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A Room With A View
—AND—
Howards End
—
E.M. FORSTER



HOWARDS END AND A ROOM WITH A VIEW

by E. M. Forster

with an Introduction by Benjamin DeMott



A SIGNET CLASSIC

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E. M. FORSTER is one of the major novelists of the first half of the twentieth century. He was born in 1879 and educated at King's College, Cambridge, where he was for a time a Fellow. His first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, was published in 1905 and was quickly followed by *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room With a View* (1908), and *Howards End* (1910) which received wide attention. In 1924, the highly acclaimed *A Passage to India*, based on Forster's first-hand observations of Indian life, appeared. His other works include collections of short stories and essays, a volume of criticism, the libretto for Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, a film script, and a study of Virginia Woolf. In 1953, Forster was awarded membership in the Order of Companions of Honour by Queen Elizabeth II. On his ninetieth birthday, in 1969, he received the Order of Merit, the highest distinction outside of political rank that a British sovereign can bestow. He died in Coventry, England, on June 7, 1970.

Benjamin DeMott was a professor of English at Amherst College and a frequent contributor to *The New York Times Book Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and other publications. His writings also include the Introduction to the Signet Classic edition of *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence.

Introduction

Writing in 1943—a time when Hemingway and Faulkner among others were still productive—the critic Lionel Trilling described Edward Morgan Forster as “the only living novelist who can be read again and again and who, after each reading, gives me . . . the sensation of having learned something.” Politics figured in this judgment—the politics of a distinct historical moment. The author of *Howards End* had become a hero among critics of the left—thoughtful liberals, such as Trilling, who were scornful of Comes-the-Revolution cant about the imminent transformation of human nature. Forster shared the hopes of those working for social and economic change within the framework of democratic society, but not the dream of sudden political cures for human woe. (After reading Pasternak’s *Dr. Zhivago* he remarked to a friend that “it makes you feel a revolution is *never* worth it.”) And he was troubled by the moral vanity and the penchant for oversimplification pervasive among proponents of radical change. (There’s a shrewd sampling of the confusions of “idealists and political economists” in *Howards End*, Chapter 15.)

But although remedies for political naivete are available in Forster, it’s not primarily through them that we gain the “sensation of having learned something.” In the year separating *A Room with a View* (1908) from *Howards End* (1910) Forster turned thirty; *Howards End* proved to be longer and more socially inclusive than any of his earlier books; an ambition to speak to the condition of an entire nation, England, was freshly energizing his mind; ruminations on large themes, including the pros and cons of redistributing wealth, fall from his characters’ lips. But *Howards End* is continuous in achievement with *A Room with a View*, and the achievement isn’t that of a political novelist. It belongs rather to a genius creator of intimacy—a comprehensively thoughtful, fundamentally *unpolitical* literary artist whose writing conjoined two kinds of knowledge quite extraordinarily different: as different as worldliness and unworldliness.

About social existence E. M. Forster knew everything. He

knew that comfortable habitation of an enclave shrivels alertness to the variousness of the human condition, and that one's effort to heighten sensitivity to family, friends, neighbors, can deepen one's social obliviousness. He knew that whimsy, politeness, even modesty can have, in certain social circumstances, cruel effect. And he knew that cruelty can be perceived—in certain social circumstances—as glamorous. Early in *Howards End* young Charles Wilcox insults and browbeats an elderly station porter, and Forster notices that the porter gazes after the young snot admiringly. The scene dramatizes the total inconsiderateness of the Wilcox clan (the mother excluded); it also represents class relationships as they are: the oppressed appearing dazzled by their oppressors because unable, for specifiable reasons having to do with the texture of lived experience, to see themselves as the oppressed. Here as everywhere Forster displays a worldly writer's interest in human interaction as conditioned by money and status.

That interest, though, doesn't carry with it the common penalty, namely blankness to other dimensions of experience. A manners-watcher, Forster nevertheless understood that men and women aren't the sum of their manners. Intermittently we dislodge ourselves from the social woodwork, becoming responsive to intimations of realities more elevated than those shaped by cash and caste, membership in an enclave, adjacency to family and friends. Forster relished such intimations, recognizing them as a form of knowledge. Lacking conventional religion, he possessed a gift for reverence, an impulse to pursue essence, a concern for values as well as prices. Working easily from observed behavior to inner feeling to meaning-in-the-large, he taught unremittingly against the reductiveness that sunders matter and spirit. The best-remembered imperative in his work (it provides the epigraph for *Howards End*) is: "Only connect . . ." He himself was, throughout a lifetime, bravely obedient to that command.

And without fuss or self-puffery. Not the least remarkable dimension of Forster's movement from manners to feeling to meaning is its apparent casualness. Revelation when it arrives seems incidental. Brevity and tact are norms. Pomposity is the unpardonable sin. Through a multitude of rhetorical devices, ironic overstatement among them, the novelist delicately teases his personal claims to insight. (For God's sake, reader, don't be intimidated, it's just me: this is one of his tones.) By placing his judgments unobtrusively—folding them into throwaway clauses—he avoids the unlovable gestures of a moral preceptor addicted to

setting inferiors straight. Readers are addressed as though sufficiently brainy to summon implications on their own, sufficiently caring to ponder the complex whole—behavior, feelings, meaning—until possessed of the riches of each element. And when there's occasion for reflection reaching beyond the consciousness of the characters onstage, the novelist contrives to bring it forth without proprietorial hauteur.

One example among hundreds: Cecil Vyse proposes for a third time to Lucy Honeychurch and is accepted (*A Room with a View*, Chapter 8). Appropriate exclamations come quickly from family and friends. Lucy's brother and mother are joyous, a clergyman invokes "every kind of blessing," the household staff is happily in the know. But the author misdoubts the adequacy of the standard vocabularies of pleasure, stock felicitational gestures, blocky group generalities. It's not that the words ring false; it's that they edge people away from the grain of their true feeling, hide the subtler meanings of the occasion.

An engagement is so potent a thing that sooner or later it reduces all who speak of it to [a] state of cheerful awe. Away from it, in the solitude of their rooms, Mr. Beebe [the clergyman] and even Freddy [Lucy's brother] might again be critical. But in its presence and in the presence of each other they were sincerely hilarious. It has a strange power, for it compels not only the lips, but the very heart. The chief parallel—to compare one great thing with another—is the power over us of a temple of some alien creed. Standing outside, we deride or oppose it, or at the most feel sentimental. Inside, though the saints and gods are not ours, we become true believers, in case any true believer should be present.

The humane brilliance of the passage is traceable in part to the sharp naming of those nearly contradictory feelings ("cheerful awe" and sincere hilarity). The pleasure and instruction provided derive from Forster's reading of the significance of the feelings he's named—his grip on both surface and essence. How tightly packed that reading is! The strange power of a plighted troth to compel both awe and laughter testifies, first, to our embarrassment in the face of the momentous. Who do these engaged people think they are? Aren't they a tad silly? How can any pair of grown human beings like ourselves affect to extract themselves from errands and routines—the tide that carries most of us through our days? Where do they get off acting as though they

were free agents, decision-makers, people with the right and the capacity to interrupt Time itself in deference solely to the state of their own hearts? Is it not grotesque—egotistical, “alien,” ridiculous—to claim such personal empowerment and sovereignty? Repeat: who do they think they are?

But even as we’re tempted to see an engagement as an absurd explosion of self-importance, we’re driven to treat it earnestly as a portent. Engagements reach a plane of being beyond personality or manners. Gazing at them from the right direction we take in that they embody the human talent for idealism and spiritual response to life. Does not the pledge of two people to love, cherish, comfort each other forever affirm the reasonableness of the great religious ideals of brotherhood and universal love? Does not each pledge echo the Rule that we’re to love others as we love ourselves? When we pause to reflect on a commitment to marriage, do we not glimpse our own mystery, our own underdeveloped seriousness? Naturally these dimensions of the act of engagement aren’t dwelled on as we utter our congratulations—or as we secretly giggle thereafter. But if we were to scrutinize our inner responses with patient intensity, advancing beyond social fact to essence, might we not surprise ourselves? Might we not come face to face with aspects of our nature and history about which it’s an impoverishment to be ignorant?

Strewing questions and implications over the landscape in this fashion isn’t, needless to say, Forster’s style; he thinks out and suggests rather than spells out and drones. His smiling voice allows us to accept Lucy Honeychurch and Cecil Vyse provisionally as alien “saints and gods,” while retaining our sensible doubt that an ordinary middle-class couple ever actually qualifies for such elevation. With cool equipoise he avoids deflating or inflating the original feelings—the slightly rattled, fazed condition of the observers of the engagement—even as he shyly exposes their bearings on matters as weighty as the history of human idealism. By pulling back for a few sentences from individual persons toward self-amused sententiousness, he nods at the book’s grander themes (their core is the belief in the holiness of the heart’s affections that is shared by the Emersons, father and son). He also confirms, obliquely, that the “just representation of general nature” for which Dr. Johnson praised Shakespeare isn’t beyond his range.

And all this is done as though in collaboration with us, the audience. We are together with the author in diffident bewilderment, confusion, mixed response, sentimentality, true belief. *We*, he says. *We* deride, *we* oppose, *we* stand outside, *our* very

heart is compelled. We're in league, in short (reader and author); our intimacy is an constant.

Many memorable paragraphs in Forster's books resemble the paragraph on engagements; the author retains, in modified form, certain options of the omniscient novelist. But from chapter to chapter we live mainly along the nerves of individual characters in open-ended time and circumstance—persons responding under pressure of confrontation, surprise, accident. And here too, always—it's the triumph of Forster's art—we have the sense of a continuing intimate under-conversation between ourselves and the reserved, sympathetic, clear-eyed narrator. Think of Helen Schlegel's comically pell-mell monologue during the umbrella search in *Howards End*:

'Oh, I am so sorry! . . . I do nothing but steal umbrellas. I am so very sorry! Do come in and choose one. Is yours a hooky or a nobbly? Mine's a nobbly—at least I *think* it is . . . Don't you talk, Meg! You stole an old gentleman's silk top-hat. She thought it was a muff. Oh, heavens! I've knocked the In and Out card down. Where's Frieda? Tibby, why don't you ever—? No, I can't remember what I was going to say. That wasn't it, but do tell the maids to hurry tea up. What about this umbrella? . . . No, it's all gone along the seams. It's an appalling umbrella. It must be mine.'

But it was not.

The feelings are beguilingly evoked. There's simulated despair at personal fecklessness, together with a sense of the stolen umbrella business as a more or less minor blip or nuisance. Like the rest of us, Helen finds her gaffes more lovable than vexing. Charmed by her own flightiness, she dramatizes it for the general entertainment. Throughout the performance—straight through from the distracted, super-stylized self-deprecation to the funny indictment of the "appalling" umbrella—she feels obliging.

And in the under-conversation between ourselves as readers and the observant narrator we come to clarity about what that feeling signifies—and about how its social roots connect with its moral substance. We agree, in silence, that Helen's charm has limits. Her jokey repudiation of possessiveness, her encouragement of a turnabout "theft" ("Do come in and choose one"), rest on a foundation of solid unearned income. Ownership of a shabby umbrella would bespeak, for her, principled dislike of

shopping for new things, lifelong understanding that between oneself and whatever purchasable object one desires, no obstacle can interfere (where there's no economic need to delay gratification, boughten objects cannot excite). The assumption that everyone shares her conviction of the pointlessness of protecting personal goods is a measure of the extent of social enclosure—the obliviousness of a class to life beyond its borders. Because of the gulf between classes, every charming word she utters is heard, by Leonard Bast, differently than as intended—and differently by us, too, reader and author standing our joint watch.

Later in the novel Forster will be explicit on the moral content of this obliviousness. We hear his voice, I believe, when Margaret Wilcox declares that:

The imagination ought to play upon money and realize it vividly, for it's the—the second most important thing in the world. It is so slurred over and hushed up, there is so little clear thinking—oh, political economy, of course, but so few of us think clearly about our own private incomes, and admit that independent thoughts are in nine cases out of ten the result of independent means.

But the effect isn't that of detached chiding by someone contrasting his or her own clear thinking about unearned increment with our fuzziness. Whether speaking directly, in analytical summary, or listening in on his speaking characters, Forster never feels to us like a superior—a screening or presenting intelligence. The illusion is that he's one of us—and it's this closeness that eases us gently yet fully into the currents of feeling.

It is, truly, an immersion. During each of the major confrontations in the books before us—between Lucy and Cecil, between the Schlegel sisters at their crisis point, between Margaret Schlegel and Henry Wilcox—we cling to one or another character's subjective emotion. We're inside Margaret's struggle to fend off impatience with the feelinglessness of the male Wilcoxes, her battle to persuade herself that her sensitivities are excessive. And, astonishingly, we're only slightly removed from Henry Wilcox's disgust at the mannerlessness of the poor, or from his for-your-own-good firmness with his fiancée ("Come along, Margaret, no wheedling").

And the writer watches with us, as I say, never from above. Clearer than elsewhere we see what we are for each other in the tiered, segmented social world nobody escapes. More poignantly than anywhere we grasp that failure in the social world—the

failure of the Emersons in *A Room with a View* or the first Mrs. Wilcox in *Howards End*—can be incontrovertible proof of worth. And do-it-yourself seems the key to our perspicacity; we have the sensation of learning something but not that of being taught. It's just me, it's just me, the writer keeps whispering, don't be intimidated. We knew this stuff together long ago, isn't it so? What does anyone need, really, except just the odd reminder now and then?

One further aspect of Forster's regard for his audience demands a word. It has to do with our inner conflict about whether, on this earth, rough justice can ever be done. Intelligent, experienced, unillusioned people, we know life often goes wrong. We know that contests between the lovable and unlovable, the sympathetic and the priggish, the tender and the hard-nosed, don't regularly end as we'd wish. It's been ages, for us, since those gloriously foolish adolescent hours when the death of a White Hat seemed unthinkable. And therefore we consider that those who tell us stories should respect our knowledgeable natures.

Forster awards us this respect. The development of human contests between unequal forces in his pages takes place in a manner offering little comfort to beamishness. If, by miracle, a figure of true and delightful virtue manages to win a round against a bully, the chronicler's musings turn rueful. David over Goliath belongs to yesteryear; the reckoning to come will probably be hard. Lucy Honeychurch confronts and shames her oppressor—but best not to assume her prospects for the future are bright. Such people as she “are censured” as the years pass:

Their pleasantry and their piety shows cracks, their wit becomes cynicism, their unselfishness hypocrisy; they feel and produce discomfort wherever they go. They have sinned against Eros and against Pallas Athene, and not by any heavenly intervention, but by the ordinary course of nature, those allied deities will be avenged.

By such predictions the novelist tunes himself to our educated gloom, our feeling for the dismal odds.

But because he is in league with us, a presence close by, he knows us better than we know ourselves. Aware that our pessimism is our pride, he's also aware that it's a veneer. Beneath it lie the old longings—the lingering hope that without obliging us to become sentimentalists or fantasists, a decent writer can somehow, in some fashion, make something come right. The intro-

ducer of classic novels who descants long on this subject deserves flaying. Little need be said except that Forster's attitude toward optimism is, finally, permissive; more than most of his contemporaries, he treats kindly our need to have things both ways. He understands how powerfully we hunger, notwithstanding our sophistication, for the comeuppance of villainy and the prosperity of the vitally good. And from this understanding, as from all his wisdom, the taint of condescension is absent. It's not out of courtesy that he refuses to condemn our inner conflict, our irresolute imaginations of disaster. It's because, albeit gingerly, he shares our hope.

As writers grow more distant in time, the specifics of their lives—family, education, loves, income, travel, political stances, and so on—often seem less interesting than the question of how the creators struck their contemporaries. And that question arises with greater frequency in the case of writers who, like Forster, inspire personal affection in their readers. We care about what happened to them away from the writing desk, but we care especially about the impression they made upon those who knew them. Was the winning person whom we glimpse behind the words on the page a literary contrivance? Is there a link, in this partisan of linkage, between real life human creature and authorial persona? What personal traits did friends and acquaintances notice and remember?

E. M. Forster was born in 1879 and lived to be ninety-one. His childhood was spent among women, his father having died in Forster's infancy. He was badly bullied at school but began to find his way as a student, thinker, and writer while at Cambridge; it was as an undergraduate that he discovered his homosexuality. He traveled extensively in Italy, Greece, and for longer than half a year in India, setting of the great novel *Passage to India*, and worked for the Red Cross in Egypt during the First World War. (His indulgent Aunt Monie left him a considerable sum, which was paid over to him in full when he was twenty-five; the money financed both his travel and his literary apprenticeship and was, as he said, his "financial salvation.") He was associated for a while with the Bloomsbury group of writers and artists, and during various intervals of his life taught at the Working Men's College.

The last novel he published in his lifetime appeared in 1924, and the bulk of his writing afterward consisted of literary and political essays and family memoirs. In his late sixties he collaborated with the composer Benjamin Britten on an opera based on

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. During his last quarter century of life he lived at King's College, Cambridge, the governing body of which made him an Honorary Fellow and provided him with rooms. The standard—and exceptionally readable—biography of Forster is the work of P. N. Furbank, who became acquainted with the Honorary Fellow at Cambridge shortly after the latter took up residence at King's.

None of the foregoing is inconsequential; none of it is answerable to our desire. Satisfying personal accounts of Forster do, however, exist in number. There are splendid bits in Furbank about a quality of Forster's that the biographer calls insight:

He felt as if, on occasion, he could see through to "life": could hear its wing-beat, could grasp it not just as a generality but as a palpable presence. The feeling communicated itself. I remember him, once, describing [an Indian friend's] children, and their love for their companion, [a young guardian] who was not quite right in the head. He spoke of it in a delighted tone, as if that was what life was made up of: the whole of life was present in it, and there was nothing beyond. I remember too, another even tinier incident. For some reason we were sharing a hotel bedroom, and as he undressed, the coins dropped out of his pocket, chinking as they fell, and he said, in a tone of mock-superstitious resignation: "When they begin to sing, it's all over with them." There was the same joyful note in his voice, and it was oddly ghostly and impressive, as if he truly had insight into the workings of Providence.

Explaining to himself how such a person as Forster could be an unbeliever, the poet Auden once remarked: "As I see him, Morgan is a person who is so accustomed to the Presence of God that he is unaware of it: he has never known what it feels like when the Presence is withdrawn."

And we have beyond this several testimonials about excellence of character (they are, to be sure, composed by close friends) that are wonderfully persuasive. (By persuasive I mean that they give us a living Morgan Forster who seems good enough to be connected with the authorial presence treasured by lovers of Forster's work.) I like best among these testimonials a tribute produced by J. R. Ackerley, himself a gifted writer and editor, whose friendship with Forster stretched over five decades. Ackerley's summary of the man runs as follows:

I would say that in so far as it is possible for any human being to be both wise and worldly wise, to be selfless in any material sense, to have no envy, jealousy, vanity, conceit, to contain no malice, no hatred (though he had anger), to be always reliable, considerate, generous, never cheap, Morgan came as close to that as can be got.

—Benjamin DeMott

HOWARDS END

“Only connect . . .”

Chapter I

One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister.

HOWARDS END.
Tuesday.

DEAREST MEG,

It isn't going to be what we expected. It is old and little, and altogether delightful—red brick. We can scarcely pack in as it is, and the dear knows what will happen when Paul (younger son) arrives tomorrow. From hall you go right or left into dining-room or drawing-room. Hall itself is practically a room. You open another door in it, and there are the stairs going up in a sort of tunnel to the first-floor. Three bed-rooms in a row there, and three attics in a row above. That isn't all the house really, but it's all that one notices—nine windows as you look up from the front garden.

Then there's a very big wych-elm—to the left as you look up—leaning a little over the house, and standing on the boundary between the garden and meadow. I quite love that tree already. Also ordinary elms, oaks—no nastier than ordinary oaks—pear-trees, apple-trees, and a vine. No silver birches, though. However, I must get on to my host and hostess. I only wanted to show that it isn't the least what we expected. Why did we settle that their house would be all gables and wiggles, and their garden all gamboge-coloured paths? I believe simply because we associate them with expensive hotels—Mrs. Wilcox trailing in beautiful dresses down long corridors, Mr. Wilcox bullying porters, etc. We females are that unjust.

I shall be back Saturday; will let you know train later. They are as angry as I am that you did not come too; really Tibby is too tiresome, he starts a new mortal disease every month. How could he have got hay fever in London? and even if he could, it seems hard that you should give up a visit to hear a schoolboy sneeze. Tell him that Charles Wilcox (the son who is here) has hay fever too, but he's brave, and gets quite cross when we