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978-0-521-29082-1 - E. M. Forster: The Endless Journey

John Sayre Martin

Excerpt

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Introduction

I

Despite widespread agreement that E. M. Forster is one of the most important English novelists of the present century, he is a writer who has puzzled, and perhaps continues to puzzle, discerning readers and critics. The sheer number of books and articles that have appeared on his work over the past twenty years is testimony to the fact that Forster's most interesting qualities do not always lie close to the surface. In 1927, I. A. Richards declared Forster to be 'the most puzzling figure in contemporary English letters'. He seems tacitly to assume, according to Richards, that the reader shares his rather 'unusual outlook on life', an assumption that can lead to some 'lamentable misunderstandings'.¹ Virginia Woolf also found something 'baffling and evasive' in the very nature of Forster's gifts. For her, his combination of 'poetry' and realism, of mysticism and fact, failed to cohere into the single vision that marks the great novelist.² Lionel Trilling, in his pioneer study of Forster, saw him as a moral realist, but an evasive one. 'The plot', he writes, 'speaks of clear certainties, the manner resolutely insists that nothing can be quite so simple. "Wash ye, make yourselves clean," says the plot, and the manner murmurs, "if you can find the soap."³ According to Philip Gardner, one of the most common adjectives that reviewers and critics have applied to Forster's fiction is 'elusive'.⁴

In one sense Forster's elusiveness is a quality of his style, which is both personal and evasive. Like many Victorian

¹ I. A. Richards, 'A Passage to Forster: Reflections on a Novelist', reprinted in *Forster, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury, pp. 15–20. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966.

² Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of E. M. Forster', in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, pp. 342–51. London, 1966.

³ Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster*, p. 12. Norfolk, Conn., 1943.

⁴ Philip Gardner, *E. M. Forster, The Critical Heritage*, p. 12. London, 1973.

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novelists, he often obtrusively comments upon his characters and incidents and indulges in moral generalizations. But he is just as likely to mask his opinion with a qualifying 'perhaps' or a form of rhetorical ventriloquism in which he suddenly projects a view, apparently his, upon one or more of his characters. Thus: 'All invitations must proceed from heaven perhaps; perhaps it is futile for men to initiate their own unity, they do but widen the gulfs between them by the attempt. So at all events thought old Mr Graysford and young Mr Sorley.'⁵

In the profoundest sense, Forster's elusiveness is a quality of his mind – a mind at once humanistic and sceptical. 'I do not believe in belief,' he proclaims in his best-known essay, before proceeding to tell us what exactly he does believe in: tolerance, good temper, sympathy; personal relationships ('starting from them, I get a little order into the contemporary chaos'); an 'aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky'.⁶ These are values, as Forster realizes, more applicable to private life than to public. But as a human being and a humanist, he is drawn both to private life and to public – to what Rickie Elliot, his young protagonist in *The Longest Journey*, calls 'the great world'. He recognizes the claims of friendship and institutions; he knows that we cannot escape, and should not seek to escape, the opportunities and responsibilities that the world affords.

Unlike nineteenth-century novelists, most of whom also recognized the claims of private and public life, Forster, in common with many twentieth-century writers, sees a fundamental division between the two realms. For most nineteenth-century novelists, there was no such necessary division. In the world of nineteenth-century fiction, a publicly acknowledged code of moral values is assumed by author and reader to be fixed and valid. Characters who are, or hope to be, happy observe the code. Those who violate it, do so at their peril.

⁵ *A Passage to India*, chapter 4, p. 37. Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1952.

⁶ 'What I Believe', in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 73. Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1951.

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So long as Jane Austen's Emma fails to accommodate her outlook and actions to this public sense of propriety, she is doomed to suffer a series of shocks and setbacks. But as soon as she is fully led to realize her errors and begins to align her values with the best ones of her society, she is rewarded with the proposal of Mr Knightley, the man who embodies in the highest degree the best elements of the moral order. For Jane Austen, as for Immanuel Kant, there is no necessary difference between the moral law within and that without. Her limited universe is all of a piece.

Forster's universe is divided. Living in a larger, less integrated world, he sees a fundamental dichotomy between public life and private, between the aims and needs of society and those of the individual. Society needs government, an order, so to speak, imposed from without and, from Forster's point of view, largely inimical to the deeper needs of the individual. The individual, on the other hand, needs the satisfactions that can best be met through personal relationships and the claims of the inner life. The difference, in this respect, between Forster's vision and Jane Austen's can be illustrated by *A Room with a View*, Forster's most Jane-Austenlike novel. Whereas Emma is morally and psychologically ready to marry Mr Knightley only when she has reconciled her aims with her society's and accepted its implicit guiding code, Lucy can marry George only by turning her back on Summer Street and, in effect, rejecting its standards. For Lucy, as for her creator, the satisfactions of the inner life are incompatible with a completely integrated relationship with the outer.

Feeling himself to be in a world divided between the claims of the outer life and the inner, an individual might – especially if blest with a private income, as Forster was – choose to foster his inner life and avoid as far as possible the jarring claims of the outer. It is a tempting choice, and there is no question that Forster saw its attraction, for there is a strong escapist element in much of his fiction. In 'The Story of a Panic', the boy Eustace, under the sway of Pan, escapes the

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world of his elders. Rickie Elliot finds in the dell at Madingley a refuge from the uncomprehending world without. Maurice and Scudder flee to the greenwood. The elderly Mr Lucas tries to remain for the rest of his life at the Khan in Plataniste. Mrs Moore yearns to retire 'into a cave of my own'. Forster, however, was too curious about the world and saw too clearly the legitimacy of its claims to be satisfied with an escapist or epicurean fostering of the inner life. 'Will it really profit us so much,' he asks in *The Longest Journey*, 'if we save our souls and lose the whole world?' The question implies a correlative one, which haunts his fiction. To what extent can we save our souls and have the whole world? How far, in other words, are the claims of the inner life reconcilable with those of the outer?

If Forster is sometimes evasive, it is basically because he does not know how far such reconciliation is possible. Unlike the nineteenth-century novelist whose assured tone derives in great measure from his subscription to a publicly acknowledged code of values, Forster, without such a code, is tentative and exploratory. Will Dr Aziz and Cyril Fielding ever be able to reconcile the claims of their inner lives with those of the world? The last words of *A Passage to India* are Forster's only answer, and as well as any they convey that note of uncertainty that so often marks his voice: 'No, not yet...No, not there.'

II

The exploratory character of Forster's fiction is thematically suggested through its pervasive emphasis on travel. Most of the central characters travel, whether to a foreign country, a purely imaginary realm, or to various places within England itself. Philip Herriton and Lucy Honeychurch go to Italy; Rickie Elliot's very life, which is conceived as a 'longest journey', takes him from Sawston to public school and Cambridge, and to his aunt's estate in Wiltshire; Helen and Margaret Schlegel visit Germany, Hertfordshire and Wales; Maurice, like Rickie, goes from his suburban home to public school and Cambridge. Later, he visits his friend Clive

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Durham's country estate, where, again like Rickie, he forms a crucial relationship with a young man. Mrs Moore and Adela Quested travel to India. The central characters in most of the short stories also travel. One thinks, for instance, of Miss Raby in Vorta, of Mr Lucas in Greece, of Lionel Marchbanks en-route to India, of the boy who boards the celestial omnibus, and of the pedestrian who, tired of walking, crawls through to the other side of the hedge.

All of these travellers visit places that yield them a new order of experience – an experience, that is to say, that lies beyond their normal range of activity and expectation. Their fundamental problem is to assimilate the new experience and accommodate it to their accustomed world.

Although varied in age and temperament, Forster's travellers are inwardly sensitive, and receptive to new places and people. Like Forster himself, they are generally products of a privileged middle-class upbringing, but being more endowed than the average man with imagination and sympathy, they are more likely to arrive at a fuller understanding of themselves and the world, and a fuller articulation of the life within them. Nevertheless, as is the case with most travellers, their receptiveness to the new is usually checked by the possession of certain values and attitudes derived from their class and culture. For all his love of Italy, Philip is a snob – a condition that prompts his objection to Lilia's marriage and inhibits his friendship with Gino. Maurice's love for Scudder, Rickie's for Stephen, and Lucy's for George, are also inhibited by their snobbery. Mrs Moore, of course, is no snob. Her problem with India stems partly from her age and ill-health, but more importantly from the fact that the country fails to conform to her English norms and her Christian-humanist sense of order. Whatever their outlook, all of Forster's travellers are to some extent pulled in contrary directions: toward the new experiences that travel brings and toward the world of familiar norms and values.

In their divided impulses, Forster's travellers resemble those in romantic allegory – Bunyan's Christian, for example, or

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Spenser's Sir Guyon, who, venturing forth in search of spiritual fulfilment, are subject to forces that help or impede them in their quest, such forces (e.g. the Slough of Despond, the Bower of Bliss) being external counterparts of elements in the travellers' own natures. Forster's travellers differ from such figures in two respects: they are more highly individualized and they are not, at least in the conventional sense, heroic. The early protagonists – Philip, Rickie, and Lucy – are, in fact, unaggressive, unsure of themselves, and consequently easily muddled by the play of stronger forces. But like the central figures in romantic allegory, Forster's travellers are in search of fulfilment and subjected in the course of their journeys to forces (characters, institutions, places) that help or impede them. Like traditional allegorists, moreover, Forster is inclined to conceive these forces in antithetical terms. On the one hand, Sawston, public schools, Herbert Pembroke and Mrs Herriton – the forces that check the traveller's receptiveness to what is new; on the other, Italy, Cambridge, Gino and Stephen Wonham – the forces that invite him to discover and fulfil what is new within himself, his life-enhancing instincts and feelings. *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* are more complex in structure and vision than the earlier novels, but their antithetical elements are still sharply drawn. In *Howards End*, the Schlegel sisters support the inner life; the Wilcoxes (with the notable exception of Ruth) the outer; both modes of life – as Margaret Schlegel comes to realize – being incomplete without the other. In Forster's last novel, the orderly, administrative minds of the English are opposed to the vital complexities of India; man's desire for ultimate meaning is opposed to a devastating spiritual nihilism. Throughout all six of the novels and in most of the short stories, the forces that would impose order from without are opposed to those that promote order within.

Between these antitheses the travellers move, trying to reconcile the forces' conflicting claims with their own psychological needs. Lucy would like both Summer Street and George. Margaret does not want to abandon her way of life, but to

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connect it to the world of business. Maurice does not really want to give up his career, and searches desperately for some way of reconciling its claims with those of his private life. And Mrs Moore would like to accommodate into a single vision her Christian universe and her experience of India.

Qualifying the allegorical aspect of Forster's fiction is its moral realism. Unlike such allegorists as Spenser and Bunyan for whom, in an age of more moral assurance than our own, good and evil were separate and distinct, Forster sees them as inextricably mixed. He is endowed, like Rickie Elliot, with the 'Primal Curse', which is not 'the knowledge of good and evil, but the knowledge of good-and-evil'. Even the antithetical forces affecting the travellers are seldom simply good or bad. Sawston may repress the free spirit, but, as Lilia Herriton realizes too late, it allows the majority of its inhabitants to lead pleasant, useful, well-ordered lives. It is the home not only of Philip's shrewish and calculating mother, but of Caroline Abbott, the well-intentioned young woman he grows to love. Italy may encourage the free spirit, but only for about half the human race: women, as Lilia again discovers, are far more repressed there than in Sawston. Gino, moreover, may be vital and charming; but he is also cunning, materialistic, and capable of cruelty. George Emerson has a morose and pessimistic streak that offsets his spontaneity and vitality. And Summer Street and Windy Corner, for all their limited view of life, have a warmth and beauty that Lucy leaves with regret.

Forster's moral realism is also displayed in the structure of his plots. The protagonists are involved in a network of good-and-evil. Helen Schlegel's attempt to help Leonard Bast leads by a chain of circumstances to Leonard's murder, which in turn contributes to Margaret's success in settling peacefully with her family at Howards End. As in life, failure or triumph in a Forster novel partly depends on circumstances beyond the individual's control.

In their drive toward self-fulfilment and their attempt to reconcile into a single vision the disparate elements of their experience, Forster's travellers are surrogates for Forster him-

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self. As a man he would like to integrate his inner needs with outer facts. As an artist he would ideally like to weld into a unifying vision his experience of inner and outer life, art to Forster being chiefly valuable because it possesses ‘internal harmony’ and presents a vision of order to ‘a permanently disarranged planet’.⁷ The modern world, however, as Forster sees it, is recalcitrant to art, or at least to the art of the novelist who aspires to convey its richness and complexity. It is a multifarious and divided world – divided nationally, racially, ideologically; and, even more fundamentally, divided between private life and public, inner life and outer. ‘How can the mind take hold of such a country?’ he asks of India – a question that applies even more forcefully to the world as a whole.

Only in a limited and still integrated world could a novelist command the single vision – the world, for example, of rural England as Margaret saw it from *Howards End*. ‘In these English farms, if anywhere,’ she muses, looking out over the fields of Hertfordshire, ‘one might see life steadily and see it whole’; see, that is, with the classical vision no longer applicable to the world at large. ‘It is impossible,’ declares Forster, ‘to see modern life steadily and see it whole.’⁸ Taken, then, as a group, Forster’s travellers project his wish to explore the world and reflect it in fiction as deeply and comprehensively as his experience permits. At the same time they express his search as a man and artist for some way of harmonizing the values of public and private life.

III

Although Forster’s acute sense of division between public and private life is probably shared by most of the major writers of the present century, it was almost certainly aggravated by his homosexuality. His early novels and stories appeared less than ten years after Wilde had been committed to prison for sodomy, and English attitudes toward the

⁷ ‘Art for Art’s Sake’, in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 93. Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1951.

⁸ *Howards End*, chapter 18, p. 158. Abinger Edition, 1973.

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'unmentionable' practice had not perceptibly changed in the meantime. Throughout most of Forster's lifetime homosexuality, even among consenting adults, remained a crime. Not surprisingly, then, a homosexual was almost bound to feel cut off from the surrounding world of what passed for sexual normalcy. A basic and obsessional feature of his private life had to be guarded.

Forster's homosexuality almost certainly exercised a profound influence on his fiction. To begin with, there are, of course, one novel, *Maurice*, and eight short stories dealing directly with homosexuality. The first version of *Maurice* was written in 1913–14, between the publication of *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*; and the eight short stories between about 1922 and 1958;⁹ most of them, that is, considerably after Forster was generally supposed to have given up the writing of fiction.

Taken as a whole, the novel and stories render in homosexual terms the major themes and concerns of the heterosexual fiction. Most of the protagonists go to places beyond their everyday sphere of activity where they are introduced to a new order of experience – to wit, homosexuality. Almost without exception,¹⁰ Maurice and the principal characters in the stories are seduced, and in one instance actually raped, into active homosexuality. Their most important homosexual liaison, furthermore, is invariably with someone different in class and outlook: Maurice with Scudder, a gamekeeper; the Reverend Pinmay with an African tribal chief; Sir Richard Conway with a milkman; Lionel March with a half-caste native; Marcian, of a patrician Roman family, with a Goth. Whatever such relationships may suggest about Forster's own sexual preferences, they afford the main character an opportunity to transcend, if only temporarily, the restraints imposed by his class and upbringing; just as, in the heterosexual fiction, the same

⁹ For dating evidence see Oliver Stallybrass's introductions to *Maurice* and *The Life to Come* in the Abinger Edition.

¹⁰ The one exception is Sir Richard Conway in 'Arthur Snatchfold', who, though 'addicted to [the female sex]', permits himself 'an occasional deviation'.

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opportunity is afforded Philip and Rickie through their relationship with Gino and Stephen respectively, or Fielding and Mrs Moore through their friendship with Dr Aziz. The consistency, in fact, with which Forster's principal homosexual characters find satisfaction outside their own class throws an interesting light on some of the key relationships in the rest of his fiction.

Forster's homosexuality may help to account for his generally unconvincing portrayal of heterosexual feeling. Despite her declaration that she loves Gino 'crudely', Caroline Abbott seems about as passionate as a plate of custard. Can one imagine Margaret and Henry Wilcox enjoying sex, or even indulging in it? As a lover, or even a human being, George Emerson is about as believable as a robot. Forster's handling of homosexual love, on the other hand, is more explicit and frequently more convincing. To be sure, Maurice's passion for Scudder rings as false as Lucy's for George, for neither Scudder nor George comes alive. But Maurice's love for Clive Durham rings true, and so does the complex blending of love, apprehension, and sadism that marks Lionel March's feeling for Cocomanut. The friendship between Aziz and Fielding may not be homosexual, but it is much more alive than the tepid attachment between Adela and Ronny.

Forster's probable apprehension of being publicly branded homosexual may underlie the fact that, at the heart of every one of the novels, there is some incident, generally sexual, whose exposure would, or does, give rise to scandal. Kidnapping, murder, and illicit love are among the activities in which his genteel men and women become involved. The very choice of a cave as the site for a sexual fantasy that overturns an entire civil administration gains significance in the light of Forster's probable apprehension.

Forster's homosexuality, then, almost certainly exercised a strong influence on his choice of themes and incidents. Nevertheless, one should beware of exaggerating that influence. If the fiction reflected only the interests and temperament of a talented homosexual, it would have a very