CHAPTER III

FORSTER'S CRITICISM: A PLEA FOR IMAGINATION
CHAPTER III

FORSTER'S CRITICISM: A PLEA FOR IMAGINATION

Forster is an artist turned critic. After *A Passage to India* (1924) Forster did not publish any novels. He ceased to be an artist and became a spokesman for art. His criticism, the unity of which can be systematically traced in his essays and reviews, mirrors, like his novels, the central conflict between fact and feeling, between the world of matter and the sphere of feeling. He was exposed to the conflict between the Benthamite and the Coleridgean cultures.\(^1\) Being an implicit Coleridgean himself, Forster, both in his art and criticism, sets upon himself the task of restoring the 'nymphs' who have departed from the modern world, and preserving them amidst the heat of the industrial milieu. He feared man's separation from the "springs of imagination, from the forces providing a culture with its nymphs and symbols."\(^2\) Forster felt the need to join poetry and prose or else, he was convinced that we shall all perish. "Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height." Live in fragments no longer.\(^3\)

Forster found the dialectic of his life and art in the

---

2. Ibid., p. 6.
traditional contention between the Benthamite and the Coleridgean cultures. Essentially it is a contrast between a mechanical and an organic view of life. Forster is a Coleridgean who pleaded for a wholeness of vision by joining poetry and materiality. In the words of Wilfred Stone, "... Forster the critic is as energetic an anti-Benthamite as Forster the artist."  

Forster's critical attitude is not a doctrinaire or dogmatic one. He dislikes systems. According to him criticism discloses rhythms not patterns. It should take us to the heart of the art, not to formal consideration of it. His criticism expresses a vision of artistic and humanistic values. It is a passionate plea of an artist for the values that would give a meaningful humanistic touch to his work. It is a plea for poetry and imagination which would, in the long run, make life meaningful in the world. His love for the personal, the passionate and the poetic provides a unity of vision for his criticism. "Manifestos belong to abroad," Forster declares with a deep distrust for designs and abstractions in literature. He would not approve of any inflexible standards which will sap the vitality of literary art. He is only too ready to abandon any moral standard at

4 Wilfred Stone, op. cit., p. 5.
a pinch. He believes that the moment of inspiration, unclouded by design, is the vital forye behind any work of literature.\(^6\) His approach to literature is personal and it is marked by an impulse to celebrate whatever brings literature alive and to denounce whatever deadens the imagination. He approaches books with the "shy crablike movement" of the mind (Aspects of the Novel). His criticism conveys a sense of the inner life.

Forster's view of art is the view of an eclectic. He draws from many sources. The essence of poetry, according to Forster, is the vision of wholeness, as was propounded by Coleridge. Poetry is a way of responding passionately to experience.\(^7\) It is the most important quality of a literary work of art. In Aspects of the Novel he says what interests him most is "that vague and vast residue into which the subconscious enters", which he calls, "poetry, religion, passion."\(^8\) These three words, Stone says, are the 'holy trinity of a romantic humanist.'\(^9\) The absence or presence of poetry is the criterion of testing literature. Poetry, according to Forster, is the writer's contact with the subsurface mind. It is the vision of the inner life. In an essay entitled "Inspiration" (1912) Forster describes the art of literary creation. He says:

\(^7\) Wilfred Stone, op cit., p. 7.
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Ibid.
writers begin their work calmly. "They write a few sentences very slowly and feel constricted and used up." But soon "a queer catastrophe happens inside them. The mind, as it were, turns turtle, sometimes with rapidity, and a hidden part of it comes to the top and controls the pen." Inner life takes over in the act of literary creation. In literature the flip side of the mind surfaces for a time. According to Forster there are two personalities in the human mind, on one the surface and the other deeper down, and literature should express not only the outward and the rational but the subconscious reality that lies at the centre of the creative personality.

Without the deeper personality, the subconscious, Forster says, "there is no literature, because unless a man dips a bucket down into it occasionally he cannot produce first-class work." So the test for good literature, for Forster, is the writer's ability to unravel the hidden mind. "Perseverance, benevolence, culture and all the other qualities that pose as good writing, are worthless if they are not rooted in the underside of the mind." (Albergo Empedocle, p. 121) Forster's idea of the subsurface mind reflects the idea of the 'unconscious' which was propounded by the works of the depth psychologists, Freud and Jung. These psychologists revolutionised the conception of human personality by their new insights into the human mind.

---

10 Donald Watt, op cit., p. 46.
12 Donald Watt, op cit., p. 46.
Though one cannot ascertain how far these psychologists influenced Forster's conception of human personality, it must be acknowledged that Forster was well aware of their theories of the mind. Charles Lamb and R.L. Stevenson, Forster says, "never let down buckets into their underworld", and always wrote with their surface personalities. So they are not first class writers in his opinion. Aesthetic activity derives from sources of integrity deep in human nature, sources that lie beyond the moral life. Art, according to him, is elemental in its reaches.

Forster was wearied at the intellectual tradition of Europe. Ennui and disgust with the modern world are his strongest feelings. But he believed in being "sensitive to what is going on." Roughly this can be taken as the manifesto of Forster, the critic: "To be sensitive to what is going on." His works after 1924 show a continuing effort to preach a humanistic gospel, to advance the claim of poetry and art, to plead for the role of the "aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate, and the plucky" in an impersonal world of technology and industry. The sensitive and the

13 In "The Art of Fiction" Forster declared: "I couldn't read Freud or Jung myself; it had to be filtered to me." p.40.
14 "Anonymity and enquiry", p. 92.
16 "What I believe", Two Cheers, p. 82.
plucky will find consolation in Art, which for Forster is "humanistic surrogate for God or the Divine Idea." Art, according to Forster, is an idea of wholeness that is greater and other than the sum of its parts. Forster has an organic view of art. He believes in art for art's sake. In his famous essay, "Art for Art's Sake", he defines a work of art as a "self-contained entity, with a life of its own, imposed on it by its creator. It has internal order; it may have external form." For Forster a work of art need not necessarily have an external form. It may have an external form. In another of his essays, "The Challenge of our times" he values art for its function of ordering the society. "Art is valuable not because it is educational (though it may be), not because it is recreative (though it may be), not because everyone enjoys it (for everybody does not), not even because it has to do with beauty. It is valuable because it has to do with order, and creates little worlds of its own, possessing internal harmony, in the bosom of this disordered planet." This is the consolation of art which only the aristocracy of the sensitive can notice and have recourse to. Forster's problem was "how to maintain beauty, space and human dignity in a levelling world, how to

17 Wilfred Stone, op cit., p. 7.
18 Two Cheers for Democracy, op cit., p. 97
19 Ibid., p. 68.
preserve the treasures of the privileged without sinking them in the anonymity of the insatiable mass." Poetry was the only answer. The way of art, however shortlived, was the only way. But Forster is far from believing that it is only art that matters. Nor is he very confident of the effect that art will produce in human hearts. In "A note on the way" he says:

The arts are not drugs. They are not guaranteed to act when taken. Something as mysterious and as capricious as the creative impulse has to be released before they can prop our minds.

Forster resembles Matthew Arnold in his struggle to order the society which was under the threat of disintegration as a result of the civilization of machine. To counter this force, Arnold proposed something that could be taken as an end in itself, and he called it 'culture'. Culture was Arnold's ideal which everyone should strive for. Whereas Art was Forster's absolute. So Forster mirrors Matthew Arnold in his humanistic concern for a benighted society.

Art, according to Forster, is a complement to society. It gives a complete expression to the human spirit. "Society", he says, "can only represent a fragment of the human

---

20 Wilfred Stone, op cit., p. 13.
21 "Art for Art's Sake", p. 103.
22 Abinger Harvest, p. 86.
spirit, and ... another fragment can only get expressed through art.23 So according to Forster, life in the world of facts and information has to be connected with an 'other worldliness', that is art. Only art can transform the world, can "attempt to shape the crude clay of actuality into something divine, to transfigure the world of appearance into 'value'.24 Art, therefore, is the creation of wholes, the harmonizing of contrarities, not the celebration of a lonely vision. It should restate the indwelling spirit in a new form because Christianity is no more a spiritual force.

Fiction and other works of art are attempts at the restatement of the indwelling spirit in a more human form. Religion, thus, for Forster, is humanism.

In fiction, or in any work of literature, what Forster prizes most is the otherness which is to be found in nature and in the depths of human psyche.25 This can be roughly called poetry, for poetry to him, is otherworldliness. His criticism, therefore, is impressionistic because he applies what in his judgement is the presence or absence of 'poetry' without being very definite about what he means by it.26 It is poetry alone which can establish the 'connection with the

23 "Art for Art's Sake", p. 103.
24 Wilfred Stone, p. 19.
25 Ibid., p. 15.
26 Donald Watt, op cit., p. 47.
which is Forster's primary meeting place of responsibility and faith. Forster values poetry because it makes literature out of information, transfigures fact into beauty, links the relative and the absolute, makes whole and sees whole, and has to do with the entire ethical and spiritual life of man. It is a bulwark against the onslaught of Benthamite culture. A work of art must be saturated with poetry and Forster says: "The sort of poetry I seek resides in objects man can't touch - like England's grass network of lanes a hundred years ago." Forster criticizes Sinclair Lewis and H.G. Wells because both of them "share the same indifference to poetry", while he commends Wilfrid Blunt because he is "partly by achievement and wholly by temperament" a poet. Forster considers Sinclair Lewis a photographer and not an artist. He says:

Neither for good nor evil is he lifted above his theme; he is neither a poet nor a preacher, but a fellow with a camera a few yards away.

He considers the works of Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse and The Waves as "successful works" because they are "all suffused with poetry and enclosed in it."

---

27 "Our Second greatest Novel", Two Cheers, p. 229.
29 "The Last of Abinger", Two Cheers, p. 363.
30 Abinger Harvest, p. 150.
31 Ibid., p. 304.
32 "Sinclair Lewis", Abinger Harvest, p. 147.
33 Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 254.
D.H. Lawrence is Forster's example of the novelist who communicates at a level deeper than plot-structure or aesthetic form. In Aspects of the Novel, he calls Lawrence "the only living novelist in whom the song predominates, who has the rapt bardic quality."34 At the centre of Lawrence's work there is "poetry that broods and flashes" (1930 broadcast) sometimes striking into pages and chapters of splendour.35 Forster rates down James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man because of the absence of the poetic sense of life. James Joyce, Forster says, "undermines the universe in too workmanlike a manner, looking round for this tool or that; inspite of all his looseness he is too tight, he is never vague except after due deliberation; it is talk, talk, never song."36 Poetic quality for Forster the critic is the unpredictable, personal, fantastic and even chaotic play of the imagination at large. Poetry is the license granted to imagination to roam freely beyond the confines of hard facts.37 It is the writer's ability and freedom to probe into the virgin territories, into the new zones of man's mind and personality. This sense of contact is what makes a writer great. Sir Sidney Lee, Sinclair Lewis and

35 Wilfred Stone, op. cit., p. 59.
36 Forster, op cit., p. 126.
37 Donald Watt, op. cit., p. 67.
Tagore miss this sense of contact with the deeper, probing imagination on the other side of the mind. "Posturing characters, intrusive didacticism, ill-formed plots — all give way in Forster's critical sensibility if the writer can convey a poetic sense of the life within." Forster is critical of the eighteenth century because it "hated mystery: it mocked a ghouls and goblins ... everything was finite and took place in the clear light of day." Though he regards Fielding as the greatest novelist of the eighteenth century he has his reservations about him. Fielding, Forster wrote in 1899, in an undergraduate essay, "wrote great books — but not the greatest books; he was too easy and comfortable in his wayside parlours and stage coaches to wander out into the unknown country." 'Finished and finite clod, untroubled by a spark' — it seems a harsh judgement on the writer of our most perfect novel, but no one can deny that it is true." Fielding is rated down because he failed to convey more than he says, he lacks the poetic sense of life. Forster attacks Dryden and Pope for ruining the spontaneity of poetry. In a lecture titled "Happy vs. Sad Endings", Forster considers Shelley, Dante and Keats great because they "contradict (not falsify) the

38 Ibid., p. 59.
39 Ibid., p. 49.
40 Ibid.
facts of life." A poet, in Forster's opinion, is to make the impossible seem the inevitable. Poetry is to be personal and passionate and Forster praises Wordsworth on this account; "... what overwhelms me is not what he thought but what he felt." 42

Literature is not an affair of rules. Forster calls it "the most exceptional and untidy affair" that "has ever entered the heart of man to create." 43 It is a man to man business in which it is the heart that dominates. So Forster is more interested in that form of literature in which human elements have a great role to play. According to him the novel is sogged with humanity. 44 Forster's thoughts about the novel spring from his notion of literature as a spontaneous activity. In Aspects of the Novel he expresses his views on the novel very comprehensively. But one can notice the caution with which Forster approaches the subject. He thinks that the novel should be personal. It is difficult to criticise because in essence it is absolutely free from rules. Forster calls it one of the moister areas of literature. 45 Absolute norms and standards do not hold good in the case of the novel. It is a "literary form so wide in its range that generalizations about

41 Ibid., p. 47.
42 Ibid., p. 49.
43 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
44 Aspects of the Novel, p. 39.
it are almost impossible." One cannot pin down the novel to any particular job or any particular rule. Forster says: "The novel in my view has not any rules, and so there is no such thing as the art of fiction. There's only the particular art that each novelist employs in the execution of his particular book."  

The novel has a personal bias. It probes the depth of human beings. It should reveal the inner life of the characters. According to Forster communication of inner vitality is the essence of the novel. This is the fundamental value behind Forster's criticism. The novelist is to create from the depths of his being. He should follow his thoughts and passions to their furthest reaches, suffuse his creations with the impress of his attitudes and mind, and he should pass the creative finger down into every sentence and every word. So according to Forster, in the novel it is not fact but the novelist's sense of the fact that dominates. The artist should aim at truth and he succeeds if he raises the emotions. In his mind a fusion of fact and fiction takes place because of the "junction of mind with the heart where the creative impulse sparks." So Forster says: "The artist is at as passionate a

---

46 The Art of Fiction, Aspects, p. 183.
47 Ibid.
49 Aspects, p. 174.
heat when he composes as when he is in love."\(^{51}\)

For a novelist, in Forster's opinion, heightened sensibility and a sense of the inner vitality are more essential to the making of a novel than the traditional stock-in-trade. Form should never restrain the vitality and the movement of the sensibility. He is totally in sympathy with the new aesthetic experiment of Virginia Woolf and says: "A heightened sensibility thus permits Virginia Woolf to go easily and safely beyond the 'norm' of current aesthetic practice."\(^{52}\) Forster admires Chekhov for his abundant vitality. Life flows on in his work, "noble, imaginative, profound, yet different only in arrangement from the life that we know."\(^{53}\) Same is the reason for Forster's admiration of Proust:

"Proust, though introspective, and unhappy, was full of vitality; he could not have written a million word if he was not . . . . . \(^{54}\)

Forster loathed the strict adherence to the traditional norms for their own sake. So does he despise innovation for its own sake. "Form is not tradition", he says in "Art for Art's Sake", "It alters from generation to generation."

\(^{51}\) Aspects of the Novel, p. 72, 54.

\(^{52}\) Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 250.


\(^{54}\) "Proust", Abinger Harvest, p. III.
Artists always seek new techniques and will continue to do so as long as their work excites them. But form of some kind is imperative. It is the surface crust of internal harmony, it is the outward evidence of order." Forster believes that the technique in English fiction alters from generation to generation. According to him "History develops, Art stands still." Art is a like a mirror in front of which the pageant of History passes. So historical changes do not necessarily influence art. The belief that feminist movement improved the position of the novel is wrong according to Forster. He says: "A mirror does not develop because a historical pageant passes in front of it. It only develops when it gets a fresh coat of quick-silver - in other words when it acquires new sensitiveness; and the novel's success lies in its own sensitiveness, not in the success of its subject matter." For Forster, the novel does not rise and fall with any public causes or social problem. Its value is artistic and not political or social. According to him, a work of art" stands up by itself, and nothing else does .... It is the one orderly product which our muddling race has produced. It is the cry of a thousand sentinels, the echo from a thousand laboratories; it is the lighthouse which cannot be hidden. The novel, in his view, is bounded by

55 Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 102.
56 Aspects of the Novel, p. 36.
57 Ibid., p. 36.
58 Art for Art's Sake" pp. 99-100.
Poetry, History, and a sea. "All we can say of it (Novel) is that it is bounded by two chains of mountains neither of which rises very abruptly - the opposing ranges of Poetry and of History - and bounded on the third side by a sea - ..." \(^{59}\)

In *Aspects of the Novel* Forster asks the question: 'What does a novel do?' He makes three types of people reply to this question. The first type answers in a good-tempered and vague manner that a novel tells a story. The second type gives the same answer but briskly and aggressively. The third type too gives the same answer but in a sort of drooping regretful voice. Forster prefers the third type and dreads and detects the other two types. \(^{60}\) Story is an important aspect of fiction but not the whole of it. The novel does not do enough if it has only told you a story. Forster's thesis is that "the basis of a novel is a story, and a story is a narrative of events arranged in time-sequence." \(^{61}\) This aspect of story appeals only to our primeval curiosity and, in Forster's opinion, if we want nothing else but the story, our literary judgements are ludicrous. Story is the lowest literary organism! But it is common to all literary types known as novels! It is universal and forms the backbone of the novel. Since story is essential in a novel and story is controlled by time sequence,

---

59 *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 25.
60 Ibid., p. 40.
61 Ibid., p. 44.
Forster stresses the role of time sense in the novel, "in a novel there is always a clock." Different authors have tried to hide this clock but it is there nevertheless. Emily Bronte, Sterne and Proust have tried to make this clock not too prominent in their novels. But Gertrude Stein went too far and "has smashed up and pulverized her clock and scattered its fragments over the world ...." She tried to free the novel from the tyranny of time and express in it only the life by value. She fails because fiction divested of time cannot express anything. The element of time is essential to fiction and Forster asserts: "The time-sequence cannot be destroyed without carrying in its ruin all that should have taken its place; the novel that would express values only becomes unintelligible and therefore valueless." Forster is aware of the presence in fiction of an organism which is higher than 'story' and he calls it 'plot'. If a novel is entirely based on time-sequence, or on a story, it cannot lead to any other conclusion but to the grave. It is an unsatisfactory conclusion and a great book should have something more to give us than this natural sequence of time that leads us to old age and ultimately to the grave. For this reason Forster says that Arnold Bennett's The Old Wives' Tale though strong,

---

62 Ibid., p. 43.
63 Ibid., p. 52.
64 Ibid., p. 53.
sincere, sad, falls short of greatness. In contrast Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a great book "because it has extended over space as well as over time, and the sense of space until it terrifies us is exhilarating, and leaves behind it an effect like music." The 'great chords' which one hears in the novel do not arise from the story, nor from the characters, nor from the plots, but from "the immense area of Russia." "Space is the lord of *War and Peace*, not time." Scott's *Antiquary*, on the other hand, is a celebration of life in time only and leads to "slackening of emotion and shallowness of judgement, and in particular to that idiotic use of marriage as a finale." 

Forster is convinced that the novel should portray convincing characters. "The novelist, unlike many of his colleagues, makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself .... gives them name and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps to behave consistently. These word-masses are his characters." But these characters will not be exactly like people in real life, if so the novel becomes

---

65 Ibid., p. 50.
66 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
67 Ibid., p. 51.
68 Ibid., p. 50.
69 Ibid., pp. 54-55.
memoir which is based on evidence. But the novel is "based on evidence + or - X, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist; and the unknown quantity always modifies the effect of the evidence, and sometimes transforms it entirely." In presenting a character, the novelist is not merely to speak about the actions and the other observable forms of his existence. What is more important for the novelist is "to reveal the hidden life at its source", to tell us more about a person than could be known and thus produce a character who is different from those we know in real life. The novelist is to express the "romanceful or romantic side" which includes "the pure passions, that is to say, the dreams, joys, sorrows and self-communings ...", and to express this side of human nature is one of the chief functions of the novel. Character in a novel, 'Homo Fictus', is more elusive than his cousin in real life, 'Homo Sapiens'. We can know more about him than we can know about our fellow creatures, because the narrator and creator are one. A character in a book, to Forster, "is real when the novelist knows everything about it." Forster praises Virginia Woolf for her experiment with the new form of sensibility to reveal the inner life of her characters. In an essay, "The early novels of Virginia

---

70 Ibid., p. 55.
71 Ibid., p. 56.
72 Ibid., p. 63.
73 Ibid., p. 69.
Woolf he says: "It is easy for a novelist to describe what a character thinks of; look at Mrs. Humphrey Ward. But to convey the actual process of thinking is creative feat, and I know of no one except Virginia Woolf who has accomplished it." He is all praise for his Bloomsbury colleague because like him she believed that human beings are the permanent material of fiction, and knew that "to capture their inner life presents a different problem to each generation of novelists." So her innovation in method and form can be justified but Forster observes that Woolf could give "life on the page" and not "life eternal." She could not create convincing characters who live. Her characters "do live, but not continuously, whereas the characters of Tolstoy (let us say) live continuously." Her problem, which would inaugurate a new literature if solved, "is to retain her own wonderful new method and form, and yet allow her readers to inhabit each character with Victorian thoroughness." In Forster's opinion, Woolf lacks this Victorian thoroughness, and she comes close to aestheticism. But he has a sympathetic applause for her because she liked writing for fun. "Literature was her merry-go-round as well as her study. This makes her amusing to read, and it also

---

74 Abinger Harvest, p. 126.
75 Ibid., p. 127.
76 Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 250.
77 Abinger Harvest, p. 127.
78 Ibid.
Forster shares a sense of situation with Woolf. In an interview with Angus Wilson he asks: "Aren't we both working in the same tradition?" ... As to interior monologue, perhaps it would have been a help. But conscience probably ... (sic) it's surely a bit of a cheat." Forster is suspicious of technical innovations which characterize many avantgarde novels of his time. It can be argued that Forster had more trust in the traditional method and style in their power to reveal the hidden life of the characters in the novel. Donald Watt's conclusion of Forster's views is at one with this argument. He says:

> It is likely that in Forster's opinion the continuous narrative style of Tolstoy and the victorians brings the reader closer to the secret life than the disconcerting streams and monologues of his contemporaries.\(^7\)

Forster classifies character into round and flat. Flat characters are "constructed round a single idea or quality."\(^8\) Round characters have more than one factor in them. A flat character can be summed up in a sentence or phrase. This classification of character springs from Forster's belief that no human being is simple and "a novel

---

\(^7\) Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 245.
that is at all complex requires flat people as well as round..." Forster observes that Charles Dickens's characters are nearly all flat but the "wonderful feeling of human depth", his "immense vitality" animate and vibrate his characters "so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own." It is a trick which Forster sees through but admits that Dickens is "actually one of our big writers." Similarly, H.G. Wells's characters are nearly as flat as a photograph but are agitated with such vigour and vitality that the reader forgets the superficiality of their complexities. Wells does not create types, his people cannot be summed up but they "seldom pulsate by their own strength. It is the deft and powerful hands of their maker that shake them and trick the reader into a sense of depth." But these "imperfect novelists" who can only transmit force and galvanize their work are quite different from the "perfect novelist", who seems to pass the creative finger down every sentence and into every word." Forster lists Richardson, Defoe, and Jane Austen as perfect novelists. Jane Austen, though a miniaturist, is never two-dimensional." "All her characters are round or capable of rotundity." Her characters show a freshness and give us a new kind of pleasure

83 Ibid., p. 75.
84 Ibid., p. 76.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., p. 77.
87 Ibid., p. 78.
each time they appear. This is because "she was a real artist, who never stooped to caricature, etc.," and her characters "are more highly organized." They are "ready for an extended life, for a life which the scheme of her books seldom require them to lead, and that is why they lead their actual life so satisfactorily." Her characters function all round. Forster admires Jane Austen because she writes with the web of family relationship in her mind. He says: "the supreme thing in life to her was the family." Family was the unit within which she exercised her liberty of choice, and similarly her characters flit and tap as much as they like but within the frame she provides for them. "The accidents of birth and relationship were more sacred to her than anything else in the world, 'and she introduced this faith as the groundwork of her six great novels." Though quite 'imbecile' about Jane Austen, Forster observes that she is a failure as a letter-writer. "She has not enough subject matter to exercise her powers .... She takes no account of politics or religion ..." Lack of direction was the defect with her letters. She did not have the sense of form and no literature can sustain itself without a form. Poverty of material, in this case, is a flaw.

88 Ibid., p. 79.
89 Abinger Harvest, p. 179.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
but in the case of her novels, which have a definite framework, it was an asset.

According to Forster, the novelist's relationship with the characters is important. The novel exists to depict human beings and the novelist is to reconcile human beings with non-human forces. He should establish a close affinity with his creations. He will sacrifice much to them and in turn he commands their secret lives and knows them. Jane Austen allows them to flit and tap as much as they liked within the framework she provides for them. Shakespeare's characters have consistency and they act on the law of probability. Tolstoy, on the other hand, makes his characters convincing by their inconsistency and by the violation of probability in the interest of simplicity.  

Marcel Proust proves that people become most real in fiction when they contradict themselves, while Virginia Woolf tried to reconcile her experimental methods with the actuality of her people. Dickens "bounces" us into accepting what he says of his characters, while "Dostoevsky's characters ask us to share something deeper than their experiences." Infinity attends the characters of Dostoevsky and "they expand to embrace it and summon it to embrace them.... Every sentence he writes

\[92\] Two Cheers for Democracy, pp. 212, 215.  
\[93\] Ibid., p. 230.  
\[94\] Aspects of the Novel, p. 123.
Forster finds it difficult to praise Henry James because he lays too great emphasis on pattern at the cost of human character. The result is tragic: "most of human life has to disappear before he can do us a novel." Henry James has only "a very short list of characters", who are "constructed on very stingy lines", and are "incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality and of nine-tenths of heroism." This "drastic curtailment ... of human beings and of their attributes" in the interests of a method makes his novels a place where only 'maimed creatures' can breathe. Forster's criticism of James's characters reaches its climax when he says, "... they are gutted of the common stuff that fills characters in other books, and ourselves."96 Forster does not approve of this heavy price which James pays in order to gain a particular aesthetic effect and agrees with H.G. Wells who "would go on to say that life should be given the preference, and must not be whittled or distended for a pattern's sake."97 Forster is vehement in his criticism of

95 Aspects of the Novel, p. 122.
96 Ibid., pp. 142-143.
97 Ibid., p. 145.
James Joyce, who, according to him, grossly misrepresented the secret life and gave a falsified and degraded picture of it. *Ulysses* portrays "all his subconscious wishes and unrealized dreams, all the mud of his mind." Forster does not approve of Joyce's condemnation of the human race and finds him to be vindictive, soured, obscure and uncompromising. He calls *Ulysses* "a dogged attempt to cover the universe with mud, an inverted victorianism, an attempt to make crossness and dirt succeed where sweetness and light failed, a simplification of human character in the interest of Hell." Joyce curtails his characters, not only in the interest of aestheticism but also in the interests of an unrelieved and unjustifiable pessimism. In an article entitled "The book of the Age"; James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Forster says:

> Of our failures and false teeth (yours and mine), he has given an excellent account, but he is too irritable and peevish to notice that we sometimes have teeth of our own. That indeed is the central mystery of human nature in this year of doubt, 1926: it is well equipped and successful, and a book that would fully express our age must take into account occasional beauty, strength and nobility. *Ulysses* shirks this problem.

Joyce thus failed to unleash the "central mystery of human nature", the underside of the creative mind, and provide little

---

98 Ibid., p. 113.

nourishment for the reader's humanity. Forster praises D.H. Lawrence because he communicates at a level deeper than plot-structure or aesthetic form. The 'novelist's touch' falsifies life and Lawrence's characters, though not alive, are filled with the living stuff. What is valuable in D.H. Lawrence is "colour, gesture and outline in people and things, the usual stock-in-trade of the novelist, but evolved by such a different process that they belong to a new world." Thus Forster finds some excuse for the flatness of Lawrence's characters.

Forster's criticism advocates spontaneity, eschews formulas, favours the personal touch and stands for poetry and imagination. I.A. Richards writing on Forster says:

Mr. Forster never formulates his criticism of life in one of those principles which we can adhere to or discuss. He leaves it in the painful, concrete realm of practice, presenting it always and only in terms of actuality, and never in the abstract. In other words, he has no doctrine but only an attitude ....

Canons and dogmas are things loathsome to Forster the critic. Criticism for him is a man to man business in which it is the heart that presides. The artist, according to him, is to

100 Aspects of the Novel, p. 131.
speak directly from his heart and the test of his worth lies in his ability to communicate at a deeper level, in his ability to portray the inner self which is the fountain spring of poetry, passion and personality. For Forster, therefore, "the artist is not a bricklayer at all, but a horseman, whose business it is to catch Pegasus at once, not to practice for him by mounting tamer colts." Coherency of method and consistency of form are irrelevant to Forster if an artist can catch 'Pegasus', that is, if he can capture the hidden life in his work. In this task the writer is always under a compulsion to 'reach back' to some elemental reality. Forster calls this compulsion, 'Prophecy.' In Dostoyevsky's case it reaches back to pity and love. In Melville's Moby Dick it is the "prophetic song" which "flows athwart the action and the surface morality like an undercurrent", and a 'contest', that forms its essential. In D.H. Lawrence the element of prophecy appears as something that "cannot be put into words" which transforms the usual fictional material into something extraordinary. Forster considers Emily Bronte as a prophetess and Wuthering Heights as prophetic fiction. It is

---

103 Aspects of the Novel, p. 125.
104 Ibid., p. 126.
105 Ibid., p. 131.
true that the book is symmetrically arranged and logically conceived. But she has introduced "muddle, chaos, tempest" in the book and the reason is, Forster says: "Because in our sense of the word she was a prophetess; because what is implied is more important to her than what is said; and only in confusion the figures of Heathcliff and Catherine externalize their passion till it streamed through the house and over the moors." 106 These were not 'bricklayers', but they were 'horsemen' who could catch 'Pegasus' at once, and so Forster finds it justifiable to excuse the "roughness of surface" 107 which is found in the works of these writers. In contrast to them James Joyce is a bricklayer and lets technique and pattern get in the way of his effort to unleash the underside of the creative mind. 108

Forster's criticism is not a systematic survey in the interests of a method and form. He does not lay down strict terms which a work of art has to fulfil in order to be called a great work of art. In this he differs as a critic from Percy Lubbock. For Lubbock the test of a novel lies in the 'point of view' from which the novelist describes the characters. Forster quotes him in Aspects of the Novel and finds it difficult to agree with him.

106 Ibid., p. 132.
107 Ibid., p. 124.
108 Ibid., pp. 125-126.
The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction (says Mrs. Percy Lubbock), I take to be governed by the question of the point of view - the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story. ¹⁰⁹

Forster does not accept this view which makes the aesthetic of fiction formulaic. This is doctrinaire criticism which places point of view in the centre. But for Forster the main focus is not the point of view; "... for me the whole intricate question of method resolves itself not into the formulae but into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into believing what he says ...".¹¹⁰ Forster puts this power right at the centre of the problem of the aesthetics of fiction. In this he is perfectly at one with Virginia Woolf who says:

> Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist's intention if we are readers.¹¹¹

According to Forster, the power to convince the reader rather than a consistent point-of-view is the factor which determines the method of fiction. So a novelist's main intention is not to project a method but to surprise the reader in a convincing manner. "The novelist who betrays too much interest in his own method can never be more than interesting; he has given up

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 81.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 81-82.
The creation of character and summoned us to help analyse his own mind, and a heavy drop in the emotional thermometre results. The worth of the novel is to be tested by this 'emotional thermometre' and not by the author's view-point. The greatness of Tolstoy's War and Peace lies in its power to bounce us up and down Russia, in keeping the emotional thermometre high. Lubbock would have found it greater if it had a view-point. But Forster approves of the shifting view point in Tolstoy because it "comes off" and it is a symptom of the "power to expand and contract perception" which is "one of the greatest advantages of the novel-form, and it has a parallel in our perception of life." So for Forster the form of the novel must be organic and not methodical. For the sake of sustained effect in fiction method has to be put aside for something more vital: imagination. Unified effect in Fiction is often the result of inspiration, - not method, - uniformly sustained throughout the whole course of an imaginative effort. This is what keeps the emotional temperature high in fiction. So a novelist should not "take the reader into confidence about his characters." The result is fatal to the aesthetic effect of the novel. "Intimacy is gained", Forster says, "but at the expense of illusion and nobility." This is

112 Aspects of the Novel, p. 83.
113 Ibid.
114 Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 95.
115 Aspects of the Novel, p. 84.
116 Ibid.
the reason why he finds it difficult to admire Andre Gide's novel Les Faux - Mannayeurs. It is all of a piece logically but, according to Forster, it is not among the vital works.

Forster's view of fiction is iconoclastic so far as the traditional conception of plot is concerned. "As for a plot - to pot with the plot! Break it up, boil it down .... All that is prearranged is false." Most novels are weak because there is a battle in them between plot and character and at the end plot takes a cowardly revenge by winding up the novel. "This is because the plot requires to be wound up."

And Forster asks: "Why is this necessary? Why is there not a convention which allows a novelist to stop as soon as he feels bored? Alas, he has to round things off, and usually the character go dead while he is at work, and our final impression of them is through deadness." This is vehement criticism of the traditional aesthetic of fiction which lays great stress on plot-construction. Forster loathes this idea because in traditional plot "logic takes over the command from flesh and blood", and his sympathies both as a novelist and as a critic are definitely on the side of the flesh and blood. The novel is a humanistic document and "human beings have their great chance

117 Ibid., p. 99.
118 Ibid., p. 94.
119 Ibid.
in the novel. But humanity is stifled by the contrived plot as Forster observes in the case of Meredith, the past master in the art of plot construction. In Forster's view, Meredith could not perceive and communicate what is really tragic in life; his vision of nature was not enduring like Hardy's. So he had to fake things up.

And his novels: most of the social values are faked. The tailors are not tailors, the cricket matches are not cricket, the railway trains do not even seem to be trains, the county families give the air of having been only just that moment unpacked, scarcely in position before the action starts the straw still clinging to their beards.121

In spite of their logicality Meredith's plots are chilly fakes and he now lies in the trough. Speaking further about Meredith's plot Forster says:

A Meredithian plot is not a temple to the tragic or even to the comic Muse, but rather resembles a series of kiosks most artfully placed among wooded slopes, which his people reach by their own impetus, and from which they emerge with altered aspect.122

In Meredith's novel, Beauchamp's Career, Forster observes, "an attempt to elevate the plot to Aristotelian symmetry, to turn the novel into a temple wherein dwells interpretation and peace."123 It was a failure because the book is a series of

120 Ibid., p. 149.
121 Ibid., p. 90.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid., p. 91.
contrivances that spring from the characters and react upon them. What one hears is only "hammering and screwing", \textsuperscript{124} to construct a well-ordered plot. In Hardy too the plot triumphs over character but Forster admires him because he is "essentially a poet, who conceives of his novels from an enormous height." \textsuperscript{125} Hardy arranges events with emphasis on casualty and the characters are required to acquiesce in the requirements of the plot. There is ceaseless emphasis on fate. "The fate above us, not the fate working through us - that is what is eminent and memorable in Wessex novels." \textsuperscript{126} But what makes Hardy admirable is that the machine that works in his novels "never catches humanity in its teeth." It is true that the characters are drained of their vitality; they are required to contribute much to the plot. Hardy's flaw lies in the fact that "he has emphasized causality more strongly than his medium permits." \textsuperscript{127} But he is great because there is an element of mystery in his novels. In spite of the cause and effect chain which connects the characters to the plot "there is some vital problem that has not been answered or even posed." \textsuperscript{128} Meredith was a great plot maker and he knew where it could stand, but Forster prefers Hardy to him; "... the works of Thomas Hardy is my home and that of Meredith cannot be." \textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{124}Ibid., p. 94.  
\textsuperscript{125}Ibid., p. 92.  
\textsuperscript{126}Ibid., p. 93.  
\textsuperscript{127}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{128}Ibid., p. 93.  
\textsuperscript{129}Ibid.
Plot is the intellectual logical aspect of the novel and it requires an element of mystery. According to Aristotle it was the sole medium for all human happiness and misery to express itself. But Forster holds the opposite view. He finds this framework inadequate to express the fullness of life and character. He says:

In the novel, all human happiness and misery does not take the form of action, it seeks means of expression other than through the plot, it must not be rigidly canalized.¹³⁰

In this rejection of the traditional plot Forster is joined by Virginia Woolf, who experimented with means other than plot to express human happiness and misery, to capture the 'luminous halo.' Woolf completely discarded plot in her later novels whereas Forster pleads for a change in perspective. He is only skeptical about the plot and its centrality in the novel.

After all, why has a novel to be planned? Why need it close, as a play closes? Cannot it open out? Instead of standing above his work and controlling it, cannot the novelist throw himself into it and be carried along to some goal that he does not foresee?¹³¹

For Forster the novel is not to be a well ordered, logical framework with a beginning, a middle and an end. If it is only that, it will fall short of its aim. It must grow and open out.

¹³⁰ Ibid.
¹³¹ Ibid., p. 95.
It is not a thing to be finished and done. It must be capable of growing further in the mind of the reader. Its rhythms should produce as their effect something in the readers' mind, something that is not and cannot be in the pages. Forster asks in this regard:

Is there any effect in novels comparable to the effect of the Fifth Symphony as a whole, where, when the orchestra stops, we hear something which has never actually been played? 132

Forster is hopeful that fiction might achieve the final expression of this type of beauty which music offers. For this the novelist should not close himself in the plot. Forster suggests:

Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion, Not rounding off but opening out. 133

This can be taken as a credal statement of Forster's aesthetic of fiction. The notion of a general and harmonious expansion is at the very heart of Forster's critical view of fiction, and it reflects Matthew Arnold's notion of culture as an aesthetic goal. According to Arnold culture implies an harmonious expansion towards the perfect state. In "Sweetness and Light" he says:

132 Ibid., p. 149.
133 Ibid., p. 149.
Culture, then is a study of perfection, and of harmonious perfection, general perfection, and perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances .... The idea of perfection as an inward condition of the mind and spirit is at variance with the mechanical and material civilization in esteem with us, and nowhere, as I have said so much in esteem with us. The idea of perfection as a general expansion of the human family is at variance with our strong individualism, our hatred of all limits to the unrestrained swing of the individual's personality, our maxim of "every man for himself." Above all, the idea of perfection as a harmonious expansion of human nature is at variance with our want of flexibility, with our ineptitude for seeing more than one side of a thing, with our intense energetic absorption in the particular pursuit we happen to be following.  

One can notice the indebtedness of Forster to Arnold for this notion of expansion as a guiding principle for the novelists as against the notion of completion which forces a novelist to wind up his plot and so finish his novel. According to Forster, fiction can achieve the type of beauty offered by music. In War and Peace he finds such type of beauty. Its chords sound behind us as we read it and when we finished every item in it acquires an unexpected expansion.  

Forster is an impressionistic critic. He has no tough standards or touchstones to measure the greatness of literary
He does not believe in theorising about literature. A work of literature, according to him, is valuable not because of its socio-political relevance, not because of its moral suggestiveness, not because of the sequentiality of incidents and logicality of plot, but because it communicates at a deeper level to the individual human heart. So a novel cannot be approached with any elaborate critical apparatus. There is only one approach to literature, that is, the personal because Forster says, "There is only one note in literature—the personal." Principles and systems cannot be applicable in the case of the novel. Forster's approach to the novel is a Shannonly one, and according to him, in the business of novel criticism the main examiner is the "human heart" and it will be a man-to-man business. This shows the impressionistic bent of Forster's criticism. According to him, "the final test of a novel will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends, and of anything else which we cannot define." Forster one's affection for the writer is also the test of his works. Forster takes interest in William Arnold because he is Mathew Arnold's brother. Commenting on Oakfield, Forster says, "... it has the Arnold integrity. It is the work of a man whose brother was a genius, and who was akin to that brother morally."

136 "Artist as Horseman...", p. 47.
137 Aspects of the Novel, p. 38.
138 Ibid.
139 "William Arnold", Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 204.
He criticises Virginia Woolf's works but they get a final applause from him because of his personal sympathies for Virginia Woolf. Jane Austen, Lawrence and Hardy are all forgiven for their flaws because of Forster's affection for these writers.

Criticism, for Forster, is an informal affair in which he speaks about what the novel should be like and how others have written novels. There is no pleading for the cause of some new aesthetic of fiction. It is the criticism of a practising artist. Hence it is informal, personal, artistic and impressionistic. Forster is a traditionalist who cannot totally approve of the modern assault upon the fabric of the novel. He sympathises with the modern search within. He believes that character remains constant for the novelist, and considers the novel as a traditional form of art. So the role of the novelist remains unchanged. In contrast to this is Woolf's historical conception of art and reality. According to Woolf, character changed and so the role of the novelist also changed. While Forster says: "History develops; Art stands still." Both these novelist-critics saw the same problem but found different solutions. Mark Goldman gives a satisfactory assessment of both as critics.

140 See note. 56 above.
As a novelist of ideas, Forster's balancing, the 'proper mixture of character', as he says in *Aspects of the Novel*, is essential to the complexity of attitudes which is the subject and form of his novel. He works inevitably from the outside in. Mrs. Woolf's balancing is aesthetic, even when, as in *The Waves*, it is a rigid pattern; her points of view are discovered from the inside and 'radiate' from a subjective centre. And though Forster's intention carries any intense poetry with it, he is really opposed to Mrs. Woolf's poetic novel. He is too conscious of the human comedy, too much the novelist of ideas, too involved however skeptically, in the liberal tradition, to commit himself to the novel of sensibility which is her major achievement.

He was not an aesthete as Woolf nearly was. He believed in art but not at the expense of life as it is. His engaged humanism took him away from aesthetic considerations. His approach to fiction as a critic is best expressed by Virginia Woolf in a review of *Aspects of the Novel* entitled "The Art of fiction" in which she presents fiction as a lady in trouble and the critics as gallants who come to her rescue. Sir Walter Raleigh and Mr. Percy Lubbock came to her ceremoniously. They had a great knowledge of her, but not much intimacy with her. Forster comes to her without any ceremony, "disclaims knowledge but cannot deny that he knows the lady well." And Woolf goes on

If he lacks something of the others' authority, he enjoys the privilege which are allowed the lover. He knocks at the bedroom door and is admitted when

141 Mark Goldman, pp. 58-59.
the lady is in slippers and dressing gown. Drawing up their chairs to the fire they talk easily, wittily, subtly, like old friends who have no illusions, although in fact the bedroom is a lecture-room and the place the highly austere city of Cambridge. 142

Unpretentious and unceremonious, untroubled by any absolute dogmatic positions, Forster the critic approaches literature with an ardent desire to search for the poetic, the passionate and the personal. And his novels are an attempt to convey the poetic, the passionate side of human character, to unravel the underside of the mind from which springs everything that is valuable in life and in art.

142 Collected Essays II, p. 51.