

**E.M. Forster**  
**and**  
**"The Machine Stops"**

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Edward Morgan Forster was born in Jan. I. 1879 in London and died in 1970. His great grand father had been a leading personage in the evangelical Clapham sect, which campaigned successfully for prison reform, abolition of the slave trade, and other progressive social actions in the liberal direction. He was the child of a widowed mother and spent his childhood in a pleasant country house. He was isolated from the normal contacts of human life and like Somerset Maugham, he was miserable as a pupil at a conventional boy's school. This experience was probably largely responsible for his feeling of loneliness and neglect as it found a sensitive expression between a mother and a son in his story "The Machine Stops". However when Forster went to Cambridge, he found there sympathetic environment, he took an honorary degree in classics and was deeply influenced by the lectures of George Edward Moore, the philosopher who wrote *Principia Ethica*. Forster joined the club of Apostles where he enjoyed freedom of debate and individual opinion. Forster was considered among the realists and he is said to mingle Hebraism with Helenism at the background of Victorian moral zeal, and to modify Philistinism by his classical interests at Cambridge. (I)

Forster lived an uneventful life, he toured Italy, Greece, Germany and India; in Africa he went to Egypt. It has been concluded however that his mind is influenced by Cambridge where he attained a good cultural background. He enriched his understanding of human nature and his love of beauty deeper by travelling.

The Novels that made Forster famous were, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, (1905), *The Longest Journey*, (1907), *A Room with a View*, (1908), *Howards End*, (1910), *A Passage to India*, (1924); *Maurice*, (written between 1913 and 1914, was published a year after he was dead).

His Short stories were published in 1914, *The Celestial Omnibus and other Stories*, and in 1928 *The Eternal moment and other Stories*.

In 1927, he wrote an important book about the novel: *Aspects of the Novel*. In 1936, he published *Abinger Harvest*; and *Two Cheers for Democracy* followed in 1951. Those two books are collections of essays in which he explained his ideas about life and writing.

In 1946, Forster returned to Cambridge and lived in King's College until his death. This was the happiest part of his life where he had many friends. He is known as a generous man giving time and money to whoever needed his help. Not only his books but also his friendliness increased his popularity greatly. In spite of his reputation he was known to be a modest man. When he was on his eighteenth birthday, King's College gave a lunch to him in his honour. Famous people visited King's College to bring him their greetings and to enjoy the celebration. On that day it has been recorded that he said on the radio, "I am quite sure that I am not a great novelist", but his distinguished guests quite probably thought differently. "To them, the quiet- rather untidy-man in the seat of honour was the most civilized writer of his time."(2)

Forster's fiction was compared and seen at the level of the great English writers such as Jane Austen and Henry James. Lionel Stevenson notes that "from Austen he derived the gentle irony that masks his sympathy, from James the concern with the moral dilemmas and the meticulous attention to form and to point of view."(3) Going backwards to the year 1950, Rex Warner compares E.M. Forster with D.H. Lawrence concerning the women characters and sex, telling that "Lawrence's exaltation of sex is more emphatic, more exaggerated than Forster's; yet in both writers, is present the desire for life and to have life more abundantly. The difference is that while Lawrence, in a religious fervour, plunges forward and invites us to follow him over great expanses, Forster, in whom there is no absence of feeling, seems in this respect to lead us up a long garden path, revealing at the end, perhaps, some aesthetic scene between the wrong people in the wrong place"(4)

In 1953 G.S. Fraser says about Forster that he is "the novelist not as speculative but as paractical philosopher, interested in human behaviour in so far as it presents us with moral problems;.. but such everyday problems as whether we are doing what we really want, and ought to do."(5) Fraser concluded that Forster is an intelligent and sensitive writer though not the most forceful and imaginative, influenced such writers, like L.P. Hartley and Christopher Isherwood.

In 1954 Walter Allen wrote that Forster has "the most personal style since Meredith's, to whom he owes much, and it is the style, ... which gives his novels their unity..." (6) Allen also compares Forster with Fielding and Thackeray that he is a success in expressing his personal attitude in a special tone of voice.

In 1961, G.D. Klingopulos concludes that Forster's novels have affinities with the novels of Hardy on the one hand and with those of Lawrence on the other

and that he is reminded also of Meredith. (7) He thinks that his earlier novels will remain fresh and individual even after much reading and they will probably remain current for a long time to come.

In an essay called "The Challenge of Our Time" Forster tells: "Temperamentally, I am an individualist. Professionally, I am a writer, and my books emphasize the importance of personal relationships and the private life, for I believe in them." (8)

Later in the text he says the following;

"I belong to the fag-end of Victorian Liberalism .. in many ways it was an admirable age. It practiced benevolence and philanthropy, was humane and intellectually curious, upheld free speech, had little colour-prejudice, believed that individuals are and should be different, and entertained a sincere faith in the progress of society."

Here Forster notes that he is one of the last Victorian Liberalists who admires the last age because of its philanthropy or the love of mankind, its acceptance of free speech, its curiosity in knowledge, its less colour prejudice as he takes, its belief that men are different and finally its trust in the progress of society. Although he admired the last decade Forster knew its faults. He said that education was imperfect and the poor was exploited in their own country and that the English were getting bigger profits than they should, but all of this changed the present century; "the poor have kicked", "the backward races are kicking". Forster offers a way to challenge the present time successfully and that is to combine "New Economy with the Old Morality". Forster does not trust the economist who says that "when all people are properly fed and housed they will have an outlook which will be right". Forster concludes in the following way:

"I cannot swallow that I have no mystic faith in the people. I have in the individual. He seems to me a divine achievement and I mistrust any view which belittles him. If anyone calls you a wretched little individual- and I've been called that- don't you take it lying down. You are important because everyone else is an individual too- including the person who criticizes you. In asserting your personality you are playing for your side." (9)

Forster defends individuality ardently and asserts his belief in the divine achievement that individual is holy, he would mistrust any opinion which belittles the individual. He says that one is important because everyone else is an individual, even the person who is critical of one for being an individual. In asserting for one's personality one is playing for oneself.

Forster accepts the fact like A. Huxley, that the present situation of world's food distribution cannot be planned without world population control. He concludes such:

"You can't do that without regulating the number of births and interfering with family life. You must supervise parenthood. You are meddling with the realms of the spirit, of personal relationship, although you may not have intended to do so."

Then Forster adds his following conclusion on human life and individuality;

"When there is a collision of principles would you favour the individual at the expense of the community, as I would? Or would you prefer economic justice for all at the expense of personal freedom?" (10)

Thus as we see in these lines, E.M. Forster indicates that he would favour personal freedom and individuality even at the expense of the community and economic justice. He also concludes that he is a writer "who cares for men and women and for the countryside". His contemporary world would make him miserable, indignant and uncomfortable. He hoped that in the new economy there would be hope for human relationships and art to gain more credit. The writer and the artist ought to express what he wants and not what he is told to express by the authorities. In Forster's opinion art has a value in itself and he expresses this in the following lines:

"Art is valuable not because it is educational (though it may be) not because it is recreative (though it may be), not because everyone enjoys it (for everyone does not), not even because it has to do with beauty. It is valuable because it has to do with order, and creates little worlds of its own possessing internal harmony, in the bosom of this disordered planet. It is needed at once and now." (II)

What Forster wants to tell about art is that art is a value in itself because it consists order and harmony and it is creative. It creates unique worlds in a disordered planet to use the writer's words. Art may be educational, entertaining, recreative and beautiful but all these qualities seem rather secondary compared to its basic value of creativity, order and harmony. Art is needed and is independent of appreciation. It ought to be practised to bring man out of his present darkness as it in fact brought original man out of his original darkness and elevated him above beasts. As Forster thinks highly of the intellectual and the artist coming more in touch with humanity, he shows distrust to the scientist for patronizing the past and oversimplifying the present and looking forward to the future where his leadership will be accepted. Forster says:

"Owing to the political needs of the moment, the scientist occupies an abnormal position, which he tends to forget. This separates him from ordinary men and women and makes him unfit to enter into their feelings. It is high time he came out of his ivory tower. We want him to plan for our bodies. We do not want him to plan for our minds."(12).

These lines show that Forster is critical about the contemporary scientist for isolating himself from ordinary men and women and perhaps the scientist thinks himself to be all too important owing to the political needs and he tends to forget that this is an abnormal situation.

In his essay "What I Believe", he starts with an interesting statement that he would not "believe in Belief". Then he concludes in an important statement that is as he says in the following lines:

"My law givers are Erasmus and Montaigne, not Moses and St. Paul. My temple stands... in that Elysian Field where even the immoral are admitted. My motto is: "Lord I disbelieve-help thou my unbelief"." (13)

Erasmus was a Dutch humanist who lived in the 16th century. He defends irrationalism and modesty in man and Montaigne is a great thinker of Renaissance who championed freedom of thought. Elysian Fields are the home of the blessed after death according to the Greek Mythology. Forster concludes that although he lives in an Age of Faith, he does not trust in Belief and probably finds more tolerance and freedom in unbelief. Again he notes, that belief in personal relationships is important where "personal relationships are despised today"(14). The writer states further that "personal relationships .. are regarded as bourgeois luxuries, as products of a time of fair weather which is now past, and we are urged to get rid of them, and to indicate ourselves to some movement or cause instead". The writer says : "I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country" (15). It seems that such a choice may seem scandalous and even amoral to the patriots. Like Dante Forster hates Brutus and Cassius because they had betrayed Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome. Forster says that.

"Love and loyalty to an individual can run counter to the claims of the State. When they do-down with the State, say I, which means that the State would down me... This brings me along to Democracy... it is less hateful than other contemporary forms of government, and to that extent it deserves our support. It does start from the assumption that the individual is important, and that all types are needed to make a civilization... people need to express themselves; they cannot do so unless society allows them liberty to do so, and the society which allows them most liberty is a democracy... Democracy has another merit. It allows criticism,...So two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three." (16)

We see from Foster's statements that he is a courageous writer, when he openly states that he would prefer personal relationships to the State even when individual

claims would run counter to the interests of the State. 'Love and Loyalty' is to be presented to the individual even if the State omits the individual. As Forster relates, individual freedom is possible in a democracy because it accepts variety of men and allows criticism. For this reason he gives two cheers to democracy but he is careful not to give the usual British three cheers, because democracy has also faults. All this shows that Forster is a fearless but a careful thinker and a writer.

About force and violence, Forster said the following: "It is, alas! the ultimate reality on this earth, but it does not always get to the front. Some people call its absences 'decadence'; I call them 'civilization' and find in such interludes the chief justification for the human experiment" (17) At the end of his one other essay, "Three Anti Nazi

Broadcast', he said the following statement about violence:

"It is a comfort to remember that violence has so far never worked. Even when it seems to conquer, it fails in the long run. This failure may be due to the Divine Will. It can also be ascribed to the strange nature of man, who refuses to live by bread alone and is the only animal who has attempted to understand his surroundings." (18).

As Forster would put it, force exists and it is a real process. It is no good to deny it like the mystic who would say that it does not exist at all, nor is it any good to defend the Nietzschean point of view which would let the monster loose. There are intervals when civilization succeeds over violence and force. In those intervals great creative actions and decent human relations occur. Forster concludes that it is a comfort to believe that force and violence is never successful in the long run and the failure is due to God's Will and to human nature that refuses to live by bread alone. The writer who had said before, "Lord I disbelieve-help thou my unbelief", shows trust in God's Will and in human nature. It is clear that his belief or his disbelief is not expressed in the ordinary sense of the word. He shows in fact faith in God, but most probably he is against organised religion or he is a hater of blind acceptance of religious thoughts and organizations. Therefore Forster should not be mistaken for an unreligious writer. He could be an unorthodox believer but certainly not an atheist. His faith in God and in human nature holds his hope in civilization in the fight against violence.

Forster says, "I distrust in great men" (19) just in the opposite of D.H. Lawrence who shows faith in the great men. Great men probably like Hitler, produce a pool of blood around them, but this belief does not hold Forster back from believing in aristocracy as probably most English do. He says;

"I believe in aristocracy, though if that is the right word, and if a democrat may use it. Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its

members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos...

I am against asceticism myself. I am with the old Scotsman who wanted less chastity and more delicacy." (20).

Forster's belief in aristocracy is in the democrat's point of view, that is he would not accept an aristocracy of power and rank but he would confirm to an aristocracy which has such virtues as understanding sensitiveness and courage. The members of such an aristocratic community would be found in every place in the world. Democratic aristocracy as the writer would accept, is the true human tradition that would succeed over cruelty and chaos or anarchy. The writer would desire less chastity but more delicacy or kindness. In that aspect he is a humanist who is against formalism, he is a defender of human nature; personal relationships and tolerance in finding the most appropriate path in life. As Forster states he is against the ascetic who would deny the ordinary pleasures of the world and lead a severe life of self-discipline for purely religious reasons.

Forster concludes:

"The Saviour of the future-if ever he comes -will not preach a new gospel... He will make affective the good will and the good temper which are already existing. In other words he will introduce a new technique... I cannot believe that Christianity will cope with the present world-wide mess... It was a spiritual force once but the indwelling spirit will have to be restated if it is to calm the waters again and probably restated in a non-Christian form."

As Forster indicates the future Saviour or prophet would not introduce a new religion or a new Book. He would only introduce a new technique in a non-Christian form making use of such virtues or human values as good will and good temper. Forster believes in the necessity of a change in the religious technique or the religious ways of the people because he does not believe that Christianity can solve the contemporary human problems without adapting a new way. We may see a parallel attitude between D.H. Lawrence and Forster in their feeling of the need of a new religious way and in their trust of one in the "Divine Will and the other in the 'Holy Ghost' to use Forster's and Lawrence's terms respectively.

### **'The Machine Stops' (1909)**

The story of 'The Machine Stops' opens with a scene at a small six-sided room like the cell of a bee. There are no lamps or windows in the room, but still there is

a soft light filling the room. There are no instruments but the room is throbbing with melodious sounds. There is only one armchair at the middle of the room with a desk at the side of it and a woman about five feet tall is sitting on this armchair. She seems like a lump of flesh with a white face like fungus. Her very definition of whiteness symbolizes death or reminds the reader of somebody sick and almost dying. This reminds us also of the lupus coloured women and men working in the hatchery laboratories expressed in the opening chapters of **Brave New World**. It seems that both writers, Forster and Huxley are emphasizing a common notion that the future of the present world is not an alive future but a deadly one.

The woman sitting on the armchair is called Vashti. She is surrounded by many switches and buttons. Whatever she wishes, she only has to touch a button or a switch. If she wished a hot bath, music, or bed or food or clothing, she touched a button and the room provided for the necessary requirements. If she wished to deliver lectures or listen to a friend's speech on literature, she would again touch a button and the screen on the wall would be lighted to give the image of the lecturer. If she wanted to communicate with any friend in any part of the world or just in the neighbouring room, she would only have to push a lever to see her friend through the screen. There was no need to travel or to go outside of her room to see a person. That was an unnecessary deed when there was a machine to provide for all her needs. As Kuno called her on the telescreen from the other side of the world she simply said the following:

"Very well. Let us talk.. I will isolate myself. I do not expect anything important will happen for the next five minutes- for I can give you fully five minutes, Kuno. Then I must deliver my lecture on 'music during the Australian Period'. Be quick! She called, her irritation returning. 'Be quick Kuno; here I am in the dark wasting my time . But it was fully fifteen seconds before the round plate that she held in her hand began to glow. A faint blue light shot across it, darkening to purple, and presently she could see the image of her son, who lived on the other side of the earth, and he could see her.

'Kuno, how slow you are.' he smiled gravely. 'I really believe you enjoy dawdling.' 'I have called you before mother, but you were always busy or isolated. I have something particular to say.'

'What is it dearest boy? Be quick. Why could you not send it by pneumatic post?'

'I want you to come and see me.'

'But I can see you!' she exclaimed.

'What more do you want?'

'I want to see you not through the Machine', said Kuno, 'I want to speak to you not through the wearisome machine.'



'Oh, hush!' said his mother, vaguely shocked.

'You musu't say anything against the machine.'

'Why not?'

'One musn't 't.'

'You talk as if a god had made the machine.'

cried the other. 'I believe that you pray to it when you are unhappy. Men made it, do not forget that. great men. But men. The machine is much, but it is not everything. I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone but I do not hear you. This is why I want you to come. Come and stop with me. Pay me a visit, so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind. She replied that she could scarcely spare time for a visit.'

'The air ship barely takes two days to fly between me and you.'

'I dislike airships.'

'why?'

'I dislike seeing the horrible brown earth and the stars when it is dark. I get no ideas in an air-ship. 'I do not get them anywhere else!' '' (22)

This dialogue between a mother and a son through the machine shows how unsatisfactory the personal relationships have become finally. The son on the other side of the earth wishes his mother to visit him, because he cannot see her real self and be near her to speak confidentially through the machine. What he sees is only an image of his mother and that is not enough for Kuno as he wishes in fact to know what his mother feels or would feel when they come face to face. There is nothing personal, confidential and warm when every communication is conducted and recorded by the machine. The people avoid personal relationships and the warmth of love by letting the machine interfere into everything and into their minds and feelings. What is pitiful is the lack of natural mother love in Vashti. It seems very unnatural that a mother rejects her son's invitation for a visit and that a mother would not wish to see and to touch her son at a time who needs her. The thing which is striking at the first glimpse is that family ties are not considered to have any importance, the family members may not care to meet or to come close in order to express the feelings of love, understanding and friendship. Talking through the screen seems to be enough communication between the individuals. Kuno is an exceptional case who expresses natural sentiments only too natural for the reader, but not normal in the kind of society that he lives.

Kuno reveals that his mother's acception of the machine as something ultimate and unchangeable is wrong. Vashti would pray to the machine but it needs reminding that the machines are all man-made, they are great men-who make the

machines but they are not gods nor is the machine god-like. Forster here indicates that machines cannot and should not replace religion and must not come to dominate men.

Dislike of nature expressed by Vashti, has been stated in a critical tone. Vashti would not like to see or to watch the brown earth, the sky or the sea through the air-ship. Here one is reminded of a scene in **Brave New World** where Lenina expresses hate and fear at the idea of watching the dark waves of the sea underneath from a helicopter as she was with a friend, Bernard Marx. The criticism of artificially induced hate of nature in **The Machine Stops** can be once more observed in parallel in **Brave New World**. This shows that both Forster and A. Huxley have observed similar tendencies- a hate of nature and too high an admiration of the machines in the contemporary men and women. Forster seems to draw the attention of the reader to this point.

Kuno expresses his wish to see the surface of the earth; it seems to be a secret desire of the nature, a wish to return back to nature, the sky, the earth and to breath the pure air again:

"The truth is,... that I want to see these stars again. They are curious stars. I want to see them not from the air-ship, but from the surface of the earth, as our ancestors did, thousands of years ago. I want to visit the surface of the earth."

She was shocked again.

'Mother you must come, if only to explain to me what is the harm of visiting the surface of the earth.' (23)

Here again Kuno desires to attain direct contact with nature as he wanted to have with his mother by seeing her face to face. Kuno would wish to see the surface of the earth and stars not through a screen or from an airship, but he would attempt to visit the outside of the machine, that is he would like to see what earth and stars like. Here it becomes clear that the future society is living in the machine underneath the earth like moles. Only with permission could they go out of the underground passages with respiratory apparatus to breath the air outside. By living and breathing inside for centuries, no man could breath and live outside on the earth without an apparatus. Man has lost his breathing facility and became unable and bound to the machine which he had made. Then future men are servile and unable men. We see that the same theme has been also observed by A. Huxley in **Brave New World** where human beings have lost even their breeding facility and thus also became completely dependant on the progressed technology for their creation.

Public gatherings were completely abandoned in **The Machine Stops**. People watched conferences seated in their own rooms. They did not have to leave their

rooms. Vashti was listened quite well. She then took a bath and summoned her bed, which was the same all over... the world and could not be changed according to any personal liking because to change one bed meant changes altogether. All the human needs were supplied in one room.

According to the Machine Book parent's duties cease at the point of the birth. Kuno was thus separated from his mother after birth and given to public nurseries. He paid many visits to her but Vashti only visited her son once as he was in the public nurseries. Vashti would finally decide to visit her son and goes on her journey in an airship which she thinks is rather old-fashioned and rough, but although she makes a very comfortable journey, she is still rather complaining from trivial things as sun coming through the window shutters. Man had progressed so far that:

"Night and day, wind and storm, tide and earthquake, impeded man no longer. He had harnessed Leviathan. All the old literature, with its praise of Nature, and its fear of Nature, rang false as the prattle of a child."(24)

Night and day, wind and storm were beaten and man had conquered nature. Now all the old literature in praise of Nature seemed rather foolish. Forster is ironical when he says that man has conquered nature. Who is in fact conquered? This is not nature at all but it is man himself who has been conquered by the machine that he had made.

As Vashti reached Kuno he told his mother that he found a way through-out of the machine on foot and what he had done was a crime against the machine and punishment was homelessness. As Kuno tried to go out to the surface of earth through an air passage, he is taken in by the many arms of the machine outside the air passage and told his mother Vashti that there were real people living outside. Vashti listened no more to her son and went away from him. After Kuno's adventure the machine forbid the use of respirators and going out as well. Now people became more religious and prayed the machine for giving them everything so that without the machine living was impossible. Human beings wanted comfort but they did not want freedom. Nobody confessed that the machine was uncontrollable by men. Thus the machine became the tyrant and ruled accordingly. Yet Kuno believed that this machine was stopping and would stop completely one day. This would mean complete death for all the beings who were living underneath the ground. Kuno's prophesy became actualized by and by. Then one day light and radio system failed. They were told that the mending organization would do the repairing. Then one other day the air system failed and in vain everyone pushed the buttons for repairment. People filled the corridors for air but there was no chance, it was too late. Kuno and Vashti embrace each other and Vashti asks a question:

"Kuno, is it true? Are there still men on the surface of earth? Is this-this tunnel, this poisoned darkness-really not the end?"

He replied:

'I have seen them, spoken to them, loved them They are hiding in the mist and the ferns until our civilization stops. To-day they are the Homeless- to-morrow-

'Oh, to-morrow- some fool will start the Machine again, to-morrow.'

'Never', said Kuno, 'never'.

'Humanity has learnt its lesson.'"(25)

As he completed his words the whole city exploded gallery after gallery to the sky. There were nations of dead men and women before Vashti and Kuno joined them. This was the tragic end of the machine civilization.

Forster shows fate in humanity. Even if a tyrannized civilization is completely ruined, there is always hope for a new life to begin at a remote place after such catastrophic ends. Yet as Vashti realistically points;

"To-morrow some fool will start the machine again"

but even if someone attempts to start the machine again there are those intervals of civilization when men can have the opportunity to achieve great deeds and to live like human beings in freedom. Kuno ends by relating Forster's thoughts that 'humanity has learnt its lesson'. Whether it has learnt it or not, history may testify it.

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