

Review Article

The Perils of E. M. Forster's Critics

E. M. Forster published his last novel nearly forty years ago. The number of his readers has increased steadily over the past twenty years. Now the number of his critics and commentators is increasing rapidly as they take the measure of this reader interest and of the writer who has inspired it.

Alongside the three studies of 1962 discussed below may be placed two important studies from the past: Lionel Trilling's *E. M. Forster* (New Directions, 1943) and James McConkey's *The Novels of E. M. Forster* (Cornell University Press, 1957). Seen as a group, they offer a surprisingly consistent evaluation of their subject. They present a Forster in conflict, torn between the actuality and the vision, the seen and the unseen, the real world and the transcendent, the outer world of sense perception and the inner world of imagination. And they present the working out of this conflict as the key to his development and the key to an evaluation of his fiction.

The short stories are dismissed (with two or three exceptions always) because in them the imaginative vision triumphs with unconvincing ease over the real world; *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room With a View* are held to be either lightweight because Forster does not attempt to work out his basic conflict, or else unsatisfactory because, though he attempts to work it out, he does not succeed; *The Longest Journey*, with its obvious seriousness and with the weight of Forster's own approval behind it, is treated with a new respect and cautiousness, though it is finally judged to raise more questions than it answers in the attempt to reconcile vision and reality; *Howards End* is seen as a notable advance, though only Trilling is willing to consider its greater realism and its greater fairness to bourgeois business society sufficient to bring vision and reality into proper balance and make the novel Forster's masterpiece; inevitably then, for all except Trilling, *A Passage to India* appears as the culmination of Forster's struggle and the apotheosis of his art. To sum up, Forster's fiction is interpreted as a progressive exploration and evaluation of the relationship between the vision of the individual imagination on the one side and the obdurate reality of nature and society on the other.

As presented by these critics, Forster's coming to grips with reality may seem

rather too consistent and tidy, but it need not on that account appear improbable or surprising. What must appear surprising is the way the development of his exploration of reality so precisely corresponds to the progress of his artistic achievement. Other writers do not tempt us to insist on such a correspondence. We must agree, for instance, that Thomas Hardy's major novels are a progressive exploration of the conflict between individual awareness and the indifference of the universe. Yet we would not on that account agree that *Jude the Obscure*, which carries this exploration further than any previous novel, is obviously greater than *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. One is tempted to agree to just such a proposition as this in discussing Forster's fiction because, by common consent, his last novel *is* his finest and his second last *is* his second finest.

But what if superiority, as is the case with Henry James, were a result of the growing mastery of the art of fiction and not at all a result of the greater reconciliation of vision and reality? Such a proposition might force us to question the basic assumption of all these critics, the assumption that realism is the end towards which prose fiction strives, to which may be added the corollaries that phantasy is an inferior literary mode and that symbolism should be unobtrusive—in other words, that symbols should emerge naturally and inconspicuously from a realistic context. Those who find Forster refreshing and original because he does make them question this basic assumption will not feel quite at home with the works under review, but they will nevertheless discover in them much that is valuable.

Mr. Trilling's contribution is now history. In 1943 we had only Rose Macaulay's pleasant appreciation to turn to. Trilling created a new interest. He led us to read Forster and to like what we read. He succeeded in doing this because his book was—and still is—eminently readable.

We can sympathize, however, with Mr. McConkey's view that much remained to be done. He set out to do it and failed. Yet his study remains the most ambitious so far attempted, and its failures are instructive. First, Mr. McConkey approaches Forster's novels and stories as a group rather than one by one, his object being to apply the critical categories that Forster himself had used in *Aspects of the Novel*. In doing this he was faced with the trivial but immensely awkward problem of how to give the reader the requisite background of plot and how to make the characters and situations come alive in his critical discussion. Rather than face this problem squarely, he solves it from moment to moment in the most minimal way. Consequently his writing is often abstract and difficult to follow.

Second, he knows that we cannot be wise about Forster unless we interpret his symbols wisely. His book sets out more deliberately than any other to give us the necessary interpretation. Sometimes he has good things to say about the symbols, and it is for these things that his study will continue to have positive value. Nevertheless, his interpretations are incomplete and unreliable. Thus in discussing *The Longest Journey* he comments admirably on such symbols as chalk, the teacup, and the railway; yet in

connection with Orion, a more important symbol than any of these, he entirely misses the point that it is associated with one of the leading characters, Stephen Wanham. Or to take a more trivial example, he tells us in a footnote that the vine at Howards End is a fertility symbol though the text tells us it is "unprolific". The word is carefully chosen by Forster, for the vine is to be associated with Margaret Schlegel, who has no interest in bearing children.

Finally, Mr. McConkey has a lot to say about what he calls, using the hideous adjective form that is fast becoming the plague of Forster criticism, the Forsterian voice. Torn between the seen and the unseen, the worldly and the transcendent, Forster places himself at a remove from the real world, at a detached mid-point. This is his point of view, the angle and place of his vision. Now obviously this voice located in the middle distance is an impression created by Forster's style. Unfortunately Mr. McConkey does not offer anything approaching an adequate analysis of this style; consequently, he leaves his Forsterian voice at mid-point as a kind of handy tag to be accepted on faith.

This study has been dealt with at length because its failures place in perspective the three new books. Except for some advance in the interpretation of symbols, they do not make good Mr. McConkey's failures.

Mr. Crews is concerned with the origin and development of Forster's thought.* His theme is the perils of humanism. He traces Forster's religious background from the pragmatic devoutness of the Clapham sect to the agnosticism of Bloomsbury, and locates his individualistic liberalism in the tradition of J. S. Mill and Matthew Arnold. Then in an admirable chapter he shows us Cambridge around the turn of the century, a Cambridge that managed, however precariously, to reconcile scepticism, liberalism, and a classical tradition of passion and beauty. Cambridge became Forster's true home, and his stories and novels are an assertion of the values for which it stood.

In tracing the progress of Forster's thought, Mr. Crews has two main themes. The first is Forster's growing recognition of a harsh and indifferent universe that imperils the tenuous optimism of the humanist. The second is Forster's rejection of classical mythology for which he substitutes what I am tempted to call realistic mythology, that is, symbols which have their origin in the realistic details and events of the novel. These two themes are neither original nor controversial. They are designed not to startle us but to provide the sound basis for a thorough and lucid analysis of Forster's intellectual and artistic development.

It is hoped that after so brief an indication of the general excellence of this study, it will not appear carping if a disproportionate amount of time is spent in questioning Mr. Crews about one of his basic assumptions and one of his major conclusions.

**E. M. Forster: The Perils of Humanism*. By Frederick C. Crews. Princeton: Princeton University Press [Toronto: S. J. Reginald Saunders], 1962. Pp. 187. \$5.25.

The assumption, outlined earlier, is that realism is the end towards which prose fiction strives. Since the idea is shared by all five critics, I want to make clear that I have picked on Mr. Crews not because the idea is any more pervasive in his study but because it is more obvious and more readily got at. It can be seen in the connection Mr. Crews finds between Forster's recognition of an indifferent universe and his rejection of classical mythology. The rejection is the direct consequence of the recognition, for to recognize the alien character of the universe is to be realistic in outlook, and to be realistic in outlook is to feel the need for a realistic mode of representing this outlook.

The assumption involved here peeps out from every page. It can be seen in this sentence from the excellent chapter, "The Limitations of Mythology": "The gradual disappearance of allusions to Greek mythology . . . marks a growing independence from a certain current of shallow moralism that runs through the earlier novels." The sentence is interesting. Two phenomena are linked by the verb "marks". Close scrutiny shows that the verb implies a cause-and-effect relationship in which the effect is indicated first. The sentence says that independence from shallow moralism is marked or indicated by (hence antecedent to, hence assumed to be responsible for) the disappearance of Greek mythology. The sentence that follows this is constructed in the same way. Turned round, it says that "Forster's ideas about man and nature remain much the same"; that development is seen in "a radical change of emphasis"; and that this change is revealed by "his shift in method" in presenting his ideas. From this I conclude that the "moralism" of the previous sentence is referred to as "shallow" not because it is sophomoric but because Forster's method of presenting it is more overt, which is to say didactic, which is to say not in conformity with the canons of realism.

What I object to here and elsewhere is the easy use of unargued assumptions about realism to condemn Forster's earlier works. And I object to it in Forster's other critics as well as in Mr. Crews. The case must be argued openly if it is to convince.

I turn now to one of the important conclusions arrived at by Mr. Crews. It can be seen in this sentence about *A Passage to India*: "The process we have traced in Forster's art, of increasing deference to the hostile or indifferent powers by whose leave we exist, is here carried one step too far. The humanistic virtue of looking steadily at the world develops into a compulsion to gaze helplessly into the abyss." Though the tendency here indicated is real enough, I am unable to accept *A Passage to India* as the thoroughly dark affair Mr. Crews believes it to be. Such an interpretation cannot accommodate the final section of the novel, a fact made obvious by the difficulty Mr. Crews has in discounting its significance.

But the problem goes deeper than the mis-reading of a single novel. To grasp Forster's thought as it works itself out in each of his fictions, we must interpret his symbols. Mr. Crews knows this, as is shown by the careful attention he pays to Mr. McConkey's interpretations whenever he sees that these can help him. Unfortunately they are not sufficient to his need. And so (to return to our example), finding himself

baffled by *A Passage to India*, he decided that the bafflement was artistically deliberate and thematically significant. Had he been able to read Mr. Beer's lucid analysis of "Caves", his conclusions about the novel might have been very different.

I wish it could be said that these understandable limitations were all that detracted from an otherwise excellent study. But it must also be said that the last chapter detracts in a far more serious way. This chapter is given over to evaluating Forster's ideas. It is marked by a disastrously philosophical seriousness and at its worst reads like an undergraduate essay. Here, for instance, is a transitional paragraph in the "yes-but" debate that results from placing cheek by jowl the ideas of T. S. Eliot and E. M. Forster:

Discounting Eliot's partisanship, however, we remain faced with an important challenge in his rejection of liberalism. The matter to be settled is whether a liberal view of human nature is not narrow-minded and latently anarchistic. Is it not dangerous to imply, as Forster's novels do, that virtue can be upheld apart from faith in a heavenly order of reward and punishment? Does Forster overlook the inherent sinfulness of mankind?

It is, presumably, a natural vice of those who study the history of ideas to assume that the calibre of an idea in the philosophic sense has a direct bearing on the calibre of an idea as it is fictionally embodied. Natural or not, it is unfortunate that so good a book should have so bad an end, and especially unfortunate when the end is quite unnecessary to what has gone before.

Mr. Crews will appeal to a limited audience of the serious and informed. Mr. Gransden, whose introduction to the art of E. M. Forster appears in the valuable Writers and Critics series, will, like Trilling, appeal equally to the serious student and to the general reader.* The opening chapters of his book are jam-packed with information, the style is vigorous, the analysis of the early novels is sympathetic and acute, and the brief asides pointing to false notes and deficiencies are consistently sound. So far two cheers are more than justified. But when Mr. Gransden comes to the final novels, his performance deteriorates. In this he is not without precedent; the same thing happens to Mr. Trilling. This apparent coincidence has set me speculating.

Imagine these two books expurgated so that all comparative comments suggesting the superiority of one novel to another are removed. The result will be two series of mainly appreciative analyses. Now imagine an innocent reader faced with these accounts of each novel. What will he conclude? Just this, that the three early novels are superior to *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*. And what will we non-innocent readers conclude about these critics? Certainly this, that it is easier to write effectively about a simple novel than a complex novel. But is that all? May we not also conclude, when two such admirable critics write with such admirable enthusiasm about the early novels,

**E. M. Forster*. By K. W. Gransden. Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd [Toronto: Clarke, Irwin], 1962. Pp. 120. 80c.

that these novels are better than they are willing to admit in their moments of judgment? Certainly it is worth thinking about.

I do not wish to give the impression that the last half of Mr. Gransden's book is not worth reading. Here, for instance, is a comment from the final chapter which refers to all of Forster's novels: "Indeed, their very unforbiddingness has probably been a stumbling block to their complete evaluation, for the English have always taken their pleasures sadly and consider an element of the strenuous and the Michelangelesque to be essential to all good art." What a splendid comment on the ponderous lucubrations of Mr. Crews' last chapter. Mr. Gransden's pages bristle with lively and perceptive observations. So much so, indeed, that I would give his book a slight edge over Trilling's as the best introduction to E. M. Forster.

In saying this I am very much aware that Mr. Trilling's special merits must not be neglected. His essay on the non-fiction, though very severe, is the best we have. More important, every other critic on Forster gives the impression of using the author to illustrate or justify the critic's theme; only Trilling makes us feel that the passage before us has been carefully selected for its merits and is worthy of our contemplation. As we read we are rewarded by insights quite independent of the critical discussion. For all Mr. Gransden's merits, then, he is not to be taken as a substitute for Mr. Trilling.

Mr. Beer's style reminds one of a speaker who has a good voice but lacks variety of tone.* The vice of such a style is that only when the speaker's subject is intensely interesting does the audience find its attention firmly held. Moreover, Mr. Beer (in contrast to Mr. Gransden) gets off to a slow start; it takes him some time to work into his subject. We must not complain too much about this, for Mr. Beer knows where he is going. The central virtue of his approach is the way he picks up words and symbols and follows their progress from novel to novel. The definitive example is "muddle", which he turns to splendid use in his analysis of *A Passage to India*.

Even in the early novels "muddle" as Forster presents it is not simply a word, but a symbol. Mr. Beer uses it as the key to an understanding of what happens at the Marabar Caves. His analysis of Mrs. Moore's experience is excellent. His account of Adela Quested's experience is exciting, lucid, and absolutely convincing. It seems to me the finest thing ever written on the novel. Moreover, it once for all lays the ghost of Lowes Dickinson's question, "What did happen in the caves?"

Mr. Beer has written a book not for the casual reader but for the Forster enthusiast. With a calm voice he insists on taking his time—even in the chapter on *A Passage to India* many pages are given over to indirect preparation before he goes on to the heart of his analysis—and the reader also must take his time. His patience will be rewarded.

**The Achievement of E. M. Forster*. By J. B. Beer. London: Chatto & Windus [Toronto: Clarke, Irwin], 1962. Pp. 225. \$6.00.

More books on E. M. Forster and his fiction will be coming along in the next year or two. We may expect at least one of them to take the short stories seriously and—if they are as bad as we have been led to believe—demonstrate this badness thoroughly and conclusively. We may expect one at least to investigate Forster's symbolic method and interpret his symbolism more rigorously than has yet been done. We may expect one at least to analyze in detail his eminently flexible, ironic, and personal style. We may expect one at least to tackle with a new thoroughness the fascinating puzzle of what novelists influenced him and in what ways. Finally, and I alter my tone advisedly, may we expect one at least to challenge the assumption that realism is the *summum bonum* of fiction and hence the touchstone by which we must judge the art of E. M. Forster?

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