

CHAPTER IV

FORSTER'S

PERSONAL PRONOUNCEMENT

In addition to his novels and short stories, Forster writes a number of essays in which he expresses his ideas on several topics. From a collection of essays called "Two Cheers for Democracy" we learn more about Forster's beliefs and thoughts.

What I Believe

It is true when Forster says that temperamentally he is an individualist, and also that he belongs to the type that is intellectually curious. He stands apart from the majority, looks at them, criticizes and suggests what they can do to improve their situation. He opens his essay:

"I do not believe in Belief Faith to my mind, is a stiffening, a sort of mental starch, which ought to be applied as sparingly as possible I do not believe in it, for its own sake, at all My motto is: "Lord, I disbelieve — help thou my unbelief'."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 77)

Forster does not mean that he rejects all beliefs. He only means that he wants to study and understand a belief before he accepts it. "I do not believe in it for its own sake, at all..." We also see that he doubts that a rule can apply anywhere, with anything, or with anybody—all the time. Belief—he says—hardens the mind against new knowledge, new understanding, new impressions; it sets the mind in a rigid pattern, and thus may easily lead to intolerance.

Intolerance of other beliefs, or of no belief. Belief, in drawing people into groups under some or other authority, may tend to produce a "mass mind" in which individuality will die or at least be dragged. He respects an individual. He, as well as the Victorian liberal intellectuals, believes that individuals are and should be different. Everything needs careful consideration not presumptuous generalization. Because we cannot always go down to the depth of each other's motive, therefore "honest doubt" is necessary to us lest we misjudge what we cannot judge and put an innocent or ourselves into trouble. When we have doubt in judging then we accept our inability to judge which in turn stops us from misjudging anything or anybody. The next step is

"One must be fond of people and trust them if one is not to make a mess of life, and it is therefore important that they should not let one down. They often do."

(Two Cheers for Democracy : p. 78)

This idea is very close to a doctrine of Christianity. One must love one's neighbours. This love of people will make man more tolerant. It will encourage man's optimism. At last it will bring all of them together then they can help each other, and work together for the good of mankind.

As Forster believes in individuals so their actions are also admired— the want to create something, to discover something .

or at least to live fully, responding sensitively to the outer world, whether of people or things. This belief also brings him to admire Democracy. He said that the sorts of people he admires

"get more of a chance under a democracy than elsewhere."

(Two cheers for Democracy: p. 79)

Democracy respects individuals. It "admits variety" and "permits criticism".

We might note at this point that Fielding, the English teacher in A Passage to India, can be considered a rough sketch of active democracy in these aspects. He "admits variety" in accepting the Indians and their culture as things in themselves and not corrupt or weak forms of English culture, and seeks "variety" in his friendship with Indians. Moreover he "permits criticism": that is, he allows himself to criticise both the Anglo-Indians and even his friend Aziz, and he is ready to allow Aziz to criticize him in return. Affection and criticism, he would say, are not irreconcilable.

Tolerance

He believes that only in this "sound state of mind" which is how he describes tolerance, can we lay the foundation for a true civilization. For him tolerance is not weakness but the ability to put up with people without necessarily giving in to them. He does not believe in any militant means to get rid of evil and to reconstruct

a civilization—for example, the principle of fighting a war to end war. Also tolerance is

"the only force which will enable different races and classes and interests to settle down together to the work of reconstruction."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 56)

Now that the age of colonization is over, countries and races can only be persuaded to co-operate, they cannot be compelled to; tolerance is obviously part and parcel of that persuasion. But it must be genuine tolerance and not some "conny substitute."

Love works in inner life alone but in public affairs only tolerance is the hope. After people have arranged to live together within a civilization built upon tolerance, love will complete their work. In fact the inner life will reinforce the outer life.

India Again

In this essay he tells us of his third visit to India in October in 1945. He has observed that the country has changed in some aspects and remains the same in other. One thing that India still keeps with her is the determination to find the correct political solution first of all. The Indians believe that after the political solution all other matters will be automatically solved. Politics occupy them persistently, and consistently. That is to

say, the vexed question of India's sovereignty, the absorption of the Indian states and the division between Hindu and Moslem.

Forster does not believe that the political solution will also solve other problems. Politics is only one of many problems the country has to face. But the vital problems concern the people, on whom depend the progress and security of the country. If the people are well equipped physically and spiritually, the country will be strong. To help the country therefore we must aim at the people. The work is vast and slow but it gives a lasting effect that will enable the country to solve other problems that may arise.

On the question of friendship between the young people of India and Britain, Forster has this to say:

"I do pray that young English people who like Indians and want to be with them will be encouraged to go to their country. Good will is not enough. Of that I am too sadly convinced. In fact, at the present moment good will out there is no use at all. The reactions to it are instantly cynical. The only thing that cuts a little ice is affection or the possibility of affection. Whatever the political solution, that can surely do no harm. But it must be genuine affection and liking. It must not be exercised with any ulterior motive. It must be an expression of the common humanity which in India and England and all the world over has been so thwarted of late, and so despised."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 335)

From the above quoted speech we are made to understand that Forster thinks that only with trust and genuine affection, two nations can live happily together. The stress on the word "genuine" — the "liking" must not be merely "cupboard love" or dictated by politics — reminds us of Mrs. Moore's reflections on her son in A Passage to India:

"One touch of regret — not the canny substitute ~~but~~ the true regret from the heart — would have made him (Ronny) a different man, and the British Empire a different institution."

(A Passage to India: p. 54)

Does Culture Matter ?

Forster describes culture as

" ... various beautiful and interesting objects which men have made in the past and handed down to us; and which some of us are hoping to hand on."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 110)

This quoted passage may give us the mistake impression that Forster's conception of culture consists merely of objets d'art. "Objects which men have made in the past and handed down to us" also means art, literature, music, knowledge, crafts, customs, beliefs, and morality. The culture of the past continues through generations

to the present. It brings into association men of different races, lands, and periods. At least the whole human race can communicate with one another through ideas and culture. In this manner Forster's dream of friendship between nations seems to realize itself. He is glad that:

"Culture, thank goodness, is no longer a social asset, it can no longer be employed as a social barrier against the mob or as a ladder into aristocracy."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 113)

Nations are only bigger societies, though problems may increase as the societies are bigger, Forster believes that culture will work by itself to unite the human race.

"Our chief job is to enjoy ourselves and not to lose heart, and to spread culture not because we love our fellow men, but because certain things seem to us unique and priceless, and, as it were, push us into the world on their service."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 115)

He wants culture to work by itself with no human interference because he thinks that culture must mean something to other people and it needs no introduction or interpretation from us; and also

"Dogmatism is of course a mistake, and even tolerance and tact have too much of the missionary spirit to work



satisfactorily."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 115)

Perhaps Aziz and Fielding: (A Passage to India) would not feel so disappointed and frustrated as to their mutual friendship, if they let their friendship proceed without any interference from "conscience" or "good will" or "the effort to bridge the gap between two nations". Frustration only discourages them from renewing their friendship. Their relationship has been too deliberate, self-conscious and thus to some degree artificial. Aziz, for Fielding, became a "cause"; Fielding, for Aziz, became a "supporter of Indians". Inevitably, after the crisis had passed, much of the personal element, sheer ordinary spontaneous affection, disappeared from their relationship. Again we must say

"Dogmatism is of course a mistake, and even tolerance and tact have too much of the missionary spirit to work satisfactorily."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 115)

Art for Art's Sake

Forster believes in "Art for Art's sake." He explains:

"A work of art—whatever it may be—is a self-contained entity, with a life of its own imposed on it by its creator. It has internal order. It may have external form. That is

how we recognise it."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 98)

Forster speaks of art while he is thinking of man. Like a work of art, every individual is unique. Everyman has his own life. He is not to be pressed into shape from outside, collapsing when the mould is removed. A man must be himself at any price. Forster says:

"I would sooner be a swimming rat than a sinking ship."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 103)

For the rat is itself, all rat, embodying in however low a form, the principle of life, while a sinking ship is only a piece of machinery which, moreover, has broken down. Forster reflects this idea while he is talking of art. He says:

"A work of art is unique not because it is clever or noble or beautiful or enlightened or original or sincere or idealistic or useful or educational — it may embody any of those qualities — but because it is the only material object in the universe which may possess internal harmony. All the others have been pressed into shape from outside, and when their mold is removed they collapse".

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 101)

This faith is linked with Forster's trust in nature—the earth, and the natural instincts in man. Any system of rules set up by man, if it does not conform with nature, is only the press that shapes man from outside but will not save him from collapsing when the mould is removed. The idea is symbolized by the fate of the baby in Where Angels Fear to Tread: taken away by force from its father, so that it may be more carefully brought up, it merely dies.

Variety in man must be valued as is originality in art. Forster believes that nature is in man and it will take care of him. No human destruction is more dangerous than that which derives from the hatred or contempt which a man may feel towards nature in himself or in others.

The Challenge of Our Time

Forster speaks of the "reconstruction" of civilization because he feels that it is menaced by new progress which he puts in his own words as "The Challenge of Our Time".

Forster admires some virtues of the Victorians. Indeed he regards himself as belonging to the rag end of Victorian liberalism which practised

"..... benevolence and philanthropy, was humane and intellectually curious, upheld free speech, had little colour prejudice, believed that individuals are and should be different, and entertained a sincere faith in the progress

of society."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 69)

Forster regrets that the belief in the principles and qualities which he admires is dying out. He feels that this loss is a challenge to our human race. In fact a new economy has changed to some extent our way of living and thinking. Although essentially man is as kind and philanthropic as before he seems to feel less inclined to let this side of his nature act. Outside his immediate responsibilities he tends to be apathetic and selfish. For those who are pressed by the hardship of life, it is pardonable. For some who only drift into the degenerated habit of their own will, Forster feels that their action is menacing man's better side. He decides that

"If we are to answer the Challenge of Our Time successfully, we must manage to combine the new economy and the old morality."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 68)

Also he puts his hope in individuals and not the mass. This is because when man realizes that he is only one tiny part of the majority, he slackens in his efforts. If he feels his own importance, then the best in him will be shown.

Scientists have done a great deal for the modern world. They furnish us with accommodations that result in comfort and also longer life, a greater immunity to disease and danger. But little

by little they have led us to be "practical" in the way that makes us feel that such Victorian virtues are a mere waste of time. They may have saved our life but they have harmed our soul. Therefore Forster declares that

"We want him (a scientist) to plan for our bodies. We do not want him to plan for our minds, and we cannot accept, so far, his assurance that he will not."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p.71)

English Prose between 1918 and 1939

In this essay Forster quotes a passage from Rose Macanlay who contrasts the two periods. The twenties were a good, hopeful, peaceful and intellectually curious decade. They also had Proust and James Joyce, two psychological novelists. The next decade was more serious, less cultured, less aesthetic and more political. Communists and Fascists were menacing the whole world.

But there has newly risen the psychological movement which, though it is old, had remained beneath the surface for a long time. Shakespeare himself was aware of the sub-conscious, and so were Emily Brontë, Herman Melville, and others. This movement signifies that man is beginning to understand himself better and to explore his own contradictions. This is one of the greatest movements man has made. The notion, derived from psychological study, that a character becomes good or evil in relation to some other characters or to a

situation which may itself change, makes us more sympathetic to our fellow-beings. It shows that a "villain" is only a "sick person" or a victim of his own surroundings; and also it encourages the hope that in a different--a better-- situation, the "villain" will be as good as any of us.

Here we are reminded of the idea of a "lost sheep" in Christianity, and the word "pal" in Thai language which originally means "young, ignorant". Later "pal" is used to call a person who causes trouble to others. The original meaning of the word implies that "a 'bad' man is immature, or undeveloped."

It needs a disillusioned kindness to rescue a part of the human race. The whole mankind will not be completely happy if it lets one part remained uncured. The sick one will later infect the good parts and the whole race will collapse.

Forster feels that a writer's duty is most important to the society and that a writer ought not to lead a forlorn retreat. Perhaps that is why we feel that though he loves only some characters in his novels, Forster is kind to all of them. A man like Ronny Heaslop (A Passage to India) is not to be condemned but led to the right spirit by the right understanding or at least by tolerance. Henry Wilcox (Howards End) is presented with a choice, with the possibility of redeeming himself. If he does not want the redemption then nobody can help him. He is thereafter to live in his unhappy, chaotic world. Margaret and Helen are protected by their own disillusionment against the selfseeking habits of the Wilcoxes.

Virginia Woolf.

Forster admires Virginia Woolf for the intensity and the freedom in her writing, for the consideration for sensations which

"reminds us of the importance of sensation in an age which practises brutality and recommends ideals."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 260)

and also for her respect for mankind

"we are not so various or so mean'; we have added to the human heritage and reaffirmed wisdom."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 262)

As for intensity in writing, Forster himself is among the best. Here. If we read him casually we are apt to miss much that he has elaborately presented to us. In A Passage to India, Ronny cannot understand that his mother has been talking about a native, because she does not indicate in her tone that it is only a native she is talking about.

Forster happens to admire Virginia Woolf of the same virtues he has, because Forster too writes with intensity and no less freedom. Think of his attack on the Saastonians. Think of the famous work—A Passage to India

Forster says that Virginia Woolf is interested in sensations — she enjoys them.

"She liked receiveing sensations - sight, sounds, tastes, — passing them through the mind, where they encountered theories and memories, and then bringing them out again, through a pen, on to a bit of paper. Now began the higher delights of authorship."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 252)

As she is deeply interested in sensations, Forster thinks she is more a poet than a novelist. Her novels are different from ordinary novels. Some people may feel that her novels are more experiments than entertainments. That is perhaps one reason her works are not very popular but classified as "high-brow" writings. In Forster's opinion the problem with Virginia is

"She is a poet, who wants to write something as near to a novel as possible."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 259)

Forster thinks Virginia Woolf has a high regard for intellect despite her respect for sensations, though she is rather bitter.

"After the sense, the intellect. She respected knowledge, she believed in wisdom. Though she could not be called an optimist, she had, very profoundly, the conviction that mind is in action against matter, and is winning new footholds

in the void."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 260)

Virginia Woolf is aware of materialism as opponent to her creed. But Forster somehow does not think that Virginia Woolf has grasped the heart of things in spite of her whole interest in the reality beneath the surface.

"The idea that all stone is like grass, and like all flesh, may vanish in a twinkling, did not enter into her consciousness, and indeed it will be some time before it can be assimilated by literature.

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 261)

There are two points that Forster does not like in Virginia Woolf's works—her lack of genuine sympathy and her feminism. He says that

"..... and I do not think she was sympathetic. She could be charming to individuals, working class and otherwise, but it was her curiosity and her honesty that motivated her"

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 264)

Virginia Woolf in Forster's idea can be seen from a character in Howards End, Helen Schlegel. Helen is kind, friendly, honest,

and brave. But the sympathy she has for Leonard and his wife is motivated by curiosity and honesty more than the love for one's fellow-beings.

As for Virginia Woolf's feminism, Forster thinks she is misunderstanding women's natural characteristics for weakness or for social underprivilege. Forster says that Virginia Woolf is not satisfied with the way of life. She wants to enter actively into other roles. She does not realize that women have enough to do in their present roles, and that if they go on without stopping

"before long women will be quite as powerful for good or for evil as men"

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 263)

We will realize what Forster means when we think of, again, Helen Schlegel. The destruction she encounters arises from her own feminism. Margaret Schlegel, to charm her man, has to act more "womanly" than usual.

Forster nevertheless praises Virginia Woolf for her contribution to English literature.

"Virginia Woolf got through an immense amount of work, she gave acute pleasure in now ways, she pushed the light of the English language a little further against darkness."

(Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 265)