Self-imposed exile as a happy ending.
A study in the fiction of E. M. Forster

A critical reading of E. M. Forster's novels reveals certain affinity between most if not all of them. The writer seems to have his favourite ways of both starting and ending his works. The question of beginnings will be discussed very perfunctorily here. The endings, more similar in their structure as the present paper attempts to prove, shall be dealt with in closer detail.

Rex Warner (1950: 8) wrote that:

Most good writers are continually, with various modifications, repeating themselves in different works. Forster is not exception to the rule.

The main theme of Forster's fiction is clash between two contrasting ways of life, cultures different either in geographical terms as England and Italy or India, or in a more
metaphorical sense between different values as these represented by sisters Schlegel and Wilcoxes.

This statement only seemingly contradicts that of Cavaliero (1979: 130):

one theme that is central in all four Forster's early novels is that of conversion: the change in outlook caused by a moment of spiritual realisation.

The conversion is a result of the clash defined above. Self-imposed exile is Forster's heroes' answer to the conversion. Instead of fighting for the truth they saw, they choose to go away with it. The conversion forms the climax, the self-imposed exile is the resolution.

The books usually open with representatives of England cast into a new environment. This should not mean that certain opening scene is repeated in various books. Quite on the contrary, the opening lines and scenes are usually powerful and surprising. However, within the first two chapters the situation is established - the heroes or heroines face a culture different from their own. The clashes that result from these differences form a necessary part of any novel of Forster.

They lead, however, to one development (a term necessary here as the device in question can serve both to move the plot forward and to close it) - a self-imposed exile. This term shall be used here to describe rejection and abandonment of native country and/or native values.

Most often it is so that a protagonist chooses to go away instead of facing the opposition. Seldom does this happen that they are actually forced to go. The word "escape" may seem more appropriate in a number of cases. The word "exile" was
preferred as it brings to mind an element of judgement after breaking especially moral rules, severance of all ties with the old environment, one the exiles would not desert of their free will. The heroes choose to go away rather than oppose their world. They are aware of conflict but instead of fighting for their cause they choose to start a new life elsewhere.

It is remarkable that the heroes decide to go into exile aware of their failure. It is not that their conversion in itself was a failure, it is as if the change brought with itself an awareness of its own fragility. The newly-discovered self cannot fight - it can develop only beyond the boundaries of their world "in the view" or "in the greenwood".

This attempt at a definition may seem somewhat vague. A short presentation of appearances of this device should make it clearer. The first novel of Forster Where Angels Fear to Tread opens with an exile and ends in one. The first exile is Lilia Herriton, for all practical purposes forced to go to Italy, far away from Sawston, the rules of which she does not and cannot comply with. Her exile is settled when she marries Gino and her family severes all ties with her.

The novel ends in the decision of Philip Herriton to leave Sawston and move to London. This ending however is less clear as an argument for the present case. Philip is to leave Sawston but intends to do it with Caroline Abbott. Whether he would stick to his word having learned that she would not marry him remains a mystery especially as the reader has already learned that Philip had once failed to leave Sawston behind in fairly similar circumstances. The conclusion of Glen Cavaliero (1979: 73) seems therefore all too plausible:
The dangerous pleasures of self-martyrdom are frequently the consequence of a too-ready acceptance of defeat; and Sawston wants to reclaim her erring sons and daughters.

*The Longest Journey* includes two exiles - Rickie Eliot and Stephen Wonham. Rickie decides to leave his environment twice. First, he leaves his beloved Cambridge where he cannot stay after his fateful decision to marry Agnes. They go to Sawston which he also leaves suddenly when the existence of his illegitimate half-brother is revealed.

Gardner (1977: 17) uses the word "emancipation" to describe the last exile. The word is telling because inasmuch as leaving Cambridge is painful as it was the first place where Rickie got to know friendship and true knowledge, his exile from Sawston is actually a liberation.

Rickie achieves a temporary happiness when he is united with his half-brother who as an illegitimate child is exiled from the proper world by definition. Failing to improve Stephen, Rickie dies saving his brother's life. Unable to cope with his life he seems to choose death.

*A Room with a View* presents “a choice of limitation in the name of a greater freedom (Cavaliero, 1979: 93)”, a limitation which is expressed by the rejection of the heroine's world. A young English girl from the suburban Summer Street goes to Italy to broaden her mind. It is there, however, that she learns of narrowness of her views and her surroundings. She falls for a young man, George Emerson, who represents for her "the view". However, when he kisses her, she readily accepts an opportunity to run away and does the same when she meets George again in England.
Lucy first tries to choose a self-imposed exile when she:
gets a chance to escape from the whole mess [she created herself] when she learns that the Miss Alans are going to Greece (Martin 1976: 103).

She is already roughly aware of her feelings (at least to a sufficient extent to reject another suitor) but not enough to accept George's love. When she finally does so, she faces rejection from her family.

George and Lucy's isolation at the end is telling. For if the novel solves the challenge of modern life in personal terms, there still remains the fact that there are other and competing claims to possess reality, contradictions inherent in the society of the day (Cavaliéro 1979: 105).

Forster himself seemed to want to clear away any doubts concerning this happy ending and in his 1958 Appendix "A View without a Room" he foresaw a reunion of the family. Such a conclusion resulted probably from his awareness of the fact that reality had changed radically during the fifty years.

When the 1908 text of the novel ends, however,

Lucy's happiness [...] is adulterated with a sense that she has alienated her family and Mr Beebe 'perhaps forever'. Her mother and brother are too 'disgusted at her past hypocrisy' to forgive her marriage to George; Mr Beebe for all his tolerance and insight, is blind to the virtue of sexual passion (Martin 1976: 104).
Nevertheless, we might agree here with Cavaliero (1979: 93) that *A Room with a View* is Forster's best liked novel because (with the dubious exception of *Maurice*) it is the only one to have a happy ending.

The very term "happy ending" requires a little thought. It is true that Forster's novels with this sole exception do not offer a happy ending of the "and they lived happily ever after" kind. This happiness is conditioned by the fact that it was achieved thanks to exile\(^1\). It is equally true though that they end with hope - the true values have been revealed, the heroes are aware of them and they seem to have shown sufficient courage to reject the old in favour of the new which has or is about to be born.

*Howards End* is a perfect case to prove this. The book ends in an exile. After the death of Leonard Bast and his murderer's imprisonment Henry Wilcox decides to desert his world and settle in the house of his late first wife. His second wife, Margaret Schlegel joins him there. They are both aware of their failure, Henry Wilcox failed as father and man while

Margaret's settlement at *Howards End* constitutes a visible retreat from the world she once professed to admire (Martin 1977: 125).

This ending may be, nevertheless, considered as a happy one as they go into this rural exile with a task of bringing up

\(^{1}\) It seems a case similar to the last comedies of William Shakespeare as *Much Ado About Nothing* or *The Winter's Tale* where the happy conclusion seems to come at too high a price.
the child of Helen Schlegel and Bast who "shall inherit England".

A partially imposed exile closes also *A Passage to India*. Dr Aziz is forced to leave Chandrapore by the British who cannot stand him as a living proof of their misbehaviour. The exile is for him a way of making his dream come true. He finds freedom from the British and self-fulfilment, inasmuch as it is possible in the India of the 1920s. He also gains a more complete awareness of his position and of his prospects.

The most clear example of a self-imposed exile is *Maurice* which ends in the heroes' decision to "escape into the greenwood" which David Craig called

the novelistic equivalent of a dissolve, neither a "happily ever after" nor a stage littered with corpses (Gardner 1973: 472).

The elements of the "exile" are the most visible here: the heroes reject a world they both felt at home with as they are aware that they are breaking the rules of it. They are also aware of the fact that their feeling although precious is too feeble to fight with the world and they choose to cultivate it in another world.

The question whether such a dubious ending can qualify as a happy one aroused some debate among Forsterian critics. In 1960, Forster (1972: 218) himself made his point perfectly clear in his "Terminal note": “A happy ending was an imperative. I shouldn't have bothered to write otherwise.”

This aim was clearly seen by early reviewers such as C. P. Snow:
[Maurice] is a novel with a purpose, and the purpose is to proclaim that homosexual love, in its fullest sense, can be happy and enduring (Gardner 1973: 435).

The writer's decision was supported by Claude J. Summers (1983: 143) and further explained by Cavaliero (1979: 131-132):

Forster's determination that his book should have a happy ending may be seen not as compensatory fantasy but as a demonstration that homosexual love, which is usually regarded merely as a problem to be analysed and overhauled by social worker, psychologist and priest, can be to those experiencing it a matter of normality and joy.

This attitude was not unanimous. Some critics as Julian Mitchell saw it such an ending as an escape from the problem and not an attempt at resolution:

Social acceptance has always been and still is the only possible serious objective for homosexuals. Forster seems to have shied away from its possibility (Gardner 1973: 440).

A more critical attitude can be found in the volume *Queer Forster*. Gregory W. Bredbeck in a very circumstantial way (leading via among others Carpenter, Whitman, Buddha and Nietzsche) seems to suggest that Maurice ends in the heroes' death. Strangely enough, Bredbeck seems to have missed in
his reading Forster's "Terminal note" where the author stated clearly that the book would have been "publishable":

If it ended unhappily, with a lad dangling from a noose or with a suicide pact, all would be well, for there is no pornography or seduction of minors. But the lovers get away unpunished and consequently recommend crime (Forster 1972: 218).

Even more dubious is the evidence used by Christopher Lane in his study "Betrayal and Its Consolations" where the author departing from failed blackmail attempted by Alec draws the conclusion that

the unconscious elements of [Forster's] fictional relationships eluded his narrative control (Martin 1997: 169).

It seems that the queer critics are more concerned with Lytton Strachey's "delightful and disquieting" letter where as the writer recalls:

[Strachey] said that the relationship of the two rested upon curiosity and lust and would only last six weeks² (Forster 1972: 219).

² Forster's memory seems to fail him here as the quotation actually runs as follows: "I should be inclined to diagnose Maurice's state as simply lust and sentiment - a very wobbly affair; I should have prophesied a rupture after 6 months - chiefly as a result of lack of common interest owing to class differences - I believe even such a simple-minded fellow as Maurice would have felt this - and so the Sherwood Forest ending appears to me slightly mythical" (Gardner 1973: 430).
than with the text and its author. It also shows that the critics know little about the origins of the book and the affinity between its heroes and George Merrill and Edward Carpenter, a common worker and a Cambridge man, a writer and philosopher who lived together from 1898 till 1928 (Summers 1983: 178). Forster again clearly explained their influence on the creation of Maurice.

The evidence provided above allows to draw a more specific definition of the self-imposed exile in Forster's novels. The plots are based upon a clash between two different values as a result of which the heroes realise their incomplete (or even none) affiliation with the value they had professed. The new awareness allows them to start a new life one they can lead only away from their world which they have to reject, go into exile while the books end in the hope of a new life.

This is were a structural analysis must end. To draw further conclusions we must refer to psychoanalytical approach. E. M. Forster was a homosexual who for a long time found it difficult to cope with his condition. According to his biographers he refrained from sexual activity to his 38th year (Furbank, 1979 vol 2: 35). This means that even when he set to write his gay love story his first-hand knowledge of homosexual relations was almost nil. The model of development visible in Forster's novels reflects thus the writer's personal vision of a homosexual's life. He was convinced that a homosexual, after discovery of his condition becomes an exile and must either leave or shall be forced to go away or punished. Forster himself was unable to reject his world and first of all his mother with whom he lived till 1945, when she died. Therefore, he passed his dream of finding a safe haven in the exile onto his heroes. It was only in the 1920s
that he realised that he could find sexual fulfilment without
the necessity of exile. It was then, however, that he ceased to
write novels.

One more theory explaining his forty year long silence can
be therefore added to the already existing ones. Forster
realised that the vision he presented in his novels was false
and ceased to sublimate his passions into fiction choosing a
happy life instead of the dubious happiness of self-imposed
happy ending.

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