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Howards End: From Letters to a Connecting Vision

BEGINNING WITH LETTERS: HISTORY AS A DISCONNECTED VIEW

One may as well begin with Helen’s letters. Howards End,
Tuesday

Dearest Meg,

It isn’t going to be what we expected. It is old and little, and altogether delightful – red brick. We can scarcely pack in as it is, and the dear knows what will happen when Paul (younger son) arrives tomorrow.

(HE, 1)

This is the famous, unassuming opening of Howards End, but why does Forster choose a letter as the way into the story? And why letters as the first means of communication between the sisters, instead of dialogue, which opens Antigone and which is used in both Middlemarch and Women in Love? The first dialogues in those two novels take place in sitting rooms, and the tone of each, different as they are from each other, retains some sort of dramatic power, despite the constraint in the social and private life of the sisters. That dramatic tension is lacking in Helen’s letters, because letters are one-way communication, and because she and ‘Meg’ seem on such close and easy terms. Her tone is casual and relaxed. She doesn’t mind – is even delighted – if ‘what we expected’ proves wrong. Her letters seem to dismiss grandeur.

The anti-romantic tone of Howards End has double or triple implications. For one thing it is self-dismissive, as if to say, ‘This is of no importance.’ Artistically, it implies that no form is being

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imposed. And it introduces the reader directly to the material as if it were not fiction but actuality which the narrator is simply reporting. Yet the letter puts the reader and ‘Meg’ (Margaret Schlegel) at a distance from the actual scene, by reporting through the persona of Helen. So Margaret and the reader are both reading and interpreting the letter. Margaret and Helen had ‘expected’ something, which the reader does not yet know about.

‘Expected’ is the key-word. Expectation has been and is going to be disappointed. Yet the message is given lightly, even with delight. Already there are two speakers, the narrator and Helen, but the narrator seems to speak in very much the same tone as the other. ‘Don’t expect my novel to have a form with a clear beginning and an ending because you will surely be disappointed. So let me release you from such an expectation right from the start. Any beginning is as good as another.’

But does the novel really have no form? Doesn’t Forster mean it to be an artistic whole? In Aspects of the Novel, Forster argues that Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony has two kinds of ‘rhythm’, the repeated ‘diddidy dum, which we can all hear and tap to’, and the rhythm of ‘the symphony as a whole’, which is ‘due mainly to the relation between its movements – which some people can hear but no one can tap to.’ There he says:

the difficult one – the rhythm of the Fifth Symphony as a whole – I cannot quote you any parallels for that in fiction, yet it may be present.

(Aspects of the Novel, 113)

Forster has Margaret, Helen, Tibby, their German cousins, Mrs Munt and Leonard Bast all listen to this symphony. He lists their various reactions, including Mrs Munt’s tapping to the music, and he even makes Helen interpret the music in visual, dramatic form: the ‘gnoblins’, which ‘merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world’, come back again and again, now stealthily, now impudently, to deny the heroic splendour of battles between ‘gods and demi-gods’ who are ‘contending with vast swords, colour and fragrance’ and making any life or death ‘titanic’. The start of the music, where this ‘not aggressive’ but anti-heroic goblin walks ‘quietly over the universe, from end to end’, finds a resonance in the way the novel starts. Only, the tone is more cheerful in the novel – perhaps