's complacency. He is also aware of violence and death with an immediacy that is absent from her works. This second factor may account for the shock which many readers experience at one of the famous sudden deaths. They are not expecting such directness to interfere with their comfort.

There is yet another side to Forster which makes it still more difficult for him to combine his forces. A combination of comedy and moral seriousness is an acceptable mixture, with an honourable ancestry in English satire; but Forster is also strongly emotional and imaginative. His devotion to love is backed by an admiration for spontaneous passion which finds its best model in the culture and mythology of ancient Greece. This element fits even less readily into the world of Jane Austen, and from this fact many of Forster's difficulties derive. But his truth to himself demands that he include this imagination and passion also, in his total vision.

Forster's difficulties as a moralist thus come second to his difficulties as an artist. His chief qualities are his gift for domestic humour, his moral seriousness, and his admiration for open-hearted passion. Normally one expects the last two to come into conflict. There are occasions when passionate behaviour is also immoral behaviour, and an author often has to occupy himself with the conflict. But Forster's difficulties spring less commonly from this than from the conflict between his gift for domestic comedy and his admiration for spontaneous emotional behaviour. By nature, the two are not ideal companions, and it requires a good deal of skill to prevent passion from either breaking so crudely upon a more delicate scene that it devalues itself, or restraining itself to the point of insignificance. Locally, Forster is usually successful, but occasionally an uneasiness in the total effect of a novel, or even more a short story, can be traced to the difficulty of making these two forces live together.

If justice is to be done to Forster's work, weight has to be given to each element in this nexus: comedy, moral seriousness and imaginative passion. And we are justified in asking how, in the first place, the juxtaposed elements should have come to exist together in his personality.

Again, the main reason lies in his background. As he has explained in the biography of his great-aunt Marianne Thornton, his mother came from a family that was closely associated with the Clapham Sect, the group responsible for many organizations associated with nineteenth-century piety. He himself characterizes the group by its 'affections, comfort, piety, integrity, intelligence, public activity, private benevolence'.⁶

His own attitude to the group has always been ambivalent. He saw in the mental attitudes which it fostered the root of much that was obtuse and unsympathetic in English middle-class life—that narrow patriotism and incapacity for personal relationships beyond a restricted circle which he was to satirize in his descriptions of Sawston. But he also has a feeling for it. Writing of the prayers of Henry Thornton, he says:

What can the words have conveyed to the reader or to the family and the servants who listened to them from opposite ends of the great library at Battersea Rise? To us they mean nothing at all. We get something quite different out of them: no meaning, but an aroma, the aroma of a vanished society, the sense of well-to-do people on their knees, the solid chairs into which the elbows dig, the antimacassared backs against which the foreheads rest, the voice of the master of the house, confronting his Maker in a monotone, and, if the hour be morning, the great virgin breakfast table, clothed all in white like a bride. For three generations it was a problem to religious Englishmen whether the breakfast dishes should come in before prayers and so get cold, or should come in after, which meant a wait, and an unpleasant sense of hanging in a void between two worlds. I do not know which decision my great-grandfather took, but there is a story that in later years his daughter Marianne read the same passage out of the Bible again and again, because she was paralysed by the sight of the cat eating the ham, and felt unable to stop either the cat or herself.⁷

It is a good example of Forster in intimate vein. The serious criticism of Thornton's attitude is followed by a steady let-down towards affectionate whimsy in which Forster's highly developed sense of the ridiculous plays an increasing part. But in the middle, between the social criticism and the affectionate whimsy, there comes that

6 MT, 29.

7 TC, 198.

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