

Book Reviews

Troubling Modernism: Forster and Fashion to Fascists

The Creator as Critic and Other Writings by E. M. Forster. Edited by Jeffrey M. Heath. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007. 814 pp. \$90.00 cloth.

The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster, 1929-1960: A Selected Edition. Edited by Mary Lago, Linda K. Hughes, and Elizabeth MacLeod Walls. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. 477 pp. \$59.95 cloth.

My initial reaction to Jeffrey M. Heath's edition, *The Creator as Critic*, is gratitude. Heath collects forty of E. M. Forster's lectures, essays and other miscellaneous writings, as well as over thirty broadcast scripts. Comprising non-fiction writing ranging from polished works to fragmentary notes and memoranda, *Creator as Critic* also borrows for its title the name of one of Forster's lectures from 1931. By titling that lecture "The Creator as Critic," Forster cleverly inverted the title of another previous work by Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist" (1891), and in so doing signaled his own career-long reluctance, contra Wilde, to embrace criticism as a form of creative activity or personality. Interestingly, Heath, too, affirms this Forsterian inversion-cum-distinction as the signature for his selection of texts—the difference between art and criticism is, for Forster, the preference for art over criticism and of anonymity over popularity.

This inversion is important because of the hierarchy it seems to impose. By ranking eternal art above ephemeral criticism Forster was staking a claim and, interestingly, taking an indirect swipe at the impressive body of non-fiction writing—largely popular criticism for established print-media venues and his BBC broadcasts—he was himself in the process of accumulating after 1924. Forster drew attention to this conflict in 1920 when speaking to the Bloomsbury Club, whose members he thought too complacent about sacrificing their reputations as artists for reputations as intellectuals, asking rhetorically: "When first did I stumble against your creative, as opposed to your critical rill?" (qtd. in Heath 53). And here we recognize a characteristic tension in the Forster corpus overall: an ambivalence between the old and the new, between the traditional status of the modernist writer (in the Arnoldian vein) and the emerging scope and influence of the popular media that fascinated Forster and which allowed

him to address those imagined constituencies—whether in India or the Everyman in England—that he loved best.

However, the distinction is also deceptive, insofar as it glosses over the extent to which the domains of art and criticism may be considered if not coextensive, then at least contiguous in Forster's work. The difference after 1924, the year of publication of *A Passage to India*, was that Forster no longer felt compelled to publish everything artistic he wrote, whereas he published or broadcast most, if not all, of his subsequent criticism. (And Heath's edition goes a great distance in bringing the last of the criticism to the marketplace.) It is therefore interesting that the very inclusiveness of Heath's collection today effectively dismisses the understanding of art Forster cherished in his own lifetime, as a sanctuary held apart from the more "public" reckoning of his criticism.

Ultimately, Forster's genius is too integrative to sustain any founding dichotomy between art and criticism. He may well have sharpened the division between art and criticism strategically in his debate with Wilde, but he certainly didn't live by strict categorizations, especially not "l'art pour l'art" after 1931 when the BBC work picked up; and as I've argued elsewhere, Forster didn't shy away from embracing a broader English-language readership, when Lionel Trilling (and others) succeeded in making him an early and notable instance of the transatlantic, literary trade in democratic ideals ("Public Intellectual"). Forster happily refashioned artistic mores as the occasion demanded so as to help construct a new arena—public advocacy—for belles lettres in a broader cultural domain. And, once having refashioned himself as a public intellectual, he was clearly capable of balancing the tradition of elite culture with the inevitable advent of mass culture; and beyond this, he was content to muddle through any subsequent distinction scholars might feel tempted to make between the two. Accordingly, if a tidy dichotomy was rhetorically useful for Forster as a critic, it may also serve us when attempting to understand his criticism. But it is a critical feint merely, which disaggregates his inspiration and only at the considerable cost of artistic truths he elsewhere expounded as indivisible: "The two pleasures melt into one another and reinforce one another, and our spontaneous praise may be expressing either or both" (qtd. in Heath 54).

One reservation about Heath's edition concerns the proportion and selections of the matter it conveys. At over 800 pages, the volume's weightiness in hand may be readily contrasted with Forster's light touch as a writer and the delicacy of his address over the wireless. Of these 800 pages, just under half of the material belongs properly to Forster; the remaining consists of Heath's annotations, three full-length scholarly essays by the editor via the appendices, and the index. (Another appendix includes Forster's early attempts at poetry which, while fascinating, might well have been excluded.) Listed at ninety dollars per unit, *Creator as Critic* is too

expensive for just about anyone who isn't a university library. Perhaps more streamlining might have been in order. The general Forster readership (wanting primarily the source material) is likely to skip the annotations, however superbly crafted.

Among the over seventy broadcast scripts reproduced in *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster, 1929-1960: A Selected Edition*, superbly edited by the late Mary Lago and her successors, Linda K. Hughes and Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, only three have found their way into Heath's volume. In view of the nearly 150 BBC talks Forster gave between 1928 and 1963, I did find myself asking, of both volumes, what were the respective editors' criteria of selection? If Heath's one size barely fits all, the editors of *The BBC Talks* have more room to dwell on the interesting variety of Forster's BBC work, including his many broadcasts to his Indian listeners via the BBC Eastern Service.

It is in these book talks to India that Forster's broadcasts are at their most intimate and assuring: a clear example of an Edwardian-era novelist very much at home using a then-cutting-edge technology to reach a wider audience. With his wartime broadcasts, Forster is clearly engaging in white propaganda. As Hughes and Walls rightly point out, however, Forster's propaganda remains most convincing when he is addressing those values he most strongly believed in—culture, democracy (for all its faults), the virtues of humanity—and most especially so for those who espoused his vision of Western-sponsored liberalism. As such, Forster's hefty output for the BBC constituted a very valuable wartime asset. As William Empson—another writer enlisted by the BBC during wartime—once noted, propaganda is most effective when it “breaks the ice,” when it renders public otherwise privately held beliefs (Haffenden 2: 17).

Forster pioneered this technique of maneuvering across private and public domains, to the extent that his broadcast rhetoric almost effaces the boundaries between them. So when he recalls and voices British civilities to his listeners on the Indian subcontinent, one supposes (as well he may have supposed) that he was speaking to like-minded, urbane elites producing art and artists of the highest rank, and not to the subaltern for whom he held an acknowledged, if admittedly ignorant, affection. And in the realm of Anglophone Indian fiction, Forster knew well of what he was talking about; his eye for spotting young literary talent was famous. Not only did he encourage the early work of front-rank writers from the West (such as Constantine Cavafy, Eudora Welty, and William Golding); in the pages of *The BBC Talks*, we encounter Forster's early endorsement of the foremost Indian fiction-writers of the wartime generation: Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, and Mulk Raj Anand. (Thanks to Lago, Hughes, and Walls, we know the precise broadcast date of this remarkable event: 9 June 1941.) Here Forster has bestowed his canonical imprimatur not on behalf of his

British listeners alone, but his Indian ones. And, as history tells us, in this case he was most certainly right.

In tandem with pushing younger talent forward, Forster enjoys soft-selling his own authority. His willingness to concede the privilege of his own position, as a British subject speaking (imperially) over the ether to a captive audience, is refreshing:

Today it's just my voice that goes East and reaches India: the rest of me stays sitting in a London Studio—worse luck—and it's only by an effort of the imagination that I can guess where you're sitting and what thoughts are in your minds. I often wish you could answer me back: *and so perhaps do you!* (*The BBC Talks* 174; original emphasis).

In this unilateral spirit, *The BBC Talks* editors concede the difficulty of capturing Forster's broadcasts whole. They acknowledge a quality Forster himself believed in, the immanence of that moment of human connection, or its promise, as, equally, a fugitive essence transcriptions can only imperfectly encode: "that stage in the life of these texts wherein writer, speaker, editor, bureaucrat, typist, audience member, and larger cultural milieu merged—once, and with a good deal of human untidiness" ("General Introduction" 46).

Perhaps it is only fair to say that minor imperfections do creep into *The BBC Talks* as well; of inconsistency, mostly, and much of this was surely Forster's own. (We can get some sense of the challenges Forster editors everywhere face by, for example, placing side by side the transcriptions of Forster's broadcast script "D. H. Lawrence" included in each of the volumes under review and noting the inevitable variances.) One factual error this reader did discover: the case of Margaret Knight cited in a footnote (*The BBC Talks* 37n103) involved Forster's defense, as argued in his correspondence with the BBC between September 1955 and April 1956, of the latter's right to broadcast on non-religious grounds, not religious ones. Forster was defending Knight's right to broadcast humanist philosophy on the BBC as an alternative to what he called "the Christian point of view."

2008 was a wonderful year for Forster studies. Yet I find myself only too aware of the limits of scholarly endeavor when it comes to any summing up of Forster's contribution to modernist letters, alongside the subsequent and emerging interest in his contributions to media studies. Not even Forster's committed public intellectualism could fully voice his love on behalf of art. Throughout the body of his work, in all its sacredness, love always lends itself readily to capitalization, as Love (like allegory in general, or reading Bunyan in particular). As Zadie Smith puts it, writing about her first encounter with *A Room with a View*: "There is something about love that does not sit well with the literary academy." Heath's edition,

then, which misses nothing at all intellectually, has only this one element lacking: a fuller treatment of the implications the abandonment of Forster's carefully fashioned reserve might entail. Moreover, via Lago, Hughes, and Walls's edition, we may have Forster's willingness to abandon authorial reserve via the wireless, but only on a one-way channel. His listeners, in life, do not respond; he cannot enjoy their fidgeting, their to and fro, their nodding off. So even the intimacy the broadcasts seek—and the efforts Forster undertook to achieve it as catalogued in *The BBC Talks* and in *The Creator as Critic* are tremendous—remains partial. The absence of such a closure of intimacy, what Smith calls “the subjective affective response” to Forster's words and those worlds he sought to fashion with them, seems glaring, his cherished privacies now blinking, somewhat shyly, in the light of our critical attention.

Works Cited

- Christie, Stuart. “E. M. Forster as Public Intellectual.” *Literature Compass*. Ed. Jesse Matz and Morag Shiach. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 1-10.
- Haffenden, John. *William Empson: Against the Christians*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Smith, Zadie. “Love, Actually.” *The Guardian*. 1 Nov. 2003. Web. 20 January 2009. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/nov/01/classics.zadiesmith>>.

—Stuart Christie, Hong Kong Baptist University