
BOOKS & WRITERS

Perfection of the Life

E. M. Forster's Letters—By K. W. GRANSDEN



IN 1923 FORSTER wrote to Siegfried Sassoon about *A Passage to India*, with which he was having difficulties: "I shall never write another novel after it—my patience with ordinary people has given out. But I shall go on writing. I don't feel any decline in my 'powers'."

He was as good as his word. He wrote far more books after 1923 than before it, but never another novel. But the explanation he offers there needs to be taken together with another, earlier comment to Sassoon (2 May 1918) *à propos* a short story:

"It's not that I'm off writing, but I can't any more put words between inverted commas and join them together with 'said' and an imaginary proper name."

How completely characteristic of this "elusive" writer (as the critics used never to tire of labelling him) to provide us with two theories of why he got stuck with fiction, one technical, one social or psychological. Of the two, the socio-psychological one will perhaps most astonish the reader of these letters¹ (when a craftsman gives a technical reason why he can't do something the layman has virtually no choice but to accept it). But no more patience with ordinary people? It might, I suppose, be said that the wide circle of friends and relations fortunate enough to be recipients of these letters do not constitute, by any definition of the term, "ordinary" people. One's friends are never ordinary, and it can be said of Forster, more than of most people, that he conferred distinction upon even his most distinguished friends by virtue of his friendship ("Human beings can't be dull if I find them interesting . . .").

Nor are the addressees represented in these two volumes exclusively, or even predominantly, drawn from the ranks of the famous and the public (though in Vol. 2 there are

inevitably more of these). His most self-revealing letters are arguably those to his mother, Florence Barger, and Bob Buckingham (the last-named does not appear at all until Vol. 2). There are also far more of these personal letters, though statistics must be handled, as ever, with care. Out of an estimated 15,000 letters written during his lifetime the editors have found room for just 446.

He had, of course, what most of us now lack—time. Though always busy, he never had a regular nine-to-five job, and he was able through his correspondence not only to give pleasure to those he wrote to, and now to us, but to explore ways of working out his own problems and stresses whether in life or art. Even if the selection here provided represents only about one-thirtieth of his estimated epistolary output, it reflects adequately, thanks to careful and experienced editing, Forster's extraordinary life-span, 86 years from the first letter to the last.

Many of the earliest letters are to his mother, and one catches something of the tone of anxious hypochondria (his own health improved steadily as he grew older, as not infrequently happens, and his mother too lived to ninety) which we find also in the relationship between Rickie and his mother in *The Longest Journey*: and something else, not physical:

"My cold is much better, nearly well, so is my cough . . . but I feel very nervous somehow. I don't know why it is, perhaps it is excitement, but lately I have always been taking the dark side of things. I have never been like it before, but it is not at all nice. . . . It is not so bad in the day time as at night, then I cry a lot. I also have a kind of foreboding that something dreadful will happen before the holidays. . . . The worst of school is, you have nothing and nobody to love, if only I had somebody. . . ."

That *cri de coeur* of 1890 (letter 12) expresses in the simplest possible terms a life's quest, but it is seldom in the early letters that his guard is down, and when it is, the result is not self-pity but the sharpness of truth. But the mutual concern for health and welfare continues through the Cambridge years and beyond ("I often wonder about your rheumatism, but feel sure you will never let me know if it is bad, in case of worrying me", he writes, at the start of a long and brilliant description of a visit to Peshawar, 12 November 1912, and examples could be multiplied). The early letters

¹ *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*. Edited by MARY LAGO and P. N. FURBANK. Vol. I, 1879-1920. Collins (1983), £15.95. Vol. II, 1921-1970. Collins (1985), £17.50.

begin also to reflect the eye for the telling and off-beat detail which marks the budding novelist, such as the description of Lord Kitchener getting an honorary degree and looking "rather a chaw-bacon in a grey suit which even I knew was not a proper fit." The self-mockery, too, is characteristic. This account of a breakfast party at King's is pure *Longest Journey*:

"My breakfast party today was rather a fiasco, owing to tiresome Mollison. I was going to have him alone, when he very stupidly said before Worters and MacMunn that it would be much better if all three came to him instead. Of course I had to persist and include them in the invitation though I didn't want them and had no occasion to ask them. That was bad enough, but if you please the next thing is that Mollison can't come, because he has an invitation from the dean whom he has so often refused that he doesn't like to do it again. I felt very cross but being 'such a lady' behaved in an exemplary manner, being left with the two I didn't want and without the one I did."

And there is the undergraduate rag which turned into a riot, observed and enjoyed from a safe and decorous distance—"very foolish, but I much enjoyed it, for I saw it from my window beautifully." That Jamesian adverb seems very much the *mot juste* in the years of innocence, and from these gentle exploratory beginnings we can trace the slow building of Forster's character and personality so that by the time of the Second World War we are in the presence of a steadfast and experienced strength which is genuinely heroic and the more impressive because some of the material from the First World War has not worn anything like so well.

In 1914 he was riding the crest of the wave, back from India with half his recalcitrant masterpiece written, a fully-fledged literary figure whose four published novels were widely praised—only Bob Trevelyan noticed, correctly I think, a streak of facetiousness in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, a perception which troubled its author—but not yet a national, let alone an international figure, as he and J. B. Priestley were to become later, not yet a "spokesman" for the arts and for liberal principles. We see him in 1914 as part of a coterie of artistic relationships, of the kind which later gave Bloomsbury a bad name in some circles. This nexus had begun to jell, ironically enough, at precisely that moment in history when all such coteries were threatened, perhaps irrevocably. "I simply don't know where this war will leave us all. There's bound to be some queer regrouping", he wrote to Hilton Young in February 1915 (letter 142): Young had been posted to Scapa Flow, and Forster's letter is full of his quarrels with D. H. Lawrence and suchlike literary small change.

I WANT TO INSERT HERE a lexical footnote. Forster was much addicted in his early years to the word "queer", long before it began to carry the popular meaning now transferred to "gay": he used it to mean anything odd, offbeat or

unorthodox; it is occasionally pejorative, e.g. "a queer unsatisfactory emotionalism", occasionally inexplicit, "I have just been to Cambridge, but find it rather queer", where the "but" presumably signifies some such ellipse as "didn't feel at home." A particularly interesting example: a relative "reminded me of Uncle Willie, only queerer", for Uncle Willie was a model for Mrs Failing in *The Longest Journey*. In the famous thirteenth chapter of that novel, Forster writes of Mrs Failing that Rickie "had never known her so queer before." It is the moment of Aunt Emily's revelation to Rickie about his brother.

Uncle Willie is a shadowy, almost non-existent figure in the letters, but we learn of his literary significance from the splendid new Abinger edition of *The Longest Journey*.² This includes among its appendices not only the discarded fantasy chapter to which Forster refers in his preface to the 1961 World Classics edition of the novel, but also a memoir, "My Uncle Willie" (c. 1920), which identifies his home in Northumberland, where Forster passed some rather unhappy childhood visits, as the model for Cadover. Uncle Willie, unlike Auden's Uncle Henry, was not queer in the modern sense of the word, though sex evidently played an important part in his life. He lived in a *ménage à trois* with his wife (who actually was called Aunt Emily) and a younger lady called Leo. After his death, the two women set up house together, and on Aunt Emily's death Leo inherited almost everything, apart from some generous legacies to Forster's cousins. "And I got nothing at all. . . . Was I merely the wrong age and sex? Anyhow, no one seems to have quarrelled with Uncle Willie as completely as I have."

BUT LET US RETURN to the letters. There is perhaps something a bit disconcerting in reliving the tea-party, National Gallery lives of the Stracheys and Lawrences during the great slaughter on the western front, and it is with relief and excitement that we reach November 1915 and Forster's departure for Alexandria and war service with the Red Cross: a relief and excitement we sense also in himself, for despite his love for his mother he was aware that he needed to get away from her influence, something he had not really managed even on the first Indian journey of 1912-13. It was Alexandria that gave him his first real and intense experience of physical love, with an Egyptian tram-conductor, Mohammed el Adl.

Here was something of transcendent value and importance to him that could not be "tea-tabled" (to use Isherwood's term, coined in *Lions and Shadows*, to describe Forster's technique of "playing down") into the kind of amusing letters to his mother which even India had continued to call forth. He turned instead to another confidante, Mrs Florence Barger, to whom he remained very close for many years. In March 1915 he offered her *Maurice* to read ("to you it will reveal a new and painful world"); two years later he invited her again into that world, not through fiction but through his own life. In an interesting note to letter 256, citing an unpublished letter of 9 August 1929 to W. J. H. Sprott ("my relation to her is queer"), we learn that Forster ceased to

² *The Longest Journey*. By E. M. FORSTER. Edited by ELIZABETH HEINE. Abinger Edition, Vol. 2. Edward Arnold, £37.50.

confide in Mrs Barger after Mohammed's death. Perhaps he no longer needed to, though his own explanation, that "she made something sacred and permanent for herself of this which fresh confidences would disturb", seems a characteristic novelist's comment—the life divided into chapters.

Forster's letters to Mrs Barger about el Adl are among the most remarkable in this collection. But it was not only about his love-affair that he confided in her at this time, but also about his relation with his mother, another sensitive area where frankness was difficult for him.

"It isn't even as if I make mother happy by stopping [the date is 10 August 1915]—she is always wanting me to be 5 years old again, so happiness is obviously impossible for her, and she never realises that the cardinal fact in my life is my writing, and that at present I am not writing. (She knows I am not writing but she can't realise it is serious for me.)"

In this same letter (149) Forster also confesses another important element in his emotional life. "I've also got to chronicle to you, not to anyone else I think, that Hugh can't again be in my life what he has been"—a reference to his friend and fellow-Kingsman H. O. Meredith, on whom he drew for the character of Clive in *Maurice* and on whom his emotional life had hitherto been romantically centred. Three months later he was in Alexandria, though it was not until 1917 that he met el Adl. Their relationship was of brief duration (Mohammed got a better job in Cairo, thanks largely to Forster's typically unselfish help, married, fell ill and out of work, and died in 1922) and cannot have been easy for either of them.

"Its drawback is that it's an understanding rather than an agreement. Its strong point is that it's a very perfect understanding, such as may pass into agreement at any moment, for the physical basis for an agreement does, on both sides, exist. If this should come I shall know perfection, if it doesn't I shall yet have been happy and achieved much intimacy. . . . It seems to me that to be trusted, and to be trusted across the barriers of income, race and class, is the greatest reward a man can receive, and that even if the agreement is not attained . . . even if he goes to Cairo and forgets me, I shall not have failed; and that other people are winning similar victories elsewhere; you and I, too, are winning one."

Letter 171, 18 July 1917

In a later letter (178, 8 October 1917) he writes to Mrs Barger again:

"I wish I was writing the second half of *Maurice* now. I now know so much more. It is awful to think of the thousands who go through youth without ever knowing. I have known in a way before but never like this. My luck has been amazing."

It is through the letters to Mrs Barger that one can follow this story, and it reads as vividly as any of Forster's fictions, and more strangely. "The greatest thing is over"? Not quite,

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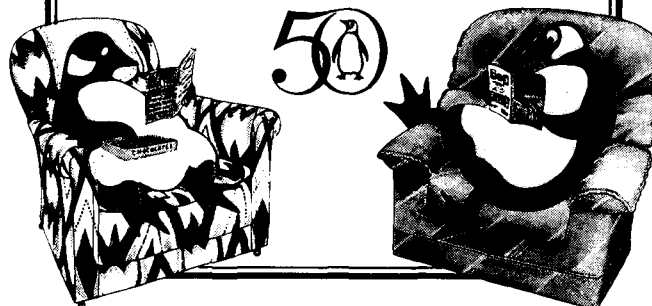
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for he was to know close personal involvement again, many years later and in very different circumstances, and for the rest of his life, though there too the course of true love did not always run smooth (does it ever?), but perhaps never again does the simple delight and gratitude in that first encounter find expression. "We had four perfect hours together", he wrote on 17 March 1921 (he had made a brief return to Egypt to see his friend before he died). The last letters in the story are very moving. "I tell you, as always, what is in my heart", he wrote (18 January 1922). "Mohammed collapsed under consumption about a fortnight before I landed, and though he is rallying from this particular attack I know that I see him for the last time. . . . These things are not sad really—there is incidentally some tears and indignation but neither form part of the central truth."

Perhaps the greatest victory Forster himself records in this letter is to be found in the words "I have been writing a certain amount of it [the news about Mohammed] to mother." To have mentioned him to her at all must have constituted a psychological breakthrough, and it is interesting to turn back one letter, to No. 214, written to his mother on board the ship which was taking him back to Alexandria and his dying friend, and to find there one bald sentence: "We reach Port Said a day earlier than expected, so I don't know whether Mohammed, who says he will meet me, will succeed." This letter is dated just six days before the letter to Mrs Barger quoted above, and if this sentence indeed represents the extent to which he felt able to confide in his mother, then it is clear how much he needed Mrs Barger. (There may of course have been another letter to his mother during those six days which is not selected here or has not survived.)

The editors print just two more letters from that time, in the second of which (217) the creative writer rises to the highest level of consolatory insight:

"Ah me—but everything is bearable, it is the betrayal from within that wears away one's soul and I have been spared that. Happiness in the ordinary sense is not what one needs in life, though one is right to aim at it. The true satisfaction is to come through and see those whom one loves come through."

That last sentence seems to bring Forster close to the novelist whom among all his contemporaries he admired most—D. H. Lawrence.

IN 1922, AFTER HIS BRIEF SOJOURN in Egypt, Forster returned to England from his second Indian journey, and settled down for the rest of his life (apart from holidays and literary excursions), partly in Surrey, partly in London, and in his later years in Cambridge. He plunged into the writing of short stories, into the laborious but ultimately triumphant issue of *A Passage to India*, and into the literary world. Having been a minor satellite, he became now one of its chief luminaries. As might be anticipated, the literary correspondence begins to proliferate, not now restricted only to the Cambridge-Bloomsbury axis of earlier years, but

including Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Cavafy, and T. E. Lawrence, whose acute criticism of "The Life to Come" is preserved in an editorial footnote—Lawrence at first found it merely funny, though he thought "Dr Woolcott" "the most powerful thing I've ever read." There are a couple of respectful notes to A. E. Housman, to thank him for *Last Poems*, which he had evidently bought, not been given, and to accompany his own gift of a copy of *The Eternal Moment*, which elicited a response from Housman "so absolutely hateful" that Forster destroyed it. There is a crack at Hugh Walpole, whose habit of dedicating his books, without prior permission, to those more distinguished than himself, was notorious, though elsewhere he writes to him affably, even respectfully—"your much greater reputation." The artist must be many things to many men.

In the 1920s and early '30s a whole new set of friendships began, first and most notably with J. R. Ackerley, who followed Forster into a private secretaryship with a Maharajah and whose letters from India "were a godsend to my etiolated novel. I copied in pages and it became ripe for publication promptly." (Researchers please note. For the text of one such letter see *The Letters of J. R. Ackerley*, pp. 6-10.) In this connection, some of the letters of Forster to his mother from 1912-13, supplementing those in *The Hill of Devi*, provide valuable source-material for *A Passage to India*, particularly that of 29 January 1913 (letter 119), describing a visit to the Barabar caves:

"But breakfast—mockery of a name—was not ready, and it was suggested we should visit the Buddhist caves while it was cooking. . . . The caves are cut out of the solid granite: a small square doorway and an oval hall inside. This sounds dull but the granite has been so splendidly polished. . . . We lit candles which showed the grain of the granite and its reds and greys . . . also tried to wake the echoes but whatever was said the cave returned only a dignified roar. We saw seven of them, but no, breakfast was *not* ready when we returned."

What a transformation awaited this light and deflationary travelogue—into the terrifying, annihilating BOUM of the novel!

And still the letters to his mother went on, a continuous outpouring of carefully tailored entertainment, solicitude, gossip and reportage. Some of the best and liveliest letters in the selection are written to her. One may be singled out here from the 1920s, an account of tea with Hardy, remarkable for its graphic vividness and its novelist's trick of catching character and tone of voice in speech.

"Simple almost dull tea at the Hardys—nice food and straggling talk. I am to lunch here tomorrow 'but the cook only came today I don't know what it will be like' says Mrs H. gloomily, and then we proceed to a performance of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in the rectory garden of which likewise little is expected. T. H. showed me the graves of his pets, all overgrown with ivy, their names on the headstones. Such a dolorous muddle. 'This is Snowball—she was run over by a train . . . this is Pella, the same thing happened to her . . . this is Kitkin, she was cut clean in two, clean in two—' 'How is it that so many of your cats

have been run over, Mr Hardy? Is the railway near?' 'Not at all near, not at all near—I don't know how it is. But of course we have only buried those pets whose bodies were recovered. Many were never seen again.' I could scarcely keep grave—it was like a caricature of his own novels or poems. We stumbled about in the ivy and squeezed between the spindly trees over 'graves of ancient Romans' he informed me: 'sometimes we are obliged to disturb one.' He seemed cheerful, his main dread being interviews, American ladies and the charabancs that whirr past while the conductor shouts 'Ome of Thomas 'Ardy, Novelist.'"

Letter 223, 19 July 1922

THE PUBLICATION (in 1924) and immediate and continuing success of *A Passage to India* was the most important event in Forster's creative life, a fact he never ceased to recognise and be thankful for. His own comments on the novel are specially revealing for they face and anticipate the question all subsequent critics have had to address themselves to: does the book undermine/transcend the old G. E. Moore doctrine, proclaimed with such joyful certainty in *Howards End*—"personal relations are the life for ever and ever." Here is what he wrote to Malcolm Darling (15 September 1924, 248):

"I have wondered . . . whether I have moved at all since King's. King's stands for personal relationships, and these still seem to me the most real things on the surface of the earth, but I have acquired a feeling that people must go away from each other (spiritually) every now and then, and improve themselves if the relationship is to develop or even endure. *A Passage to India* describes such a going away—preparatory to the next advance, which I am not capable of describing. It seems to me that individuals progress alternately by loneliness and intimacy, and that legend of the multiplied Krishna . . . serves as a symbol of a state where the two might be combined. The King's view oversimplified people: that I think was a defect. We are more complicated, also richer, than it knew, and affection grows more difficult than it used to, and also more glorious. Here again it occurs to me whether the above is not the philosophy of a bachelor. . . . There is no discounting one's experiences."

Despite the pains it cost its author, *A Passage to India* was well received (though "I hear the Govt. are upset about the sales . . . they did not mind until it sold. . . . I wonder whether they will ban it") and launched him for the first time into absolute rather than relative fame and fortune. At first he was bewildered and uncertain how to cope. "All this fame and money, which have so thrilled me when they come to others, leave me cold when they came to me. I am not an ascetic, but I don't know what to do with them, and my daily life has never been so trying, and there is no one to fill it emotionally" (251). By now one can guess the recipient: Florence Barger, to whom he continued to confide his problems with his mother, compounded now by the need to

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decide where the two of them should live (they moved in 1924 from a rented villa in Weybridge which sounds like something out of *A Room with a View*, to West Hackhurst, the house designed by his father and bequeathed to him by his Aunt Laura).

The year 1924 was important for him, not only because it was the year of *A Passage to India*, but because in that year, as he wrote to Mrs Barger, he decided that he was "going to have two rooms in town", and from then until he got too old to manage, he always maintained a flat in London, whither he could escape for a couple of nights from his almost entirely female family to see his friends. Now his life proliferated into the various activities of a famous author: the Clark Lectures at Cambridge (*Aspects of the Novel*), much reviewing and criticism for Ackerley at *The Listener* (a periodical to which, I have cause to remember with gratitude, he remained loyal after Ackerley's retirement).

There were important new friendships, too, with a new generation of writers for whom he was a literary as well as a personal guru, notably Christopher Isherwood, whom he addressed by his surname for at least eighteen months and to whom he sent, in a letter dated 4 July 1937, his famous parody of Landor (324):

*I strove with none for none was worth my strife,
Reason I loved, and next to reason, doubt,
I warmed both hands before the fire of life
And put it out.*

An earlier letter to Isherwood (319) includes an acute critique

of *The Ascent of F6*, the first night of which Forster had attended ("the Abbot—the finest scene in the play . . . the mother-business . . . doesn't work out as it should dramatically").

Of his emotional friendships, that with Bob Buckingham was much the most important. It survived many stresses and vicissitudes and grew always in strength, helped by Bob's remarkable wife. The Buckinghams provided him with a family: he responded to and shared in their tragedies, especially the death of their only son Robin of Hodgkin's disease. In the same letter to Isherwood which contains the Landor parody, he wrote.

"I have also been considering what has been most satisfactory in my own life, and ruling out Bob on the ground that he is not in a cheap edition, I have come to the conclusion that it is the *Passage to India*. It is amazing luck that one's best book should be the widest read and the one most likely to do good."

In the letters to Bob one can see Forster struggling with his own possessiveness. He praised the virtues of courage and unpossessiveness but like most of us did not always find it easy to practise what he preached: "If you call living a full life seeing me once a fortnight I don't. . . ."

AS HE GREW MORE CONFIDENT of himself and his influence, the letters become more authoritative. His work in the Second World War was war service of a different kind from that undertaken in Alexandria. Now he involved himself passionately in the crusade against Nazism. He spoke at meetings of the National Council for Civil Liberties, he criticised the BBC "over the victimisation of private opinions" (there was a move to ban from the air those who had expressed or were believed to have held pacifist or communist views, and in a letter to the Director-General he made it clear both that he objected to this censorship and that he himself did not share these views and believed in going on with the war). He represented Britain at P.E.N. conferences and had the wit and courage to shout "Art for Art's sake?", and then, when everyone had satisfactorily misinterpreted the scorn in his voice, "I should just think so."

The tenacity with which he maintained the rights of minorities, the private voice in the public place, shines through the long years of the second darkness with an exemplary light. He too now enjoyed his finest hour. He never let bureaucracy get away with muddle, discourtesy, prejudice or bad taste. (Long before the War, he had declined a seat on the council of the Society of Authors because he felt it had prevaricated over the prosecution of *The Well of Loneliness*, and had taken issue with the International P.E.N. over a proposal to organise a cruise to Skyros to unveil a monument to Rupert Brooke.)

After the War his life changed again. In 1945 his mother died and in the following year he was evicted from West Hackhurst, a discreditable episode which elicited one of his sharpest business letters. (How times, incidentally, have

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changed, and how surprising it seems to us today that a man of such wealth should never have bought a freehold.)

"You are good enough to commend me for being helpful, and there seemed no reason to be otherwise, once I had decided to accept notice. But this does not make me the less critical of your action. With your tradition and social standing you should not have deprived me of my home. It is unlikely that you and Miss Farrer are interested in my opinion, or in local opinion. Still you will agree that it is unusual in civilised circles to turn out a tenant when his age is sixty-seven, when houses are unobtainable, and when the house he leaves was designed by his father."

Letter 378

The sequel is well known. King's College came to the rescue, and offered him the rooms where he was to make a home for the remainder of his life, and where I, along with so many other undergraduates, first had the chance to meet him. From this new base he set out on fresh enterprises. He visited America for the first time, and collaborated with Eric Crozier to produce the libretto for *Billy Budd*, an undertaking not without its difficulties, as we learn from a letter to Benjamin Britten (394) and from a letter of Crozier's printed by the editors as a footnote ("E. M. F. did not realise Britten's sensitiveness about criticism of work in progress"). Over *Maurice* he continued to dither—it is clear from two letters to Isherwood (330, 384) that he was thinking about publication in 1938 and again in 1948, "but the objections are formidable." Meanwhile, he entered the theatre as well as the opera house. Santha Rama Rau adapted *A Passage to India* for the stage, while Wilfred Stone, writing his study of the novelist, *The Cave and the Mountain*, elicited some valuable reminiscences of the Cambridge years. "He [Nathaniel Wedd] was certainly the leading influence on me when I was an undergraduate and a permanent one since" (letter 434). How far away, now, seems that early letter to Wedd—"Dear Mr Wedd, I have finished all the Latin you suggested, except the last two books of the *De Natura Deorum*, which I have been unable to get hold of."

SO LONG A LIFE, perhaps like other very long lives, seems indeed to come full circle as it draws towards its close. For me, the strangest moment in reading these pages came when I reached letter 421 (16 July 1958):

"If there seems time I want to tell you of a strong experience or rather re-experience that I have just had. I am destroying or rearranging letters and came across those from Mohammed el Adl—I may not even have mentioned his name to you, he was a tram-conductor whom I met in Alexandria 1917-1919, and again saw in 1922, soon before his death. I assumed the letters would be nothing much, but gave a glance before destroying them, and was amazed—all the things I most adore glimmering in them. He had gone underground in the interval, and there is no doubt that a little of him re-emerged in Cocoa. They have given me the oddest feeling. . . ."

The reader shares that odd feeling, for the addressee of this letter, to whom Forster cannot be sure he ever mentioned el Adl, is P. N. Furbank, co-editor of the letters and Forster's appointed biographer. The greatest thing is indeed over. It is almost as if el Adl has become an invention of Forster's in the same way as Cocoa (a character who first appeared in the *Entrance to an Unwritten Novel* and reappeared in the story "The Other Boat") is an invention. Of course we know perfectly well he existed, and can in an instant turn the calendar back forty years to those letters to Mrs Barger and prove it, but the sheer length of Forster's life, the (studiedly?) casual reference, the Proustian sense of rediscovering by recreating time lost, all conspire to suggest the fiction that el Adl was himself a fiction.

Moreover, throughout these volumes there is a curious and recurring sense of *déjà vu* as we read of journeys and places which were to become part of the novels—and not just in the most obvious case, that of *A Passage to India*, where *The Hill of Devi* has already provided the opportunity to compare the "real thing" with the truer fictional version. Thus, in the accounts of a visit with his mother to Italy in 1901-2 we get pre-echoes of the Lucy novel:

"We have been here three days, and very comfortable, but my mother hankers after an Arno view and a South aspect, so we are not stopping. . . ."

The elderly ladies of the hotel make midnight excursions in the well-lighted streets in search of blood and adventure, and come back breathing desolation and woe.

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The exalted level is sustained by an old lady who is understood to be waiting for an inspiration to write a book, and an old lady who had really written one, which was squashed by the landslip at Amalfi."

And in 1905 he went to Germany to act as tutor to the children of the novelist who called herself "Elizabeth" (Countess von Arnim). The letters describing this visit show Forster at his most delightful: clearly he was having a lot of fun, away from the family, popular and successful socially, shopping, sightseeing, picnicking, dancing, at his most sociable and *bürgerlich*. The German connection was to provide him with some of the background and tone of his most sociable and *gemütlich* fiction, *Howards End*, and also, in Elizabeth herself, yet another model for the complicated Mrs Failing. It was while Forster was in Germany that he was beginning work on *The Longest Journey*, the least *bürgerlich*, most imaginatively symbolist of his novels. It was there, too, that he saw Wagner's *Siegfried*, whose hero, another child of nature, provided a model for Stephen—he was indeed at one time to have been called after him, according to the 1961 Introduction, though the only other name which survives in the early drafts is the somewhat less heroic Harold. But the published letters are tantalisingly silent about the early gestation of *The Longest Journey*. No reference to it occurs in the letters selected from the period of the German visit. However, the Abinger introduction quotes a letter written by Forster to his mother from Germany on 18 August 1905: "Should I ever write another book it will be called *The*

Longest Journey, and the one after that *Windy Corner*."

THUS THE READER MAY CREATE through these letters the most fascinating of Forster's unwritten novels, a kind of do-it-yourself construction kit for a *roman à clef*. If he really gave up fictional narrative because "it's not that I'm off writing but I can't any more put words between inverted commas and join them together with 'said' and an imaginary proper name", then perhaps these letters constitute the formula whereby he "saved" a life as full of tragicomedy as any domestic novel and processed it into thousands of chapters and paragraphs which it is the reader's task and delight to assemble. It is a novel with a large cast of non-imaginary proper names, and with a many-voiced first-person narrator, Morgan, EMF, Pop(py): there is Lily's Pop(py)—Lily being herself a persona for Alice Clara, dearest mother—endlessly solicitous to comfort and amuse; Florence's Morgan, telling as always what is in his heart; official Forster, rebuking bureaucracy, telling Lord Annan that he cannot share his love of largeness ("I have a growing, perhaps ingrowing respect for smallness"); literary Forster, discussing Melville with Britten, new writing with Lehmann, Bridges with Spender; entrepreneurial Forster, promoting the work of Forrest Reid, Cavafy, Ackerley; erotic Forster, confiding his fantasies to chosen friends, T. E., Christopher, William, Joe, Bob.

Not only is there this multiplicity, but another process, not

Words

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to do with the text, is going on invisibly while we read, for the man behind the personae is getting older page by page, year by year, in a world not of narrative but of real time, or rather perhaps of both: older, but also wiser, defter, cleverer simply, so that two processes coexist and coalesce, one reflecting the complexities of reader-controlled art, the other the inescapable processes of nature, the roll-call of the real dead, Robin Buckingham, Lily, Virginia, T. E. and D. H.—a process over which the reader is powerless, able only to glance uneasily at dates as he gets towards the end of the second volume. It is appropriate that the last letter selected here should be to May, devoted wife of Bob Buckingham and devoted friend, in whose house in Coventry, a few months after this, he died:

"Silence cannot mean peace. Send me a line (All right here)."

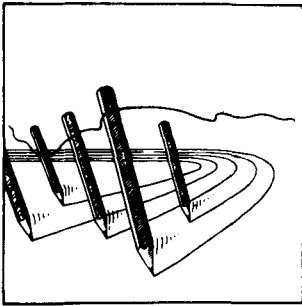
Pondering this enigmatic message (cry for attention?), which somehow seems so fitting a conclusion to these volumes, I found myself recalling some words from *A Passage to India*—"the perfectly adjusted organism would be silent." I looked the passage up (it is the beginning of Chapter XIV) and read this:

"Most of life is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it, and the books and talk that would describe it as interesting are obliged to exaggerate, in the hope of justifying their own existence. Inside its cocoon of work or social obligation, the human spirit slumbers for the most part, registering the distinction between pleasure and pain, but not nearly as alert as we pretend. There are periods in the most thrilling day during which nothing happens, and though we continue to exclaim: 'I do enjoy myself,' or, 'I am horrified,' we are insincere. 'As far as I feel anything, it is enjoyment, horror'—it's no more than that really, and a perfectly adjusted organism would be silent."

Forster's letters seem to proclaim the contrary: that nothing in life is so dull that it cannot be made interesting by writing well about it, and that "silence cannot mean peace" unless it be the silence of the grave. We are grateful that the imperfectly adjusted organism called E. M. Forster went on talking and joking and confiding and entertaining until the end. Perhaps in this achievement of the human spirit the Yeatsian dilemma, "perfection of the life or of the work", is happily resolved.

Down Under with Waltzing Jane

Australia in Fiction—By D. J. TAYLOR



"**P**RAY REMEMBER", says a colonial pundit somewhere in *Jane Austen in Australia*, "that we are but a young country." You might think—for all that the author is intent upon one of those exercises in the historical subjunctive and hence entitled to latitude—that this is a little contrived, a

small piece of self-consciousness over which the author and reader can exchange a wink. Yet meaningful remarks are strewn about the pages of all these books with deliberate artlessness. "No real mystery can be solved", reckons Darcy Burr in *The Doubleman*, while Herbert Badgery, the hero of *Illywhacker*, will feed you his opinions on truth and lies, reality and subterfuge, at the drop of a hat. After all, "it was no trouble to lie." No. This sort of revelation, symbolic games being given away, is quite deliberate. It is a hint in code to the reader, requiring only his own decoding, a warning about the likelihood of artifice and dissimulation. Forewarned, forearmed, we stride on into the text.

The gleeful acceptance of artifice is a central force at work in the modern novel. More advanced forms of critical theory demand that each book exist as its own meta-text, ceaselessly

commenting on its own preoccupations and resolves, turning in on itself to demonstrate symbols and inconsistencies. This trickiness, this feeling that you have broken in on the author's private codes, risen to a higher level of interpretation than he or she anticipated, can be stimulating. It can also make you pine for the staid satisfactions of pace and narrative; an assumption that the author, like you, is waiting breathlessly to see what will happen to his characters. Frequently in these modern fictions, assembled with nods in the direction of Derrida and the Yale critical school, the author is nothing much more than a puppetmaster who, masochistically, wants you to see the strings.

Australian fiction was always a likely candidate for this approach. Historical circumstance demands it. Peter Carey quotes as his epigraph remarks by Mark Twain on the confusing and downright implausible nature of much Australian history: presumably this can be taken as a defence of his own method, which is to write equally fanciful fiction. You can't after all, truthfully explain the inexplicable. Possibly these intentions have something to do with the current modishness of the Australian novel, a slap to insular sensibilities which thought that it began and ended with Patrick White. Other home-grown stars—Frank Moorhouse, for instance, who combined scrupulous realism with the odd stylistic flourish—never progressed beyond cult acceptance in this country. It would be difficult to describe any of these