

E. M. FORSTER

CENTENARY REVALUATIONS



EDITED BY

E. M. FORSTER: Centenary Revaluations

Edited by
Judith Scherer Herz and
Robert K. Martin



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Preface

E. M. Forster, unlike Dickens, never visited Montreal. Indeed he never travelled further into Canada than Niagara Falls, a visit he excitingly recreated in *Marianne Thornton* by describing his cousin Inglis Synnot's much less tame expedition in 1859. But Concordia University, Montreal, was nonetheless the site in May 1979 of a centenary conference whose participants, the Dean of Dulborough conspicuously absent, came from Canada, the United States, England, Australia and India for a three-day critical scrutiny and reassessment.

The programme combined major addresses and seminar sessions, a writers' panel and a concert reading of excerpts from *Billy Budd*. Those who appeared on the programme were: Marcia Allentuck, Stephen Arkin, John Beer, Carl Behm III, Marie-Claire Blais, John Colmer, Peter Firchow, Philip Gardner, André Gerard, Kathleen Grant, Anthony Harding, Elizabeth Heine, Judith Herz, Linda Hutcheon, J. K. Johnstone, Robin Lewis, John Sayre Martin, Robert K. Martin, James McConkey, Frederick P. W. McDowell, Patricia Merivale, Bharati Mukherjee, Ira B. Nadel, Stacey Olster, Norman Page, John Plant, Paul Rivenberg, Barbara Rosecrance, S. P. Rosenbaum, Judith Ruderman, Vasant Shahane, Stella Slade, Elizabeth Spencer, Wilfred Stone, George Thomson, Molly Tinsley, Donald Watt and Eudora Welty.

The present volume contains a selection of the papers read at the conference chosen to represent the range of topics discussed. We have, in addition, included a few others that could not be delivered at the conference but nonetheless speak to the issues raised there.

We wish to thank all those who came to join us in Montreal. We extend our gratitude as well to the Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge, and to the Society of Authors as the Literary Representatives of the Estate of E. M. Forster for permission to use unpublished materials; and for their generous

assistance to the conference, Concordia University, the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Council of Canada, and the British Council, in particular its Montreal representative, Mrs Anna Lamarra. Sheila Lanthier, Ruth Portner, Michael Pacholka and Bill Reid all contributed enormously to the conference's success.

But the conference could not have taken place, nor the present book have been published, had there not been the demanding, exacting and inspiring work of Oliver Stallybrass. To his memory, renewed with each turning of the page, we dedicate this volume.

Montreal 1980

*JSH
RKM*

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1 Introduction: In Search of the Comic Muse

Judith Scherer Herz

‘What special tribute shall we bring him?’¹ Forster wryly asked in 1927, speculating on the centenary of his untimely but immediate death. More than half a century later we can echo that question but without any of the irony that Forster implied in the question’s supposed justification: ‘He could scarcely have endured to put forth masterpiece after masterpiece had he not felt assured of the verdict of posterity’. Although verdict may have ‘too much the atmosphere of the law courts’ about it, he nonetheless could feel reasonably confident about the judgement of his contemporaries (he had just delivered the Clark lectures, *A Passage to India* had been translated into French, reviews, essays, appraisals of the contemporary novel increasingly spoke of his importance). Nonetheless he was far less certain of the epithet ‘great’ than were some of his more enthusiastic commentators. ‘My novels will be either almost-successes or failures’,² he wrote to Virginia Woolf in that same year and throughout his life he remained sceptical of the notion that his five published novels constituted a succession of ‘masterpiece after masterpiece’. But despite Forster’s own diffidence and his toying with the idea of greatness finally to put it aside, a cumulative verdict has been returned, in which at least one novel has been accorded that status and the entire œuvre an importance whose extent we are only beginning to recognize. Thus the question — ‘what special tribute shall we bring him?’ — remains still to be answered.

One tribute is, of course, a continued and excited reading. As with all writers one especially admires, there is the pleasure to be got from showing him to others, communicating one’s own excitement and receiving the reflection of one’s first enthusiasm often deepened as new eyes read newly. Perhaps that is special

tribute enough. But the awareness of the necessity of an ever more discriminating reading, a realization that we have yet to sharpen our tools of analysis to a sufficient fineness for the continued study of Forster's writing are the necessary corollaries of our continued pleasure in the reading. This need for a renewed and renewing scrutiny may justify the offering of this collection in the way of special tribute as well.

It is offered with the sense of the ultimate stability of Forster's reputation, but reputation is nevertheless a flighty creature and there have been times over the past fifty years where she has seemed on the verge of flying away. Thus John Crowe Ransom could write in 1943 of a Forster 'revival' (in an essay that was in part a response to Trilling's study, itself the chief spark of that revival), implying that in the twenty years since *A Passage to India*, Forster had begun to slip into oblivion.³ (This was, perhaps, more an American than an English phenomenon, considering his importance to Auden and Isherwood and his continued presence as an essayist and broadcaster.) Thirty-five years later there was again talk of a revival, especially in the reviews of P. N. Furbank's biography, many of which speculated on the vicissitudes of reputation, remarking, in particular, that Forster seems to have fallen behind Virginia Woolf as the two fly in and out of the clouds atop Olympus. They are, one suspects, moving more companionably above than the visible flight patterns of their reputations might presently suggest. This companionship, however, is based more on class, milieu, shared friends and experiences than on any crucial similarities as novelists. And I am not at all sure we can predict which reputation will alight on the higher bough twenty years, thirty years from now when reappraisals will again be in order. Their concerns with the nature of fiction aside, however, the strong likelihood is that they will neither be compared as novelists nor judged in relation to each other's accomplishments. What I am, of course, assuming is that they will be talked about and read, accorded the importance, dare one say the greatness, that many of the contributors to this collection assume (in posterity's name) for Forster's work.

There has always been, during these periods of revaluation, some tendency to separate the man and his writing, a tendency in part abetted by the seeming split in Forster's writing career. But we should be on guard against talking of Forster primarily in terms of how fine a human being he was as if his liberal humanism

were somehow a quality distinct from and intrinsically more important than his performance as a novelist. (Paradoxically this tendency to admire Forster's political integrity often joins with almost the reverse attitude, a biographically based belittling of his accomplishments as one attends to his relationship with his mother, his sexual problems, his friends' gossip, as if these 'facts' were more worth the scrutiny than his writing. Either way his achievement as a novelist gets blurred.) But the whole of Forster's writing is unified to an extraordinary degree. One has always noted a touch of the essayist in the novels' narrators and the novelist's fiction-making is even more in evidence in essay, broadcast, biography. Moreover his contemporaries saw him in much the same way as we 'see' his narrators. There are countless descriptions that echo these essential characteristics: He had 'an appearance of retiring diffidence, of a desire only to be gentle, and charming, and amusing while in fact taking deadly aim'.⁴ But however expert an essayist he was and complex, sharp, loving and fine a human being, it was the achievement of the novelist that prompted the centenary observances, not the other way around.

We are willing to believe what Forster says as an essayist because we have learned to trust him so implicitly in the fiction. This trust does not necessarily mean total agreement; in *Howards End* there is a margin for argument and, perhaps, in the outermost political and historical reaches of *A Passage to India* as well. But he never hides anything about a character nor is he evasive about his own beliefs. Words are utterly respected. As Meredithian as he is in some respects, he never Meredith-fashion piles up his words like a child playing with toys. It is in this sense he is most like a poet (not in the Meredith-like poetizing he sometimes indulges in). For Forster, as for his admired Jane Austen, words matter. Writing (like the inner life) pays.

And the reader pays too. There is not the luxury of detachment. We accept his judgements (or — and this is almost the same thing — we argue strenuously with them) whether or not we are of his philosophical-political persuasion. John Crowe Ransom may have shared a part of his beliefs (that part that Ransom labelled agrarian, what Forster ruefully referred to as feudal, knowing what the cost of real property was but wanting-not-wanting it at the same time), but Ransom by no means shared all of them. Yet there is no better description than Ransom's of the essential

mechanism of a Forster novel: 'Five separate times he has taken a set of characters, indisputably alive, at least middling in virtue, and studied them, head and heart with uncanny and merciless intelligence'.⁵ The crucial word there is *intelligence*, a quality which eschews sentimentality and 'allowed Forster to inhabit his created world with absolute assurance and authority. Intelligence of this order is not *parti pris*.

The voice that we most associate with this assurance of judgement is a comic one. It undermines and unmasks, its playfulness and charm turning on a sudden to more sombre tones. But it never loses balance and always produces a widening out of perception unlike many comic strategies which tend to work reductively. Its presence has been noticed from the start and not infrequently deprecated. It is a familiar position stretching from Leonard Woolf's reference to Forster's lapses into silliness in the early novels to Leavis's uneasiness with its re-emergence in *A Passage to India*.⁶ Indeed, had he listened to his friend, Bob Trevelyan, this voice would have been silenced at the very beginning. For what Trevelyan objected to were just those qualities we most admire in Forster, his 'cool, hard, comic tone'⁷ in Irving Howe's marvellously apt description of the unsentimental and continuous intelligence operating in all the fiction. Curiously, Trevelyan attacked the comic muse not for what she did, but for the way she said it. As unliterary a critic as he was, he did nonetheless address himself to what he begrudgingly supposed 'one must call style'.⁸ Forster's he found 'too conversational and even slangy', not even appropriate for 'a slight and comic narrative' and he tried to convince Forster of the importance of the author's 'dignity'. His voice, Forster was instructed, should have a 'certain sameness of quality, and, if possible, beauty'. That end-of-the-sentence desideratum it had in abundance but in forms that Trevelyan could evidently not appreciate. Ransom's characterization of the 'beauty and purity' of Forster's style underlines this point exactly, and Ransom further links these qualities to 'the refreshing collocation of wit and poetry' (after the fashion of Meredith, but a Meredith transcended, for Forster has grace where Meredith has excess).⁹ The point is, of course, that the 'beauty' is a function of the comedy, and in Forster's variation on a Keatsian theme, comedy is closely allied to truth. After all, Cecil Vyse, imagining himself a humorist, decided that 'in the interests of the Comic

Muse and of Truth'¹⁰ he would bring the Emersons to Windy Corner. Both truth and comedy were indeed served but the humorist departed unsmiling.

That the Comic Muse covered more ground than Windy Corner we have long observed, but we have only now begun to map the extent of her territory. For as much as she is at home in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room With a View*, she also flits across the landscape of all the others, taking up a surprisingly important residence in the last and greatest of all of Forster's major fictions. And she appears there not simply in the comic diminishings of the Turtons and Burtons, nor in the Oriental extravagances of the extras that hover about Aziz, but at the very heart of the novel. The expedition to the caves is the familiar Box Hill picnic but here small courtesies and familiar gestures have become syllables in an unknown — or a not yet invented — language: ou-boum. The event is unfolded as if it were tea on the vicarage lawn. The displacement is gradual. By the time the comic muse departs, only tragedy remains.

Although the near alliance of the comic and tragic modes has been recognized long before Polonius' recitative of generic distinctions, the special form it takes in Forster's writing has yet to be adequately explored. With increasing emphasis recently on a study of the Forsterian voice (several essays in this volume approach the problem through an examination of syntax, narrative voice, myth-making), we are beginning to assemble the tools for just such a study. There are nonetheless many obstacles in the way, not the least being the difficulties involved in talking about the sort of comedy Forster learned from Jane Austen. For both Austen and Forster nuance of language, verbal wit whose surprises are direct encounters with Truth, even the very rhythms of sentence and paragraph, all create a comic depth which makes the surface action of the characters often appear as pantomime. The characters can be very good by themselves, but the reader is primarily intent on catching the author's voice, for what he has to say about them is often more important than what they have to say for themselves. As he slides in and out of his characters he is able to appropriate even the language of their follies and pretensions, and he does this not in order to unmask them but to clarify them. It is essentially a comic process in which both reader and character are implicated along with the narrator.

Sometimes it is hard to tell them apart. Whose consciousness

are we within, for example, when in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* we are made to feel Philip's almost physical pain as the vision of a dentist in fairyland explodes his false romanticizings? Our laughter there is directed not so much at Philip as at the comically incongruous patterns formed by his fragmenting consciousness (laughing gas and the Etruscan League). But partly because Philip himself had invested such faith in the comic muse our laughter is never reifying and it affords Philip as well a small space for recovery at the same time as it probes his absurdities and delusions. Forster even manages to absorb the central image of the passage into his own commentary when he speaks of Philip's spurious sentimentalizing as if it were a bad tooth to be extracted ('a touch will loosen it'). Narration becomes one with fiction. Dentistry has its uses (just as sons of dentists can be fallen in love with — a truth that Philip in appropriately subliminal fashion comes finally to acknowledge and Caroline not so subliminally). Thus the preposterous 'a dentist in fairyland' ceases to be a simply comic cry. The voice that comments 'the sooner it goes from us the better. It was going from Philip now and therefore he gave the cry of pain', (ii, 20) has directed our laughter in ways we were far from anticipating when we first encountered Philip's horrified reaction to Caroline's exhausted admission. It is an exquisite exercise in point of view, but we can imagine Lubbock's disapproval for the point of view is chameleon-like rather than constant. It is embedded in the language of the scene rather than within a single consciousness.

Our laughter co-ordinates the full range of our responses in such a passage, but occasionally, especially with characters like Harriet, it is simpler and more predictable. Then it is more nearly like the response of 'intellectual superiority' that Philip, invoking Meredith, found a congenial posture to adopt, a posture which Forster satirized so knowingly (and in some ways so fondly) in his portrait of 'Cecil as a Humorist' (*RWV*, x). However, we are usually not allowed Cecil's complacent, albeit aesthetic, detachment. More often our laughter is absorbed into the larger resonances of the fiction as we are forced to make ever finer discriminations in our attention to character, action, voice.

Even when our laughter is simple it can be enormously satisfying. When, during the conference, Elizabeth Spencer read the passage from *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in which Harriet gets the smut in her eye, the audience laughed heartily. We obviously

heard something Trevelyan had not, for one of the passages he had singled out for special disapproval moved from the waltzing train to Harriet's notorious smut. The passage was completely familiar to most of us; yet the laughter was the response of a new delight.

But that was the only time during the conference when the Italian novels were more than passingly mentioned. The conference was by no means a sombre affair. Partly due to one's sense of the presence of Forster — would he not have thought the enterprise faintly comic we wondered — there was a pleasing friendliness, a lightness even in scholarly debate. Yet comedy itself was never a subject of that debate. It thus might seem somewhat perverse in an essay that purports to introduce papers mostly deriving from that conference to dwell at such length on the comic mode in Forster's writing. But if this is indeed to be a period in which Forster's somewhat unstable reputation will be fixed, then it is crucial that our revaluations do justice to his full accomplishment. That finely tuned laughter which is so probing a tool of moral analysis also provides us with our most accessible entrance into the fiction, and is one of our chief pleasures once we are within. As grateful readers and responsible critics we should acknowledge comedy's presence as we describe possible approaches to Forster's achievement.

The conference was, in part, celebration, in part, careful scrutiny, and, from a purely academic point of view, exceptionally productive as the essays included here suggest. The major emphasis remains, in this collection as it was at the conference, on the fiction, but the essayist and critic are present too. One crucial assumption is that the novelist and the humanist are a single person, so that, for example, the essay that sets out to assess the value of Forster's liberal humanism in the wake of the horrors of the Second World War accepts without question that his 'position as novelist is . . . forever secure'. And the essay that defines his distinctive philosophy finds a successful test of that philosophy in the considerable political influence he had both in regard to India and to civil liberties. The whole of Forster's life — its interior privacy as glimpsed in the letters, journals, the biography, its public expression as recorded in the fiction, the broadcasts, the essays and reviews — becomes the witness to, the validator of his beliefs. Thus the attempt to locate that which will endure as fashions change, both fashions of fiction