EWA STACHNIAK Wrocław

# THE PROBLEM OF PERSONAL RELATIONS IN E. M. FORSTER'S NOVELS

Although E. M. Forster belongs to the 20th century, his novels have little in common with experimental and nihilistic literature of his age. He seems to belong to the past world of gentle humanism, realizing its dangers, but nevertheless not shaken in his convictions. His fictional creativity comprises the years 1905 (his first novel Where Angels Fear to Tread)—1924 (A Passage to India). Distrust of institutions and organizations causes Forster's concern with the private and personal; he is trying to fit his characters into their private schemes—a problem much more difficult that it might seem at first sight. By means of personal and private he approaches the most complicated problems of our age, remaining an individualist tries to achieve universal harmony and understanding

E. M. Forster himself, in many of his critical works, stressed his faith. in personal relationships. This paper is an attempt to define, and classify those personal relations presented in his novels which explain and represent Forsterian philosophy of life. The critical works about Forster's creativity, although acknowledged the importance of his belief, did not go into detailed analysis of personal relationships.

Looking for sources of such an unshakeable conviction and belief one has to look closer at E. M. Forster's biography and examine some of the most influential aspects of his life. His early childhood, very happy, full of spontaneity and naturalness, was dominated by women. This part of his life remained in sharp contrast with school-years when individuality was suppressed, emotions and naturalness discouraged.

At this stage of his life Forster came to Cambridge which was to mean so much to him and where he developed all the ideas he was to explore in his novels. Cambridge friendships showed him the value of personal relationships, which he was to treasure until the end of his life.

Cambridge of those years was dominated by such personalities as G. L. Dickinson, J. M. E. McTaggart, Nathaniel Wedd, Roger Fry, who believed in personal relations, distrusted authority, stressed the private

and personal. Homosexuality was one of Cambridge characteristics—stimulated by Greek ideal of homosexual friendship as free from wordly motives, a noble force which distinguished heroes from ordinary men.

Forster belonged to the circle of idealists but he managed not to shut himself off from the real world. Cambridge was a symbol of something ideal but he never forgot the great world which included it. What he never freed himself from, though, were his homosexual sympathies, and they greatly affected the personal relations in his novels. Thus Cambridge provided him with models for personal relations used later on and made his treatment of women characters very specific.

Forsterian concern with an individual is in its essence romantic—a tendency reinforced by Edward Carpenter whom he met in 1913. This meeting was a revelation for Forster and an inspiration for Maurice, his only openly homosexual novel. Carpenter considered love to be a shaping force of society—love between individuals be it homosexual or heterosexual, divine; physical union being a natural component of such love.

It has been already said that Forster did not shut himself off from the outer world. Travelling that he had undertaken after leaving Cambridge confirmed his beliefs and provided a more general context for them. India by showing him new culture, traditions and new relations made him see problems connected with achieving universal harmony, Italy with its warm-heartedness, spontaneity and freedom contrasted with British standards of restricted emotions and puritanic restraint. All these facts affected personal relations in his novels in a considerable way and deepened his understanding of the world.

Out of all social relations possible, that between two individuals is considered by Forster to be the most important. He trusted it and believed in it calling it the only thing "solid in a world full of violence and cruelty." It would be convenient to divide the interpersonal relations presented by him into two groups: (1) that of human fellowship, and (2) that of family relations.

Human fellowship embraces informal, spontaneous and emotional relationships between two individuals, and can be further subdivided into: (a) comradeship, (b) brotherhood, (c) heterosexual love.

Comradeship is placed highest in Forster's specific hierarchy of personal relations. It concerns two male friends and is not deprived of stronger or weaker homosexual overtones. It bears strong similarity to Cambridge friendships.

Brotherhood is asexual and has a very definite symbolic meaning for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster, Two Cheers for Democracy, Harmondsworth 1974, p. 75.

the characters involved and for England. This symbolic meaning determines and overshadowes the whole relationship.

In the heterosexual group a relation between two lovers was meant to equal comradeship in terms of moral value but Forster's novels do not confirm it and one can easily feel the author's preference for homosexual relationships.

When human fellowship relations are always of important and positive value to the characters involved, family relations may be either negative or positive. If negative, they function as destructive forces obstructing the full development of a personality and are instantly dismissed by the author. When positive, they are either included into human fellowship type or become marginal and important only as far as they prepare the ground for human fellowships later in an individual life.

In order to provide a criterion which would help to evaluate the personal relations among Forsterian characters it seems convenient to formulate the following synthetic definition of Forster's understanding of an ideal relation. It is based on his views expressed both in his critical works and novels.

By a personal relation between two individuals he means:

- a relation which is informal and spontaneous;
- continuous: it is not bound to last for ever but needs ample time to come into being, develop and finally mature;
- all-embracing: it is able to satisfy all the emotional needs of both persons;
- emotional: based on mutual love, understanding, tenderness, honesty and trust; providing emotional harmony, being of practically equal value for both persons;
- real: the individuals involved are taken as they are: with full awareness of their being flesh and blood.

#### COMRADESHIP

Personal relations involving two men in an affectionate friendship are perhaps the most characteristic of Forsterian fiction. Such pairs of friends as Gino and Philip from Where Angels Fear to Tread, Aziz and Cyril Fielding from A Passage to India or Rickie and Ansell from The Longest Journey most strongly represent Forster's understanding of comradeship. Such relations, based on comprehension and love, recall the Greek ideal of friendship together with all its homosexual implications.

All the Forsterian comradeship relations differ in the degree of homosexual overtones. The relationship between Aziz and Fielding is almost free from homosexual strain and at the same time conveys Forster's most mature understanding of complexities of human fellowship. An explanation can be found in his biography: A Passage to India was his

last novel, written after *Maurice* which marks the psychological release of his previously restricted homosexuality. Being more mature and having overcome his problems through acceptance of his own homosexuality Forster became more objective—friendship did not necessarily mean a homosexual friendship any more.

Earlier masculine friendships lack this ease which is a result of the author's inner balance. Many episodes in *The Longest Journey*, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* narrow masculine friendship, involuntarily perhaps, to repressed homosexuality and thus weaken the final impact of the relationship. This group includes such pairs of friends as Rickie and Ansell or Philip and Gino—relations characteristic of early Forsterian fiction.

Maurice must be treated separately—the relationships presented there are explicity homosexual. This novel constitutes a link between Forster's treatment of masculine friendship in his early novels and in A Passage to India.

Gino and Philip from Where Angels Fear to Tread, representing two different nations, British and Italian, are a pair of friends representative of the early treatment of comradeship. In the light of Forsterian belief that friendship between two nations can be possible only through individuals, the relationship between Gino and Philip has a more general impact than a similar relationship between two Englishmen. It tests the possibility of contact and at the same time reveals limitations of both nations.

Being Italian, Gino stands for everything Forster considers Italian. Impulsive and masculine, almost on the verge of brutality, he is a symbol of natural passion. Philip, on the other hand, is weak and feminine. He is governed by Sawston and his mother who represents all the evils of English middle-class morality. In England he will always be submissive and never rebel against what he knows to be bad. England is his reality where he feels estranged but at the same time too weak to free himself. He can only mock his fellow-countrymen but he himself remains passive and indifferent, comparable to a stone or a plant.

Gino and Philip meet in Italy, a place where the release from repression of protestant restraint takes place. For Philip Italy is a land of romance where people behave spontaneously, with sensitivity and sensuality, where passion is not equalled to sin. Their lives are full, good and evil mingle and life manifests itself through both. It is in Italy that Philip abandons his indifference and all important things in his life happen there: he accepts personal responsibility, gets involved in reality and even falls in love.

When Philip re-enters England his return is not victorious. His powers and abilities to live a full life fail him the moment he leaves Italy. The comradeship that joins Philip and Gino could not have happened in England. What is more, as long as Philip measures Gino according to British standards the latter is for him no more than a dentist's son and a cad. It is

only after Lilia's death, when Gino's only link with England breaks off that Philip accepts Gino: the Romance is back.

The value and meaning of this relationship is determined by Italy and all it represents for Forster: spontaneity, natural passions and full acceptance of life. And although Philip will always treasure its memory, his return to England equals death. Forster put Gino and Philip together to show the gulf between the two cultures, to analyze, through a personal relation, English undeveloped hearts and restrained emotions. Through Philip and Gino not only is England contrasted with Italy but strength is juxtaposed to weakness, passion to indifference. The meaning of such a relationship is univocal—Forster's thesis is that Sawstonian middle-class destroys personality and that an understanding between the two attitudes to life is possible only outside English middle-class narrowness.

Homosexual episodes in Where Angels Fear to Tread appear as if against Forster's intentions, have hardly any importance and are irrelevant to the interpretation of the relationship. In Maurice, on the other hand, they are of extreme importance. Forster does not conceal his sympathies which result from his own homosexuality, the book—written when homosexuality was illegal and culprits severely punished—emphasized Forster's involvement and his own serious problems. Brought up in a Victorian family he might have experienced Maurice's doubts and fears before he accepted homosexual love. Maurice seems to be Forster's spiritual diary, an exemplification of his own inner struggle. Personal relations in the novel are the direct result of his inner problems.

There is a considerable analogy between *Maurice* and an eternal pattern of mythologized experience as both are the expressions of man's eternal struggle for identity. Joseph Campbell analyzing ancient myths from the point of view of their eternal significance, arrives at the pattern the adventures of the hero follow "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power and a life-enhancing return." A separation from the world results from Maurice's homosexuality—a warning appeared early but Maurice was too young and inexperienced to understand it.

His actual "road of trials" began during the second year of Cambridge. This part of his life bears strong similarities to Forster's own Cambridge experiences. The most representative relation of this period is Maurice's friendship with Clive. Clive was an intellectual, highly influenced by Plato and the Greeks, and their ideal of noble homosexual friendship. Clive followed Plato, excluding "the actual deed of sex" from his experience. Maurice accepted it although he felt strange yearnings of the body. He was not fully awake yet but he did not realize it. For conventional morality it is much easier to accept the relationship between Maurice

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> J. Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Princeton, New Jersey, 1973, p. 35.

and Clive than between Maurice and Alec. Cambridge ideals are much "nicer" than reality. Edward Carpenter's ideals were in sharp contrast with those of Cambridge. His belief in full, both spiritual and physical union prevails. Clive changes and leaves Maurice to himself. This transitory stage during which he accepts his own homosexuality is very difficult: Maurice abandons the hope for happiness and love.

The moment Maurice accepts Alec with his social background and sex the road of trials is over. Maurice becomes a totally different man: ceases to deceive his body and wins the right to love against the whole world. He understands the mystery of sex for himself, finds the peace of soul. The goal he is hoping for, is his. Now, the full round of the myth demands that the hero should return with his boon for the salvation of his community. But "numerous indeed are the heroes fabled to have taken up residence forever in the blessed isle of the unaging Goddess of Immortal Being," Campbell writes. Maurice refused to return to society. Neither he nor Alec wanted to fight with its prejudices. Forster left his characters "in the greenwood" where they are eternally happy, and dedicated the novel TO A HAPPIER YEAR when society would be able to accept unconventional love as he accepted it himself.

In Forster's last novel the central comradeship relation is between the representatives of two races: the Indian Aziz and the British Cyril Fielding. This relation is to answer one of the most difficult questions: whether an understanding and friendship between two races is possible at all. As usual for Forster, the problem is to be solved through individuals in search for comradeship. The fact that Aziz and Fielding belong to nations politically hostile, and that the formal relation between an Englishman and an Indian is that of a ruler and the ruled one, makes the problem even more complex. Thus Aziz—Fielding relationship has to overcome all the possible dangers of human fellowship: the impossibility of coming to full understanding, the differences of race, temperament, culture, religion and politics.

The difference between India and the West seems to be the difference between a humanistic (man-centered) world-view in the West and a more mystical cosmic view of things in India, in which man and his works count as little (or as much) as any other phenomena. The Indian view of life and religion is all-inclusive while western culture tends to exclude rather than to accept the varieties of existence. Religious differences determine the way of viewing the world and influence people even if they are not very religious themselves. Such a barrier is a serious one even if people try to cross it. Good will and understanding is not enough.

The clash between two cultures produces the sense of superiority in the British and an inferiority complex in the Indian. Thus when Fielding

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

comes to Aziz's bungalow the latter is ashamed of both his being Indian and his Indian friends. This sense of inferiority produces embarassment and breeds suspicion. And it is suspiciousness which is the final straw in destroying Aziz's and Fielding's friendship. Thus cultural limitations give life to personal ones. Indian temperament is responsible for Aziz's impulsiveness, and superficiality, British restraint for Fielding's seeming lack of emotions.

Neither Aziz nor Fielding belong to a group of seers, characters of Mrs. Moore type. They have no supernormal powers of grasping the universe and its implications. These merely personal limitations make them ignorant of Marabar caves and their implications. They do not reach beyond the factual, matter-of-fact grasp lacking visionary insight into events. Although Aziz is a warm-hearted and well-intentioned person, he is rather callow and superficial; he is not mature enough to come to terms with life. His immaturity manifests itself in his selfish behaviour, and impulsiveness which constitutes a serious drawback in the understanding between the two men.

Neither is Fielding impressed by the caves. He also lacks perception which transcends normal intelligence and education. This is his personal limitation, but at the same time it is a human limitation. Most people have to "connect" without the aid of any religion or transcendental insight but with kindliness and tolerance. Thus the very humaneness is against people and their relationships and creates some more obstacles and barriers between people.

The novel ends with parting of the two friends, reconciled but going their own ways. "No, not yet... no, not there" is the final message of the novel. It may seem too optimistic as it ignores evidence—but perhaps, as it is with all beliefs, its force lies in ignoring evidence. On the other hand, it seems to say that comradeship will be possible only when people can meet in perfect equality and freedom, when old distinctions between the rulers and the ruled would cease to exist.

#### BROTHERHOOD

It has been already mentioned that brotherhood relations, which comprise sisterly relations as well, have definite symbolic meaning for Forster. Its best representatives are: Rickie and Stephen from *The Longest Journey*, and Helen and Margaret from *Howard's End*. Both novels have much in common in terms of problems discussed and both make brotherhood a central relationship in the novel. Through its symbolic meaning brotherhood is to answer Forster's question of inheritance, and to test

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> E. M. Forster, A Passage to India, Harmondsworth 1964, p. 317.

the value of an ideal personal relation when confronted with the world.

E. M. Forster treats brotherhood as an almost mystic union of two individuals, and one may feel the nostalgic note of his own longing for a brother, a feeling natural to all children brought up as the only child in the family.

Rickie Eliott, who is an autobiographical character, longs for a brother during his rather lonely childhood. But it is only when he is a grown up man that he discovers he has one. Rickie accepts Stephen the moment he learns he is his mother's son. His love for Stephen does not appear very convincing. It hardly fits the Forsterian definition of a successful relation. It is not an outcome of understanding, true fellowship, contact. This love comes out of the force of the dead, rather than of the living. Rickie sees his mother in Stephen and loves him as an embodiment of her love.

Such a treatment of a personal relation deserves, in fact, a special consideration. It certainly has to be distinguished from Stephen's understanding of it. For Rickie, the most difficult thing is to accept Stephen as a man. He desperately tries to take him as a symbol of redemption, a reincarnation of his mother's love, a romantic hero. Thus Rickie fails to establish a valuable relation which will be in accordance with Forsterian understanding of it. Finally he dies never to know that "it has bequeathed him salvation." For the moment when he saves drunken Stephen from death at the level-crossing, is the only moment when he treats him as a man. But at the same time Rickie loses his faith in people altogether. Stephen breaking his promise not to drink makes Rickie go bankrupt. His understanding of the relation fails him and Rickie dies.

Stephen's treatment of his relation with Rickie is more Forsterian. It is real—Stephen takes it as it is, does not expect too much from it, does not offer love for nothing.

He refuses to be treated as a symbol and is not to be treated as a romantic hero either. He smashes Rickie's altars one by one and it is he who survives. Through this Forster emphasizes the value of Stephen's treatment of personal relationships. The childish, romantic, symbolic relation is to be sacrificed for the sake of the more mature one.

The problem to be solved in the novel is: who shall inherit England? Which relationship is powerful enough to be trusted with the inheritor? Although both Rickie and Stephen conceive a child, Rickie's daughter is born lame and dies soon. It is Stephen's child who is to inherit England, but Rickie is not to be totally banned. He is granted his part in the inheritance—he gained it through saving Stephen from death, and Stephen reformed, completed by Rickie, is never to "backslide again." Through Rickie's death the two brothers are united in the best possible relation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> E. M. Forster, The Longest Journey, Harmondsworth 1974, p. 288.

In Howard's End the relationship between two sisters Helen and Margaret is Forsterian from the very beginning. The girls love and understand each other. The only thing they do not have is the experience of the "outer life" and it makes their relationship incomplete. They need both experience and confrontation with the world of the Wilcoxes, the world of power. In the course of events both sisters are separated—Helen is rebellious, Margaret tries to connect both worlds—theirs and that of the Wilcoxes. While separated both sisters experience much and emerge fuller and more humane than before. Helen is not pure, blind passion any more and Margaret understands that there are things one cannot overlook and connect. They realize that love they have for each other, their "inner life" is more important than the "outer life of telegrams and anger." They have achieved completion.

There is a very distinct analogy between two last scenes of *The Longest Journey* and *Howard's End*. Both present an inheritor of English tradition, the result of the completed relationships. The scenes are symbolic and thus their meaning is manifold and more powerful.

"Reformed" Stephen takes his child into the woods to sleep. The child named after "their" mother embodies Rickie and Stephen in an ideal relation, united for ever and able to guide "the future of our race." Stephen is victorious but only through Rickie and thus acknowledges his brother's share in the inheritance.

The inheritance is understood as continuity of English tradition, an inheritor is the outcome of a complete brotherhood relation which outlived, and eliminated all the other relations and even death.

The fact that Stephen takes the child into the woods gives the feeling of vastness and unlimited range of the inheritance. The wood is nature, freedom—and it is significant that Stephen, himself a symbol of nature, should take the child with him to follow his way of life. His daughter, too, is to treat nature as a natural part of her surroundings, has to live outdoors free, unspoiled by the society.

Helen's son is born in and shall inherit Howard's End, a house which embodies all the best of English tradition, a house which Forster equals with continuity and goodness of English countryside.

The house is guarded by the wych-elm—"a spirit of the place"—as though it were a friend or companion to the house, as though the house, with its civilized traditions, and the tree, a spirit of nature, were in a kind of partnership. To inherit it means to inherit a spirit of nature in an eternal comradeship with English traditions.

The brotherhood relation does not necessarily have to be successful only because it involves brothers or sisters. Forster opposes the general view taking love between brothers for granted—he demands that it should be judged by the same standards as any other personal relation, if it is to be successful.

It has to be complete in order to be valuable. Once completed it is of the utmost importance, is able to build, to create and is to "inherit the earth." But it should be noted that brotherhood relations are present only in those novels which treat about England and its future. The moment Forster occupies himself with more universal problems, brotherhood gives way to comradeship (as it happens in A Passage to India).

### HETEROSEXUAL LOVE

After a closer look at marriages presented in Forster's novels, there is little doubt that their creator places them far below both comradeship and brotherhood. Forster believes that marriage contract should be reserved for the chosen few, as an average man reduces marriage to ownership which does not satisfy the need for comradeship and tenderness. One cannot help feeling that he is a hardened bachelor and this is the chief reason for his contempt for lovers "locked in each others arms." He does not deny the necessity of love, but the love he decsribed is rather a blissful state of exaltation and hardly a companionship of two mature personalities.

One of the marriages which Forster meant to be successful is that between Lucy and George from A Room With a View. Their relationship is presented in terms of romantic, mythologized love and there is no companionship between them whatsoever. The novel ends with a picture of the married couple becoming one with poetry and myth. It seems that Forster found it easier to mythologize love than to present it in everyday human terms.

Another attempt to show a successful marriage is a union between Margaret and Henry Wilcox from Howard's End. Their relationship is hardly one of simple love. Henry is rather an embodiment of an idea than a flesh and blood character, and their union seems to be rather a union of business and power v. intellectual sensitivity. Margaret marries Henry but does not accept him—she secretly hopes to reform her husband and "loves" him for what he yet might be rather than for what he really is. Finally, when Margaret is sure he will change no more there is a clash between them and the relationship is resumed only after Henry is completely defeated and broken down. Again Forster does not show a true marriage of acceptance which would equal comradeship in value.

When Rickie realizes that his marriage with Agnes has destroyed him he is scolded by his creator for not keeping his wife "in line," for showing her "all the workings of his soul." If keeping "a wife in line" is an essential part of a successful marriage it does not promise fulfilment in the long run. If we compare it with comradeship, the difference is rather

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

striking. Marriage is never to equal comradeship where equality of partners is taken for granted, where trust and honesty are its essential part.

Love is a dreamy state of soul, and marriage, in general, just a restriction of personal liberty rather than a valuable relationship, Forster seems to imply through his novels. But he fails to notice that no true relation is possible without restriction and sacrifice of abstract freedom.

Forster's homosexuality and bachelorhood are certainly responsible for this discrimination of marriage but, nevertheless, it seems rather disappointing that he should be so partial, as otherwise his works show a good deal of objectivity.

During the whole of his life, both in his novels and in critical writings, Forster proclaimed his belief in individuals and relations between them. His treatment of personal relations underwent certain evolution though. The early relations seem somewhat deficient since they were not fully tested by their creator. Personal limitations of every human being, cultural differences were not taken into account. Thus one cannot be sure if George and Lucy or Alec and Maurice remain attached to each other for a long time. It is only in his more mature novels that the test takes place even at the expense of breaking the desirable relationship (Aziz and Cyril Fielding).

In The Longest Journey Forster expresses his disapproval of travelling the longest journey with one friend only. It corresponds to his idea of "travelling light" which is avoiding commitment. On the other hand it is difficult to imagine a successful, mature personal relationship without commitment and at least partial abandonment of oneself. The example of Maurice is significant here. There is little exaggeration in saying that all the author's liking is with him, despite of his sacrifice of the whole world for one person only. This seems to be the chief inconsistency of Forster's philosophy of life, but to revise it means to revise the whole concept of romantic, absolute freedom for an individual.

It has already been mentioned that Forster does not treat all personal relations equally. His peculiarity for comradeship is as evident as his failure to do full justice to other personal relations. No marriage or heterosexual love is to equal comradeship in his novels although he is not openly against either marriage or love. His clumsiness in presenting a successful love-relation or a partial treatment of marriage occur as if against his own wishes. He is never openly antifeminist though some of his women characters unwittingly betray that the author's sympathies were not with them—apparently his homosexuality and bachelorhood being responsible for his attitude.

To conclude one may as well say that personal relations are the vehicle for Forster's philosophy of life. Through them abstract ideas are translated into individual terms and treated from a personal point of view.

## RELACJE INTERPERSONALNE W POWIEŚCIACH EDWARDA MORGANA FORSTERA

#### STRESZCZENIE

E. M. Forster wielokrotnie, zarówno w swoich powieściach, jak i pracach krytycznych, występował w obronie tezy uznającej przyjaźń i miłość za najwyższe wartości człowieka.

Działalność twórcza Forstera, począwszy od Where Angels Fear to Tread aż po ostatnią jego powieść A Passage to India, to poszukiwanie idealnych relacji międzyludzkich mających stać się kluczem do rozwiązania skomplikowanych zagadnień związanych z całokształtem działalności człowieka.

Elementarne pojęcie filozofii Forstera — pojęcie relacji interpersonalnej — przechodziło szereg przeobrażeń. W dojrzałej postaci przez idealną relację między dwiema jednostkami rozumiał Forster każdą spontaniczną i nieformalną więź będącą jednocześnie ciągła, pełną, emocjonalna i realną.

Klasyfikując relacje interpersonalne występujące w powieściach E. M. Forstera, ze względu na stopień adekwatności z Forsterowskim rozumieniem pojęcia relacji wyodrębniono trzy zasadnicze grupy:

- 1. relacja przyjaźni (comradeship) najpełniej realizująca postulaty idealnego związku, posiadająca najpełniejsza charakterystyke:
- 2. relacja braterstwa (brotherhood) występująca we wczesnych powieściach autora, o wyraźnie symbolicznym znaczeniu, dorównująca relacji przyjaźni;
- 3. relacja miłości (heterosexual lovė) wyraźnie, choć nieświadomie dyskryminowana przez autora, w żadnej z powieści nie osiąga dojrzałej postaci.

Ewa Stachniak