

Beyond the Traditional: An Attempt to Reassess E. M. Forster's Fiction

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E. M. Forster's position within the development of the 20th century British novel has been somewhat ambivalent: on the one hand his traditional poetics has been stressed (cf. both Czech academic surveys of English Literature), while on the other his attachment to the Bloomsbury Group has been foregrounded. Following an analysis of all his six novels, a major part of his short stories and literary critical essays I intend to document the tendency of his fiction towards modernist aesthetics.

At the outset I would like to mention only some essential factographic data: four of Forster's novels, namely, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *A Room With a View*, *The Longest Journey* and *Howards End* were published during the Edwardian period, his novel *A Passage to India* was brought out in 1924, and only posthumously, in 1971, was his homosexual novel *Maurice* (which was completed in 1914) published, along with his short stories focusing on the same subject.

It must have been the polyvalence of Forster's novels, with their deceptive air of simplicity, which brought them such a wide readership in the first quarter of the 20th century when compared to the novels of the great modernist triumvirate, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence. Yet the meaning of Forster's novels is not revealed through their plots but through symbolic moments in the lives of the characters which are not immediately entirely comprehensible to them. Daniel Schwarz characterises Forster aptly when he claims that Forster's plots reflect discontinuity and flux and that his characters are victims of confusions (Schwarz 1989: 136). Also, the third person narration in Forster's novels is only seemingly objective as his narration is very dynamic. (The narrator even occasionally identifies with the least positive character.) Forster thus changes his narration towards a more expressive form as he no longer believes that one point of view could be comprehensive and could express the entire truth. Forster's novels thus portray a subjective quest which can never be final.

Forster thus problematises both the artistic and thematic conventions of the mainstream novel and if criticism sometimes mentions a provocative inspiration by Jane Austen one would have to hasten to add that Jane Austen serves him only as a starting point for his radical deconstruction of such traditional middle-class values as proper social manners and the importance of reason, which should under all circumstances check human emotions and desires, and also class distinctions. In an anticipation of D. H. Lawrence his characters are assessed according to their honesty or dishonesty towards their best impulses or, to paraphrase Martin Heidegger, according to their ability to recognise their authentic being.

Starting with his first novel *Where Angels Fear To Tread* (1905) Forster, through narrative strategies, tries to evoke some writerly qualities of his text, i.e., to suggest that his work is an intellectual construct. I will mention at least one example of a metafictional comment from the novel: 'What follows should be prefaced with some simili—the simili of

a powder mine, a thunderbolt, an earthquake [...] ‘ (WAFT 44).¹ The Czech translation by Josef Schwarz tries to somewhat suppress these metafictional comments apparently in an effort not to disrupt the illusion of the fictitious story. The writerly character of the text is therefore not so obvious in Czech, ‘To co následovalo, by mělo být předesláno nějakým příměrem: byl to výbuch miny, hromobití, zemětřesení [...] ‘ (KBVA 44).²

Forster also anticipates modernist aesthetics in his focus on the value of instincts and the inner lives of his characters and through his dynamic conception of identity, including sexual identity. Fluidity of identity had of course been explored by Ernst Mach, Henri Bergson (and much later by Jacques Lacan) and became essential for the modernist conception of character. The sexual fluidity which appears in all Forster's novels reminds one not only of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* but also of the confession of Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway* to the effect that the most exquisite moment of her life was when she kissed her friend Sally. (The word ‘exquisite’ is a key word of the aesthetics of G. E. Moore and The Bloomsbury Group and it is also the keyword of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which influenced modernism). Examples of protean sexuality can be found in D. H. Lawrence's and James Joyce's work but can of course also be found in Marcel Proust, Robert Musil, Herman Hesse and other modernist writers.

In his literary theoretical essays, e.g., in his essay ‘Art for Art's Sake’ Forster like T. S. Eliot or Roger Fry, declares a tendency towards order, towards an internal harmony which is in his opinion unattainable in society and which is inherent only in a work of art or mystic contemplation (AAS 102-103). The tendency toward harmony and a longing to convey wholeness of being is clearly common to all modernist writers but Forster's uniqueness lies in his evocation of a metaphysical (transcendental) dimension which he calls ‘the unseen’ and which can be attained through imagination or empathy. (Forster's ‘the unseen’ is thus different from Lawrence's vitalistic ‘the unknown’ which symbolises the unconscious and its potential communication with the cosmos.) The characters which epitomise this dimension are mainly Ruth Wilcox in *Howards End* and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India*. Forster often evokes this spiritual dimension by means of symbolic and prophetic moments which appear in an unusual juxtaposition with comic moments and thus contribute to the ambiguity and even incoherence of some of his texts.

Forster's declared tendency to—what could with some simplification be called—Kantian autonomous aesthetics—is connected with his lifelong interest in the relationship between literature and music. The tendency of the major modernist writers towards synesthesia is a critical commonplace and I will therefore focus Forster's originality here, the very originality which the Romantic and modernist aesthetics propound.

In each of his novels with the exception of *Maurice* a sudden, surprising and totally unexpected death appears. *The Longest Journey* is characteristic here as shortly after the narrator's characterisation of Gerald as an object of erotic desire (‘Just where he began to be beautiful the clothes started’ (LJ 35), follows this laconic statement at the beginning of chapter five, ‘Gerald died that afternoon’ (LJ 51).

In his essay ‘The Raison d'Être of Criticism in the Arts’ Forster responds to the criticism of this tendency in his work when he says that in contemporary music we find many sudden deaths ‘the phrases expire as rapidly as the characters in my novel, the chords cut each other's throats [...] ‘ and he continues, ‘/b/ut these defects—if defects they be—are vital to the general conception’ (RECA 128).

Benjamin Britten, who admired Forster's fiction (and entrusted him with writing the libretto for his opera *Billy Budd*), claimed that musical techniques were inherent to the very structure of Forster's novels. In his essay ‘Some Notes on Forster and Music’ Benjamin Britten claims that ‘the construction of Forster's novels often resembles the “classical” opera (Mozart-Weber-Verdi) where recitatives (the deliberately un-lyrical passages through which

action is advanced) separate arias or ensembles (big, self-contained set pieces of high comedy or great emotional tension)' (Britten in Herz 1997: 140).³

The aesthetics of opera has been associated in British culture with gay sensibility and identity since the times of Oscar Wilde. Wayne Koestenbaum believes that 'o/pera has the power to warn you that you have wasted your life. You haven't acted on your desires' (Koestenbaum in Gosciolo 1996: 197). This statement about opera stands for the role of classical music in general in Forster's work and does not apply to one kind of human relationship only. In his novel *A Room with a View*, for instance, Mr Beebe, listening to Beethoven in Florence, says about his British middle-class fellow tourist: 'If Miss Huneychurch ever takes to live as she plays, it will be very exciting—both for us and for her' (RV 52).

Some of Forster's characters may expire as suddenly as phrases in musical compositions but their influence continues and it is sometimes even stronger after their deaths. Rieckie's mother and Gerald in *The Longest Journey* are cases in point as well as Ruth Wilcox in *Howards End*. Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India* who has during her life shown extrasensory abilities through empathising with other people becomes after her death almost a local god when her name is distorted into a Hindu sacred syllable reiterated by the crowd. I believe this mystic dimension, i.e., the unseen, connects Forster with Virginia Woolf, especially in her novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

The question of whether Forster's declared rationalist humanism is qualified by his mysticism has been raised in literary criticism before. To be sure, Forster's position among contemporaneous British liberal intellectuals was somewhat specific in more respects than one. His position within the intellectual elite was somehow ambiguous given his permanent awareness of otherness in a society in which homosexuality was criminalised until 1967. Yet it may have been this very awareness of otherness which made him sensitive to marginalised or oppressed groups or races.⁴

One of the topics in his complex and many-layered novel *Howards End* is a testing of Mathew Arnold's thesis on whether culture could minimise social differences and connect classes. Although the lowest classes are not represented ('they are unthinkable', HE 58) for literary representation), Forster demonstrates in the poor clerk Leonard Bast his belief that any attempt to reconcile classes by means of culture alone is bound to end in disaster. Through this dramatisation Forster substantially qualifies the as yet undiluted optimism of Victorian and Edwardian liberalism. The reconciliation of the two dominant philosophies in the novel, the Romantic personified by the Schlegel sisters and the utilitarian personified by the Wilcox men is rather a failure than a success. The ending of the novel is ahistorical because it renders an almost textbook example of nostalgic pastoralism as it has been known in literature since Virgil. The country house Howards End becomes a refuge from 'the civilization of luggage' and from the impending expansion of London which is portrayed in Blakean terms as the city of Satan. Yet the ambiguity of the word 'end' in the title of the original implies that Forster was aware of this ahistoricism.

Forster's last novel *A Passage to India* has been called an epitaph to liberal humanism. I believe this novel still remains significant as in spite of some essentialist assumptions and stereotypes it was the first anti-colonial novel to admit the inability of Eurocentric values to embrace what Forster considered to be the complex, polyvalent evasive and incomprehensible character of India. The postcolonial critic Edward Said noticed that Forster's approach was diametrically different from Kipling's attitude in his novel *Kim*. While *Kim*, through empirical and rational means, succeeds in accurately mapping, describing and confidently explaining all the mysteries of India, as, to paraphrase Michel Foucault on whose work Edward Said draws, to know means to master (Said 1994: 156-199),⁵ Forster's characters by contrast face permanent frustration as their efforts to understand India end—due to the

deficiency of western epistemology—in complete failure. Just like the Brahman Godbole's songs India is for them a labyrinth of sounds which their western ear cannot distinguish.⁶ Adela and Healslope cannot name the birds they see, they do not know what animal crashed into their car and these are only an anticipation of the events in the Marabar caves. While epistemological scepticism is part and parcel of the modernist paradigm in general, it clearly has some idiosyncratic features in this novel.

Forster must have undoubtedly encountered a cosmos which is hostile to the human effort, i.e., the cosmos whose centre is not man in Thomas Hardy's fiction, yet in his Indian novel he was clearly inspired by Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter who unlike Kipling, both found manifestations of transcendent aspects of experience, i.e., aspects of Forster's unseen.⁷

In his polemical review of *Gods of India* by the Wesleyan missionary E. Osborn Martin Forster characterises the Hindu imagination as 'a constant sense of the unseen' (Forster in Das 1982: 245). The Puranic myths with their merging of the divine and the human were most congenial to him. What he admired most in Hindu rituals was the connection of the cosmic and the comical (Das 1982: 245). The seeming disparity between mysticism and comedy which in his own work contemporary criticism found so unusual and incongruous.⁸ He valued Hinduism for its concern with vision rather than with the rules of conduct he found in Christianity (Das 1982: 253). Yet it is only Mrs Moore who at the beginning of the novel achieves by means of empathy a mystical connection with the cosmos in a scene of almost Lawrentian natural mysticism which is (*pace Howards End*) not to be found in any other novel by Forster. All the other relationships in the novel between the English and the Indians and also between the English themselves suffer from a frustration and failure which are connected not with a mythic dimension but predominantly with the historical dimension of the novel—British rule in India. In contrast to the mythic ending of *Howards End* the ending is historical here as two men of different races, the liberal Mr Fielding and the Muslim doctor Aziz, cannot be friends until India becomes independent.

The inability of language to convey the complexity of India has been implied. Yet *A Passage to India* also suggests that language can restrict, it can imprison people and make them define things inadequately. Forster suggests still another paradox connected with an almost postmodernist notion of language when in *Aspects of the Novel* he playfully compares his favourite writer André Gide to the apocryphal old lady who proclaimed: 'How can I tell what I think till I see what I say' (AN 2000: 99).

To conclude I would like to reiterate that not only *A Passage to India* but also *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *The Longest Journey* and to a great extent also *Howards End* and the late stories represent a polyvalent world of quest, uncertainty and frustrated communication which indeed still make Forster very much our contemporary.

Endnotes

¹ Quotations from Forster's works in the text are identified by cue-titles and the page numbers in brackets.

² This is not meant as a criticism of Josef Schwarz's translation (Cf. also Schwarz's masterful translation of *A Passage to India* of 1974. It only testifies to my earlier generalization that Forster's narration in all his novels is more complex than it may at first seem.

³ See also Herz about the homosexual cult of Wagner (Herz 1997: 137-50).

⁴ This is what had been in a less explicit form first suggested by Wilfred Stone as early as 1966 in his important monograph *The Cave and the Mountain: A Study of E. M. Forster* (Stone 1966: 354).

- ⁵ See also Parry, B. (1995) for a complex reading of the novel.
- ⁶ The imagined natural world of the Booker Prize winning *The God of Small Things* of 1997 by the Indian writer Arundhati Roy speaks in an interesting way to the Indian world of Forster's *A Passage to India*. Her mystical and magical world tries to capture and *understand* all the sounds and smells of India which Forster only insinuated. In view of what was earlier said about Forster's relationship to music it is curious that it should be another Indian writer, Vikram Seth, for whom music is both a theme (transcendence) and rhythm of his novel *An Equal Music* of 1999.
- ⁷ The mystical tradition in English literature should not be underrated either, as Martin Procházka, who saw an earlier version of this paper, pointed out.
- ⁸ See e.g. V. Woolf's statements about E. M. Forster whom she earlier (in 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown') enlisted among her fellow Georgians. In her later essays she finds his gifts a 'contradictory assortment' (Woolf in Trivedi, 1979: 222).

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