

# E. M. Forster and the Liberal Imagination

*E. M. FORSTER. By Lionel Trilling. (The Makers of Modern Literature Series). Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books. 1943. 192 pp. \$1.50.*

*A ROOM WITH A VIEW. By E. M. Forster. (The New Classics Series). Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions. 1943. 318 pp. \$1.*

*THE LONGEST JOURNEY. By E. M. Forster. (The New Classics Series). Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions. 1943. 327 pp. \$1.*

*HOWARDS END. By E. M. Forster. (Alblabook Edition). New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943. 393 pp. \$2.50.*

*WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD. By E. M. Forster. (Alblabook Edition). New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1943. 283 pp. \$2.50.*

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

IT is the modest contention of Mr. Lionel Trilling in a critique (in book form) at once sympathetic and short that E. M. Forster is a novelist of enduring value, who can be "read again and again and who, after each reading, gives me what few writers can give us after our first days of novel-reading, the sensation of having learned something." I call this contention modest for the reason that Mr. Trilling does not, with a flourish of brasses in his own honor, announce that he, and he alone, has rediscovered neglected merit. In fact, he rather hints that Forster just misses greatness, or that you can, at any rate, make out a case to show that this is true. This tantalizing justice of insight encourages the reader to declare: "Why not, then, great?" and to read Forster for the evidence. The evidence is now easily available. The publishers of Trilling's study have issued reprints of two novels, and Alfred A. Knopf has issued two more in another format. (Not all my admiration for Mr. Knopf's contribution to American publishing reconciles me to such unnecessary cacophony as "Alblabook.") The absence of "A Passage to India" from these reprints is a tribute to this novel, already easily available in the Modern Library and in an Everyman's Library edition for which Forster has supplied interpretative notes. The short stories have not, I think, been recently reprinted, and of course the non-fictional prose must be hunted up in its original forms.

It is a comment on the decline and

fall of fiction from its high estate (a decline and fall known everywhere except in bookstores) that Mr. Trilling has had to go back to an Edwardian to find a novelist he can reread, learning something at each perusal. Why has he had to turn to a writer whose first book appeared in 1905, whose latest (and apparently last) novel was published in 1927, and who has written no fiction since? The reasons are many, but it is here sufficient to point out that the American novel, at least, has been killed by the publicity men. They have forced it into the place which the commercial short-story held before the rise of illustrated weeklies. Novels pour from the presses in a shallow stream, each of them ballyhooed by a "publicity campaign," a build-up of favorable "quotes" from friends, a skilled skimming of reviews for favorable sentences, a pressure drive on book-sellers, who are told the amount of money the firm is going to spend on advertising the unique features of this particular book, the use of an eye-catching dust-jacket for precisely the same purposes as yesterday's eye-catching dust-jacket—and the novel disappears within three months. This is not art, but commerce; not production for use, but production for sale. Forster was not involved in the book racket.

Forster was, as Mr. Trilling points out, happy in his birth-date. He developed in the Horatian age of the English novel—that golden time when the Victorians were ending and the Edwardians beginning, when literary art had not become the monopoly of critics and poets only, but was gen-

erously at the disposal of even novelists. In his books, whatever the passions and the troubles of his characters, Forster conveys to us the serene maturity of an epoch now patronized only by vulgar and opinionated minds. A single date illustrates his good fortune. In 1898 "The Nigger of the Narcissus" appeared; and the great preface to "The Nigger" (one of the four or five crucial documents in the whole history of English fiction) announced a method and proclaimed a creed. That method and that creed are the subject of Mr. Trilling's first chapter, the title of which I have stolen. I am, however, not so concerned as is Mr. Trilling with the deficiencies of the liberal imagination in life as I am with the glories of the liberal imagination in literature.

Mr. Trilling says many shrewd things about Forster's central theme—the inability of the English middle class, products of nineteenth century liberalism, to enter imaginatively the lives of others—Italians, Hindus, or even natural Englishmen, servants of Pan and Priapus in the England of Ruskin. Implicit in his excellent discussion is also the splendor and strength of the liberal tradition—the splendor and strength of thoughtfulness. This it is that gives body and insight to Forster's novels. This is the vitalizing force in John Morley and G. Lowes Dickinson, in Gilbert Murray and Oliver Elton, in Lord Balfour and Sidney Webb, as it is the vitalizing force in the fiction on which Forster was nourished and to which he proudly owes allegiance—the novels of Meredith and James and Conrad and Galsworthy. Forster's books are acts of thought as well as works of art. He does not, like the Marxians and the post-Freudians, write a novel as an act of emotional relief. He knows other impulses than anger. His books can be reread because they have a quality defined by a great neglected Victorian. They have fundamental brainwork.

But brainwork is not all. Brainwork uncontaminated by sensibility gives you the brittle fiction of Bernard Shaw and Chesterton or that of the propaganda novelists of our time. The great fusion achieved by the liberal imagination in the decades that nourished Forster, a fusion more highly tempered than at any other recent time in English history, was a fusion of thoughtfulness and sensibility. The Victorians knew that human life might be lived nobly; the Edwardians discovered that sensibility could not



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be denied. It is subtly wrong to think of the inheritance from Swinburne and George Meredith as mere neopaganism; it is true to note in the movement of the age a reaching out for more than intellectual issues and moral values—a sense that the solid satisfactions of life include sexuality and physical energy, a sense of the body and a sense of an over-soul that, if it was not transcendental, was at any rate sweet and sanitive. It is in this dual world that Forster's characters have their richest being. Some, like Gino in "Where Fools Rush In," are rooted mainly in Priapian values, and some, like Helen in "Howards End," seem to know only Plato, but the novelist knows both worlds and so do his greater characters.

It is, indeed, a sense that the life of flesh and blood floats suspended in a larger world of secret and important meanings that makes Forster worth rereading. Like other men in that great and wonderful generation he gave up Wordsworth, but he did not therefore rush into Zolaism. He and John Galsworthy are almost the last novelists of whom it can be said that their characters dare to have not merely bodies, but souls. Spirit really speaks to spirit in his pages, but not in the mere Victorian meaning of the word. There is in his books an other-worldness neither wholly pagan nor wholly mystic, but a product of a heightened and educated sensibility. The lack of similar intelligent sensibility is the curse of American fiction. Our writers are afraid of sensibility because they mistake it for sentimentalism; or, what is worse, they turn it merely into sex.

There are, to be sure, large defects in Forster's books. His thoughtfulness and his sensibility serve him splendidly in great moments, but he is not always at a great pitch. There are times when, in place of art, he seems to take refuge in the privilege of being a gifted amateur. His novels are plotted, but he seems at unexpected moments mildly ashamed of the fact. Sometimes he makes colloquial virtuosity do the work of insight, and sometimes it is hard to believe he is not spoofing the whole show. But almost no living novelist has his sense of the tears in human things; and no living novelist has quite dared, as he has done, to by-pass the economic divisions of mankind for the sake of a deep and tender spirituality. To read him, to reread him is really to restore one's faith in the dignity of man. That seems to me why Mr. Trilling has done a laudable job in calling attention to Forster's qualities, and why these reprints of work that somehow does not date are justified in these lean times in fiction.

## A Poem About a Saint

*THIS MAN WAS IRELAND.* By Robert Farren. New York: Sheed & Ward. 1943. 229 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by PADRAIC COLUM

A GREAT deal can be said for Robert Farren's book but not until something has been said against it. The verse forms do not represent an artistic achievement: they are too loosely worked. But the poem has true connection with the folk mind, and in having that it has authenticity; there is breadth in it; it has a boisterousness that is refreshing in a poem today; it has the quaintness and the occasional charming irrelevancy of the folk-tale; it has humor. And the poet has achieved the feat of getting published a book of poetry of over two hundred pages.

It needs a certain amount of special knowledge for its full enjoyment, and the reviewer who feels he should impart some of this knowledge has to be long-winded. The central character in the poem, the man who was Ireland, was one who adopted the name Colm, signifying dove, and who came to be known as Colm-cille, Dove of the Church. He lived in times when Britons, Picts, Saxons, Gaels were harrying one another in the island of Britain, when the kingdoms that were to be Scotland, Wales, England had still to be hammered out, and when the Roman order was being introduced, in some places reintroduced, by the Church. Colm-cille worked for reconciliation amongst those elements; he strove even to bring birds and beasts into the circle of human kindness. He promoted the monarchy founded by the Irish in a little Scottish state, and thereby, with the prestige that his mission gave to the Gaelic language, set up a political and cultural nucleus for the medley of peoples who were the Scottish population

of the time. In Ireland he was credited with saving the Bardic Order from dissolution after the outrageous and blackmailing satires of the poets had made the dynasts take action against them. He was also credited with the recovery of the old Pagan epic, the Tain, which, through the neglect of its custodians, the Bardic Order, had been lost and forgotten: he raised the original composer of the Tain, the long-dead Fergus MacRoy, from the tomb, and had him dictate the epic to the chastened bards. Here is a place to give a specimen of Robert Farren's verse: it relates to the recovery of the epic, but it is also a tribute to the story-tellers whose influence is so evident in this poem:

By ashen sods where shadows mope  
a cailleach puffs a pipe to ash,  
and fumbles under thoughts like  
smoke  
for words that lift the spirit's latch.

Words that have crept down time  
on rungs  
of country cailleachs' tongues un-  
changed,  
flushing with flame the smoke that  
clung  
around a race's heritage.

And yet no scribe's pen could have  
scratched,  
nor scholar's spelt back Ireland's  
eyes,  
nor cailleachs' mumbling under  
thatch  
made candled nights for country  
boys.

Nor poet fed from shining jet  
with welling water their God's-plot  
had not the Dove drawn back to  
breath  
the epic Ireland had forgot.

Drawn back to breathing flesh Mac-  
Roy,  
and, re-endeuing ghost with bone,  
wormed from his shuddering tongue  
the Tain,  
and laid him down to death, alone.

Colm-cille had not always been for appeasement: he did not accept the verdict of the King of Ireland in the copyright case (the first recorded) in which he was defendant. By working all night in a monastery while the other monks slept, he transcribed a book that was unique in Ireland just then. The monk who owned it demanded that the copy be left with the original in the monastery. The king and his law-advisers did the best they could in this unheard-of case: the only precedent they could lay hold of was in the maxim of the law of a pastoral state: "With every cow her calf." The king rendered it: "with every book her calf-book"—every copy stays with its original. The verdict

