mentally hazardous farming practices—from subsidizing the overproduction of corn and wheat crops to promoting the destruction of wetlands. Yet as the word spreads, farmers are rapidly losing their old reputation as "stewards of the environment."

ARTS & LETTERS

Forster's Passage

"One Cheer for E. M. Forster" by Joseph Epstein, in *Commentary* (Sept. 1985), 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Few modern writers have achieved such universal acclaim as Britain's novelist E. M. Forster (1879–1970). *A Passage to India* (1924), his last novel, is a 20th-century classic. His reputation as a literary hero stands nearly unblemished.

Ironically, notes Epstein, editor of the *American Scholar*, a recent friendly biography of the author (*E. M. Forster, A Life*, by P. N. Furbank) actually deflates Forster's heroic image. The new portrait reveals facts that show him to be not a paragon of virtue but a mollycoddled "prig" who was bullied at school and unable to get along with his peers.

At Cambridge University he finally came into his own, Epstein says. Forster read Classics and fell in with an elite coterie of intellectuals, including philosopher Bertrand Russell and economist John Maynard Keynes. He sought to establish his independence. He shed his Christian upbringing and experimented with homosexuality. Yet he returned home after graduation to live with his mother. In his diary, Forster wrote that his life was "straightening into something rather sad & dull." He resolved to do "more exercise," not to "shrink from self-analysis," to "get a less superficial idea of women," and not "to be afraid to go into strange places or company, & be a fool more frequently."

Although Forster did not have to work (he inherited £8,000, then a tidy sum), he took jobs anyway as a cataloguer at the British National Gallery, secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas, and "searcher" for the Red Cross Wounded and Missing Bureau in Egypt during World War I. This period between Cambridge and the war was his most prolific. Between 1905 and 1914, he completed five novels. But commercial and critical success were not central to Forster's life. Rather, he was motivated by a vain effort to overcome a "relentless yearning, and the haunting feeling of missing out on life." Epstein suggests that Forster's longing for a young man in India may have played as great a role as his humanitarian convictions in his writing of *A Passage to India*. The book has an explicitly political theme—the brutality of British rule in India. Yet Forster thought of himself as "above politics." In 1939 he wrote: "I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to chose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country."

ARTS & LETTERS

Epstein does not accept Forster's apolitical declarations. Rather, Epstein believes that "the sterility of middle-class English life" was Forster's real enemy. What kind of world was the novelist seeking? One governed mainly by desires and passions—a kind of life that Epstein finds "thin, hollow, and finally empty."

Audubon's Artistry

"Audubon and His Legacy" by John McEwen, in *Art in America* (Sept. 1985), 980 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10021.

"It is a strange snobbery that isolates botanical or ornithological illustration from . . . art," says McEwen, who writes for the *Times* of London. "John James Audubon [1785–1851] is one of the most notable victims of this prejudice."

It is true that Audubon, now widely remembered as a naturalist, has been ignored as an artist. Indeed, the amateur ornithologist after whom the Audubon Society is named was also the author and illustrator of *The Birds of America* (1827–38), a four-volume elephant-folio edition containing 435 plates and 1,065 figures—now valued at more than $1.5 million. Here Audubon depicted every known species of American bird in life-size pro-

Great Blue Heron *(1821). Eager to record perfect images of American birds, Audubon not only shaded and drew them exactly as they appeared but also presented them in life size. Even birds with six-foot wingspans were squeezed onto the 27-by-40-inch plates by contorting their postures.*