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## The Other Side of the Hedge: aspects of the work of E. M. Forster and some other English novelists of his time.

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“The essential function of art is moral,” wrote D. H. Lawrence. “Not aesthetic, not decorative, not pastime and recreation. But moral.” At first sight this is a narrow doctrine and one which we may have some difficulty in accepting, especially where the art of the novel is concerned. But this, I think, is because we tend to set too narrow an interpretation on the term “moral”. We associate the word with didacticism, with Mrs. Grundy, with an attitude of prohibition: “Thou shalt not . . .” If we interpret the word in its widest sense – and the sense which I propose in the present context is something like “casting a significant light on human conduct” – then there is no doubt that the novelist’s art has a great deal to do with morality.

There was, at all events, no doubt in the minds of the first English novelists of the eighteenth century. They were shy

neither of the term nor of the function which it implied. Defoe, for instance, coined the phrase “moral fable” to describe his novels; Richardson has often been condemned because his morality is too crude and too obtrusive; and as for Jane Austen, we may open her works at random to find evidence of the same conception of the novelist’s function:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

“However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters. (*Pride and Prejudice* Ch. 1)

The moral judgement here is implied in the irony of the repeated “truth” and of the words “rightful property”.

What we are offered by these early novelists is not a merely neutral picture of life, but a picture with a moral significance. It is difficult, indeed, to see how a neutral picture would be possible to the novelist. For as long as the subject of the novel is human conduct – the way men and women behave under certain circumstances – some moral judgement, some standard or norm of conduct, would appear to be necessarily implied. The idea of moral judgement is perhaps as essential to the novelist as the idea of cause is to the historian.

Now, an attitude towards fiction such as we see demonstrated in the works of Jane Austen implies, I think, two things. It implies a settled society in which all share the same beliefs about human life and destiny, about the nature of good and evil. And it implies that the writer himself can accept without question, almost without reflection, this fundamental religious and philosophical attitude. The novelists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were writing for a middle-class public, and being themselves of the middle class, were able to write within the framework of the thought of this class without any grave misgivings about the background of belief which their novels assumed. The lack of speculation, in the work of these novelists, on the broad questions of philosophical beliefs which lie behind ethical attitudes is, in fact, an indication of the extent to which these beliefs were taken for granted. Even George Eliot was able to adopt an ethical attitude which derived from her early Evangelical upbringing, though she

was not a Christian at the time when she wrote her novels. In her work we see the English novel of the nineteenth century drawing moral dividends on spiritual capital invested in an earlier period.

Towards the end of the century a great change takes place in the religious thought of the middle class. For various reasons, of which perhaps Darwin's theory of evolution was the most important single one, the foundations of middle-class faith were shaken. This is not to say that the middle class as a whole rejected Christianity or that no writer since that time has been a Christian, but that religious faith and hence ethical attitude have become in the novel a more self-conscious matter, less to be taken for granted. This is perhaps a simplification, and no doubt there were other causes for the change in the direction of fiction which took place towards the end of the last century, but the names of George Moore, Samuel Butler, and Thomas Hardy are a sufficient reminder that about this time faith and morals became subjects of speculation to the novelist. Broadly speaking, the early novelist worked inwards, from a settled view of the universe and of good and evil to particular reflections on human conduct, whereas the modern novelist begins with human nature and works out to the universal.

This brings me to the title of my lecture, which is the title of one of Forster's early short stories or fantasies, originally published in *The Celestial Omnibus* (1914). The author is hiking along a dusty road with brown crackling hedges

on either side – the road which he has been travelling ever since he could remember. He is so tired that, for the first time in his life, he sits down to rest on a milestone:

A little puff of air revived me. It seemed to come from the hedge; and, when I opened my eyes, there was a glint of light through the tangle of boughs and dead leaves. The hedge could not be as thick as usual. In my weak, morbid state, I longed to force my way in, and see what was on the other side. No one was in sight, or I should never have dared to try. For we of the road do not admit in conversation that there is another side at all.

Most of Forster's novels and short stories are on the same subject – the relationship between the road and what is on the other side of the hedge. My purpose this evening is to try to point out some of the methods he uses to look through the hedge to the nature of good and evil, and what he sees on the other side.

If we make due allowance for the lapse of time, Forster's world as a novelist is much the same as that which Jane Austen explored a hundred years earlier – the world of the English upper and upper-middle class, his own class, in fact. His method too – that of social irony or satire – is largely similarly to Jane Austen's and, of course, derives from hers. But whereas Jane Austen's method is to place her characters against an implied norm or standard of civilized behaviour and thus to achieve an ironical insight into their conduct, Forster achieves his insight – an insight into human nature in general – by placing his characters against

a wider background than their normal one. He puts these upper-class, Protestant Christian, English people, with their notions of respectability, of right and wrong, in an unfamiliar environment – usually a foreign environment. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, his first novel, he sends his English characters chasing off to Italy; in *A Passage to India*, his last, the English are seen against the variegated background of Indian life.

He does this, it must be emphasized, not merely to throw light on English character, but to reveal human nature in general, to reach some truth about good and evil.

*Where Angels Fear to Tread*, you may remember, tells the story of a marriage between an English lady of the class I have been talking about and an Italian, and the consequences of that marriage. Lilia, a widow of thirty-two, and her little daughter are both very much under the domination of her late husband's family, the Herritons. Lilia is by origin the social inferior of the Herritons, and as all their attempts to make her conform, after the death of her husband, to the strict code of behaviour of their own circle have failed, they decide to send her off to Italy for a year in the company of a very proper young girl whom they think they can trust, Caroline Abbott. Spring comes round and the family in England receive a telegram to say that Lilia is engaged to a member of the Italian nobility. Philip, Lilia's brother-in-law, is sent out to stop the engagement and discovers that Gino is a mere boy, the son of a dentist and only a remote member

of a noble family, and that he and Lilia are already married. Thus the book begins in the manner of a story of romantic escape. Both Philip and Caroline share Lilia's dissatisfaction with the kind of life represented by Sawston and feel the pull of the freer, warmer, more spontaneous life of Italy. Caroline explains the part she played in Lilia's escapade in the following way:

"I hated Sawston, you see."

He was delighted. "So did and do I. That's splendid. Go on!"

"I hated the idleness, the stupidity, the respectability, the petty unselfishness."

"Petty selfishness," he corrected. Sawston psychology had long been his speciality.

"Petty unselfishness," she repeated. "I had got an idea that every one here spent their lives making little sacrifices for objects they didn't care for, to please people they didn't love; that they never learnt to be sincere – and, what's as bad, never learnt how to enjoy themselves. That's what I thought – what I thought at Monteriano."

"Why, Miss Abbott," he cried, "you should have told me this before! Think it still! I agree with lots of it. Magnificent!"

"Now Lilia," she went on, "though there were things about her I didn't like, had somehow kept the power of enjoying herself with sincerity. And Gino, I thought, was splendid, and young, and strong not only in body, and sincere as the day. If they wanted to marry, why shouldn't they do so? Why shouldn't she break with the deadening life where she had got into a groove, and would go on in it, getting more and more – worse than unhappy – apathetic till she died?"

Lilia dies disillusioned, in childbirth, and the wheels are set moving at home once

more when Caroline decides that she must make some atonement for her mistake and try and rescue the baby from Gino in order to give him an English upbringing. So she and Philip find themselves once more in Monteriano, this time in the company of Harriet, Philip's prim and self-righteous sister. Italy once more exerts its influence on the spirits of the two young people – though not on Harriet's – and, in spite of the gravity of the cause to which they are dedicated, they all spend the evening at the opera. This episode (Chapter VI) gives us an obvious contrast between the austere, unfeeling North (represented by Harriet) and the warm, emotional South. But this is not all. What appears at first to be a simple satire on English respectability and self-righteousness turns out to be a comment on life. For Italy is the fountain of beauty, but it is also capable of extreme bad taste. Rapture exists side by side with squalor. The prima donna is stout and ugly and no longer young, and turns out to be, moreover, the disgusting creature who sat in their compartment on the train and who smelt.

The contradictions are all summed up in the character of Gino. He has about him a certain pagan attractiveness for the English characters. Miss Abbott feels it, as we have seen, and so does Philip. And yet he is not the romantic lover we expect. There is nothing romantic about his background or his motives. He marries Lilia for her money and is callous to her after the marriage. He is capable of downright brutality and yet at the same time of a great love for his child. As

Miss Abbott realizes when she sees him with the baby:

This cruel, vicious fellow knew of strange refinements. The horrible truth, that wicked people are capable of love, stood naked before her, and her moral being was abashed. It was her duty to rescue the baby, to save it from contagion, and she still meant to do her duty. But the comfortable sense of virtue left her. She was in the presence of something greater than right or wrong.

Hence, the new view of Italy which these two characters, Miss Abbott and Philip, gain is more in the nature of a revelation than a disillusionment. They are forced to face and acknowledge the complexity of life.

Forster is thus able to achieve insight by placing his characters against a wide international background. He is also able to explore depths in the human mind which were undreamt of by earlier writers like Jane Austen. It is significant that, at about the time when Freud was trying to win recognition for his discovery of the unconscious mind and his theory of dreams, classical scholars and anthropological writers like Sir James Frazer, Sir Gilbert Murray, and Jane Harrison, were exploring the religious and psychological meaning of those Greek myths which were formerly thought to be little more than the product of free waking fancy. As Freud discovered a subconscious part of the mind, the source of all vital impulses, these other writers discovered a dark side of Greek religion, which was more vital than the Olympian. Freud

himself recognized the connection between Greek myth and the unconscious mind when he coined such terms as "The Oedipus Complex". Several of E. M. Forster's early short stories – 'The Story of a Panic', 'The Story of the Siren', and 'Other Kingdom', for example – use the underworld gods, the dark side of Greek religion, in order to reveal the dark side of human nature.

Like D. H. Lawrence, Forster goes to the instinctive part of man for the truth about life. The moments of great psychological crisis in his novels are also moments of clairvoyance for the characters involved, moments when they see into the nature of reality. There is the experience of Adela Quested in the Marabar Caves, for example (*A Passage to India*). We are never told whether the insult offered to her in the cave was real or imagined. We only know that Dr. Aziz was not responsible. There is a strong suggestion of hysteria, of a neurotic fear (Adela is worried about her engagement). But a neurotic fear is capable of quite a natural scientific explanation, and Forster aims at something more. That is why the incident is left obscure. The fact that Mrs. Moore has an unpleasant experience in the caves at the same time as Adela points to the supernatural, or at least suggests that in the caves the basic stuff of the human mind is more likely to break through to the surface. At all events they both hear the echo – "Boum" – and for both of them it seems to strip life of all illusion and pretence and reveal it in its nakedness. Mrs. Moore has the knowledge in the more articulate form:

She had come to that state where the horror of the universe and its smallness are both visible at the same time – the twilight of the double vision in which so many elderly people are involved. If this world is not to our taste, well, at all events there is Heaven, Hell, Annihilation – one or other of those large things, that huge scenic background of stars, fires, blue or black air. All heroic endeavour, and all that is known as art, assumes that there is such a background, just as all practical endeavour, when the world is to our taste, assumes that the world is all. But in the twilight of the double vision, a spiritual muddledom is set up for which no high-sounding words can be found; we can neither act nor refrain from action, we can neither ignore nor respect infinity.

What had happened to her in that scoured-out cavity of the granite? What dwelt in the first of the caves? Something very old and very small. Before time, it was before space also. Something snub-nosed, incapable of generosity – the undying worm itself. Since hearing its voice, she had not entertained one large thought, she was actually envious of Adela. All this fuss over a frightened girl! Nothing had happened, “and if it had,” she found herself thinking with the cynicism of a withered priestess, “if it had, there are worse evils than love.” The unspeakable attempt presented itself to her as love: in a cave, in a church – Boum, it amounts to the same.

Helen Schlegel has a similar experience when listening to Beethoven's fifth symphony in Chapter V of *Howard's End*.

This is, admittedly, a sombre view of life, but it would not be correct, I think, to call it a pessimistic one. Pessimism implies something simpler, more clear-cut, and in a sense more comfortable –

something like the tragic universe of Thomas Hardy. Forster's world picture tries to do justice to the paradoxes of life, without explaining the contradictions away. His art has been praised for many fine qualities – for its wide human sympathy, for instance – but its greatest quality could perhaps be called honesty. It consists of a willingness to be just to the whole of experience. This is the kind of honesty which (as T. S. Eliot says in his essay on William Blake) we find in great art – the honesty of *King Lear* or of Blake's ‘The Tyger’:

When the stars threw down their spears  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

\* \* \*

The dilemma which Forster states in the above quotation from *A Passage to India* is a modern one: “All heroic endeavour, and all that is known as art, assumes that there is such a background” (that is “Heaven, Hell, Annihilation – one or other of those large things . . .”). The reference to art brings us back to the point from which we started, and reminds us that the dilemma of modern man is also the dilemma of the modern artist.

Another writer of the early part of the present century, who is very unlike Forster in origin and training – a writer whose art, one would say, is as different from Forster's as chalk from cheese – is very much concerned with the same dilemma. I am referring to Joseph Conrad. Perhaps *Nostromo* is the novel one should go to for Conrad's most artistic and accomplished examination of this, his cen-

tral problem, but its outlines can be traced more clearly in the inferior *Victory*. Here is the dilemma as he expresses it in that book:

Every age is fed on illusions, lest men should renounce life early, and the human race come to an end. (*Victory* p. 94).

As Conrad sees it, some ideal, some absorbing passion, devotion to some cause, is necessary for the carrying on of life. Men must have some sort of faith – not necessarily a religious faith – in order to be able to act at all. Yet, if the ideals by which men live are placed one by one under the scrutiny of relentless intelligence, if they are traced to their sources and examined in all their implications by the sceptical human mind, then absurdities and inconsistencies are revealed; they are seen to be illusions, in fact.

In *Victory*, Axel Heyst is a man who has learned to look at life in this way. Brought up by his father to distrust life and all its promises, he gives up all attempt at action and tries to cut himself off from all intercourse with his fellow men by settling down on a deserted island. Nevertheless, life breaks into his peace and quiet, first in the form of Lena, the young girl whom he befriends, and then in the form of the three grotesque bandits. Heyst's tragedy is that he is too enlightened. His scepticism has left him with no motive for defending that which his feelings have betrayed him into valuing. Ironically, it is Lena's simple devotion to him – a devotion which is entirely misplaced, it should be noted – that enables her to win her “victory”. The novel is highly allegorical and its moral is clear.

Conrad is on the side of the committed, those who have “learned while young . . . to put their trust in life”.

This is surely the message, too, of one of Conrad's short masterpieces, *Typhoon*. Captain MacWhirr is the exact opposite of Heyst:

“A gale is a gale, Mr. Jukes,” resumed the Captain, “and a full-powered steamship has got to face it. There's just so much dirty weather knocking about the world, and the proper thing is to go through it with none of what old Captain Wilson of the ‘Melita’ calls ‘storm strategy’ . . .”

Yet his strength is the result of his lack of imagination, his limited intelligence:

It was, in truth, as impossible for him to take a flight of fancy as it would be for a watchmaker to put together a chronometer with nothing except a two-pound hammer and a whip-saw in the way of tools.

There is no way back from the position of Heyst to that of Captain MacWhirr.

Thus two important writers of the early part of the present century are concerned with the same problem, the problem which arises in an enlightened and sceptical age, when not only is religious faith weakened but the scientific spirit seems to deny validity to all forms of idealism and to deprive man of all ultimate motive for action whatsoever. It is significant that their work points in both cases to some partial abdication of the pure intellect in order to meet the claims of instinct, and this leads us immediately to the work of another writer of the same period – D. H. Lawrence. But that is another story.