23 ‘The Last Englishman’: Lawrence’s appreciation of Forster

John Beer

In his book *Thought, Words and Creativity*, F. R. Leavis ends a discussion of Lawrence’s greatness by quoting two remarks of his concerning Forster. On 23 July 1924 he wrote to Secker,

Am reading *Passage to India*. It’s good, but makes one wish a bomb would fall and end everything. Life is more interesting in its undercurrents than in its obvious; and E. M. does see people, people and nothing but people ad nauseam.

A year later, on 13 August 1925, he wrote to him again:

*St Mawr* a bit disappointing. The Bloomsbury highbrows hated it. Glad they did. Don’t send any more of my books to E. M. Forster – done with him as with most people. Vogue la galère.¹

Taken in isolation these quotations might suggest that Lawrence’s attitude to Forster was always, and primarily, hostile; and many modern readers would no doubt accept the implication without question. There is at first sight such a marked contrast between the whimsical, understating, ironic Forster and the vivid, forthright, combative Lawrence that one would hardly expect to find either liking the other. Yet even the comments just quoted may be seen, on scrutiny, to be gesturing in another direction as well. *A Passage to India* is, after all, being described as ‘good’; and if Secker is not to send any more of Lawrence’s books to Forster, this shows that he has, for some reason, been encouraged to do so in the past.

Examination of Lawrence’s comments at the time modifies
further the impression of hostility. The first quotation represents what is in many respects a first judgement of *A Passage to India*, which he had not yet finished reading. On the day when he did finish it he wrote to Forster himself, offering a more extended critique (as we shall see later); a fortnight later, asking Carlo Linati if he had read it, he expressed the opinion that Forster was ‘about the best of my contemporaries in England.’

Dr Leavis himself, some years ago, paid a memorable, if guarded, tribute to Forster, in which he acknowledged a possible kinship between the two men. Forster’s ‘radical dissatisfaction with modern civilization’, he said, ‘prompts references to D. H. Lawrence rather than to Jane Austen.’ (Later in the essay, admittedly, he warned his reader that this was an ‘over-emphasis’.) Other critics, including Frank Kermode and Wilfred Stone, have drawn attention to specific points of comparison. It is only with the availability of their writings in completer form, however, that it has become possible to explore the full extent of the relationship, both in literature and in life.

There are some things which can be discerned (and perhaps more clearly) without such apparatus. Surveying the novels of both men side by side, one is struck by a common curve in their careers. Each wrote an important early novel around the theme of an attractive young girl faced with a choice between two suitors, one of whom is acceptable by the standards of her own society, the other ‘unsuitable’ but more deeply attractive to her physically; in each case the novel proved difficult to work. The ‘Lucy novel’ took various forms in Forster’s mind before it was published as *A Room with a View* in 1908; Lawrence’s *The White Peacock*, similarly, went through various changes before its final version of January 1911.

As one compares these two novels, on the other hand, certain resemblances and differences between the two writers begin to define themselves. In *A Room with a View*, the heroine’s choice is between Cecil Vyse, a cultivated and witty but enclosed young man on the one hand and George Emerson, an open-minded impulsive young man on the other. In the course of the novel she learns to trust the wholeness of her instinct towards George rather than the attractive aestheticism of Cecil. The choice is presented ultimately as one between enclosure and freedom: life in a succession of rooms with Cecil Vyse or life with an outward view, as offered by George.

By comparison Lettie Beardsall, the heroine of *The White Peacock*, seems more like a woman of the world. Her problem is something of