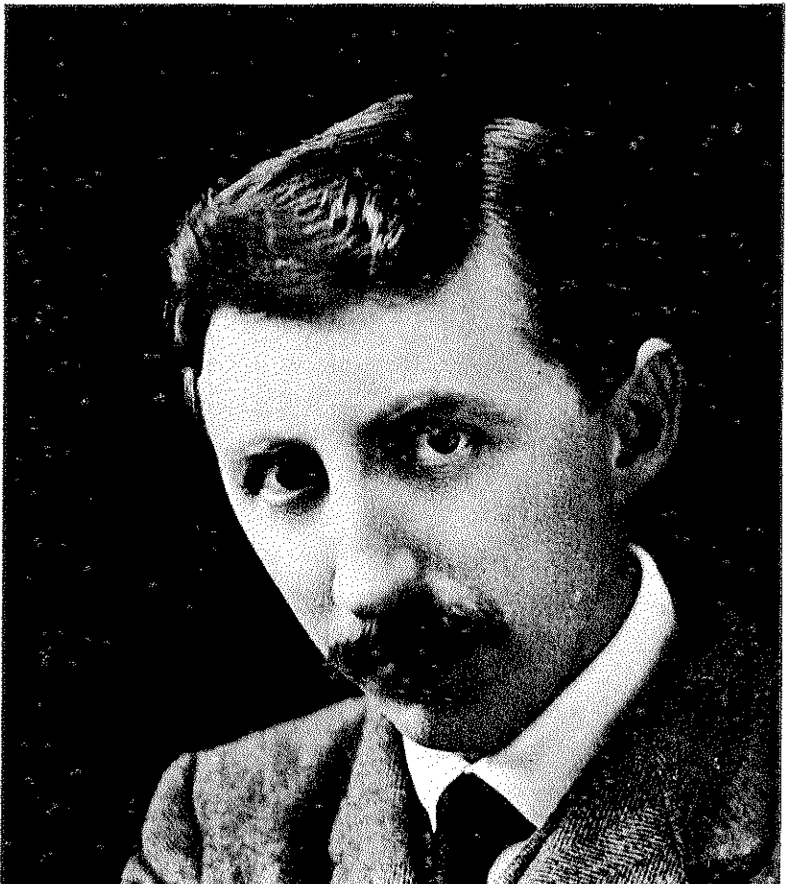
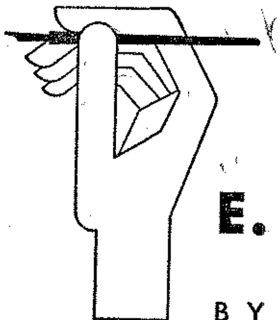


E. M. FORSTER



E. M. Forster

BY LIONEL TRILLING

THE MAKERS OF MODERN LITERATURE

New Directions Books - Norfolk, Connecticut

LIBRARY C. C. N. Y.

part of Rickie will survive in the mythological stories he has written—readers of *The Celestial Omnibus* will recognize them as actually Forster's own; in the coda with which the novel ends Herbert Pembroke dickers with Stephen over the rights and royalties they are to share. But Rickie's justification is fullest in Stephen. To Rickie Stephen owes not only his physical but his spiritual life, his salvation in happiness and responsiveness, in his farm, wife and child. The last note of the story is the theme of Rickie's survival; Stephen, to acknowledge his gratitude to Rickie in the best way he knows, "bent down reverently and saluted [his] child; to whom he had given the name of their mother." The generous error and noble superstition had destroyed Rickie himself (as it had destroyed Shelley with his ever-intensifying search for death) but it had saved others, for although erroneous it was generous, and though superstitious it was noble, and it asserted, foolishly but firmly, the real existence of things.

6. A ROOM WITH A VIEW

IN ORDER OF PUBLICATION, *A ROOM WITH A VIEW*, WHICH APpeared in 1908, is the third of Forster's novels. But in order of conception it may perhaps have been the first, for Forster drafted a large part of it in 1903. Certainly in the Italian setting of its early scenes and in the manner of its comedy, its affinities are with *Where Angels Fear To Tread* rather than with *The Longest Journey*. In scale and tone it is even smaller and lighter than *Where Angels Fear To Tread*, its manner is airier, it takes more color from the outdoors and more charm from human absurdity, and the quality of its comedy is more romantic; but the comedy is also shot through with a sense of melodramatic evil which, though not so violently expressed as that of the first Italian comedy, is more frightening in its gratuitousness and in its restraint.

Comedy, we are often told, depends on incongruity. We are less often told that tragedy has the same dependence. The incongruity is between the real and the unreal; both comedy and tragedy require blind characters. In *Oedipus*

Rex and *King Lear* the blindness finds physical expression; in *Othello* the many metaphors of vision stress Othello's inability to see what is before his eyes, and Orgon in *Tartuffe* is as unable as Othello to see what his senses present to him. This confusion of the real with the unreal, which had touched Forster's first novel and dominated his second, is also the theme of *A Room With A View*.

The incongruity on which the comedy of the novel rests is symbolized by the blood on certain photographs. They are Alinari prints of some of the famous pictures of Florence and have been bought by Lucy Honeychurch, an excessively proper though quite pretty girl, who is traveling in Italy with her elderly cousin, Charlotte Bartlett. The purpose of the photographs is to remind Lucy, when she returns to England, of her triumphant appreciation of Giotto's tactile values. But in the Piazza Signoria, at "the hour of unreality—the hour, that is, when unfamiliar things are real," two men, Florentines, argue about money and one draws a knife and stabs the other; Lucy faints into the arms of young George Emerson, a fellow guest at her pension, and as George escorts her home, he throws a little package into the Arno—it is her photographs, he explains, which have been stained with the blood of the murdered man.

For Mr. Eager, an English clergyman resident in Florence, the event in the Piazza is a disgrace to the fair traditional city. " 'This very square—so I am told—witnessed yesterday the most sordid of tragedies. To one who loves the Florence of Dante and Savonarola there is something portentous in such desecration—portentous and humiliating.' " The irony is almost too obvious. Mr. Eager, choos-

ing to forget what the Florence of Dante and Savonarola was like, has turned life into art; thus it can be contemplated by the timid. But art is not life, as we are reminded by the blood that now and then falls on our pictures, or to be more precise, we should say that the art of the timid is not life: to the courageous the pictures have had blood on them from the first.

Caroline Abbott had said " 'I mean it crudely—you know what I mean. . . . Get over supposing I'm refined,' " and *A Room With A View* is about "crudeness" and "refinement." Its theme is stated by the old socialist, Mr. Emerson: " 'Love is of the body—not the body, but of the body.' " It deals with the physical reality upon which all the other realities rest. The blindness to this reality is the source of the comedy and the comedy is played out to the verge of tragedy.

The blood on the photographs is symbolic not only of the novel's point but also of its method. Nothing could be more artful, nothing more disembodied than this story about naturalness and the body. Its hero and heroine are as nearly creatures of air or mythology as it is possible for two young people to be in a story about sexuality. As in any good novel, the characters grow out of the author's prose, and the prose of *A Room With A View* is swift and airy, its most memorable effects are of impalpability, of brightness and of wind. At the very end of the book darkness and evil are introduced, and for the first time we see that we have, after all, been dealing with matters of great consequence and reality. The effect of the contrast, of the sudden introduction of evil into what has seemed an almost trivial world, is remarkable—almost too remarkable: we

feel that a novel should not acquire its stature from a single effect.

The slender story begins with a room without a view. Lucy and Charlotte, when they had first arrived at the Pension Bertolini, were sorely disappointed in their rooms which, contrary to promise, had no view. Old Mr. Emerson, publicly and loudly, but in all generosity, had offered to exchange rooms, for his and his son's did have views. We must suppose for this novel a state of manners which permits Miss Honeychurch and Miss Bartlett to be embarrassed and even affronted by the offer and to refuse it, although perhaps such manners are archaic even for 1908; it is not until Mr. Beebe, a clergyman of their acquaintance, assures them of the propriety of accepting the offer that they consent to make the exchange. But they continue to be as cool as possible to the Emersons.

Both George and Lucy are young people imprisoned, Lucy by her respectability, George by a deep, neurotic *fin de siècle* pessimism. But the scene of death on the Piazza has not been lost upon them. It begins, indeed, the destruction of their prisons. George has held Lucy in his arms and now wants to live. Lucy's dull propriety begins to give way before the possibility of passion.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Beebe has been wondering about Lucy ever since he heard her rather startling performance of Beethoven. Suddenly—and irritably—she begins to develop. She has come to Florence for "culture"—for correct knowledge about Giotto's tactile values and to buy "florid little picture frames that seemed fashioned in guilt pastry; other little frames, more severe, that stood on little easels and were carven out of oak; a blotting book of vellum; a

Dante of the same material; cheap brooches, . . . pins, pots, heraldic saucers, brown art-photographs; Eros and Psyche in alabaster, St. Peter to match," all the facile tourist-trove of phrases and objects. And she finds instead "the eternal league of Italy with youth." She discovers that she has less respect for Charlotte, for Mr. Eager, even for Miss Eleanora Lavish, the novelist who is so free and frank, who tells her that "One doesn't come to Italy for niceness, one comes for life," and who is quite sure that life is local color.

Then on a picnic there is some confusion and Lucy, in search of the two clergymen, asks the coachman in her limited Italian, " 'Dove buoni uomini?' " The coachman, having his own notion of what a good man is, directs her to George Emerson. She tumbles down a bank to a flowery terrace, and the flowers, the sudden wide vista of the Val d'Arno and her own emotions quite overcome her and she submits to George's kiss. But before a word can be exchanged between them the "silence of life had been broken by Miss Bartlett who stood brown against the view."

George's is the first of three kisses by which the comedy is punctuated. Lucy receives the next one from a young man named Cecil Vyse. For Lucy, confused by her own passion, has submitted to the wisdom of the brown Charlotte Bartlett. Old Mr. Emerson had declared at the picnic that Lorenzo de Medici had been quite right when he said, " 'Don't go fighting against the spring,' " but Charlotte knew how to wage just that fight. Convinced herself, she convinces Lucy that George, like all men, is a rake and his kiss but a masculine "exploit." " 'Do you remember that day at lunch when he argued with Miss Alan that liking

one person is an extra reason for liking another?' " Charlotte says to prove her point.[1] She is an artist in precaution; the world she has contrived and now presents to Lucy is a "cheerless, loveless world in which the young rush to destruction until they learn better—a shamefaced world of precautions and barriers. . ." Later, in *Howards End*, Forster comments at some length on the tragedy of precaution:

> Actual life is full of false clues and sign-posts that lead nowhere. With infinite effort we nerve ourselves for a crisis that never comes. The most successful career must show a waste of strength that might have moved mountains, and the most unsuccessful is not that of a man who is taken unprepared, but of him who has prepared and is never taken. On a tragedy of that kind our national morality is duly silent. It assumes that preparation against danger is itself a good, and that men, like nations, are the better for staggering through life fully armed. The tragedy of preparedness has scarcely been handled, save by the Greeks. Life is indeed dangerous, but not in the way morality would have us believe. It is indeed unmanageable, but the essence of it is not a battle. It is unmanageable because it is a romance, and its essence romantic beauty.

[1] *Epipsychidion* is again relevant:

> Love is like understanding, that grows bright,
> Gazing on many truths; 'tis like thy light,
> Imagination! which from earth and sky,
> And from the depths of human fantasy,
> As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills
> The Universe with glorious beams, and kills
> Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow
> Of its reverberated lightning. Narrow
> The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,
> The life that wears, the spirit that creates
> One object, and one form, and builds thereby
> A sepulchre for its eternity.

But Charlotte knows otherwise and carries Lucy off to Rome where Cecil Vyse is staying (with his mother); Cecil falls in love with Lucy from the heights of a clearly superior culture and later, in England, Lucy accepts his offer of marriage. The engagement is not the occasion for Cecil's kiss. The kiss does not occur until some days later, a delay which has been criticized (by Miss Rose Macaulay in her book on Forster) as unnatural, as no doubt it is. But unnaturalness, even to this extreme, is part of Cecil's nature and the story is now for some time to be preoccupied with Cecil's nature. It becomes Meredithian—in the social comedy that ensues, in the praise of Nature and naturalness, in Lucy's young brother Freddy with his true perceptions, in the scene of sunshine and water that is to be the second meeting of George and Lucy, and most of all in the dissection of Cecil.

For Cecil is a small Willoughby Patterne and Lucy is his Clara Middleton to be shaped to his notion of what an advanced young woman should be. Forster, however, is more generous than Meredith in whose pursuit of Sir Willoughby there is something almost madly obsessive and entirely cruel; in *The Egoist*, comedy's "slim, feasting smile" (a phrase which always suggests the merrier grave-worms) becomes almost the baying of hounds. Forster's relation to the Meredithian spirit is complex; as he tells us in *Aspects Of The Novel*, Meredith had meant much to him in his youth, as to all emancipated young people in the early years of the century; yet even as he uses the Meredithian spirit he dissociates himself from it by making Cecil himself a devotee of Meredithian comedy.

Freddy Honeychurch begins the dissection. He does not like Cecil, he cannot understand why.

> Cecil praised one too much for being athletic. Was that it? Cecil made one talk in one's own way. This tired one. Was that it? And Cecil was the kind of fellow who would never wear another fellow's cap. Unaware of his own profundity, Freddy checked himself. He must be jealous, or he would not dislike a man for such foolish reasons.

And the novelist takes the matter up where Freddy leaves off.

> Appearing thus late in the story, Cecil must be at once described. He was medieval. Like a Gothic statue. Tall and refined, with shoulders that seemed braced square by an effort of will, and a head that was tilted a little higher than the usual level of vision, he resembled those fastidious saints who guard the portals of a French cathedral. Well educated, well endowed and not deficient physically, he remained in the grip of a certain devil whom the modern world knows as self-consciousness, and whom the medieval, with dimmer vision, worshipped as asceticism. A Gothic statue implies celibacy, just as a Greek statue implies fruition. . . . And Freddy, who ignored history and art, perhaps meant the same when he failed to imagine Cecil wearing another fellow's cap.

Cecil despises women who talk about cookery and he has a quick eye for interior decoration; he is the cultured man in this story and although he is not cruel, like Rickie Elliot's father, his culture makes him peevish and superior. Culture for him is a way of hiding his embarrassment before life. He is taken to call on Lucy's mother's old friends and, feeling the engaged man's natural resentment, he behaves badly. Certainly it had been a bore, "yet the smirking old women, however wrong individually, were racially correct," and Cecil should have had wit enough to see it.

The comedy now proceeds on good-and-bad taste. A certain Mr. Flack, a contractor, has built two villas which horrify the gentry of the neighborhood. They are very ugly, but, as usual, Forster is on the side of ugly houses. If Mr. Flack is not properly trained in the use of columns, still his columns, bad as their capitals are, represent Mr. Flack's own taste and desire. Sir Harry Otway, the leader of local society, had vainly tried to direct Mr. Flack's taste; now he has bought the villas, meaning to tear them down, only to find that Mr. Flack has installed an aged, bed-ridden aunt in one of them. How to let the other is a problem, for it is too expensive for the peasant class and too small and dreadful for "any one the least like us." It is a house for a bank clerk and everyone fears that a bank clerk will rent it. But Cecil, the devotee of Meredithian comedy, (he possessed, in addition, "his full share of medieval mischievousness") solves the problem of the tenant. He has struck up an acquaintance with the Emersons in London and he thinks it a fine stroke to introduce this strange pair to the community.

But before this has happened, Lucy has been kissed by Cecil. He has noticed that when Lucy walks with him she sticks to the road and avoids the fields and trees. He comments on this and she agrees it is so; indeed, when he questions her further, she says that she thinks of him always as in a room—a drawing room and without a view. But she is good-naturedly willing to walk in the woods with him; and beside a tiny pool that sometimes fills up in a heavy rain, she is quite willing to be kissed. It is not a successful kiss except as it reminds Lucy of George's.

The comedy begins to be played out quickly and in the

open. With the Emersons coming to the villa, Lucy is in a panic and reproaches Cecil for his trick; he, thinking she is snobbish—snobs in Forster's novels always think everybody else is snobbish—and planning to educate her in the best ideas, tells her, "'I believe in democracy,'" and is surprised to hear her snap, "'No you don't. You don't know what the word means.'" More is involved in this little love story than love; as always in Forster, sexuality and right political feeling have a point of contact.

George and Lucy meet again. It is just after George has been swimming with Freddy and Mr. Beebe in the pool, and the pool in the sun and wind "had been a call to the blood and the relaxed will" and had dispelled his bleak neurotic despair. He runs shouting through the woods and comes face to face with Lucy and Mrs. Honeychurch, neither of whom is quite shocked at his being, except for Mr. Beebe's clerical hat, quite naked. The mischief is done and George's exhilaration—and Lucy's—continues on the tennis-court.

> He wanted to live now, to win at tennis, to stand for all he was worth in the sun—in the sun which had begun to decline and was shining in her eyes; and he did win.
>
> * * * * *
>
> He jumped over the net and sat down at her feet, asking: "You—are you tired?"
>
> "Of course I'm not!"
>
> "Do you mind being beaten?"
>
> She was going to answer "No," when it struck her that she did mind, so she answered, "Yes."

And it is because of Cecil's behavior about tennis that Lucy finally jilts him. She hears Freddy begging Cecil to make a fourth at tennis and Cecil's voice replying.

> "My dear Freddy, I am no athlete. As you well remarked this very morning, 'There are some chaps who are no good for anything except books'; I plead guilty to being such a chap, and will not inflict myself on you."
>
> The scales fell from Lucy's eyes. How had she stood Cecil for a moment? It was absolutely intolerable, and the same evening she broke off her engagement.

Cecil jilted is a better man than Cecil engaged; "for all his culture, Cecil was an ascetic at heart and nothing in his love became him like the leaving of it." But Lucy's break with Cecil does not mean her union with George. He has caught her behind a bush and kissed her again; and she knows that his first kiss was not an "exploit," but again she turns to Charlotte Bartlett and, for no reason, refuses to marry George. It is here that the story passes into strangeness and into something like horror. It passes, indeed, from Lucy and George to two other people. They are Miss Bartlett and Mr. Beebe.

As the story makes this change, Lucy stands on the brink of an abyss. Charlotte Bartlett's words of congratulation are the first Lucy hears when she refuses George and she responds to them with the pert and vulgar words of her own self-congratulation; her voice rings with Charlotte's favorite manner. As she goes out of doors, she is "aware of autumn"—"summer was ending and the evening brought her odours of decay, the more pathetic because they were reminiscent of spring." In the subtle—sometimes too subtle—thematic fashion he often uses, Forster had written almost these very words earlier in the novel when he had said of the sweet elderly Miss Alan of the Pension Bertolini that "A delicate pathos perfumed her disconnected remarks, giving them unexpected beauty, just as

in the decaying autumn woods there sometimes arise odours reminiscent of spring."

Now Miss Alan and her sister—they have touched the story lightly again as possible tenants for the Flack villa—are on the point of another tour, this time to Greece and the near East; they want the name of "a really comfortable pension in Constantinople." And they beckon Lucy—not only to the trip but to the state of being a Miss Alan. Charlotte Bartlett also beckons. Something deep in Lucy wants to follow. She wants to join the "unforeseeing multitude" of *Alastor* which is the same as the "vast armies of the benighted" to which Charlotte is recruiting her.

> It did not do to think, nor, for the matter of that, to feel. She gave up trying to understand herself, and joined the vast armies of the benighted, who follow neither the heart nor the brain, and march to their destiny by catch-words. The armies are full of pleasant and pious folk. But they have yielded to the only enemy that matters—the enemy within. They have sinned against passion and truth, and vain will be their strife after virtue. As the years pass, they are censured. Their pleasantry and their piety show 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.
>
> Lucy entered this army when she pretended to George that she did not love him, and pretended to Cecil that she loved no one. The night received her, as it had received Miss Bartlett thirty years before.

And of this Mr. Beebe is glad. The sunny comedy had darkened with Lucy's response to the temptation of celibacy; it becomes terrifying with Mr. Beebe's happiness at Lucy's sure movement toward the benighted army. The

effect of surprise is almost illegitimate. ". . . Who would have supposed," we have been asked of Mr. Beebe early in the story, "that tolerance, sympathy, and a sense of humour would inhabit that militant form?" And when the tolerant Mr. Beebe had seemed disappointed over the engagement of Cecil and Lucy, could it be anything but dissatisfaction on the part of one who understood the implication of the way Lucy played Beethoven? And this seemed surely to account, too, for his pleasure when the engagement was broken. Yet now—

> His belief in celibacy, so reticent, so carefully concealed beneath his tolerance and culture, now came to the surface and expanded like some delicate flower. "They that marry do well, but they that refrain do better." So ran his belief, and he never heard that an engagement was broken off but with a slight feeling of pleasure. In the case of Lucy, the feeling was intensified through dislike of Cecil: and he was willing to go further—to place her out of danger until she could confirm her resolution of virginity. The feeling was very subtle and quite undogmatic, and he never imparted it to any other of the characters in this entanglement. Yet it existed, and it alone explains his action subsequently, and his influence on the action of others. The compact that he made with Miss Bartlett in the tavern, was to help not only Lucy, but religion also.

The feeling against religion in this novel is naive and direct and makes a small sub-plot. In Florence Mr. Eager—he had been carefully contrasted with Mr. Beebe but now we know that both are cut from the same cloth—had hinted that old Mr. Emerson had, in effect, murdered his wife, George's mother. But we learn that Mr. Eager himself had been the "murderer" of Mrs. Emerson, for when George had had typhoid in childhood, Mr. Eager had played upon Mrs. Emerson's fears about her son's lack of

baptism—"he made her think about sin, and she went under thinking about it." And now Mr. Beebe is trying to murder Lucy's soul.

But help comes from an unexpected source. Lucy moves more and more to Charlotte Bartlett until even her mother comments on the resemblance in tone, but it is Charlotte Bartlett who rescues Lucy by bringing her face to face, in Mr. Beebe's study, with old Mr. Emerson. Mr. Beebe had not wanted them to meet and he is furious with Miss Bartlett, knowing that Mr. Emerson could win the day for his son. And in this scene the old agnostic has "the face of a saint who understood," while at the news of Lucy's surrender to George, Mr. Beebe's face is "suddenly inhuman." To him the whole affair is "lamentable, lamentable—incredible." He can never forgive the young people.

Together on their honeymoon at the Pension Bertolini, George and Lucy try to puzzle out Miss Bartlett's reversal. That she knew Mr. Emerson was in the study is certain. Then why had she brought Lucy to the study? Something deeper than her deep negation had wished the right outcome of the affair, just as something beneath Mr. Beebe's warm tolerance wanted it killed.

> [George] whispered: ". . . I'll put a marvel to you. That your cousin always hoped. That from the very first moment we met, she hoped, far down in her mind, that we should be like this—of course very far down. That she fought us on the surface, and yet she hoped. I can't explain her any other way. Can you? Look how she kept me alive in you all the summer; how she gave you no peace; how month after month she became more eccentric and unreliable. The sight of us haunted her—or she couldn't have described us as she did to her friend [Miss Lavish.] There are details—it burnt. I read the book afterwards. She is not frozen, Lucy, she is not withered up all through. She tore us apart twice, but in the rectory that evening she was given one more chance to make us happy. We can never make friends with her or thank her. But I do believe that, far down in her heart, far below all speech and behaviour, she is glad."
>
> "It is impossible," murmured Lucy, and then, remembering the experiences of her own heart, she said: "No—it is just possible."

As Forster sees the mind, such are its depths and contradictions.

The occasion for Mr. Montgomery Belgion's essay, "The Diabolism of E. M. Forster" was Mr. Belgion's perception that Forster divides mankind into sheep and goats and has no pity on the goats. "For Mr. Forster, it seems evident, you are either born a sheep or a goat, and, whichever it is, that you are doomed to remain. There is no hope for you." And Mr. Belgion continues: ". . . For that great mass of unfortunate outsiders Mr. Forster has no pity. . . . On the contrary,—and here we reach a very significant thing, it seems to me—on the contrary, he sneers at them." Had Mr. Belgion been less doctrinally elated over his discovery and had he not overstated his case with oddly bitter talk about "mockery" and "sneering" and "a smell of brimstone," he might have reported accurately what does happen in Forster's novel. For the fact is that in Forster there is a deep and important irresolution over the question of whether the world is one of good and evil, sheep and goats, or one of good-and-evil, of sheep who are somehow goats and goats who are somehow sheep. In *A Room With A View* he compromises—as it is the novelist's right to compromise—between these two views. Mr. Beebe is goat, Charlotte is goat with a sheep somehow hidden

within her, she is good-and-evil. And this uncertainty about moral judgment will haunt Forster's intellectual life; on the whole, the view which sees life as good-and-evil will gain over the other, but it will never be completely in control.

7. HOWARDS END

BIOGRAPHY INTRUDES ITSELF INTO LITERARY JUDGMENT AND keeps it from being "pure." As we form our opinion of a particular work, certainly the sole object of our thought should be the work itself. But it seldom is—and although we call extraneous the facts that thrust themselves upon us, they inevitably enter into our judgment. We are always conscious of an author, and this consciousness does not rise only from elements in the work; the extraneous personal facts that reach us are never wholly ignored. Literary facts are as intrusive as personal facts, though no doubt they are more "legitimate." The author's whole career presents itself to us not improperly as an architectonic whole of which each particular work is a part; and the shape of that career, the nature and pace of its development, the past failures and successes or those which we know are to come, the very size of the structure, the place of any single unit in the logic of the whole—all bear upon our feelings about any particular work.