

MR. E. M. FORSTER

ABINGER HARVEST, by E. M. Forster (Arnold, 12/6).

Apart from the Clarke Lectures, reprinted as *Aspects of the Novel*, and the memoir of Lowes Dickinson, this is the only book Mr. Forster's eager public has been given since *A Passage to India*, and it is a disappointing book. It is composed of reprinted essays, reviews, articles, etc., divided into sections: one is of literary criticism, another about the East, another on aspects of contemporary England, and one of essays mostly in the popular historical manner (née Strachey) on figures of the Past. The publishers tells us 'the range of outlook is even wider' here than in Mr. Forster's previous work, but even his greatest admirers will hardly find anything more than a casual re-statement of Mr. Forster's outlook, split up as it were under a spectroscope. *Abinger Harvest* ought to be an occasion for some critic to make a revaluation of the novels too. However, we must be content here with summarizing what this volume alone shows.

It is a mixture of autobiography and criticism. What it chiefly does is to furnish a key to Mr. Forster's peculiar poise, that poise which constitutes the individuality of his novels and from which his characteristic irony springs. Under the spectroscope it is seen to be a balance between a critical and a charming stance. He is gifted with impulses in both directions, and, hovering as he necessarily does between the serious and the playful, this makes him unduly concerned to be whimsical. He is often here merely playful and then he tends to become a bore (e.g. last half of the group of sketches called 'Our Diversions'), or personal in the worst sense. His weakness, felt in the novels as an uneasy wobble in some of the ironic effects, is here revealed as a frequent inability to decide which he wants to be—critical or charming. You get the impression that he is positively unable to resist following out a whimsical train of thought, whatever the business in hand. 'My Wood' is an instance of turning this habit to profit by the use of a serious overtone, but it stands almost alone on this level. Generally his poise in these essays is unstable, he seems, as so rarely in the novels, to be uncertain what he intends to convey or where he means to alight (hence perhaps his liking for Ronald

Firbank, who will remain a tiresome fribble to most of us). 'A Flood in the Office' shows a characteristic surrender to the easier current; it starts from a dispute between two eminent engineers about the irrigation of Egypt and continues, at a tangent, about Father Nile. Mr. Forster sees from the corner of his eye the real significance of the dispute—the eternal antipathy between the disinterested intelligent man and stupidity allied with vested interests—but it is not the spectacle of integrity struggling to make its voice heard that arrests his imagination: it is the whimsical fancies suggested by 'the unique mass of water.' Of course it makes a more amusing essay this way. The objection is that the consistently whimsical outlook has the effect of making any other appear priggish—exactly as *Punch* does, which Mr. Forster very feelingly denounces on other grounds. And you do get the impression that Mr. Forster is disinclined to risk being thought too serious, he takes so much care to elicit the 'How amusing' response.

The literary criticism carries us a step further in our analysis. The intuitions are good, there are striking flashes of discernment (some of the critical stuff, such as the essay on Sinclair Lewis, is better than anything in *Aspects of the Novel*), but he doesn't seem to know how to consolidate. As in that book, it is amateur criticism; there is some kind of mental habit that prohibits discipline and sustained effort. The amiably whimsical-personal approach is not made to seem justified as a profitable mode of literary criticism: essays like that on T. S. Eliot are so inadequate that it is surprising that Mr. Forster should have thought them worth reprinting. The brief note on Conrad makes the radical criticism of this novelist who has been written and lectured about with so little profit:

'This isn't an æsthetic criticism, nor a moral one. Just a suggestion that our difficulties with Mr. Conrad may proceed in part from difficulties of his own. What is so elusive about him is that he is always promising to make some general philosophic statement about the universe and then refraining with a gruff disclaimer . . . These essays [*Notes on Life and Letters*] do suggest that he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel . . .'

And again on Ibsen, how acute, how just:

‘Although not a teacher he has the air of being one, there is something in his method that implies a message, though the message really rested on passing irritabilities, and not on any permanent view of conduct or the universe . . . Moral ugliness trespasses into the æsthetic . . . Poetry might perhaps be achieved if Ibsen’s indignation was of the straight-hitting sort, like Dante’s. But for all its sincerity there is something automatic about it, he reminds us too often of father at the breakfast table after a bad night, sensitive to the defects of society as revealed by a chance glance at the newspaper, and apt to blame all parties for them indiscriminately. Now it is the position of women that upsets father, now the lies people tell, now their inability to lie, now the drains, now the newspaper itself, which he crumples up, but his helpers and servers have to retrieve it, for bad as are all political parties he must really see who got in at Rosmerholm.’

Yet you feel he is not wholly aware of the force of his criticisms, for he always proceeds to shy away from the point he has made so convincingly and go back on himself—generally out of benevolence.

You go on to conclude that Mr. Forster is not so adequate a critic as he might be—as he ought to be, judging by his natural endowments. His blind spots are particularly instructive; they seem to be created by a social environment whose influence would repay investigation. There is the section of essays on *The Past*. They have none of Lytton Strachey’s hateful qualities—the cheap irony, the vulgar prose effects, the assumption of superiority to his historical puppets—but it is significant that he should be sufficiently an admirer of Strachey’s to try his hand at this genre, and sad that he should have been encouraged to think the attempts worth republishing. [But no doubt many will find them delicious.] In these circumstances his personal touch deserts him. ‘Presently the old mistress [Hannah More] will ring a bell, Louisa will fail to answer it, there will be horror, disillusionment, flight, the Industrial Revolution, Tolstoy, Walt Whitman, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb.’ This, along with *The Common Reader* 2nd Series from which it might have come, shows the unfortunate meeting-ground of

three writers. It is distressing to see so distinguished a writer sinking to this. From this volume posterity will do some deducing about Mr. Forster's background: he feels amiably towards the submerged layers below him ('Me, Them and You,' and there other indications of a desire, creditable rather than effective, to gear in with the great world); and is critical of those aspects of his economic class which his circle have agreed to consider targets (*e.g.*, 'It is different for me'), but his most successful achievements here are in a very small way (*e.g.*, 'The Doll Souse' and 'The Scallies'). There isn't much appearance of sharply-felt first-hand criticism. Everything points to an uncritical taking-over of group-values. For instance, he boldly confesses to being one of the highbrow minority who can 'make fun' of Wembley, while the next essay displays him revelling in the deliciousness of Mickey Mouse and Co.; anyone who has observed a highbrow film audience relaxing from the effort required to appreciate Russian or surrealist films and preparing to really enjoy themselves when the Walt Disney turn follows must feel this a worthier subject for an ironical pen. A satirist, to command our respect, ought to be aware of his blinkers as well as of his tether. Thus it seems at least somewhat arbitrary to assume that the British Empire is ridiculous whereas Mr. Clive Bell isn't; posterity's Bloomsbury (not very long hence) may judge otherwise.

Where suitable subjects occur, when his critical abilities are able to function on important topics that are also congenial, Mr. Forster produces his best work. The best section in this volume is that on The East, and the best essay in it on 'The Mind of the Native Indian State.' This is not merely whimsical, merely charmingly witty, but witty to a serious purpose; it is responsible:

'The Princes have studied our wonderful British Constitution at the Chiefs' Colleges, and some of them have visited England and seen the Houses of Parliament. But they are personal rulers themselves, often possessing powers of life and death, and they find it difficult to realize that the King Emperor, their overlord, is not equally powerful. If they can exalt and depress their own subjects at will, regard the State revenue as their private property, promulgate a constitution one day and ignore it the next, surely the monarch of Westminster can do as much or more. This belief colours all their intercourse with the

Government of India. They want to get through or behind it to King George and lay their troubles at his feet, because he is a king and a mighty one, and will understand. In the past some of them nourished private schemes, but to-day their loyalty to the Crown is sincere and passionate, and they welcomed the Prince of Wales, although his measured constitutionalisms puzzled and chilled them. Why did he not take his liegemen aside and ask, in his father's name, for the head of Ghandi upon a charger? It could have been managed so easily. The intelligent Princes would not argue thus, but all would have the feeling, and so would the reader if he derived extensive powers under a feudal system and then discovered that it was not working properly in its upper reaches. "His Majesty the King-Emperor has great difficulties in these days": so much they grasp, but they regard the difficulties as abnormal and expect that a turn of the wheel will shake them off. However cleverly they may discuss democratic Europe or revolutionary Russia with a visitor, they do not in their heart of hearts regard anything but Royalty as permanent, or the movements against it as more than domestic mutinies. They cannot understand, because they cannot experience, the modern world.'

It concludes with a sample of Mr. Forster's personal brand of wisdom—a deprecating refusal to be easily wise. The same note is struck elsewhere, as in the capital little sketches 'Advance, India' and 'The Suppliant,' which might both have come from *A Passage to India*. It is sustained in the most impressive thing in the book, the courageous and useful address, delivered last year to the International Congress of Writers at Paris, on 'Liberty in England,' which contains passages that every civilized person will be grateful to Mr. Forster for. [This recalls Mr. Forster's valuable report of that congress in *The New Statesman and Nation*, July 6th, 1935.] Along with this goes 'A Note on the Way,' which is personal in the best sense. You conclude that Mr. Forster's courage—and courage is readily felt to be an important part of this writer's make-up—is not associated with his irony so much as with his delicate emotional machinery. Certainly it is something in the nature of courage which provides the mainspring: courage to assert the virtue of the finer feelings. Compared with

the other major novelists of this century Mr. Forster exhibits a lack both of personal vigour and of that intellectual strength which impresses as the best source of vitality ; you can't imagine him making the kind of personal judgments that Lawrence made nor has his irony anything in common with the refreshing sardonic quality of Lawrence's. Nor has he shown a capacity for such an ironical achievement as *Cakes and Ale*, which, side by side with a sardonic criticism of the writer's environment, exhibits positive values convincingly incarnated. Niceness has its drawbacks apparently, in letters if not in life ; Mr. Forster in *Abinger Harvest* shows himself to be the nicest kind of person, but so nice as to be somewhat tame perhaps—or else what accounts for the disappointment the book leaves? Though his public work (*e.g.*, formerly as president of the Society for Cultural Relations with Soviet Russia and till recently as president of the National Council for Civil Liberties) is a reminder that it is not necessarily his most ponderable side that is presented to the reader.

Q. D. LEAVIS.

SHAKESPEARE AS A FORCE OF NATURE

SHAKESPEARE, by John Middleton Murry (*Cape*, 12/6).

'To try and identify oneself with Shakespeare as a force of Nature—however presumptuous it may sound—is the best way to understand him.' Reading that, we expect the worst ; but it is only fair to say that our expectations are not altogether fulfilled. The introductory chapters, it is true, are concerned to establish the fact that Shakespeare was a poet of a different *kind* from most other great poets (except Keats) and therefore demands a different critical approach. It apparently does not occur to Mr. Murry that there is something radically wrong with the implied conception of criticism: one would have thought that a critical method inadequate to deal with Shakespeare would stand self-condemned. The Romantic attitude to Shakespeare, he says, is left intact by modern 'scientific' criticism: are these, then, the only alternatives? Is there nothing between the 'realistic' school, with its archæological