

CHAPTER V

FORSTER'S

MEANING TO THE PRESENT AGE

### Forster's Meaning for the Present Age

Our age is known as the Atomic Age. If the Eighteenth Century is the age of discoveries and enlightenment, the Twentieth Century is the age of political creeds. We are made to understand that the condition of people's living is poor and also it is the duty of politicians to solve this problem. This age is epitomised by two world wars and many minor wars taking place successively including the long non-stop cold war between the Capitalist World and the Communist World.

The economic problem which is facing every nation now largely arises from wars. Wars do not only destroy man's life but also destroy all he has built up — from buildings to culture. Some countries still have not recovered from the destruction caused by World War II. France and Germany are still in desperate state. It is interesting to ask oneself who are responsible for such a tremendous destruction. Is it the people's own will that leads a country into war, dragging many other countries into the same ruin? Do people have so weak an imagination that they can't conjecture the cruelty of wars?

After the 1914 war people formed the League of Nations with the aim of preventing any more wars. In 1939 World War II took place, this time after the war they formed the United Nations Organization with the same intention as before. The result is that we have many minor wars taking place successively — the Korean War, Vietnamese War, Suez Canal trouble, rebellion in Hungary, and lately the bombardment of Quemoy Island. It is evident that despite the awareness of the cruelty of war mankind cannot avoid it. Who are responsible when a war breaks out?

Leading scientists of the world have been hailed for **their** success in space travelling. We give another planet to the sun. People are thinking of going to the moon. They do not care a pin for a plan of getting nearer to understand ~~their~~ fellow beings. The atomic power instead of proving a great use to mankind has become a weapon to threaten other nations in ~~their~~ meetings. Every nation is afraid of war and therefore is building up its military power to fortify itself and to be ready for war if it is attacked. We have learnt from history that when many nations are ready to protect themselves they will be ready to start a war too.

Though scientific and medical discoveries have brought great benefit to men, the essential problems remain to be solved. Man's expect of life is greater, yet the destruction of human life caused by modern methods of warfare is greater than ever before. And is it worth while for man to live longer unless he spends the extra time usefully and happily?

People are still oppressed by economic problems. It is generally felt that the problems arise from the destruction caused by wars and the increase of population. The fact is that the new standard of living which is raised by industrialism and modern science is also one important source of the economic problems.

Industrialism and modern science have become almost man's masters. Scientists have to go on correcting the result of the last discovery. Each atomic test affects man's health, growth of vegetables, and the climate. Forster reflects the fact in "The Machine Stops" in which man is shown as hardly human. He worships the Machine, and

he himself has become a machine too. Kuno asks his scientist mother.

"Cannot you see, cannot all you lecturers see, that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space and the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it. The Machine develops—but not on our lines. The Machine proceeds—but not to our goal. We only exist as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could work without us, it would let us die".

(Collected Short Stories : p. 131)

The living of most people nowadays reminds us of a poem called "The Dirge" written by Henry King, Bishop of Chichester (1592-1669) the first stanza runs as follows:

"What is the existence of man's life  
 . . . But open war, or slumbered strife?  
 . . . Where sickness to his sense presents  
 The combat of the elements:  
 And never feels a perfect peace,  
 Till Death's cold hand signs his release."

People prepare themselves, not to live, but to earn their living, from childhood. Almost half of ~~their~~ life-time is spent in some vocational training. Art has become a luxury. Ethics must wait until they have some free time. They often never have. Men get married when they can which often happens to be rather too late. Some of them marry without love. They seem to have no even time to understand each other before they marry. After marriage they send ~~their~~ children to some nursery-homes and later to kindergarten schools. The children finish ~~their~~ study from colleges and are strangers to their parents. Family life is hardly enjoyed.

We cannot blame these pitiable people. Deep in ~~their~~ hearts the remembrance of the life of the old days must exist. Some of them really cannot live in the way they want. Some are too afraid of poverty. They have been scared by poverty until they cannot stop making money although they are very rich. Others feel uneasy when work does not occupy ~~their~~ minds. Fear, worrying, and competition, take hold of people's minds. We often find some people who work very hard to make money and give it to the doctors who cure them from the sickness caused by over-work. Unconsciously people have become slaves to their own civilization. They are governed by restlessness. They work all ~~their~~ life and scarcely enjoy their life lest they cannot catch up with their competitors. In their old age, they retire from business with a pension or gratuity. They either settle down and spend their life peacefully or alone or else they make some trip to places they have been wishing to go. By that time they are too old-too weak in health to enjoy their

fortune. They have to do it—to enjoy the scanty reward or else they will pass out having enjoyed nothing. Such is the way of life of many people in civilized countries in our age.

Surely there are people who live differently from those described above. They still take care of their own selves. They have real homes in which they enjoy family life, they learn the ecstasy of love, the value of friendship and the inner life. They read books, enjoy the landscape. They live their lives fully and naturally.

Some people have a greater aim in life. They try to work for "the reconstruction of our civilization." These people have saved themselves and want to save their fellow-beings. Forster is one of them. He expounds his ideas in writings and lectures. In range, he passes from the happiness and value of an individual up to the reconciliation of all races—all nations.

He has reminded people of their value as human beings. He has pointed out that life is a blessing and life can offer man many splendid things. He brings our attention back to instinct, culture, and intellectualism. He has reminded some people that if they do not live their lives then they will become dead in spirit. Philip Herriton's opinion of his mother is given thus:

"Her life, he saw, was without meaning. To what purpose was her diplomacy, her insincerity, her continued repression of vigour? Did they make anyone better or happier? Did they even bring happiness to herself?"

Harriet with her gloomy peevish creed, Lilia with her clutches after pleasure, were after all more divine than this well - ordered, active, useless machine".

(Where Angels Fear to Tread : P. 98)

If man does not enjoy his life then it becomes a burden. If he neglects his life and so suffers, he brings a curse on himself. Again and again Forster reaffirms that we must be happy, and help other people to be happy too. The Schlegels want Leonard Bast to come up from the abyss of life and share some happiness. But we must be happy first. Rickie tells his pupil, Varden, who is sad because he has been bullied by his stronger friends.

"Be happy. It's your duty. You can't be good until you've had a little happiness. Then perhaps you will think less about forgiving people and more about loving them"

(The Longest Journey : p. 210)

Some people cannot find happiness so they either try to occupy their mind with business or they turn bitter, and using propriety as a mask, they revenge themselves on other people. Shakespeare gives a vivid illustration of this fact in Twelfth Night. Sir Toby says to Malvolio thus:

"Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall  
be no more cakes and ale?"

(Twelfth Night, act III, sc.iii, l.125)

Miss Bartelott, disappointed in her life, becomes frigid and tries to interrupt Lucy and George's love. Many people's lives are empty within. When they break down because they can no longer keep up their pretence, they have nothing to rely on. Forster persuades them to enjoy their lives with nature, culture, instinct, and intellectualism. There are some who shelter in conventions. To them Forster says

"But what nonsense! When real things are so wonderful,  
what is the point of pretending?"

(The Longest Journey: p. 71)

In another novel he puts these words into a character's mouth:

"Society is invincible--to a certain degree. But your real life is your own, and nothing can touch it. There is no power on earth that can prevent your criticizing and despising mediocrity-- nothing can stop you retreating into splendour and beauty--into the thoughts and beliefs that make the real life -- the real you"

(Where Angels Fear to Tread: p. 89)



These warnings are for those who hesitate between conventions and their own deeper selves. Some people seek for the meaning of life and think that nullity or sin in the background of life and become unhappy. Forster has reminded them that whatever is behind life, they should live and enjoy their lives as much as possible and contribute some happiness to their fellow beings.

Mrs. Moore and Helen Schlegel encounter a horrible experience of the nullity of the universe. Mrs. Moore loses her interest in her own life and all human beings; she dies soon. Helen Schlegel fights against her vision and at last after many blows of bad fortune she again "wants to live." When Henry Wilcox asks her a blunt question in his business manner, she answers:

"But I am interested. You ask as if I had lost all my interest in life. I am still Helen, I hope."

( Howards End: p. 311 )

It is not our duty, Forster seems to say, to worry about things beyond our apprehension. Thus Forster himself does not pay much attention to Christianity or Hinduism. We should be interested in the real things. Mr. Emerson criticises his son's melancholy.

"We know that we come from the winds, and that we shall return to them; that all life is perhaps a knot, a tangle, a blemish in the eternal smoothness. But why

this makes us unhappy? Let us rather love one another,  
and work and rejoice. I don't believe in the world sorrow."

( A Room with a View: p. 38 )

Forster is not narrowed down to pessimism despite many things that disgust him. The business people and the Sawstonians are revealed as empty and panic-stricken within. He attacks them for their selfishness and coarseness. Nevertheless he says that they do run the country and make it possible for the cultured and intellectual type to exist. They also deem our sympathy because it is the public school system and the elders in Sawstonian conventions that corrupt them. We remember that Forster points out that Englishmen come out from their mother-land intending to be gentlemen in their colonies but the English people who live there before corrupt these newcomers. Margaret Schlegel tells her sister, Helen

"How dare Schlegels despise Wilcoxes when it takes  
all sorts to make a world?"

( Howards End: p. 109 )

This is at once an acceptance of fact and tolerance. It also shows respect for individuals. It is anyhow no business of the Schlegels to do more than persuading the Wilcoxes to do what they want. People cannot be owned. She also tells Helen that

"Haven't we all to struggle against life's daily greyness, against pettiness, against mechanical cheerfulness, against suspicion?"

( Howards End: p. 151 )

Forster is a moral realist. He deems that philanthropy will make us happy; in his essay "What I Believe" he says:

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

( Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 78 )

Forster's integrity must not be mistaken for passivity. Forster never loses hope, but again he never deceives himself or his audience. Forster preaches that we must be aware of our aim—we must know what we really want. Margaret accepts Henry Wilcox because she loves him—his masculinity, his superficial chivalry. She sees all his defects but she hopes she can make him a better man. She also admires him for the good he does to the country. His practicality is, she thinks, lacking in her cultured type. She is well aware that "it takes all sorts to make a world." She will not spoil her life courting an ideal. This is one attitude that many people in real life have not adopted and so they are frustrated. People have to be tolerant for one other reason too—we often cannot be sure of our

judgment of other people. Generally people look at others through the glasses of partiality or prejudice. Experiences hoarded in their subconscious can easily colour their view of others. The glasses often remind them of interests, classes, and races. Since we cannot always trust our judgment we should cultivate tolerance, and perhaps then we shall not regret our judgments later or spoil our own life in pessimism.

Life is not only valued in terms of the happiness it offers to man; it is also valued for what man achieves. Forster admires people "who are sensitive and want to create something or discover something..." He admires those who have a purpose in life, Rickie for instance since he has an aim to write and has finished writing "a pile of little stories, all harping on the ridiculous idea of getting into touch with Nature;" he feels that

"He too had a purpose and a value in the world at last."

( The Longest Journey: p. 115 )

Forster admires people who struggle to reach their aims no matter whether they can accomplish them or not--those who rather struggle and die young than to live out "a mildly honoured life of respectable compromise."\*

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\* Lionel Trilling uses this phrase in E.M. Forster on page 39

Forster has tried to guide people who are lost in the confusion of our modern civilization--those who

"joined the vast armies of the benighted, who follow neither the heart nor the brain, and march to their destiny by catch-words...(who) have sinned against passion and truth, and vain will be ~~their~~ strife after virtue.....(who) feel and produce discomfort wherever they go."

( A Room with a View: p. 214 )

He portrays all sorts of people with careful sympathy--except for the Sawstonians--assures them that human beings are not so various or so mean.

Forster does not tolerate oppression. The Anglo-Indians are attacked mercilessly despite what they have done for the country they rule, because he detects in their hearts--self-righteousness, and hatred to the degree of malignity. Even clergymen who out of ignorance and apathy cause unhappiness to believers in their teaching. Mr. Eager is attacked very severely because he uses God's name as a mask for his cruelty. He makes Mrs. Emerson "think about sin and go to her grave thinking about it," only because Mr. Emerson does not believe in baptism and has not got George baptized in his childhood. Then Mr. Eager, after driving the lady to death, announces that Mr. Emerson has murdered his wife in the sight of God.

Herbert Pembroke becomes a clergyman and when he settles with Stephen on printing Rickie's writings, tries to cheat Stephen.

Forster gives supreme value to life, and a high respect for individuals. This spirit does not confine him from taking an interest in society. He believes in the progress of society. He trusts that tolerance will lead man of all races, classes, and interests, to settle down together and work for the reconstruction of our civilization.

In our age some people incline to consider life as an accident of Nature, a competition, or a burden, so we need people like Forster to show them the value of life and how to live happily. He will also encourage them to participate in the work for the happiness of the whole of mankind.

In regard to politics--we cannot deny its vital influence over our living--let us first have a look at a brief news printed in Bangkok Post, February 10, 1959.

"TOKYO, Feb. 10--(AP) -- A National Chinese gunboat was sunk by the Chinese Communist naval force off the Fukien Coast Feb. 2, Peking radio reported Tuesday.

The broadcast said ' 11 armed Kuomintang agents aboard the vessel were killed and 12 others captured.'

Peking Radio said the armed agents, who the broadcast claimed belonged to a detachment of a special agents 'organization' were killed and 12 others made prisoners.

The gunboat, the English language broadcast said,

was attempting to kidnap Chinese fishermen Feb. 2 "

Imagine how this slight incident may spark a war between the people of the same race who own different beliefs. It is not a war between nations but within the same nation--the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communists. Because these two groups of people, or more exactly their leaders, have different beliefs, different interests--a great number of people must come to war. Those people who are to fight and die have no hostility against each others. The leaders more often run away with some wealth than commit a suicide if they are defeated. They themselves hardly know their opponents. Some of them never study their opposite side's points of view. In this case it is a mere conflict of interests that make them decide to have their people killed in battles.

In every conflict there are people who would rather settle without war. If they can, these people will try to persuade their leaders to make some sacrifice to maintain the safety and happiness of the whole nation. We know too well that in a war both sides lose. After the war the people of the conquering nations do not have double happiness, they do not have longer life, in fact they gain nothing. Perhaps they will have to take up the burden of aiding the vanquished nations. Of all creatures, no species is stranger than human beings.

But if people want to live their normal life instead of going to war and playing a game of massacre and suicide, they

must be wise and they must have the power to guide their leaders.

Bernard Blackstone quoted William Blake's speech in his writing on Virginia Woolf.

" 'I am really sorry', said William Blake at the beginning of the last century, 'to see my countrymen trouble themselves about politics. If they were wise, the most arbitrary Princes could not hurt them. If they are not wise, the freest government is compelled to be a Tyranny. Princes appear to me to be fools. Houses of Commons and Houses of Lords appear to me to be fools; they seem to me to be something else besides Human Life."

( Supplement to British Book News: No. 33 )

This is why Forster cherishes intellectualism—~~Mind~~—which is the foundation of tolerance. Margaret tells Helen, her sister that they must understand themselves:

"We don't know what we want, that's the mischief with us."

( Howards End: p. 186 )

Ansell asks Rickie

" Did it never strike you that phenomena may be of



two kinds: one, those which have a real existence, such as the cow; two, those which are the subjective products of a diseased imagination, and which to our destruction, we invest with the semblance of reality?"

( The Longest Journey: p. 24 )

Agnes, Gerald, Herbert Penbrooke, all despise intellectualism. They are among Forster's bad characters. Fielding, Ansell, and Margaret, are intelligent. They often speak for Forster.

But wisdom is not enough, chance must be there too. Forster thinks that Democracy gives more chance to people than any other government. He gives two cheers for Democracy.

"So two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two it permits criticism."

( Two Cheers for Democracy: p. 79 )

In fact Forster has made use of the privilege of criticism. He criticises the British colonial policy in his famous work—A Passage to India. He has shown the defects and implied the loss of India.

Ronny Heaslop works hard and faithfully but the result is that the Indians are unhappy and hate him. The effort is fruitless because Ronny does not give them what they want. They ask for friendliness and he gives them justice. Aziz tells Fielding that

"When I was a student I got excited over your damned countrymen, certainly; but if they'll let me get on with my profession, and not be too rude to me officially, I really don't ask for more"

( A Passage to India: p. 168 )

Fielding himself believes that

"The world,.....is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can but do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence."

( A Passage to India: p. 65 )

He also says that

" 'Indians know whether they are liked or not, they cannot be fooled here. Justice never satisfies them, and this is why the British Empire rests on sands.'"

( A Passage to India: p. 270 )

Nowadays international relationships have grown up on a large scale. The basis is political, and therefore these relationships "rest on sand!" The nations cannot help aiming at advantages for themselves. Fielding and Aziz though wanting to be friends cannot, partly because "the horses did not want it", and partly because Aziz cannot forget what is due to India and Fielding

cannot forget what is owed to England.

A Passage to India is not a political novel. Its real theme is the friendship between Aziz and Fielding. Yet Forster has proved his cosmopolitanism. The work was written in 1924 when India was a colony of Britain. The author has risked the name of traitor in asserting justice and truth. He has implied that India is for Indians. Though India needed British aid, Forster does not approve of the oppression the Anglo-Indians have exerted on the natives.

Will politicians ever risk themselves as Forster has done? Will statesmen bear in their mind the value of each individual life? Will they conceive the real goal of life and therefore stop sending a vast number of people to death to assert their beliefs? Soldiers are of course more than walking uniforms!

Though history has proved man's ignorance in believing in positive militant ideals and implies many more wars, we still have a hope. Forster will be read. There will be some more 'Forsters' to come--to fight for man's salvation. One report from England permits us to hope. V. S. Pritchett reports in his article written on the occasion of E.M. Forster's eightieth birthday. A part of the article runs as follows:

"It is a mistake to take this infertile and original writer literally. Thus his 'apathy' really means 'integrity'. One other writer of his generation, Boris Pasternak, has it, and has demonstrated its phenomenal spiritual strength. . .

Like him, Forster hands back the ticket, bored by the verbosity of the strong-willed, knowing that there is a creative force in the secrets of life. He is fresh because he is unable to conceive of a life without free choice; perhaps we would think him more than courageous, and actually great, if his novels had conveyed the other half of the argument: that we have to choose for others and the choice is made by others for us. But this is to ask for an inrush of ungoverned emotion beyond the scope of comedy."

( New Statesman, London: 27 Dec. 1958: p. 913 )