

# Aspects of the Novel

E. M. Forster



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**E. M. FORSTER**

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**ASPECTS OF THE  
NOVEL**

edited by  
**OLIVER STALLYBRASS**



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## CONTENTS

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION	9
AUTHOR'S NOTE	21
1. INTRODUCTORY	23
2. THE STORY	40
3. PEOPLE	54
4. PEOPLE ( <i>continued</i> )	71
5. THE PLOT	85
6. FANTASY	101
7. PROPHECY	116
8. PATTERN AND RHYTHM	134
9. CONCLUSION	151
APPENDICES	
A. <i>Extracts from Forster's Commonplace Book</i>	155
B. <i>The Fiction Factory</i>	176
C. Materials and Methods of Fiction	179
D. <i>The Art of Fiction</i>	182
ANNOTATED INDEX	189



PELICAN BOOKS

ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

Edward Morgan Forster was born in London in 1879, attended Tonbridge School as a day boy, and went on to King's College, Cambridge, in 1897. With King's he had a lifelong connection and was elected to an Honorary Fellowship in 1946. He had honorary degrees conferred on him by many universities. He declared that his life as a whole had not been dramatic and he was unfailingly modest about his achievements. Interviewed by the B.B.C. on his eightieth birthday, he said: 'I have not written as much as I'd like to . . . I write for two reasons; partly to make money and partly to win the respect of people whom I respect . . . I had better add that I am quite sure I am not a great novelist.' Eminent critics and the general public have judged otherwise; in Penguins alone *A Passage to India* has sold well over a million copies.

In addition to six major novels and two collections of short stories (published in Penguins), E. M. Forster published various other works; they include two biographies, two books about Alexandria, the result of his sojourn there in the First World War, when he was with the Red Cross, and, with Eric Crozier, the libretto for Britten's opera, *Billy Budd*. He died in June 1970.





## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

It was Forster's annual custom, as one year passed into the next, to review in his diary the year just ended, presenting for his own inspection a balance-sheet of his physical and spiritual health, fame, and occasionally fortune. His pen ran more readily, on these occasions, to self-castigation and self-pity than to their opposites; and 1927 was accordingly a

difficult year to review as I feel happy and think it has been . . . Substructure of money and fame. Gave away about £600 and could have managed more. Lectures (Jan.-March, published Oct.) a success. Big audiences in the Arts Theatre<sup>1</sup> and fellowship at King's in consequence.

The lectures were the annual Clark Lectures, sponsored by Trinity College, Cambridge, and of all such series in the field of English literature perhaps the best-known. From Leslie Stephen and Edmund Gosse to William Empson and I. A. Richards, the lecturers have included not only the predictable roll-call of famous, or once famous, critics and scholars, but also, over the last fifty or sixty years, the occasional noted practitioner of one of the literary arts – a historian, say, or a dramatist, or a poet. In the academic year 1926–7 the honour fell, for the first time, to a novelist; and the man selected was the author of that much-praised recent novel, *A Passage to India*.

Forster was pleased by the invitation, but hesitant over accepting; and on 17 March 1926 he wrote to his Indian friend Syed Ross Masood:

1. [Not today's (Cambridge) Arts Theatre, but a university lecture-hall then known by that name.]

## ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

I am in some excitement over the Clark Lectureship which has just been offered me by Trinity College, Cambridge – 8 lectures on English literature to be delivered there this autumn or next spring for the very substantial remuneration of £200. I shall accept if I can summon up courage.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand there was the money, the uneasy knowledge that he was not writing another novel or anything else of substance, and above all, perhaps, the kudos – not least that of following in the footsteps of T. S. Eliot, for whose poetry Forster felt a strong if guarded admiration. (For that of A. E. Housman his feeling was unqualified; but it was probably a little later before he learned of Housman's having been offered the lectureship ahead of Eliot, and was allowed not merely to see but to copy Housman's elegant letter of refusal.)<sup>3</sup> On the other hand there were the factors calling for 'courage': chief among them, surely, not the ordeal of addressing a large and primarily academic audience, but the fear that in doing so, and on the subject of that 'inoffensive hen' the novel – for however the invitation was framed he must have known what was expected of him – he would be inviting, not least from his fellow novelists, the charge of inconsistency. For much of his life Forster was conscious of 'the gulf between the critical and creative states';<sup>4</sup> and when, twenty years after delivering the Clark Lectures, he was invited to that other Cambridge to speak on 'The *Raison d'Être* of Criticism', he began with the unreluctant admission that 'the case *against* criticism is alarm-

2. From a typewritten copy in the possession of Mr P. N. Furbank.

3. The letter – in which Housman courteously declines to let 'a whole year (and it would not take less)' be 'subtracted from those minute and pedantic studies in which I am fitted to excel, and which give me pleasure' – appears in full in Forster's *Commonplace Book* (following the block of entries which form Appendix A in the present volume) and in *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, edited by Henry Maas (London, Hart-Davis, 1971).

4. *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Abinger Edition, vol. 11), p. 118.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

ingly strong' and concluded with the assertion that there is no 'first-class *raison d'être* for criticism in the arts'.<sup>5</sup> Such critical work as, holding these views, he nevertheless produced is, with no other exceptions, diminutive in scale, wayward in manner, and characterized by quick, sharp insights rather than by detailed analysis, or the consistent application of any critical theory, or the kind of dissection that might be looked for in a course of eight lectures 'on some period or periods of English Literature not earlier than Chaucer'.<sup>6</sup> Did he really wish to compete with Mr Clayton Hamilton, of whose *Materials and Methods of Fiction* he had made savage fun a few years back,<sup>7</sup> or with Professor E. A. Baker, a volume of whose monumental *History of the English Novel* he was presently to treat with a degree of disrespect that moved the author to an indignant protest, and Forster to a partial apology?<sup>8</sup>

The answer was, perhaps, never seriously in doubt: his current affluence might prove a mere flash in the American pan (the American sales of *A Passage to India* had far outstripped the British), unlike Housman he had no 'studies', pedantic or otherwise, to interrupt, and in the last resort he would have needed, for a refusal, a good deal less vanity, or vanity of an austerer or more sophisticated brand. Nevertheless, his acceptance did not entirely dispel his qualms,

5. *Op. cit.*, pp. 105, 118.

6. Forster's wording (quoted from p. 24) is not quite that of the terms of the lectureship as announced in the *Cambridge University Reporter*, 6 March 1883. But the terms have in fact varied from time to time: originally the lecturer was appointed for three years, had to give at least sixty lectures in all, and received £300 per annum. Forster had, of course, lectured on literary subjects before now; but his early series of Extension Lectures had been on Italian history, while his papers to the Working Men's College are rather a special case.

7. In the review which forms Appendix B and is the source of the phrase 'inoffensive hen'.

8. *The Spectator*, 28 June 1930, p. 1055, and 12 July 1930, p. 54.

## ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

some of which he voiced in a letter of 11 July to a friend in Alexandria, G. H. Ludolf:

I suppose the chief point in my being alive – at least the only public point – is to produce good books, which I can't say I'm doing. I spend my time in reading novels by other people in connection with some lectures to be given at Cambridge next year ... I ... am struggling through *Clarissa Harlowe*. Have just polished off Defoe and Sterne, both of whom I enjoy enormously. All this is pleasant enough, and the lectures are well paid. But it hasn't anything to do with creation. I feel like a dummy, from whom real life has been withdrawn, and I always have thought – and fear I always shall think – that most men over forty are in the same case: they are happy and pleasant enough, they enjoy things, they fill a place (having first made it to fill): but the respect they conspire to retain is totally misplaced.

The 'polishing off' of eighteenth-century novels had begun, probably in April, with *Tristram Shandy* and *Moll Flanders*, entries on which open the series of notes in Forster's Commonplace Book. Having got so far, on 17 May he wrote to Virginia Woolf, confessing that *Tristram* and *Moll* were new to him, and asking innocently for 'the names of the best novels'.<sup>9</sup> Even if he hadn't read all of them, I suspect that he had a clearer idea of what they might be than he chose to let on. In any case, since presently he was dismissing one of Virginia Woolf's published opinions as a 'dreary Bloomsbury conclusion',<sup>10</sup> it seems unlikely that he was unduly influenced by her private recommendations, if indeed she made any in response to this appeal.

If in advance Forster was 'fussed' by the 'somewhat agitating honour' of his lectures, the first 'went better than I expected', after the second he felt the audience was 'interested so far', by the third the lectures were 'a popular success among the Cambridge intelliganzanettes', by the

9. I have seen only a transcription of this letter.

10. See p. 164.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

seventh a 'great success', and by the end 'the *greatest* success', so that 'my constant rise to fame impedes me' from letter-writing.<sup>11</sup> That the lectures were greatly enjoyed by most of the audience seems beyond a doubt – though this is explained in very different terms by the two correspondents who have been good enough to send me their recollections.<sup>12</sup> Mr George Rylands, who attended several of the lectures, recalls Forster's 'sly smile which quickly broke into a choking almost childish laugh' and adds:

Morgan never pontificated; he was never doctrinaire; never condescending or supercilious. Above all, although he never raised his voice, he never mumbled. The lectures, as he says in the printed version, were 'informal, indeed talkative' . . . The best of the Clark lecturers who followed him have succeeded for the same reason. They have talked, as Morgan was to do most memorably on the air . . . they talked to 'the Common Reader'.

This, the evidence of a Fellow of King's, would presumably be ruled out of court by my other correspondent, Dr F. R. Leavis, who sat through all eight lectures and remembers being 'astonished at the intellectual nullity that characterized them'. For him, the explanation of Forster's 'demonstratively sympathetic reception' and 'gruesome' success with his – 'certainly *his*' – capacity audience is that the latter consisted largely of 'sillier dons' wives and their friends' (Forster's 'intelliganzanettes'?), although there were also 'a great number of male dons present, including my old tutor (a Kingsman) – no exception to the rule that Kingsmen are always loyal'. Dr Leavis, who sees all this as

11. Letters to Virginia Woolf, 19 November 1926; C. P. Cavafy, 19 January 1927; Dora Carrington, 25 January 1927; Edward Arnold, 2 February 1927; T. E. Lawrence, 7 February 1927; E. V. Thompson, 10 March 1927; and T. E. Lawrence, 18 March 1927. For some of these quotations I am indebted, once, again, to notes made by Mr P. N. Furbank.

12. Professor (then Mr) I. A. Richards proved to have been away from Cambridge at the time on a 'round-the-world honeymoon wander'.

evidencing 'the potent orthodoxy of enlightenment', continues:

The resultant book at once became a nuisance: all the girls' school English mistresses in England seized on the distinction between flat and round characters – which after all was as good as anything the book did yield critically. I speak as one who was largely responsible for the 'English' teaching at Girton and Newnham.

One may remark in passing that Dr Leavis has elsewhere found *Aspects of the Novel*<sup>13</sup> less wholly devoid of critical yield, Forster's 'necessary demolition-work' on Meredith having saved the author of *The Great Tradition*<sup>14</sup> from this particular necessity. But Dr Leavis is not the only critic who has been severe on *Aspects*, and it is time to consider the shortcomings with which it has been taxed.

Forster, as I have already suggested, was to some extent in a false position: that of a hired critic who had grave doubts about the value of criticism. From this dilemma he sought to extricate himself by offering criticism of the kind he found most congenial and 'inoffensive', casting occasional doubts over 'the whole caboodle', and firing off an early broadside against the 'pseudo-scholarship' of which he ironically claimed to be a practitioner. Was his position equivocal? J. D. Beresford thought it was: Forster, he says in his review of the book,<sup>15</sup> gives the impression that

for two pins he would have thrown his cap and gown over the windmill and declared that there wasn't a single principle among all the canons of literary criticism that was worth two-pence . . . But anarchy cannot be openly preached in a University hall, not even literary anarchy, and Mr Forster had to respect the wishes

13. The title under which the lectures were published, in London by Edward Arnold and in New York by Harcourt, Brace, on 20 October 1927.

14. London, Chatto & Windus, 1948; see p. 33 in the Penguin edition.

15. *New Adelphi*, June 1928, pp. 366–7.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

of the late William George Clark. Discretion was essential, a measure of sedateness . . .

If for Beresford, as I infer, the regrettable feature was the sedateness, for Ford Madox Ford it was the anarchism, and the irreverence that went with it. The title of his review, 'Cambridge on the Caboodle',<sup>16</sup> expresses his outrage at Forster's jesting use of that word. He equates Forster's attitude towards 'the art and craft that has given him honour and fame' with that of *Punch* 'towards the graver problems of life', and continues:

In as much as Mr Forster is a novelist he is a priest and in this work it is as if with the one hand he elevates the Host whilst with the other he writes donnish witticisms about how the sacred wafers are baked.

Forster the intellectual nullity, Forster the pusillanimous anarchist, Forster the sacrilegious priest: such are the charges that fly around when the novelist turns from creation to criticism – and takes with him the characteristic 'refusal to be great' which is generally<sup>17</sup> regarded as amiable or even admirable in his fiction. But surely it is a mistake to measure Forster's slim volume by the standard of books he did not aspire to write or emulate? And it may be that a more pertinent criticism is the one made by the narrator in Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale*:

I read *The Craft of Fiction* by Mr Percy Lubbock, from which I learned that the only way to write novels was like Henry James; after that I read *Aspects of the Novel* by Mr E. M. Forster, from which I learned that the only way to write novels was like Mr E. M. Forster . . .

For me, that disposes definitively of Lubbock's book; and, if I find it less than fair to Forster's, at least it suggests, in its

16. *Saturday Review of Literature*, 17 December 1927, pp. 449–50.

17. Though not by Lionel Trilling, who coined the phrase (*E. M. Forster*, London, Hogarth Press, 1944, pp. 10, 155).



## ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

amusingly exaggerated way, what kind of a book *Aspects of the Novel* is: a set of observations, somewhat arbitrarily arranged (the first hint of the framework for Forster's 'ram-shackly course' occurs only towards the end of the notes which form Appendix A), of a man who is a novelist first, a slightly uncommon reader second, a friend third, and an analytical or theorizing critic fourth. Friend third and critic fourth. For it has to be admitted that Forster never hesitated to subordinate criticism to friendship, and in *Aspects of the Novel* there are three clear examples: the gratuitous puff (neither his first nor his last) for Dickinson's *The Magic Flute*; the discrepancy between his lukewarm private and fulsome published comments<sup>18</sup> on two of Percy Lubbock's books, a discrepancy almost certainly reflecting loyalty and gratitude to a King's contemporary who in 1918, as his superior in the Red Cross, had given him strong support in an organizational dispute; and his decision 'not to send Mrs Woolf the uncorrected proofs for a small private reason; they contain a criticism of her own work which I have modified in the revise!!'<sup>19</sup> We have the right to be scandalized – Forster's word in the context of his famous preference for betraying his country rather than his friend – but not to be surprised: People before Art was a lifelong and oft-stated part of his credo.

Even when seen for what it is, *Aspects of the Novel* still has the occasional power to madden – as Forster intended it should: 'I hope that I have annoyed some of you over Scott!' he remarks. Scott's admirers have duly risen to the bait,<sup>20</sup> voices have been raised in favour of many another

18. See pp. 81, 136, 137, 160–61. And as late as 1944 Forster was recommending *The Craft of Fiction* to his Indian listeners; see the disappointingly repetitive talk, 'The Art of Fiction', which forms Appendix D.

19. Letter to Brian Fagan (Forster's editor at Edward Arnold), 2 September 1927.

20. Notably several of the book's reviewers: in order of their general friendliness, L. P. Hartley (*Saturday Review*, 17 December 1927), Virginia