

A Passage to Eternity - in Memoriam E. M. Forster

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E. M. Forster is one of the outstanding novelists of this century and despite his small output, his influence has been tremendous. His novels are an exploration into the deepest recesses of reality and possess the same sense of mystery and variety that life has. In this article, the writer gives a brief resume of Forster's life and works and highlights the characteristics which seem to her to be the special marks of Forster's genius.

He died quietly as he had lived quietly - a shy, unworldly man whom I had the privilege of seeing some years ago in the lush serenity of King's College, Cambridge. The passing away of E. M. Forster may not have been a great event in the war-torn, clamorous world of today where so much memorable action takes place every day, but in the world of thought and art, there is a void and a silence. E. M. Forster, the writer who wrote so strangely yet so beautifully, so penetratingly yet so tenderly, is no more and one feels somehow that there is a little less light in the world.

Edward Morgan Forster was born in London in 1879. He was educated at Tonbridge School and King's College, Cambridge, of which he became Fellow in 1927 and Honorary Fellow in 1949. He spent his formative years in the company of the finest and most representative minds of the latter years of the nineteenth century (e.g. G. E. Moore, G. M. Trevelyan). A student at Cambridge in the days when the Hellenist Lowes Dickinson (whose biography he wrote in 1934 and with whom he founded the *Independent Review*) was an influence at King's College, his mind was shaped towards a classical coolness and aloofness. With all his later enthusiasm for humane conduct, his rebellion against orthodoxy of thought and conduct, his defence of the underdog and the down-trodden, that detachment never left him.

E. M. Forster's first novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) is a penetrating study of international character, bringing out the contrast between the Italian and the British people and their ways of life. "Parts of that novel, written with a deft touch, show excellent irony and humour, worthy of the social comedy of Jane Austen. Surprisingly enough, other parts are strongly dramatic, and indeed show much power, but the association between tones that do not quite harmonize will strike the reader as a slight incongruity." (Legouis and Cazamian). However, this novel in which "Italy figures much more substantially and disturbingly, as the critical challenge to the 'civilization' of Mr. Forster's cultivated English people...is decidedly a success. It seems to me the most successful of the pre-war novels." (F. R. Leavis).

The Longest Journey (1907), Forster's second novel, contained an indictment of the custodian of the pre-1914 English middle-class ethics, based on standards of firmly-held aesthetic values, personal integrity and sincere human relationships. Against that aspect of English upper-middle-class values which can be summed up in the words "public school," "the civil service," and "the established church," Forster set up his own set of symbols. These symbols are Forster's measuring-rod of his public school and Anglo-Saxon character, and always include the life of impulse - of impulse even to brutishness and cruelty. They are very evident in *The Longest Journey* which is Forster's most serious novel, yet "in many ways the most delightful." (Walter Allen).

Italy provided the background also for Forster's next novel *A Room with a View* (1908) which F. R. Leavis has described as "a charming and very original book - extremely original and personal....provoking comparisons with Jane Austen." Forster's next novel *Howards End* (1910) written after he had been tutor to the children of Elisabeth of the German Garden at Nassenheide, won great acclaim. Mair and Lord describe this novel as a magnificent exercise of the mature adult intelligence moving among contemporary themes. *Howards End*, the latest of Forster's pre-war novels, is perhaps his most ambitious and is the most explicit as a statement of his values. "Only connect" is the motto of the book: "Only connect the passion and the prize." The novel's main theme is the contrast between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. Margaret and Helen Schlegel are the representatives of Forster's own liberal humanitarian position, while the Wilcoxes, a middle-

class family, stands for “the outer world of telegrams and anger.” As F.R. Leavis points out, “The Schlegels represent the humane liberal culture, the fine civilization of cultivated personal intercourse, that Mr. Forster himself represents.” The Wilcoxes, on the other hand, represent the builders of the Empire - “obtuse, egotistic, unscrupulous, cowards spiritually, self-deceiving, successful.” Yet Margaret, the elder and more intelligent and mature of the Schlegel sisters, marries Mr. Wilcox, the head of the clan. The prose of her marriage is further juxtaposed with the romance of Helen’s. Connection is made in the novel but involuntarily, in terms of place and allegory.

Between 1910 and 1924, Forster published *The Celestial, Omnibus* (1911) a series of short stories. *A Passage to India*, Forster’s best-known novel, was published in 1924. This novel based on a first-hand perception of Indian life, is about the clash between the East and West, about England and India in which the author examines human relationships. The event in the Marabar Caves represents a failure of the fumbling yet touching attempts of Mrs. Moore, Adela Quested and Fielding, on the one hand, and Dr. Aziz on the other, to make contact as human beings, yet the figure of Mrs. Moore seems to assure us that reconciliation is possible. Mrs. Moore is not an exceptional person but she represents Forster’s own awareness of the nature of things. She “broods over the novel, not benignly, anything but that, but as a symbol of acceptance, of unconscious life going on heedless of the disputes of the passing moment. Mrs. Moore one feels, will be there when England and India alike have been forgotten.” (Allen).

With *A Passage to India* Forster entered into a clearer and fuller awareness of his potentialities as a novelist, yet strangely enough he never wrote a novel after it. *The Eternal Moment*, a collection of short-stories appeared in 1920 followed by two collections of essays - *Abinger Harvest* (1936) and *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951). The last-named book contains, among other essays, two penetrating appraisals of Allama Iqbal and Sir Ross Masood whom Forster admired for their strength and humanity. Forster’s Cambridge Clark Lectures, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) expressed his literary aesthetics as firmly opposed to Aristotle. In 1951, Forster collaborated with E. Crozier in the Libretto of Britain’s Opera *Billy Bud*, and in 1958, published *Marianne Thornton*, a domestic biography.

Critics have often remarked upon the inequality of Forster’s work and the failure of his symbolism to carry conviction. F. R. Leavis remarks: “The

inequality in early novels - the contrast between maturity and immaturity, the fine and the crude - is extreme; so extreme that a simple formula proposes itself. In his comedy, one might carelessly say, he shows himself the born novelist; but he aims also at making a poetic communication about life, and here he is, by contrast, almost unbelievably crude and weak." Walter Allen expresses similar thoughts: "The great weakness in Forster is simply and all the time the inadequacy of his symbolism; his novels are a mingling of social comedy and poetry: the social comedy, even remembering Meredith, is the best we have had since Jane Austen, but the poetry does not work."

Critics have also said that the plots of Forster's novels are over-complicated, improbable, melodramatic and far-fetched. Some have felt offended at his intrusions into the novel in which he is one of the Personae, guiding directing, moralizing, cajoling. Like Fielding and Thackeray, Forster is the omniscient narrator, commenting on his characters, interpreting their motives and actions, bidding us admire or detest. This way of writing is strongly objected to by critics who feel that characters should be left alone, that the author's presence tends to make characters into puppets who can be manoeuvred.

Within the short space of this essay it is not possible to deal with Forster's merits and demerits as a novelist at any length. Like many other great novelists, he is a controversial figure whose greatness is by no means easy to assess. His output is remarkably small - five novels in all. He wrote and thought in the nineteenth rather than the twentieth century way, yet his influence was been tremendous. Like him his work has a shy, unworldly quality and is almost diffidently presented, but it has had an enduring impact.

Forster was a man who believed above all in what John Keats called "the holiness of the heart's affections." In his essay "What I believe," he begins by asserting his faith in personal relationships. For him, the moments of real communication, of true enlightenment, in life are when people meet simply as People (as when Mrs. Moore and Dr. Aziz meet in *A Passage to India*). Forster deals with the interactions of two types of character, the intersection of two planes of living. In all his novels he brings into conflict those who live by convention and those who live by instinct: those for whom property and propriety, and those for whom personal relationships, are the

most important things in life. The world of convention he describes with keen observation and satire and his descriptions of it abound in unforgettable touches of wisdom and humour. In the world of instinct and emotion he is really at home.

Forster was a great spokesman of the liberal tradition. As F. R. Leavis has stated, "in current usage 'Liberal' is largely and loosely employed as a term of derogation: too much is too lightly dismissed." Forster's greatest work *A Passage to India* embodies his profound vision. Leavis has pointed to the tacit general agreement that this novel "all criticisms made is a classic: not only a most significant document of our age, but a truly memorable work of literature. And that there is point in calling it a classic of the liberal spirit will, I suppose, be granted fairly readily, for the appropriateness of the adjective is obvious. In its touch upon racial and cultural problems, its treatment of personal relations, and in prevailing ethos the book is an expression, undeniably, of the liberal tradition; it has as such, its fineness, its strength and its impressiveness and it makes the achievement, the humane, decent and rational - the 'civilized' - habit, of that tradition appear the valuable thing it is."

The touch of Oriental mystery and mysticism which is found in Mrs. Moore was Forster's own peculiar gift. For him, life, like India, was a muddle not a mystery, and with his intuitive understanding he saw that its meaning could not be expressed in simple statement but only darkly through symbols. In his novels, beneath a fastidious air of culture, there moves a strong current of primitive, almost animal vitality. Forster has his appetites, and it is this which distinguishes him from Henry James as a novelist. Sudden, dark floods of passion sweep over the exquisite cultivations of mind and manners in his novels, and in crises where James tended to fade out in pompous qualifications, Forster's critical moments are submerged in a sort of hot, tropical vagueness which leaves the reader as bewildered and terrified as are the characters in the book.

Throughout Forster's work runs a criticism of the "undeveloped heart." He is a passionate advocate of the whole person and his villains are those who refuse to recognize or to reveal the holiness of the heart's affections. It is because Forster tries to see not just a part but the whole of life - the conscious and the unconscious, the concrete and the abstract - that his novels have the same mystifying depths that life has. Having read one of his

novels one does not feel that one has come to the end of a story; rather one feels that one has had a glimpse into the deepest recesses of reality. One often shrinks back in terror but such is the magic of this strange, wise man's touch that one always goes back to him feeling that if only one could follow him on his lonely trail into the heart of life's mystery one would be able to understand not just our present situation but eternity itself.

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