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## Working Paper Series

**The Homoerotic Function of Foreign Settings in the Early  
Fiction of E. M. Forster**

by  
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The belief that there is a foreign place which would be more appropriate and sympathetic for gays has been typical for gay literature since Ancient times when the theme of homosexual love was introduced into the myth of Arcadia (Woods 1998: 17-31). This belief is strongly present *also* in modern gay culture, as Henning Bech describes it:

Happiness is not now, at most in existing memory or in yearning; and it is not found here but in another country, a foreign country - [which is] a stock theme in the homosexual experience. (Bech 1997: 37)

Specific localisation of such a foreign country has been changing over the years yet at the turn of the century the homoerotic geography of the educated British concentrated on two places: Greece and Italy. They were associated with gay love primarily due to the Ancient literary tradition (the term "Greek love" was used as a synonym of homosexuality in the 19th century<sup>1</sup>) the works of which such as the Platonic dialogues were in those times the only available "gay literature" (Jenkyns, 1980: 282).

In the case of Italy it was also widely believed that this\_country was more willing to accept or at least

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<sup>1</sup> This meaning of the adjective "Greek" should not be applied to Forster's works. "While it would certainly be simplistic to suggest that Forster meant Greek as a code word for homosexual, much as Dorian, Platonic, or Sapphic had become, it would be equally misleading to attempt to explain Forster's "Greek" without including the ideas of harmony, peace, nature, and so on, the idea of an accepted and recognized place for the homosexual relationship." (Martin 1977: 70)

tolerate homosexuality. This belief was supported by such Victorian homosexuals as John Addington Symonds, Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo) and Horatio Forbes Brown who either wrote about erotic liaisons with Italian youths or settled down in Italy giving grounds for the belief that homosexual practices were possible there rather than in other European countries (Rahman, 1988: 54)<sup>2</sup>. The myth of Italy as a homosexual heaven was also strengthened by graphic arts especially by photographs of Wilhelm von Gloeden and his followers.

The early works of Edward Morgan Forster are characterized by the usage of foreign settings to such an extent that they are often labelled "the Italian novels". The actual setting of them is not limited to Italy but, especially in the first short stories, includes also Greece. The term, *the Italian novels* was widely used (among others) by Crews 1962, Thomson 1967, Brander 1968 and Dowling 1985. Yet it may seem more reasonable to replace the adjective "Italian" with "Mediterranean" as the importance of Greece is almost equal and the two influences tend to mingle for example in such works as "Albergo Empedocle", the action of which takes place in Grigenti, a Greek colony in Italy, and in "The Story of a Panic" where English tourists encounter the Greek god Pan in the North of Italy. To be more precise then, one

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<sup>2</sup> "For Forster, undoubtedly, Italy was the place where homophobia was 'irremovable... but not particularly high' (Altman 1978: 538), [Italy] "was associated in Forster's mind with homosexuality, as [it] was notorious since the Renaissance as the land where homosexual pleasures could be procured. (Rahman 1988: 54)

might say that the two locales tend sometimes to be perceived as one. The other term would also allow the introduction of Alexandria which, though not present in Forster's fictional works, plays an important part in his oeuvre.

The term "Italian novels" is used basically to describe the two novels: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908). The six short stories which may be referred to as "Italian" include "Albergo Empedocle" (1903), "The Story of a Panic" (1904), "The Road from Colonus" (1904), "The Curate's Friend" (1907), "Other Kingdom" (1909), and "The Story of the Siren" (1920)<sup>3</sup>. The list of Italian novels provided above is not exclusive and it must be supplemented at least by *Maurice* (1913-1914, published 1971) which marks a decisive departure from the kind of treatment of foreign settings as presented below. It should be pointed out here that the present paper concentrates exclusively on the early works of Forster, omitting the question of the homoerotic character of his presentation of India in *A Passage to India* and *The Hill of Devi*.

Peter Hutchings sees the issue in an extremely simple way claiming that

Forster's sexual geography [is as follows]: Italy, for heterosexual romance, Greece for homosexual love,

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<sup>3</sup> Glenn Cavaliero claims that "The Story of the Siren" though published only in 1920 was "composed as early as 1904" (1979: 264), that is within the period 1904-1908 when other "Italian" works were written.

Constantinople as a gateway to polymorphous perversity  
(1995: 224).

The issue, however, was somewhat more complicated and Hutchings seems both misled by the final draft of *A Room with a View* and not curious enough to read closely *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, not to mention the fact that Constantinople plays an extremely minor role in Forster's fiction as the aim of the voyage of the Misses Alan in *A Room with a View*.

Robert K. Martin more precisely describes Forster's usage of the Mediterranean settings as follows:

Throughout most of his stories, Forster opposes a Greek world to a more modern, English world, or in some cases, an Italian, Mediterranean world to a northern, Anglo-Saxon world. His use of the Italian theme is almost identical to that of Henry James, who consistently opposed the sensuality and moral complexity of Italy to the materialism and moral simplicity of England. (Martin 1977: 70)

The first source of Forster's interest in the Mediterranean was his preoccupation with Antiquity which started when he was in secondary school and was strengthened during his stay at Cambridge by his studies in history and Classics (Furbank 1979: 44-80). The influence of such people as Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson or Walter Pater combined with very wide reading both in the classics and contemporary studies in Ancient culture<sup>4</sup>. Voyages to the Mediterranean which

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Forster's reading list from 1899 in Furbank, 1979:

Forster began upon his graduation in 1902 and was to continue until the 1950s further strengthened this interest.

It would be limiting to point out his interest in Classic literary tradition and travels as the only sources of the use of such settings just as it would be wrong to present the interests as exclusively personal as the latter half of the 19th century was a period of increased preoccupation with antiquity. It seems also necessary to explain the meanings Victorian culture ascribed to the region. Perception of Greece was greatly influenced by the famous distinction between "hebraism" and "hellenism" formed by Matthew Arnold who:

did not condemn the Victorian cultivation of the private conscience, which he called 'hebraism' (in allusion to the Old Testament Hebrews) and he defined as 'strictness of conscience' but he thought it needed supplementing. The culture with which he wished to supplement hebraism he called 'hellenism' in allusion to the ancient Greeks and defined as 'spontaneity of consciousness'. (Gillie 1983: 57)

Forster initially follows Arnold in his works though he treats his concepts only as a point of departure<sup>5</sup> as he was further influenced by the works of J. A. Symonds and G. Lowes Dickinson who developed this distinction so that it meant not only freedom of the soul as opposed to moral rigidity, but also sexual freedom as opposed to

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<sup>5</sup> The issue is presented at length in Ross 1980.

the rigid patriarchalism and heterosexuality associated with Hebraism (Martin 1977: 70).

Mediterranean culture is in Forster's fiction "the stimulus to the physical, instinctive self" (Adams 1980: 113) yet revealing one's true identity is perceived and presented as potentially dangerous. The curate from the short story "The Curate's Friend" is a perfect example of this as speaking of his friendship with a faun which may be read as a veiled representation of homosexuality, he says:

[I]f I breathed one word of that, my present life, so agreeable and profitable, would come to an end, my congregation would depart, and so should I, and instead of being an asset to my parish, I might find myself an expense to the nation. (Forster 1954: 93-94)

Especially in the earliest works the influence is far from beneficial and

one easily recognises a pattern common in Forster's early fiction: a symbolic journey to Italy or Greece, the realization of an identity with the Greek spirit, and a sudden transformation, into madness or death. (Martin 1982: 102).

This is what happens to the hero of "Albergo Empedocle" who discovers his "affinity" with an ancient Greek in Girgenti and as a madman is sent to a lunatic asylum. Achieving awareness of one's own homosexuality through the influence of a foreign setting is thus presented as madness. Yet the rejection of the spirit can be equally devastating as it is in the case of Mr

Lucas in "The Road from Colonus" who is "saved" from accepting the ancient influence only to survive as a living dead. The influence is less dangerous when felt outside Greece itself as it occurs in "The Story of a Panic" (though in this case the ending is left open) and in "The Curate's Friend" quoted above where the Greek half-gods (Pan and a faun) appear far away from their natural habitat and exercise more beneficial influence.

The Greece of Forster's early works was, rather a variation on the ideal Arnoldian Greece than the actual country. Judith Scherer Hertz goes as far as to claim that:

The very earliest of the strategies Forster developed to contain his sexual energy was the creation of a fantasy landscape. Often in Greece, sometimes in Italy, or even in an England inhabited by the semi-divinities, it is the place where one encounters one's true nature, where one is allowed one's real sexual identity, not the one so incongruously provided by the Peaslakes, the Tytlers and the Worters. (Herz 1978: 255)

This view is not generally accepted and the presentation of the Mediterranean is elsewhere (e.g. Michońska 1980: 428-429) praised for realism and lack of idealisation. One has to agree however, that Greece itself plays a secondary role in Forster's fiction. It has decidedly meant very much to him yet

In his early work ... it is an ideal to be approached with awe and reverence. Possibly too much awe and reverence is shown; for it is contemporary Italy rather than ancient or

modern Greece that provides Forster, in his early novels, with the world to be opposed to his contemporary English scene (Warner 1954: 8).

An explanation for that may be found in *A Room with a View* where the reverend Beebe says that:

I haven't been to Greece myself, and don't mean to go, and I can't imagine any of my friends going. It is altogether too big for our little lot. Don't you think so? Italy is just about as much as we can manage. Italy is heroic, but Greece is godlike or devilish -- I am not sure which, and in either case absolutely out of our suburban focus (Forster 1978: 197)

These conclusions may be partially Forster's own as rather quickly he concentrated on Italy as the setting of his fiction. In this respect he belongs again to an established

Romantic tradition of embracing Italy as the home of brilliance and passion, of emergence from the English fog and snobbery. Like Shelley and Browning, Forster finds Italy rich in moral and emotional extremes that make the stuff of melodrama (Crews 1962: 71)

Yet just as it was in the previously presented cases Forster departs from a tradition only to use it in his own way. Although his Italy is, indeed, the Italy of the Grand Tour of Shelley and of Pater, it has, nevertheless, special features.

Italy is seen as a land of spontaneity; its social traditions and moral restraints are either ignored altogether, or else shown as wonderfully and inexplicably encouraging the

free play of impulse. In Italy what you ought to do, and what you are expected to do, and what you to do mysteriously tends to be one and the same thing."

(Cockshut 1977: 173)

Italy becomes thus a place for a

rebellion against middle-class conformity and the possibility of escape - often literally and usually to Italy.

(Altman 1978 537-538)<sup>6</sup>

where such a rebellion seems quite acceptable. A place where lovers who offended the system can find, at least temporary refuge as it is in *A Room with a View*. Naturally, in the published texts Forster writes only about straight lovers.

Apart from the Classical tradition the choice of Italy as the ideal refuge was also influenced by Forster's perception of Italian society with masculine domination "free from feminine criticism" (Wilde 1973: 259) which makes the country an ideal of Forster's vision of homosexuality even though he is ready to recognise that it happens at the expense of women.

Italy is such a delightful place to live in if you happen to be a man. There one may enjoy that exquisite luxury of Socialism -- that true Socialism which is based not on equality of income or character, but on the equality of manners. In the democracy of the cafe or the street the

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<sup>6</sup> The issue of escape or self-imposed exile in E. M. Forster's fiction was presented in Fordoński, Krzysztof "Self-imposed Exile as a Happy Ending. A Study in the Fiction of E. M. Forster" Burzyńska, Joanna ed. *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Conference of the PASE Gdańsk 2000* (in press).

great question of our life has been solved, and the brotherhood of man is a reality. (Forster 1976: 53)

Quite obviously, though choice of place just as references in the text (e. g. repeated allusions to Michelangelo or A. E. Housman) may lead a queer oriented critic to notice that Forster's foreign settings are homoerotically charged, it is more a matter of allusion or mood than of anything that can be specifically pointed out. The fact is that as the manuscripts prove Forster consciously removed from the texts submitted for publication anything that might have suggested homosexuality. Yet even so, in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* we can find a surprising description of an encounter with a group of young Italian gentlemen in the opera during which:

Philip would have a spasm of horror at the muddle he had made. But the spasm would pass, and again he would be enchanted by the kind, cheerful voices, the laughter that was never vapid, and the light caress of the arm across his back (Forster 1976: 111-112).

More recent analyses of the novel, such as that of Nicholas Royle, attempt to prove that a queer subtext is much more prominent than it might seem at first glance:

Forster's novel mixes the crude and ambiguous; it plays with the sexual suggestiveness of language, with innuendo and double meaning. [Two] brief examples: in Forster's novel a 'knowing person' does not enter the back door of the house but rather 'take[s] the edifice in the rear' (48), at

the opera Philip finds 'amiable youths bent... and invited him to enter' (111) (Royle 1999: 9-10).

It is disputable if we should accept Royle's statement that "a queer reading of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is absolutely necessary" (11) at face value yet it surely opens a completely new approach to the text. Such a reading is of little value in the case of *A Room with a View* and even Royle agrees that "the novel's 'queer emanations' are only of limited force and value" (41). This, however, becomes more comprehensible when we realise that the published text is the third version of the novel. The two early drafts survived and a comparison is possible that explains the direction which Forster's self-censorship<sup>7</sup> took to make the novel the heterosexual romance it is now. The most striking change occurs with the first crucial event in the novel, the murder in the Piazza Signoria in the "Fourth Chapter":

[In *Old Lucy*] the most significant incident "a catastrophe," is the death of a young Italian in the Piazza Signoria, an incident similar to the murder which brings Lucy and George Emerson together in *A Room with a View*. But in the early draft, Lucy is not present. Narrated from Arthur's point of view, the episode consists largely of a lurid and erotic description of the dying "naked youth". The sight of "the young Italian's perfect form lying on the fountain brim"

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<sup>7</sup> Forster's own attitude to it is best summed up in a sentence from his 1958 appendix to the novel entitled 'A View without a Room' - "It is not my preferred novel - *The Longest Journey* is that - but it may fairly be called the nicest" (Forster 1978: 231)

(*Old Lucy* 37) causes Arthur to renounce art in favour of life, as he tells Lucy "to promote human intercourse and bring about the brotherhood of Man." (*Old Lucy* 47) Forster did not include this piece of adolescent homosexuality in the finished novel; by 1903 in *New Lucy* his story became a heterosexual romance. (Rosencrance 1982: 87)

Similar changes in the early drafts brought about a text in which most of the more direct representations of homoerotic atmosphere are all but gone, even though the changes did not touch such basically homosexual characters as Cecil Vyse "the ideal bachelor" of "the sort who can't know any one intimately" (Forster 1978: 191) and Reverend Beebe who

was, from rather profound reasons, somewhat chilly in his attitude towards the other sex, and preferred to be interested rather than enthralled. (Forster 1978: 53-54).

Forster was sufficiently successful for his novel to have a number of successors as Norman Douglas' *South Wind* (1917), Huxley's *Those Barren Leaves* (1923) and Elisabeth Bowen's *The Hotel* (1927) which followed his descriptions of Italy "as a liberating force on Anglo-Saxon temperaments" (Cavaliero 1979: 63). Yet the author himself was decidedly not satisfied with his work and the way his censored homoerotic foreign settings were presented in his novels. The year 1908 with the publication of *A Room with a View* marked a departure from the Mediterranean themes.

The writer returned to them in 1913 when he started to write his only overtly homosexual novel *Maurice*. The

beginning of the novel offers a direct presentation of the influence of Classical Greek culture upon the heroes - Maurice and Clive, while borrowing and discussing Plato's *Symposium* become the first signs of their affection<sup>8</sup>. The reader is to a point led to believe that the heroes follow the rules set by the Victorian understanding of homosexuality. All such expectations, however, are wrong.

As his relationship with Clive drags on Maurice grows more and more disillusioned with Greece 'a heap of old stones without any paint on it' (Forster 1972: 100-101) while Clive, who goes there alone, and "Against [his] will ... become[s] normal" (Forster 1972: 104). Greece is no longer a storehouse of art but simply a reminder of last things, with its culture dead, and thus an appropriate place for Clive to 'become normal'. It shall never again appear in Forster's fiction. The English "greenwood" now becomes the idyllic place where gay lovers can find refuge. This change quite naturally followed a change in Forster's interest and change towards English settings visible in *The Longest Journey* and *Howards End*.

According to Robert K. Martin's probably most influential essay "Edward Carpenter and the Double Structure of *Maurice*" this change marks Forster's rejection of Victorian (one might call it "Platonic") vision of homosexuality in favour of a more modern one professed by Edward Carpenter. A similar opinion was

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<sup>8</sup> This motive is discussed at length in Dowling 1994.

voiced almost contemporaneously by Tariq Rahman in "*Maurice and The Longest Journey: A Study of E. M. Forster's Deviation from the Representation of Male Homosexuality in Literature*" in which Rahman argues that *Maurice* is a groundbreaking novel, the first one which moves from describing ephebophilia (love of boys) or erotic friendship between men towards androphilia (love of men) (Rahman 1988: 74).

The degree of homoerotic element and its influence thus vary in time. In the earliest short story the setting is "godlike or devilish" Greece and the influence, especially when direct, is so strong that it can bring a sensitive man to madness (Forster clearly divides his characters among those able to feel it - and be saved to use his term - and those who are unable of any change). With the introduction of Italy as a setting in his later short stories and his first novel the importance of Greece diminishes and in *A Room with a View* any homoerotic element can be seen only in the background. *Maurice* reintroduces Greece but only to reject its possible influences. What the novel announces is that gay love is possible in any setting among people of all walks of life and is a value in itself which does not need support from the classics. Ancient Greece is therefore relegated to museums which is symbolically done in Chapter 43 of *Maurice* - Greek antiquities remain in the British Museum where they belong while Maurice and Alec go to "a place" to spend the night together.

Forster thus finally rejected the Mediterranean setting as appropriate for his fiction. He did not, however, reject the usage of foreign settings tinged with veiled homoeroticism to which he returned in *A Passage to India* and later in the posthumously published homoerotic short stories. Never again, though, did Greece or Italy serve as a setting for his fiction. Ironically, it was only when he gave up describing the Mediterranean and went to Alexandria there during the First World War that he had his first sexual experience and then fulfilment in love. Yet this only convinced him that he should give up writing novels as he was not able to discuss in them the subject that interested him most - gay love.

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