Leaving Home:
E.M. Forster and the Pursuit of Higher Values

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[original pagination 37]
In the Buddha's day, leaving home was an accepted feature of the contemporary socio-religious ethos. It was not uncommon for people – mostly men, but occasionally women – to be so inspired by the Dharma that, soon after their first encounter with the Buddha or one of his disciples, they would decide to drop everything and leave it all behind in pursuit of the Truth. Determined to make a clean break of it, they severed, at a single stroke, all bonds of family, caste and clan.

This literal kind of going forth is not so relevant in the modern West. The traditional family lifestyle has become so fragmented that in the majority of cases, people have already left home in the physical sense before they become interested in the spiritual path. There may well be no spouse or children to leave, no house, and hardly any possessions to give up. When they go along to their first meditation class, read a book, or hear a talk on some aspect of the Dharma, they are already living alone in a flat or bed-sitter, or sharing a house with friends. These days, there may be more resonance for new followers of the Dharma in the following exposition of the ideal of homelessness than in the accounts of going forth we read in the Pali texts:

> we should not put our spiritual security (let alone our psychological security) into any provisional intellectual structure in such a way that if the structure is disturbed, our security is disturbed… by not resting on anything, we keep moving and growing. Again and again in the Mahāyāna, in [38] the Perfection of Wisdom literature, as well as in the Pali texts, the Buddha exhorts his disciples not to settle down in views…
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> … [the phrase] 'dharmas never hold them' makes it clear that wandering without a home is not to be taken just in the material sense, but also psychologically… there is no home of any kind to be found in the spiritual community. In this way the ideal of homelessness is given a much more profound interpretation… Resting nowhere, being quite free, and not being bound by such provisional concepts as skandhas and dharmas – using them but not being enslaved by them – that is the ideal of homelessness.[1]

In quoting the phrase 'dharmas never hold them', Sangharakshita is referring to the fourth line of the sixth verse of the *Ratnaguṇa-saṃcayagāthā* (in Edward Conze's translation).[2] The whole line reads: 'Without a home they wander, dharmas never hold them.' 'They' are the Bodhisattvas who have gained Transcendental Insight, and have realised that all dharmas are entirely empty. On the way to attaining this sublime ideal of true homelessness, the Dharma-farer has to work hard at loosening attachments to 'homes' of many kinds, be they psychological, social or ideological.

'Home' is the place we live, either literally or in our minds. It is our familiar environment, a place where we know our way around, and above all, where we feel secure. It is not only that on which we depend for our sense of security, but also that from which we derive our sense of identity. Without it, we feel insecure and afraid. Therefore we cling to it. We need it. We are enslaved by it. If it is destroyed or taken away from us, we are devastated, and feel lost.

But this is only one side of the coin. It can also happen, as individuality begins to push out succulent fresh shoots, that we experience the false refuge as a confinement, and even an imprisonment. The developing individual can feel trapped by all the norms and values which

'home' stands for. The famous refrain from the *Sutta Nipāta* – 'Cramped is this life at home, dusty its sphere' – is no longer frightening but inspiring, and the life of the Holy Man, the true Dharma-farer, wandering fancy-free, like gossamer on the breeze, becomes enviable. In this sense, home is experienced not as a nest, a comforting [39] cocoon which one has to tear oneself away from, but rather as a prison, a stifling confinement from which one longs to break free.

It is interesting to turn to the writings of E.M. Forster with this in mind. A recurring theme in his work is that of men and women who, imprisoned by the stifling domestic and social milieux in which they find themselves, desperately seek the freedom to respond to a higher call.

This higher call is not religious in the conventional sense. E.M. Forster did not belong to any religion. He left Christianity behind, apparently without a struggle, while he was a student at Cambridge. Where there is any overt reference to religions other than Christianity in his work, it is to Hinduism or Islam, rather than to Buddhism. But I think we can say that he was in unconscious sympathy with the Dharma because his philosophy of life is man-centred, not God-centred. Personal development is important to him. He is often labelled as a 'liberal humanist'. He passionately believed that human beings need not stay stuck in grooves but are free to develop. When he uses the the word 'spiritual', as he occasionally does, it is not in any authorised religious sense, but in order to indicate an expansion of being and the individual pursuit of higher values.

Forster's earliest fictional writings are short stories. Many of them are fantasies about men and women who escape, or want to escape, from the stuffy social milieu that hems them in, from a dry colourless world into an infinitely expanding one.

Mr Lucas, in a story called *The Road from Colonus*, is one of these, an old man whose 'phrases and gestures had become stiff and set, his anecdotes, once so successful, fell flat, his silence was as meaningless as his speech'.[3] He has come to Greece with his daughter and a couple of her friends, to satisfy a life-long curiosity about the country. Contrary to his expectations, the visit stirs him deeply and there comes over him 'a strange desire to die fighting.'

When the story opens, he has goaded his mule ahead of the party and has entered a pleasing grove of plane trees. He is immediately captivated by the place. The grove houses a primitive lodging run by an old woman who lives with her grown-up son and a couple of younger children. A tall hollow tree leans over the house. Out of its hollow, a spring bubbles up, and as he peers [40] into it, Mr Lucas discovers that it is a shrine with images of the local gods. He climbs into the hollow and there experiences an awakening, one of those glimpses of something higher that Joyce would call 'epiphanies', Wordsworth 'spots of time', and Forster 'Eternal Moments'. In Forster's fiction, such visitations are usually inspired, as in this instance, by the spirit of place. Suddenly everything Mr Lucas sees is transfigured.

> He was aroused at last by a shock – the shock of an arrival perhaps, for when he opened his eyes, something unimagined, indefinable, had passed over all things, and made them intelligible and good.
>
> There was meaning in the stoop of the old woman over her work, and in the quick motions of the little pig, and in her diminishing globe of wool. A young man came singing over the streams on a mule, and there was beauty in his pose and sincerity in his greeting. The sun made no accidental patterns upon the spreading roots of the trees, and there was intention in the nodding clumps of asphodel, and in the music of the water. To Mr Lucas, who, in a brief space of time, had discovered not only Greece, but England and all the world and life, there seemed nothing ludicrous in the desire to hang within the tree another votive offering – a little model of an entire man.[4]

But the old life comes to reclaim him. The others return, their jangling voices bringing more than a touch of the English Edwardian middle class into that sacred grove. With unerring snatches of dialogue and a few deft phrases, Forster evokes the awful contrast. '"Why here's papa playing at being Merlin"', croons his daughter Ethel. The others go into false raptures about the spot. Their vapid protestations of delight fool Mr Lucas into thinking them sincere.

"Well, I must stop" said Ethel, "I positively must". "Yes do! You and your father. Antigone and Oedipus. Of course you must stop at Colonus". The ironic analogue with Sophocles' play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, threads in and out, a sort of leit-motif of the story. Mr Lucas' mind relaxes into delightful musing at the prospect of spiritual salvation from the 'old thoughts, old wearinesses' that the stay will bring. He is convinced that 'one such night would [41] place him beyond relapse and confirm him forever in the kingdom he had regained'.[5]

Realising that the others are not serious after all, the old man is furious. When he hears Ethel's strident voice calling him to horse, he announces his determination to stay, echoing Oedipus's vow never to leave the grove of the Eumenides.[6] But he is too old for young tricks. They quietly lead his mule up from behind and the young man hoists Mr Lucas into the saddle. He is led away, helpless, from his salvation, away from the spring of renewal and a new birth, back to the old wearinesses to a cramped old age and death.

The 'prison' in another story, *The Celestial Omnibus*, is a dismal middle class family in Surbiton; the 'prisoner' is a boy who escapes to heaven on a horse-drawn omnibus which, he discovers, leaves twice a day, at dawn and dusk, from the end of the alley-way opposite his house. In this story, the boy's mind is not expanded by spirit of place; rather, he escapes from a cultural desert into a cultural paradise. Here, it should be stressed, 'culture' is not a hobby, but a means of developing the heart and watering emotional dryness. Many of Forster's characters suffer from what he calls 'the undeveloped heart'. The boy knows next to nothing about art. Poetry is a chore for him, something he has to learn when he's been naughty. For Mr Bons ('snob' spelled backwards!), a regular visitor to the house, art is a sort of hobby which he enjoys sounding off about. Whereas the boy's heart is open to development, that of the visitor is closed. The story plays on this contrast.

When the boy gets back from his solo Omnibus trip, he is beaten by his father for lying about his journey to the heavens. The narrow world of the suburb is closed to wider horizons! And for further punishment, he is made to learn a sonnet of Keats by heart and recite it in front of the visitor. After a few lines, he bursts into tears because, he says "All these words that only rhymed before, now that I've come back, they're me". He goes on reciting:

> 'Aye, on the shores of darkness there is light, And precipices show untrodden green. "It is so, sir", cries the lad, "All these things are true". "I never doubted it," said Mr Bons, with closed eyes'.[7]

Curiosity gets the better of the visitor and he accompanies the boy on a second trip to the Heaven of the Immortals. At the start of the journey he notices that the driver is Dante, who, he smugly claims, is his favourite author. [42] But the trip is too much for Mr. Bons. His heart is too shrivelled to take in such sudden floods of light. While the boy marvels at the celestial rainbows spanning the precipices, his wretched fellow traveller grovels on the floor, screaming to get out.

In *The Machine Stops*, the tragedy of the undeveloped heart appears on a more comprehensive scale. The whole of civilisation has moved underground, and people – all of them now pale and stunted – live in air-conditioned cells. This time, the prison seems complete. They have lost contact with the earth and fresh air, and derive all their needs and pleasures from the

Machine which literally rules their lives. Inevitably, one of the characters, a youth, finds his way back to the surface of the earth, and savours its delights before being clawed back inside by the worm-like feelers of the Machine. Year by year, the Machine is operated 'with increased efficiency and decreased intelligence', and eventually there is no one who understands the Monster as a whole. Slowly but surely, its workings deteriorate without, at first, anyone noticing. When the end comes, the main character is terrified.

> 'She had never known silence, and the coming of it nearly killed her – it did kill many thousands of people outright. Ever since her birth she had been surrounded by the steady hum.'[8]

An airship crashes down through one of the main ventilator shafts, and the youth and his mother, the only ones to be saved – not physically, but spiritually – watch the disintegration in their dying moments. 'They saw the nations of the dead, and, before they joined them, scraps of the untainted sky'. Forster was concerned that we 'keep open a few breathing holes for the human spirit'. He was appalled by the encroachment of the machine age, beginning to cast its shadow of cold iron over man's vision of the infinite (the 'untainted sky'). What the infinite is, he wisely never attempts to define, although in his later fiction he subtly suggests it through 'quiet indications' and recurring symbols.

One way in which Rickie, the hero of Forster's second novel, *The Longest Journey*, wants to keep open the breathing holes, is by getting in touch with Nature. Rickie explores this theme in his writings. In an early passage in which he is telling Agnes, his fiancee, about his stories, "Pan Pipes", it soon [43] becomes clear that he is in fact talking about Forster's own early stories, especially one called "Other Kingdom", in which a young girl runs into a beech grove and becomes a Dryad.[9] This was this kind of thing for which D.H. Lawrence criticised Forster's early work, warning him against investing Nature, symbolised by Pan, with spiritual attributes. In the first collection of Forster's short stories, and the early novels, Pan is there in the background as a tangible daemonic force which suddenly erupts (especially in *The Story of a Panic*). It appears in a somewhat more evolved condition in the form of Stephen Wonham in *The Longest Journey*. Stephen is Natural Wholesome Man writ large, embodying simple, back-to-the-earth values. He represents a kind of solution to Edwardian closed-mindedness and the inflexible codes of social behaviour which Forster detested.

But *The Longest Journey* depicts a much broader canvas than the tension between Pan and the grip of vapid social codes. The value of friendship and brotherly love is also a theme, and it is clear in the early chapters that Rickie gains a lot from friendship, especially from his contact with his friend Ansell. In a striking passage in which, from our Western Buddhist perspective, we can hear a clear resonance, Rickie bemoans the fact that friendship is so easily side-lined:

> We fly together, like straws in an eddy, to part in the open stream. Nature has no use for us... Dutiful sons, loving husbands, responsible fathers – these are what she wants, and if we are friends it must be in our spare time… a few verses of poetry is all that survives of David and Jonathan…' [Rickie] wished there was a society, a kind of friendship office, where the marriage of true minds could be registered.[10]

Rickie's friend Ansell echoes this later in a letter, in which he urges him not to marry, arguing that the woman with whom Rickie is in love is not real, but a projection of his diseased imagination! He pleads with Rickie not to close his heart to higher values, begging him to remember that man should care for a hundred things besides a marriage partner and that 'the more

civilised he is, the more he will care for these other hundred things and demand not only a wife and children, but also friends, and work, and spiritual freedom'. [44]

But Rickie is in love; in the conflict between his inner voices, his infatuation easily wins. He opts for the unsuitable marriage – the 'longest journey' of the title – to Agnes, a mean-spirited woman who is totally without vision. It soon becomes clear that he will not find the fulfilment he seeks from the marriage. As it all turns sour, he slowly slides out of love into a sort of death-in-life as a teacher at his brother-in-law's public school, where Agnes becomes matron.

In the last third of the novel, Rickie experiences a kind of redemption in his love for Stephen, who, as he discovers through Ansell's agency, is his illegitimate brother, not through the father he hated but the mother he loved. In the end, he escapes from the marriage which is destroying him.

'The longest journey' is a phrase from the famous passage in *Epipsychidion* [11] in which Shelley passionately deplores the exclusiveness of marriage. Though not all marriages in Forster's novels are seen in this light, he spoke more than once of what he called 'that astonishing glass shade' which descends at marriage, forming a barrier between the couple and the rest of the world. There are happy marriages in his novels, but they do not come as the culmination of passionate love affairs. Forster himself was homosexual and in view of the repressive climate of the time decided to confine his less inhibited descriptions of sexual encounters to those between men in his novel Maurice and the later short stories which were not published till after his death. The first sexual incident in his book Howards End is a fumbled chaste kiss in a rose garden and the only other carnal exchange takes place offstage, its fruit coming as a bit of a surprise to the reader!

The proposed marriage between Margaret and Henry in *Howards End* is not so much the consummation of physical love but rather a device for bringing together the conflicting ideals of two families, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. Weaving its way through the story is the theme of balance, the need to integrate two essential qualities which tend to go to extremes. Margaret Schlegel, the central character, strives to integrate the opposing tendencies. Here she is, reflecting in the middle of a disagreement with her sister Helen about her impending engagement to Henry Wilcox of the 'opposing camp': [45]

> She felt there was something a little unbalanced in the mind that so readily shreds the visible (a mind, that is, like Helen's!). The business man who assumes that this life is everything, and the mystic who asserts that it is nothing, fail, on this side and on that, to hit the truth. Truth was not halfway between… but was only to be found by continuous excursions into either realm.[12]

As often in Forster's work, it is not a question of one or the other, reason or emotion, prose or passion, the outer life or the inner life, but of finding a middle way between the two. The two families are forever contrasted but the novelist's aim is to bring them together, to bridge the gulf. The Wilcoxes – all except Mrs Wilcox – are for the outer life of business and getting things done, the life, as Helen puts it, 'of telegrams and anger', while the Schlegels are for the inner life of refinement, through culture and personal relations.

At the two extremes are Helen Schlegel on the one hand, and Henry Wilcox on the other.For Helen, the emotions and personal relations are everything. Speaking of them, she often echoes Keats famous phrase, 'the holiness of the heart's affections'. In complete contrast, Henry Wilcox says of himself: '"I am not a fellow who bothers about my own inside". Outwardly he was cheerful and brave: but within all had reverted to chaos'.[13] The whole drama of the novel turns on the conflict between these opposites.

Margaret's function is to strive to reconcile them, to bring about what seems an impossible union. She is the one to make the vital connection. 'Only connect…' is the famous epigraph of the novel. She has to 'build the rainbow bridge' as Forster puts it, between the prose and the passion, the prose of the Wilcoxes with the poetry of the Schlegels:

> Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.[14][14]

In terms of our own spiritual practice as Buddhists, the struggle to connect in Howards End is what we would call the integration of reason and emotion. We have to work so hard to bring together those fragments of ourselves and heal the split between head and the heart. Margaret Schlegel hopes to heal the split by accepting Mr Wilcox's proposal of marriage. Helen is appalled. She [46] herself had briefly contemplated union with Paul, Henry's son, but had withdrawn when she glimpsed the 'panic and emptiness' behind the Wilcox business-like facade.

Though Margaret can see their limitations, she also acknowledges the debt owed by people like herself to the Wilcoxes of this world. The Schlegels do not have to work; they live off a family inheritance. She reflects that if the Wilcox types hadn't worked for thousands of years, there'd be no ships and trains 'to carry us literary people about. "More and more do I refuse", she says, "to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it"'. The middle way again!

She sets to work to build that rainbow bridge, but it is a daunting task and the odds are very much against her succeeding. Through Helen's well-meaning but impulsive behaviour and the consequent revelations about Mr Wilcox's murky past, things come to a head at a wedding party in Shropshire, where the Schlegel reverence for the sanctity of personal relations comes into headlong collision with the Wilcox habit of dodging the emotions. Tragedy is barely averted before the final reconciliation at Howards End.

With all his exploration of the theme of people integrating alienated fragments of themselves, especially reason with emotion, and with his frequent references to the business of connecting, healing rifts and spanning gulfs, not much is required in the way of bridge-building to relate Forster's work to the connection between art and spiritual development explored by Sangharakshita in his essays on art and the spiritual life.[15] The supreme connection, that between Art and the development of Insight into the Transcendental, Forster does not make, but in his later novels he often evokes a sense of profound dissatisfaction with the comfortable limits of the known, pointing to something higher and beyond. His rather saintly characters, such as Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India* and Mrs Wilcox in *Howards End*, are people of genuine moral integrity who, in spite of their commanding presence, manage to stay aloof from the other major characters and their conflicts. Disgusted with the prejudice of his British persecutors and never doubting his innocence, Mrs Moore refuses to participate in the trial of Aziz, the Indian doctor accused of seducing Adela.[47]

In an article entitled 'Anonymity: An Enquiry'[16] Forster elaborated on the two personalities of the artist. The first is the surface self, preoccupied with day-to-day business. The second is the lower personality – lower, that is, in the sense of deeper – which comes into operation when the artist is involved in the creative act. Without this, he argues, 'there is no literature'. This deeper personality is less rigid, more malleable than the surface persona; it does not clamour for recognition, does not care whether his readers know that 'I wrote this' or not. It would be perfectly happy with the anonymity enjoyed by the authors of the early English and Scottish ballads:

> Although it is inside S.T. Coleridge, it cannot be labelled with his name. It has something in common with all other deeper personalities, and the mystic will to assert that the common quality is God, and that here, in the obscure recesses of our being, we near the gates of the Divine.[17]

One sometimes loses track of this deeper persona in Forster's fictions. It can be seemingly buried by the commonplace – what Lionel Trilling called 'the quaint, the facetious and the chatty'. His fine prose style is interrupted in places by a grating old-maidish note, so when his sudden reachings down to the depths do come, they take us by surprise. A contemporary of Forster put it rather well: 'He has the curious effect of sidling up to one with his whimsies – then, suddenly, real power.' It is a power which leaves us not on the brink of Enlightenment, but certainly with a perspective beyond mere conventions. I come away from a reading of his best work with my distrust of 'homes', in the sense of false refuges, confirmed. He leaves me with a brighter sense of something higher and much more deeply satisfying to the human spirit.

Based on a talk given at the Norwich Buddhist Centre.

NOTES

[1] Sangharakshita, *Wisdom Beyond Words*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993, pp.219–20.
[2] Edward Conze, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary*, Four Seasons, Bolinas 1973, p.10.
[3] E.M. Forster, *The New Collected Short Stories*, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985, p.95.
[4] *Ibid*. p.97.
[5] *Ibid*. p.98.
[6] Sophocles: *The Theban Plays*.
[7] E.M. Forster, *The New Collected Short Stories*, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985, p.55.
[8] *Ibid*. p.137.
[9] E.M. Forster, *The Longest Journey*, Penguin Modern Classics, 1967, pp.76–7.
[10] *The Longest Journey*, op.cit., p.69.
[11] P.B. Shelley, *Collected Poems*: Epipsychidion ll.
[12] E.M. Forster, *Howards End*, Penguin Classics, 1988, p.195–6.
[13] *Ibid*. p.187–8.
[14] *Ibid*. p.188.
[15] cf. Sangharakshita, *The Religion of Art*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1988.
[16] In E.M. Forster, *Three Cheers for Democracy*, Penguin Books 1965.
[17] *Ibid*. p.97.