

E. M. Forster and the English Ways of Ex(Sup)pressing Emotions

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Abstract: E. M. Forster's interest in emotions as well as in ways of expressing and suppressing them was an important theme of his essays. "Notes on the English Character", in which he presents the idea of "the undeveloped heart", are probably the best known of them. Forster finds "the undeveloped heart" characteristic of the British, especially men of the upper classes, educated in public schools.

The issue plays an equally important role in Forster's fictional works. The ways and means of ex(sup)pressing emotions are often used in his novels and short stories as a useful element of characterisation and tool in development of the plot. They become especially valuable devices in those texts in which representatives of different cultures come into contact or oppose each other (e.g. the English and the Italians in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, or the English and the Indians in *A Passage to India*), often, though not always, resulting in the conflict of unreasonable emotion vs. emotionless reason.

The essay attempts to reconstruct Forster's understanding of emotions (concentrating on their forms and expression in Great Britain opposed by those of Italy and India) as based on the essay and present the ways the novelist uses ex(sup)pressing emotions in the structure of his works (discussed on selected excerpts).

Keywords: Britishness, English, character, expression, suppression, emotions

Edward Morgan Forster's views on emotions and especially the ways the English handle them can be reconstructed from his essay "Notes on the English Character", first published by the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1926 and then reprinted in the collection *Abinger Harvest* in 1936. It is fairly obvious that Forster saw literature as an important element in his vision of emotions – he repeatedly claims that the English literature is proof that the English cannot be devoid of emotions of which they are so often accused by foreigners (Forster 1996, 7). However, it is hardly as certain whether he intended the essay to be used as a skeleton key in reading his own works of fiction, which is what I intend to do. The present essay aims at reconstructing Forster's understanding of English emotions and presenting on a limited number of selected examples (for the sake of brevity, it is not our aim here to present a complete list of all such instances) how the writer applied his concepts in his own novels, play, or short stories.

In his essay, Forster sees public schools as responsible for the way the English handle their emotions. He makes it clear that his remarks do not apply to other British nations such as the Scots and the Irish, in which societies public schools do not play the same role. The idea seems somewhat exaggerated and probably tells us more about Forster's personal childhood experiences than about the English national character as such. In his opinion public schoolboys "go forth into [the world] with well-developed bodies, fairly developed minds, and undeveloped hearts" (1996, 5). It is the "undeveloped heart – not a cold one" that is responsible for the difficulties English face in the sphere of emotions. Forster expands this statement as follows in a passage which was ultimately not included in the published version of the essay:

The English character ... is not cold. Partly from education, partly from shyness, partly from a belief that emotion is most honoured if reserved for an appropriate occasion, the English character often suppresses it. But it possesses it: criticise its method if you like. Call it undeveloped. But don't call it cold (1996, 406).

Consequently, an Englishman can feel but he is afraid to feel, "he must bottle up his emotions or let them out only on a very special occasion" (1996, 5) and he often chooses not to react rather than to risk reacting in an inappropriate way because, generally speaking, "feeling is bad form" (1996, 5).

The ideal approach consists thus of suppressing rather than expressing emotions.

It is an ideal, however, which is often misunderstood by foreigners whose attitude towards emotions is significantly different. Forster moves on in his essay to criticise this English attitude quoting an anecdote involving an unnamed Indian friend; one might guess that he refers here to Syed Ross Masood. The "friend" compares the English attitude to that of the people of the South, who do not "measure out their emotions as if they were potatoes" (1996, 6 - it is supposed to be a quotation from the aforementioned "Indian friend"), an attitude which Forster in turn compares to "slopping emotions about like water from a pail" (1996, 6). The difference is, as Forster concludes, in the use of emotions resulting from the difference in attitudes. In his opinion the English see their emotions as a finite resource, which is hardly comprehensible for the Southerners, and he ultimately finds this English attitude wrong, agreeing that emotions may be endless and the English may "express them copiously, passionately, and always" (1996, 7).

Further remarks concern English emotional "slowness". Once more Forster uses an anecdote proving that "the Englishman appears to be cold and unemotional because he is really slow" (1996, 7) in reacting and/or expressing his emotions. The story refers to a coach the passengers of which were French and English. In a moment of a nearly missed accident the French reacted immediately and vigorously while the English sat calmly. Yet when the coach reached an inn an hour later and the Frenchmen had already forgotten about the incident, one of the Englishmen had a nervous breakdown. Forster's conclusion is as follows: "when a disaster comes, the English instinct is to do what can be done first, and to postpone the feeling as long as possible" (1996, 7). Yet again it is a complete suppression of emotions that is the expected ideal behaviour and Forster seems quite taken in by this ideal, as it is usually more efficient. As a result, however, in an average Englishman "there is plenty of emotion further down, but it never gets used" (1996, 14).

Ultimately, the suppressing of emotions results in what Forster attempts to define as "unconscious deceit", "muddle-headedness", or "self-inflicted muddle". In order to clarify the concept Forster uses an example from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, in the second chapter of which Mrs John Dashwood convinces her husband that he should not give his step-mother and step-sisters any money even though he promised their father to support them (Austen 1994, 5-11). The Dashwoods are not villains, there is nothing

dramatic or violent about their sin, and yet they do wrong in the end even though it takes them much time to do it and they fail to notice when they collapse morally (1996, 12-13).

The “self-inflicted muddle” is, consequently, the ability to confuse one’s own mind so completely as to behave in a mindless, irrational, or even immoral and harmful way, apparently without any awareness of the fact. The “muddle” very often begins with a rational or even noble intention which is gradually thwarted and altered in such a way as to end up as a parody or even the opposite of the original intention while the process is, in the mind of the muddled person, fully rational and even noble. In the example taken from Austen’s novel Mrs John Dashwood is absolutely convinced that her husband’s relatives do not actually need any financial support while it is her duty as a mother to protect the family possessions for the sake of her children.

It is quite telling that speaking about both the English “undevelopment of the heart” and “emotional slowness” Forster uses foreigners (respectively the Indians and the French) as a mirror in which the English must be reflected in order to see and understand themselves. As a matter of fact, Forster does not see much of a chance of improvement that could possibly result from such an introspection, a point which he expands in a comment on the English attitude towards criticism. An Englishman never considers that “he is capable of improvement; his self-complacency is abysmal” (1996, 9). The “tolerant humorous attitude” with which an Englishman confronts his (usually foreign) critics “is not really tolerant, because it is insensitive, and not really humorous, because it is bounded by the titter and the guffaw” (1996, 9). Forster ends his essay on an optimistic note, claiming that “in the next twenty years we shall see a great change and that national character will alter into something that is less unique but more lovable” (1996, 15). The conclusion, however, does not sound very convincing and Forster seems to soften his own criticism, calling his remarks “notes on the English character as it has struck a novelist” (1996, 15).

I realise that I may be accused of reading more in Forster’s essay than what is actually there. I must also admit that the published version of the text does not support my further concepts in an obvious and clear manner. The published version, however, is not the only one in existence. The essay,

although dated 1920 in the collection *Abinger Harvest*¹, was actually written in or before 1913 and it was certainly first presented to a “group of Indian students at Cambridge during the autumn term of 1913”, as it is confirmed by memoirs of one of the students quoted in the notes of Elizabeth Heine, the editor of this particular volume of the *Abinger Harvest* edition (Forster 1996, 404). The 1913 text is much longer than the published version and it contains several passages later removed, of which the following, in which Forster addresses the Indian students, seems the most important:

You will be coming across Englishmen all your lives and it is right that you should ask yourselves what manner of men they are, and I being by profession a novelist, have to ask myself the same question. In order to portray English people in fiction, I have had to consider what manner of men they are in life. I have come to a few conclusions which I should like to lay before you (1996, 404).

Forster’s remarks are thus presented as the result of considerations which preceded his writing. He actually made them public when his career as a novelist was almost over, even though at the age of 35 he was hardly an old man. Consequently, it seems justified to assume that the vision of the English attitude towards emotions presented in the essay was the vision which Forster had applied in his works before the discussed essay was conceived. Let us then try to see if and how these conclusions are reflected in Forster’s own works. We shall look into selected texts for three elements – the self-inflicted muddle, the slowness of emotion, and the undeveloped heart which fails to deal with emotions properly and makes one unable to read and react to other people’s emotions. The purpose of the following presentation is not an in-depth analysis, it is rather meant as indicating the presence of the aforementioned elements and their ubiquitous character in Forster’s works.

The muddle is quite obviously the easiest to spot. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), the first novel that Forster completed and published, both the main plot and several subplots are based on the muddle which the English characters make themselves and for themselves. The Italian characters, however, are usually innocent bystanders or the victims. Lilia’s Italian

¹ It might be a typo as the essay was actually first published in 1926.

love affair and marriage are largely the results of her fully justified though pointless attempts to teach her unteachable mother-in-law a lesson. Each successful step Lilia makes seems (at least to her) fully rational but by the time she dies giving birth to a nameless son, she successfully manages to corner herself in a loveless marriage in a foreign country the language of which she does not speak and the culture of which leaves her indifferent.

Yet this is only the first of the sequence of self-inflicted muddles in the novel. Miss Abbott's superficially charitable though rather obviously equally pointless attempt to save Lilia's son from the "godless" Italians spurs Mrs Herriton to intervene and send a rescue party consisting of her two children. The intentions of Miss Abbott may be (with certain reservations) considered noble, even if foolish. It is quite striking, however, how completely she (and all other Englishmen involved in the rescue operation) disregards the emotions of others: the Italian relatives of the baby, especially its father.

The intentions of Mrs Herriton are anything but noble: she feels she must protect the opinion she enjoys in the neighbourhood and if it takes adopting a baby with whom she is actually not even related, she is ready to take the challenge. Caroline Abbott shames her into action. It is also quite probable that Mrs Herriton manages to convince herself that it is what she wanted all the time and believed the right and proper thing to do. The muddle expands, engulfing still new characters, all of whom are perfectly convinced that their aims and motives are actually noble and pure. Ultimately, it all ends rather literally in a catastrophe, two coaches collide in the dark and the baby is killed in the accident.

The ability to make a muddle is not limited to women in Forster's fiction. In *The Longest Journey* (1907), Rickie Elliot makes a muddle for himself when he meets Agnes Pembroke and falls in love not so much with the real person who is actually both indifferent to him and unworthy of his love (which is immediately obvious to his best friend Stewart Ansell) but in an imaginary ideal of which he in turn considers himself unworthy. The muddle expands when Rickie steps in to replace Agnes' late fiancé and is ultimately forced into marriage by her scheming brother. Even the death of their daughter is not enough to make him break away from the muddle he got himself into, he is freed from this toxic relationship only when Agnes attempts to drive away his half-brother Stephen. One should remark here that Agnes' motives are also (from her point of view) noble and just – she merely attempts to protect her husband from a troublesome relative.

Similar elements may be traced in the plot of the third of Forster's novels, *A Room with a View* (published in 1908), which tells the story of the muddle made by Lucy Honeychurch when she refused to accept the fact that she fell in love with a young man who "would not do". The gravest sin of the young man in question, George Emerson, is rather appropriately his inability to keep his emotions in check when he sees and kisses Lucy on the hillside at Fiesole. Trying to escape not so much George himself but rather her own emotions which she cannot control, Lucy only gets deeper and deeper in the muddle. In the process she is gladly assisted by her muddled cousin Charlotte Bartlett and two equally muddled closeted homosexuals: the reverend Beebe and Cecil Vyse. Lucy actually goes as far as to accept the proposal of the latter. It is only the clear-headed and very un-English Mr Emerson who forces her to go "out into the muddle she had made herself" (Forster 1977, 204) and accept her own emotions, and the costs of trying to escape from them.

A self-inflicted muddle strangely similar to that presented in Jane Austen's novel quoted above appears in *Howards End*. The late Mrs Wilcox bequeathed the eponymous house to Margaret Schlegel. Mrs Wilcox's husband and children, however, when they learn of the will, decide after a discussion that the best course of action is to destroy the will and it is consequently burned. The decision, however, continues to haunt the family through the novel and, ultimately, Margaret Schlegel becomes the owner of Howards End when she marries Mr Wilcox. It is, however, the death of one of the characters, Leonard Bast, that becomes necessary to force the Wilcoxes to face and accept the reality. The muddle is, consequently, an extremely important element in the structure of each of the four novels Forster wrote in the first decade of the 20th century.

The examples of the English "slowness of emotion" are less numerous and this characteristic quality does not play an equally significant role in the structure of Forster's novels. One may mention here Caroline Abbott's and Philip Herriton's inability to recognize and express their own feelings for what they actually are in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. The famous murder scene in Piazza Signoria in *A Room with a View* (Forster 1977, 41–45) may be another example. George Emerson first rescues Lucy Honeychurch, who faints at the sight of blood, and only after a long while does he start to analyse his own emotions evoked by the murder. He is to some degree excused because Lucy desperately tries to distract him by somewhat muddled attempts at conversation. Lucy seems at this point completely unaware of the emotional

impact of the scene she has just witnessed. Her main concern is to make sure that no one ever hears about her collapse in the square. Cases of slowness of emotion can be detected also in *Howards End*, especially in the behaviour of the Wilcoxes, e.g. Henry Wilcox's slow acceptance of the situation following the death of Leonard Bast and the part Mr Wilcox himself played in the event. It is also the case in *A Passage to India*; the most notable example in this novel is the behaviour of Adela Quested after the alleged rape.

It is, however, the undeveloped English heart which plays the most important role in Forster's fiction. It reveals itself in two ways – the inability to express and even understand one's own emotions combined with the conviction that one is always the best off suppressing them, and the inability to read and react properly to the emotions of others, especially when the others come from a different culture (most often Italian or Indian, but also vaguely defined "natives", as it is in the short story "The Life to Come"). Forster's characters have been variously divided into binary pairs of "people of the room" and "people of the view", "Medieval" and "Renaissance" characters, those who can and those who cannot be saved, to mention but a few of proposed divisions. It is their undeveloped hearts, however, that allow us to draw a line between one group and the other in these binary oppositions, regardless of which nomenclature we accept. It should be pointed out here that the division is hardly ever rigid. Forster quite fortunately avoids simplification in his character drawing. In every novel we can find characters who ultimately defy the readers' expectations. In *A Room with a View* such characters are e.g. the liberal and benevolent reverend Beebe ultimately turning against Lucy in the final scene of the novel and the muddled and cold Charlotte Bartlett who unexpectedly helps the lovers come together.

Most of the main characters in Forster's fiction suffer from this condition to a smaller or greater degree. Oddly enough, Forster does not find his characters with fully developed hearts sufficiently interesting to make them the main heroes or heroines of his works. Stewart Ansell, Mr Emerson, and Mrs Moore play important roles in the respective plots but they are always secondary characters. The writer focuses instead on these characters who have the potential to change and go through the process of the development of the heart. It is precisely this process which forms the backbone of all Forster's novels. We may list here Lucy Honeychurch coming to terms with her own love (and the muddle she made trying to escape it), Henry Wilcox understanding the value of emotions (more broadly anything which cannot be evaluated

and sold for cash), Rickie Elliot who liberates himself from the vicious influence of Agnes Pembroke and her brother, and Maurice Hill who ultimately succeeds in embracing his own sexuality, liberating himself from the sterile relationship with Clive Durham. Maurice's choices and emotional development are presented in opposition to those of Clive who "becomes normal" and accepts the boundaries set by his society, suffering as he does from the "undeveloped heart".

However, it is quite often so that we find a character for whom the process of development proves too much. This turn of events is employed more often in the short stories, the very size of which does not allow for a more detailed presentation of the process of change. Such characters may retreat to the safety of their original position as is the case of Mr Lucas, the main hero of "The Road to Colonus". Others, such as Harold, the main hero of "Albergo Empedocle", retreat into madness or choose suicidal death as Lionel March in "The Other Boat".

The undeveloped heart may also be seen clearly when the English meet foreigners. In the early "Italian" novels this role is rather limited and their presentation somewhat general. Gino Carella from *Where Angels Fear to Tread* seems the only fully developed - "round", to use Forster's own terminology introduced in *Aspects of the Novel* - Italian character. Somewhat more complex Italian characters may be found in short stories, such as Gennaro in "The Story of the Panic" or the nameless Sicilian in "The Story of the Siren", but in each case the scope of the development is limited by the length of the text. Forster usually concentrates on his English characters, the Italians are important only inasmuch as they reveal the emotional limitations of the English such as Mr Leyland in "The Story of the Panic". The Italians may also help in the process of emotional change, as it happens in the novel *A Room with a View*, in which the nameless Italian driver, who apparently knows better than Lucy who she looks for in the hills by Fiesole, directs her towards George Emerson.

The Italians in Forster's fiction often seem like children whose ability to express emotions comes directly from nature, they do not need to regain the ability because they never lost it. However, they are not presented as ideals in their manner of handling emotions, either. As it has been already stated, Forster wisely avoids any too far-fetched conclusions just as he avoids representing the cultural differences as the conflict of unreasonable emotion vs. emotionless reason. The Bosnians depicted in Forster's only completed play

The Heart of Bosnia were not quite as lucky to escape being presented as governed quite exclusively by emotions, but Forster saw his failure and this play, a rare case in his oeuvre, was neither staged nor published.

The dangers resulting from the undeveloped English heart were finally presented in the greatest variety of options in Forster's last novel, *A Passage to India*. Forster presents here a vast array of English types exhibiting a variety of behaviours which are usually observed by the Indians - both Muslims and Hindus - with amused detachment. The novel, however, is the most balanced of all Forster's works as far as the presentation of the various communities is concerned. Even though criticism of the English is an important issue in the novel, the Indians are not shown merely as superior, closer to nature, or more emotionally open, as was the case of the Italians in the earlier works. The Indians also have their own peculiar personal traits of character which make it difficult for them to reach communication either within their own communities, Hindu and Muslim, or with the English. The ultimate failure of friendship between Dr Aziz and Fielding, expressed in the final words "No, not yet ... No, not there" (Forster 1978, 312), is brought about by erroneous actions of both gentlemen and the communities to which they belong.

It is obviously debatable to what extent Forster's vision of English emotions was actually precise and correct. Forster's personal experience was at that time largely limited to his own middle class. When he writes in the final paragraph of the discussed essay "what new element the working classes will introduce [to the English character] one cannot say" (1996, 15) he means most likely "I cannot say because I just do not know". It is the middle class to which his comments apply the most. It is precisely the class that he presents in all his novels. The seemingly lower class characters such as Leonard Bast and Alec Scudder are, on closer inspection, members of the middle class, even if it is more likely lower middle class. Although we may question the general value of Forster's concepts concerning the English character, we should accept the fact that they describe the part of English society which Forster knew first hand. There is no point, however, in debating the fact that what he presented in his essay as the English character and the English attitude towards emotions was the vision he believed to be real and at the same time in dire need of change which he tried to propose through his writings.

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