

Social Non-Conformists in Forster's Italy: Otherness and the Enlightened English Tourist

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Abstract: Recent years have seen increasing attention to E. M. Forster's approach to issues of race and ethnicity, including how Forster's oeuvre advances problematic views of foreign cultures. Nevertheless, the criticism on Forster's Italian novels has lagged behind, with readers continuing to emphasize how *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908) valorize Italian culture and undermine prejudiced assumptions of English cultural superiority. This article considers the portrayal of English social non-conformists in Forster's Italy, individuals whose interactions with Italian people and landscapes inspire them to develop new ways of approaching class and gender as well as nation and ethnicity. I reveal that while the Italian novels use this trope of the non-conformist to stress a foreign culture's power to generate reform at home, they also overemphasize the cultural difference that separates Italy from England, indulging in primitivist, patronizing depictions of Italian spaces and people. The novels also exhibit a problematic narrative impulse to sacrifice their Italian characters for the benefit of their Englishmen and Englishwomen, imagining the lives and especially the deaths of Italians as a tool for enlightening the English tourist. This discontinuity in Forster exemplifies the persistent essentialization of Italy in twentieth-century Anglo-American fiction.

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Attempts to categorize the work of E. M. Forster along ideological lines are inevitably frustrated by contrary inclinations within his *oeuvre*. There is a persisting—and understandable—temptation to extol Forster as uniquely humanist: as a progressive thinker and talent whose novels project an immanently wise vision of human identity and relationships. This received wisdom may encourage us to overlook the regressive aspects of Forster's approach to racial and class dynamics—or, as David Bradshaw recently phrased it, the reality that Forster “is less enlightened about race and class” than his work might overtly suggest (6). Fortunately, recent years have yielded a greater awareness of these pitfalls of reading Forster, generating critiques that more thoroughly acknowledge these discontinuities in his work.¹ Yet despite the momentum of the more critical discourse surrounding texts like *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*, readings of Forster's Italian novels lag behind. While rightfully noting Forster's internationalism and his social progressivism, readers rarely comment on the Italian novels' primitivist understanding of Italy, their dichotomous vision of the national character of England and Italy, or the way that this vision subtly reinforces England's central position within the global order. Meanwhile, particularly in his treatment of English social non-conformists in Italy, which will be my focus here, Forster advances characterizations of Italianness that are remarkably mixed in this way. If we hope to develop a fuller perspective on *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908), we must recognize the contradictory valences of the Italian novels: the highly specific, externally shaped vision of difference that these texts project onto Italian spaces and the people who inhabit them, even in asserting the unique value of both.

Among those who actively consider questions of nationality and ethnicity in these texts, Forster's Italian novels are typically understood as a testament to the enlightening influence of the foreign culture of Italy. Forster's Italy, it is suggested, offers a fresh voice of authority that challenges the restrictive, misguided norms and values of the home country, moving Englishmen and Englishwomen to think and act in new and better ways through resistance to ethnic and class hierarchies and possibly even gender stereotypes. We are told that Forster uses his portraits

of Italy to raise questions about England's supposed primacy within the global order, subverting the assumptions of a world in which "Latin" nations and ethnic groups are understood as inferior.² Of course, such readings are vastly preferable to the language of savagery and civilization that earlier critics themselves often used to refer to Forster's Italian and English characters, respectively.³ Still, it is noteworthy that most scholars tend to focus on Forster's purported de-centering of English power and English values, making only passing references to fetishization in the Italian novels. Even Lauren M. E. Goodlad, who recognizes that Forster's fiction falls prey to "the exoticizing and fetishizing of otherness" (325), ultimately characterizes Forster as "a queer internationalist" who advocates the need "to open oneself to the world's multifarious disclosures: to cultivate an ethos of ongoing epistemological revision and embodied encounter" (330).⁴ Such readings almost aggressively characterize Forster's Italian novels as texts that advocate humility: texts that ask their characters and their readers to recognize the limits of their understanding and to absorb the rich body of knowledge that the Other may choose to teach them.

Meanwhile, in truth, Forster's portrait of Italy *is* sometimes flattering and even subversive: it combats xenophobia and stresses the transnational power of a foreign environment to upend entrenched English social mores and reveal the need for reform. The Italian novels are stories of accidental social non-conformists: Englishwomen whose families send them abroad in hopes of eliminating their aimless and often inconsistent appetites for social rebellion, but who instead become dramatically more distanced from English norms upon quitting their home country. As I will demonstrate here, the anticipation that Italy's influence might work to consolidate rather than challenge an Englishwoman's social identity rests on the view of Italy as both a refined civilizing force and an inferior Other from which England can be successfully distinguished and separated. Forster's narratives exert a corrective impulse on his characters by problematizing this view of Italy and underlining its call to non-conformity, which generates new modes of viewing nationality and ethnicity, class, and gender, not only for women like his main characters Lilia and Lucy but also for the other English characters who surround

them. In this way, the novels' emphasis on "the new order of experience" (John Sayre Martin, qtd. in Goscilo 193) is linked to their valorization of the Italian influence: what Margaret Goscilo terms Italy's "spontaneity, passion, and affinity with nature" (205).

Still, in thus imagining Italy, Forster's novels also insistently over-emphasize the purported "difference" of both rural and urban Italian spaces and their inhabitants—their charming timelessness or anti-modernity; their dangerous natural beauty; their primal, animalistic violence; and their unabashed coarseness—thus fetishizing and often patronizing the "primitive" Italian nature that inspires social experiment. The Italian novels also assert an implicit value judgment in the way in which the English characters transcend their less enlightened selves at the expense of the novel's Italians, whose lives are subordinated to the inner development of the tourist, generating a problematic hierarchy of which the narratives communicate limited awareness. This duality in Forster exemplifies the continuing and deeply entrenched marginalization of Italy in the Anglo-American literary imagination after the turn of the twentieth century: how Italy was understood to exist not in continuity with but apart from northern Europe, even among writers who were otherwise dedicated to the work of deconstructing social binaries and hierarchies and who overtly sought to valorize Italian culture within their work.⁵

Forster's Rebels and the (Expected) Italian Influence

Where Angels Fear to Tread quickly establishes that Lilia Herriton, despite her enthusiasm for the trip, has in effect been exiled from England by her family. Her purported sins are manifold: Lilia remains crude despite having been "continually subject to the refining influences of her late husband's family" (7), and, more pressingly, she threatens not to remain a widow, having indulged in a courtship with a local curate that has scandalized the Herritons and jeopardized their social reputation. At the same time, the novel's first descriptions of Lilia paint her non-conformity as rather unstudied or accidental: Forster's narrator recalls how "the sight of so many people talking at once and saying such different things caused Lilia to break into ungovernable peals of laughter" (3) and how, "laughing helplessly, she was carried out into the fog" (5) on

the departing train. Rather than thoughtfully rejecting English expectations regarding decorum as the foundation of public behavior, Lilia is instinctually unbridled in her responses to others.

In this social climate, Italy is conceived of as a means of preventing the dishonor or social embarrassment of the Herritons, whose matriarch comments that she “mind[s] nothing,” not even the indecorousness of Lilia’s farewells, “so long as she has gone” (6). At first glance, it would seem that Lilia’s destination could be any place as long as it were sufficiently distant to dissuade the curate from following her. Nevertheless, in the imagination of Lilia’s brother-in-law, Philip, and occasionally in the minds of the others, there seems to be something captivating about the idea of Lilia’s traveling in Italy in particular. For Mrs. Herriton, it is the prospect of apparently less suitable destinations such as the south of France that makes Lilia’s Italian travel attractive. That the more proper ladies “had the greatest difficulty in dissuading [Lilia] from the Riviera” (6) suggests a perceived hierarchy within international tourism in which Italy is viewed as more fitting and less socially risky. This valuation dovetails with Ann Ardis’s assertion that female travel to Italy “is possible because a burgeoning tourist industry has established ‘contact zones’ that anglicize Italy just enough that it is ‘safe’ for young English women and their chaperones” (63)—though ironically, Lilia is “a widow of thirty-three [who] requires a girl ten years younger to look after her” (6). At the same time, for the well-traveled Philip, the expectation is that because “Italy really purifies and ennobles all who visit her,” functioning as “the school as well as the playground of the world,” Lilia will return from Italy refined and with a sense of culture: “He found the situation full of whimsical romance: there was something half attractive, half repellent in the thought of this vulgar woman journeying to places he loved and revered. Why should she not be transfigured? The same had happened to the Goths” (6). In other words, Lilia’s family predicts that Italy will “improve” her and bring her wayward identity in line with the conventions of the social class into which she has married. Far from representing a danger, then, the Italian influence is expected to do what England has failed to accomplish. Philip, at least, envisions Lilia’s travels as a sort of modified Grand Tour—not as the capstone of an upper-class education

but as the remaking of an adult woman into a form that her society can recognize as valid.

As the opening chapter progresses, however, it emerges that Lilia's membership in this English social community requires more than her refinement at the gentle hand of Italy. Full social membership entails a self-distancing from Italy in which the tourist simultaneously admires and looks down on Italian places and the people who populate them. Thus, the letters from Lilia that cause Philip to comment that she is "improving" are brief, vague, and rather smug: "Florence she found perfectly sweet, Naples a dream, but very whiffy. In Rome one had simply to sit still and feel" (8). Underlying the comedy in Lilia's characterization of the malodorous Naples is a sense that such commentary is precisely what is expected of the educated English tourist, who appreciates Italy while never failing to remember the proper distinction between the home environment and the foreign one. Still, it is Lilia's description of the fictional Monteriano, where the bulk of the novel's action takes place, that is the most striking: "In a place like this,' she wrote, 'one really does feel in the heart of things, and off the beaten track. Looking out of a Gothic window every morning, *it seems impossible that the middle ages have passed away*'" (8; emphasis added). Here, Lilia's series of clichés leads into a description of the foreign landscape that insistently denies its modernity by rendering it timeless, thereby subjugating Italy to the purported sophistication of the contemporary Anglo gaze. As Philip continues approvingly to relate Lilia's description of the "quaint" town and its inhabitants, "the Italians unspoiled in all their simplicity and charm" (9), it becomes clear that in Forster's England, Lilia's perceived accession to social respectability is tied to her capacity to view rural Italy and Italians as the primitive Other. Forster's faux Baedeker entry on Monteriano⁶ does something similar in contrasting the old Monteriano, "the Mons Rianus of Antiquity," with the town's "small importance" (13) in the present day, suggesting that such condescending ways of viewing rural Italy are not at all exclusive to the Herriton family.

Although the family motivation for Lucy's trip abroad is less overtly stated in *A Room with a View*, Michelle Fillion has argued compellingly for a similar reading of Lucy's character and of her relationship with the

community she leaves behind, noting "Lucy's aspirations to the ranks of the 'New Woman'":

At the novel's outset, [Lucy] has been packed off on an Italian tour with her strait-laced maiden aunt, Charlotte Bartlett, presumably to ward off the inclinations that Lucy has been acting out at the piano. . . . As depicted in *A Room with a View*, Lucy's piano-playing undercuts Victorian social conventions. It has become a liability to her feminine socialization, a distinct problem in a financially strapped and fatherless home. (57–58)

With the danger represented by Lucy's nascent taste for social experiment, Italy is deemed a safer place for her than home, and Italian travel becomes a way of promoting feminine English respectability. At the same time, Lucy's rebellion within the novel's opening chapters remains both directionless and incomplete, not unlike Lilia's: "Nor has she any system of revolt. Here and there a restriction annoyed her particularly, and she would transgress it, and perhaps be sorry that she had done so" (42).

In this liminal space between social non-conformity and adherence to convention, Lucy, like Lilia, is exposed to a host of English assumptions about the necessary distance between the female tourist and the world of Italy and Italians that exists outside the Cockney safety of the Pension Bertolini. These assumptions assault Lucy from all sides, reinforced equally by the copy of John Ruskin's *Mornings in Florence* (1870) that she carries—which seems to value centuries-old Florentine relics far more than anything the contemporary city has produced—and by the Englishmen and Englishwomen who attempt to influence her. If well-bred English onlookers like the traveling Miss Alans consider the Florentine culture of churches, photographs, hillside views, and Renaissance villas to be a legitimate vehicle for cultivating the young girl, they also suggest that actual contact with the city's inhabitants is unseemly—"Italians, dear, you know" are to be avoided on the circular tram (40)⁷—and Forster aptly illustrates that social approval for Lucy's behavior will be contingent on her maintaining an appropriately condescending view of contemporary Italian society. Thus, Lucy's onlookers cherish hopes regarding Italy that may at first seem consistent but that

are contradictory in important ways. They expect Italy simultaneously to protect the social reputation of the Honeychurches by forestalling social disaster at home and to consolidate the social membership of the errant Lucy while she is abroad. More importantly, however, they expect Italy to accomplish this not just by refining Lucy through exposure to its earlier cultural history but also by encouraging her to assume the role of the patronizing, educated tourist in judging modern Italian life. It is this suite of expectations that Forster will dismantle in the ensuing chapters of the narrative.

Challenging British Presuppositions Abroad

In the first of Philip Herriton's comments about Italy, Forster seems to project a different manner of viewing the country and its people, one that might challenge these predictable stock observations and expectations:

“Remember,” he concluded, “that it is only by going off the track that you get to know the country. See the little towns—Gubbio, Pienza, Cortona, San Gemignano, Monteriano. And don't, let me beg you, go with that awful tourist idea that Italy's only a museum of antiquities and art. Love and understand the Italians, for the people are more marvelous than the land.” (3)

Instead, however, Forster rapidly consigns Philip to a category that spans both of his Italian novels: that of the elitist Anglo traveler who believes himself to know the “real” Italy (and thus to be superior to the average English tourist) but is revealed to be misguided or inconsistent in his approach to the country. Philip, for instance, refuses to accept that his sister-in-law might literally “love” and marry an Italian citizen.⁸ In this way, Philip resembles the Italian-snubbing Reverend Eager from *A Room with a View*, who is characterized as “a member of the residential colony who had made Florence their home” and who “read, wrote, studied, and exchanged ideas, thus attaining to that intimate knowledge, *or rather perception*, of Florence which is denied to [typical tourists]” (51; emphasis added). In thus positioning his Englishmen, Forster wields one of his most potent weapons against the dominant wisdom regarding Italy, calling into question the seeming authority of this authoritative class

of tourist or expatriate by classifying such generalizations as “perceptions” rather than “knowledge” and by characterizing such individuals as hypocrites.

At the same time, Forster intensifies the challenge to conventional wisdom about Italy by privileging descriptions of Italian characters and spaces that run counter to received English wisdom: people and vistas that prove bewildering to even the most confident Englishmen and Englishwomen. For instance, consider the town of Monteriano, the primary setting of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. “Its colour was brown,” we learn, “and it revealed not a single house—nothing but the narrow circle of the walls, and behind them seventeen towers. . . . It was impossible to praise it as beautiful, but it was also impossible to damn it as quaint” (21). In such moments, Forster’s narrative resists the stereotype of a uniformly picturesque Italy, emphasizing the gap between the expectations of the tourist (and perhaps those of the reader as well) and the reality of the novel’s chosen setting. Likewise, in Lucy’s Florence, we learn that “Italy in the wet” (34) is unappealing, but it is precisely this lack of appeal that confers dimensionality: “The whole life of the South was disorganized, and the most graceful nation in Europe had turned into formless lumps of clothes. The street and the river were dirty yellow, the bridge was dirty grey, and the hills were dirty purple” (34), leading the elderly Catherine Alan to ask, “Who would suppose this is Italy?” (35). Lucy herself expresses the same type of dismay in recognizing the Basilica di Santa Croce’s resemblance to a barn, yet as readers, we intuit that we are meant to delight in the unexpected plainness and normalcy of the place. These unromanticized descriptions of the quotidian draw us away from the generalizing expectations of the Herritons or the Miss Alans and from the ideology proposed in travel guides like Ruskin’s, which Forster satirizes by poking fun at the perspective they engender in their readers,⁹ lending greater depth to the characterization of Italian spaces in the process.

The revelation of the social standing of Lilia’s future husband Gino functions similarly in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*: “Philip gave a cry of personal disgust and pain. . . . A dentist! A dentist at Monteriano. A dentist in fairyland! False teeth and laughing gas and the tilting chair

at a place which knew the Etruscan League, and the Pax Romana, and Alaric himself, and the Countess Matilda, and the Middle Ages . . .” (20) In marrying a man who “has not got one penny,” whose “social position is nil” (21), and whose father makes his living in what Philip deems a repulsively modern and undignified manner, Lilia has “de-cultured” Italy for Philip and for the reader, bringing to light the prosaic contemporariness of its inhabitants and their unglamorous similarity to the average Englishman. Her actions also counter Philip’s view of Italy as “fairyland,” implicitly reminding the reader that Italy is a modern nation now, not merely a collection of picturesque vistas and historical artifacts, and that it needs dentists for its citizens as much as any other country does. Thus, Forster encourages us to recognize the many layers of Italy at the same time as he ridicules the one-dimensional outlook of the Anglo tourist abroad.

The most direct challenge to English expectations, however, lies in the many forms of social experiment that Forster’s characters explore while they are abroad and afterwards, despite their relatives’ hope that Italy will inspire the opposite. Examples abound of this Italian influence: Lilia remarries (and marries an Italian) despite the objections of the family that has always looked down on her, Philip loosens his attention to class distinctions, Lilia’s “chaperone” Caroline Abbott and Lucy go so far as to love (and, in Lucy’s case, to marry) across the boundaries of class, and Lucy’s cousin Charlotte is ultimately “deflect[ed] from the path of prim chaperon” (35) in encouraging the match. Moreover, the change that Italy inspires is philosophical as well as functional: Lilia’s second marriage, for instance, makes social non-conformity possible on an ideological scale by empowering her to lay claim to a more confident and self-directed vision of justice in matters of class and gender:

For twelve years you’ve trained me and tortured me, and I’ll stand it no more. . . . When I came to your house a poor young bride, how you all looked me over—never a kind word—and discussed me, and thought I might just do; and your mother corrected me, and your sister snubbed me, and you said funny things about me to show how clever you were! . . . But, *thank*

goodness, I can stand up against the world now, for I've found Gino, and this time I marry for love! (27; emphasis added)

As we will see, Lilia's social experiment is largely a failure, and it ends with her death during childbirth. In a sense, Lilia's experience forms another example of what David Medalie (with reference to Adela Quested in *A Passage to India*) calls the danger of "attempt[ing] to transpose values without a careful consideration of the contexts in which they are to be applied" (38). Nevertheless, Lilia's presence in Italy inspires her to consolidate her previously aimless rebellion and to critique suburban English social norms in a way that she previously found impossible. Although Forster's contemporary Italy is even more concerned with circumscribing female behavior than modern England is in the novel, the (supposed) passion and impulsiveness of the Italian nature are nevertheless necessary to effect a change in the gendered behaviors that Lilia seemed destined to repeat at home.

What is more, each of these forms of rebellion is also somehow tied to the rejection of xenophobia; Forster's characters begin to disregard the borders imposed by nationality and ethnicity, suggesting the hollowness of the perceived hierarchy that subordinates Italy to England. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Philip and Caroline return to Italy on what is essentially a "civilizing mission," seeking to liberate a half-Italian child from the horrors of an Italian upbringing—only to be diverted from that mission by experiences in Monteriano that challenge the principle of English cultural superiority that is supposed to justify their plans. In the novel's opera scene, in which Philip forgets his attention to social hierarchies in a flurry of male camaraderie (and subtly homosexual pleasure, as some have suggested),¹⁰ the barriers imposed by Philip's English citizenship and Anglo-Saxon heritage are also dismantled: "Philip had whispered introductions to the pleasant people who had pulled him in—tradesmen's sons perhaps they were, or medical students, or solicitors' clerks, or sons of other dentists. There is no knowing who is who in Italy" (91). In this moment, Philip rejects not just the conventional English wisdom of class consciousness but also the pretense to cultural superiority that Forster's English characters so often claim.

As Caroline begins to recognize her own regard for Gino, the unconventionality of the social relationships deepens further:

Had she ever been so happy before? Yes, once before, and here, a night in March, the night Gino and Lilia had told her of their love—the night whose evil she had come now to undo.

She gave a sudden cry of shame. “This time—the same place—the same thing”—and she began to beat down her happiness, *knowing it to be sinful*. She was here to fight against this place. . . . She was here to champion morality and purity, *and the holy life of an English home*. (92; emphasis added)

Here, the emphasis on Caroline’s failure to conform is acute. Although she has purportedly become a true defender of the cultural divide between Italy and England, Miss Abbott commits the most overt social betrayal in longing for a union with Gino after Lilia’s death, indulging in a vision of the Italian widower that runs counter to the norms governing the behavior of unmarried women and that simultaneously challenges the taboo of cultural mixing as well as the dominance of the home culture.

Even in *A Room with a View*, which limits the actual interaction between the English and the Italians, this anti-xenophobic tendency remains visible. Forster’s narrator suggests on several occasions that a kind of kinship exists between Lucy and the various nameless Italians who populate the text. We read that “[s]urely the vendor of photographs was in league with Lucy in the eternal league of Italy with youth” (52), and when the novel’s cab driver and his sweetheart are separated, they gesture to Lucy in supplication, implying that as young lovers, they are more deeply connected to Lucy and her future lover George Emerson than they are separated from the English couple by nationality or ethnic culture. Without any air of superiority or condescension, Lucy dares to try to speak Italian with the cab driver, and though her mostly failed attempt introduces a note of humor into the text, it also provides a tangible model for a less self-concerned and patronizing form of tourism. Later, in noting that the driver “alone had divined what things were” for Lucy and George but that “[t]he thoughts of a cab-driver,

however just, seldom affect the lives of his employers" (68–69), Forster's narrator communicates an awareness of the prejudice inherent in this separation, suggesting that given the fundamental connection between the Italian man and the Englishwoman, the artificial sense of division imposed by these entrenched hierarchies is unwarranted. And although Italy's transfiguring influence might seem weaker in this novel—perhaps because, as Jeffrey Heath suggests, "Italy works on Lucy in concert with the Emersons [George and his father]" (9)—this shared influence itself generates a flattering and meaningful parallel between Italy and the Emersons, who are arguably the wisest and best characters in Forster's narrative. Thus, although Italy is much more the backdrop than the center of the action in Forster's second Italian novel, the narrative does intimate an interest in destabilizing jingoism as well as class hierarchies and norms of docile femininity.

Forster Othering Italy: A Politics of Exaggerated Difference

Despite the presence of such legitimating discourse in Forster's Italian novels, Forster himself indulges in the use of stereotypes and artificially emphatic binaries in characterizing Italian spaces and their inhabitants, bolstering the same sense of Italian difference—and, sometimes, inferiority—that the novels also seem to undermine. In each narrative, Italians and Italian landscapes are imagined as charmingly timeless or anti-modern; as having an untamed, sometimes dangerous natural beauty; as animalistic and violent; and as unabashedly crude. By imposing a fetishistic vision of "primitive" modern Italy, Forster deepens the assumed gulf between England and Italy and dramatically influences the orientation of the Italian novels toward nation and ethnicity.

In the opening of the second chapter of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the narrator describes how "the bewildered tourist" arriving in Monteriano "must take what is suitably termed a 'legno'—a piece of wood—and drive up eight miles of excellent road into the middle ages" (16). This description simultaneously challenges and confirms the idea of towns like the fictional Monteriano as forgotten by the hand of modernity. That the road is "excellent" bespeaks a certain level of civilization, yet the continuing references to "the middle ages," together with the humorous

commentary on the available modes of transportation in the town, insist on linking rural Italy to the distant past and contradict the later signs of Monteriano's inglorious membership in the contemporary world. The Italian townspeople also conform to this view of their culture as charmingly old-fashioned: they are intuitive rather than analytical and value money less deeply than they do other, more intangible forms of reward. Indeed, the narrator comments that Philip's "fellow-passengers had the usual Italian gift of divination, and when Monteriano came they knew he wanted to go there, and dropped him out" (16)—while later on, in almost paying his driver the exorbitant fare he requests rather than haggling for a better price, Philip risks "mak[ing] the man discontented and unhappy for the rest of the day" (16). The humor in these anecdotes does not neutralize their implications for rural Italian society. Italy is painted as nourishing behavioral instincts and values that the more sophisticated English have forgotten and as eschewing the devotion of the latter to industry and profit, instead maintaining a retrograde, pre-capitalist mode of existence.

This characterization of Italy is not meant to be critical; after all, "divination" is termed a "gift," and the implicit reference to the divine projects an image of primitive spiritual power onto the Italians, positioning them as the intuitively wise priests of their world. Furthermore, given some of the opinions Forster seems to have held regarding England's rapid entrance into modernity,¹¹ one might not be surprised to see him emphasize and applaud the opposite qualities in a new nation that his novels imagine as escaping some of those perils through its persisting traditional ethnic culture. Nevertheless, this aspect of the narration rather disturbingly previews what D. H. Lawrence would write about Italians a decade later in his travelogue *Twilight in Italy*, which describes how "the Italian, through centuries, has avoided our Northern purposive industry, because it has seemed to him a form of nothingness," and how Italian living rests on "the senses made absolute" (44). This arguably racist vision of Italian ethnic identity also manifests in *A Room with a View*, as both Forster's characters and his narrator comment on the ability of Italians to "read our thoughts" and "foretell our desires" (36), using diction that suggests that such prescience is a biologically

inherited trait. Even the cab driver appears different when viewed in this light; according to the narrator, his comprehension of Lucy is a product of “the whole of his instinct” rather than the “scraps of intelligence” (68) possessed by the English. Although “Phaethon,” as the narrator calls him, is referred to as a god, the tradition that Forster invokes in naming him is a pantheistic, pagan one, and the reference underscores the uncivilized power of historic Italy while suggesting that not much has changed even in the present day. The assertion that “[n]either the Ages of Faith nor the Age of Doubt had touched him” (58) problematically situates the cab driver as an anti-modern, anti-intellectual symbol of the Italian people’s enduring, timeless nature, dramatizing the separation between the primal Italian instinct and the developed English mind.

The descriptions of natural beauty in the Italian novels deepen the imagined foreignness of Italy by underscoring the threatening quality of the Italian landscape and the ways that the Italian version of nature challenges the pastoral cliché of harmony between man and his environment. On the route to Monteriano, the violets threaten to overtake the road, which Forster’s narrator likens to “a causeway soon to be submerged under the advancing tide of spring,” noting that “[t]here are such violets in England, but not so many” (19). Significantly, this shift to the present tense suggests that Forster’s narrator is speaking as himself here rather than reproducing Philip’s perspective during the moment of his arrival in Monteriano. We receive the impression that this suggested contrast between Italy’s threatening excess and England’s relative tameness is one that the text itself endorses, not a “perception” of Philip’s that the narrative critiques. What is more, not only does the landscape of Monteriano confound the conventions of the pastoral (as Ardis has commented), but nature in Forster’s version of rural Italy seems to challenge the dominance of civilization’s infrastructure—its roads and causeways—creating a type of peril that is unknown in “placid” (17) England or in modernity itself. Thus, in such descriptions, Forster’s Italy is yet again excluded from the order of contemporary society, specifically contrasted with the “modern” English landscape. The threatening quality of rural Italy also intensifies as the narrative progresses: the darkness of an evening rain-storm arguably causes the most tragic action of the novel, illustrating

that the dangerousness of the elements can wreak havoc on the physical lives of Forster's characters as well as their ideology. Because Forster applies this trope exclusively to Italy, casting England as a comparatively predictable environment where the rain is a quotidian nuisance rather than a murderous force, even the weather becomes emblematic of the boundary between contemporary Italy's national character and that of Forster's modern England.¹²

Although some critics have read George and Lucy's kiss in *A Room with a View* as situated within a much tamer version of nature than manifests in Monteriano, a careful reading reveals the subtly dangerous quality of that landscape as well. In the way that "the ground gave way" under Lucy's feet and "the flowers beat against her dress in blue waves" (67), there is an understated but discernible current of violence in the Italian environment. This current of violence momentarily demolishes George and Lucy's restrained Englishness, a fact that even Lucy recognizes later in recalling how their transgression came about. Thus, the narrative imposes a substantial gulf between the wild, unruly Italian landscape and the regulated, modern English one, as well as the values and (in)action that they encourage. Although the Italian influence in this moment enriches the lives of Forster's characters rather than threatening them, the scene is also followed by a tremendous storm, an "immense electrical display" (69) that concretizes the potential for danger, destroying what trappings of modernity seem to exist in this rural Italian space: "There was an explosion up the road. The storm had struck the overhead wire of the tramline," we read, "and one of the great supports had fallen" (70). The portrait of Italy's natural power rapidly ceases to be flattering and even more emphatically illustrates the difference and the frightening quality of the foreign environment that Forster envisions.

In arguing that the colonizer "oscillates between veneration and revulsion" (148) with respect to the colonial space, Madeleine Dobie advances a notion that proves surprisingly applicable to Italy as Forster imagines it. For Dobie, the view that the dominant society holds of the purportedly subordinate one involves more than what Edward Said, with reference to Orientalism, calls "the ineradicable distinction

between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (42). In short, Dobie also conceptualizes the dominant society as fetishizing the Other. This fetishism involves "the overvaluation of selected aspects of Oriental culture" and, in French colonial novels, the use of Oriental culture as "a mechanism by which creative artists *expressed their disillusionment with French society*" while also "turning the East into a colorful plaything" (159; emphasis added). At the same time, echoing Said's description of how "Islam [came] to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, [and] hordes of hated barbarians" (59), Dobie continues to emphasize the place of terror and "revulsion" within the complex of reactions of the hegemonic power to its perceived cultural inferiors. She emphasizes that in the consciousness of the colonizer, "the Orient was invested with powers that, from the European standpoint, it really did not possess" (159). Of course, there are quite obvious and very significant differences between the French colonial apparatus and the political, economic, and cultural relationship between England and Italy. Nevertheless, this characterization of the response of socio-cultural power to difference is notably relevant to Forster. In their representation of Italy in all its mysterious and fearsome power, we can see Forster's novels enact this same dance between terror, "disgust,"¹³ admiration, and the desire to imitate the foreign in order to escape or eliminate what is "disillusioning" about English society and its culture. This dynamic complicates our understanding of how Italian customs and values or even Italian spaces might be valorized in these novels. It becomes more difficult not to recognize the novels' complicity with a deep-seated matrix of implicit value judgments about the North, the South, and the distance between them: judgments that partially mirror those made in England about East and West at the turn of the twentieth century. In such moments, we see that Forster's subtle racism and chauvinism do not appear solely in his complex treatment of colonial India. On the contrary, we can also find them in his depictions of a European nation that we may not conventionally consider when we examine the character and the stakes of Forster's attitude toward ethnicity—a nation whose Europeanness, all the same, does not save it from being subordinated by Forster in a similarly racialized manner.

In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the problem becomes especially acute in the novel's exploration of Italian violence—more specifically, in Gino's multiple transformations into what S. P. Rosenbaum calls “a kind of monster” (190), which reveal the underlying viciousness and animality of the Italian character as Forster imagines it:

There was plenty of brutality deep down in [Gino], and one day Lilia nearly touched it. . . . As she said to Perfetta afterwards, “none of his clothes seemed to fit—too big in one place, too small in another.” His figure rather than his face altered, the shoulders falling forward till his coat wrinkled across the back and pulled away from his wrists. He seemed all arms. . . . He looked at her with round, expressionless eyes, and slowly stretched out his left hand. (44)

The transformation effected here is indeed dramatic; Gino's physical deformation not only assigns him a kind of terrifying power but also strips him of his humanity, marking him as a “brutal” animal at best and a “monster” at worst. His “expressionless eyes” and lack of speech lift Gino's character further out of the realm of civilized human discourse and into that of brutal physical combat, the recourse of creatures that cannot express their aggression verbally. Something similar also happens in Gino's attack on Philip near the close of the text, in which animal imagery dominates: “The left hand came forward, slowly this time. It hovered before Philip like an insect. . . . There was a quick swoop above him, and then a low growl like a dog's. Gino had broken his fingernails against the stove. . . . Suddenly the instinct came to [Gino]. He crawled quickly to where Philip lay and had him clean by the elbow” (126–27). Whereas Philip is “seized with remorse” and feels “pity and tenderness,” Gino is inconsolable and stalks his opponent “on tiptoe” (127), then tortures him by taking advantage of his physical weakness in a move that is characterized not as strategic or intelligent but, again, as base “instinct.”

Certainly, the reader understands this violence as stemming from the loss of a child—yet the narrative presents the more general pattern of Gino's brutality in such a way that it cannot be understood as a cultur-

ally universal consequence of tragedy. Rather, Forster invokes the North-South binary directly, as his narrator comments regarding Gino and Lilia “that more than personalities were engaged; that the struggle was national; that generations of ancestors, good, bad, or indifferent, forbade the Latin man to be chivalrous to the northern woman, the northern woman to forgive the Latin man” (49). In this way, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* does not simply attribute Gino’s violence to his nationality and his ethnic heritage; it also suggests the eternal impossibility of bridging the gap between the English and Italian value systems and social norms, recalling Said’s description of how in *A Passage to India*, “we are left in the end with a sense of the pathetic difference separating ‘us’ from an Orient destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West” (Said 244). The same “convivial” Italian who inspires Lilia, Philip, and Caroline to reflection and experiment is engineered with frightening defects that subtly indicate the “moral, intellectual, and social superiority” of the Englishman, who at least does not intend to use violence and “whose standard [regarding women and marriage] is higher even when his practice is the same” (45). The positive equivalence that Goswami identifies between “Italy’s exotic Otherness” and “the Otherness of male love” (211) is thus only one implication of Forster’s national and ethnic schema, and the Italian violence in the text does more than deepen the undercurrents of homosexuality in such scenes.

Perhaps because Italy is afforded less room overall within Forster’s second Italian novel, the overt violence that takes place within its pages begins abruptly and ends quickly. However, in *A Room with a View*, the fixation on Italian brutality is palpable in that one of the novel’s most pivotal scenes revolves around the murder of one Italian by another for a paltry sum, an event that makes George “want to live” (46) and that hints to Lucy of the coming revolution in her personal existence. In that moment within the narrative, while Italian violence is assigned an extraordinary power to change the lives of the English tourists, the metaphorical distance of the Italians from the fainting Lucy and the Englishman who breaks her fall could not be greater. Although the word “brutality” (9) is used early in the novel to describe George, a crime of passion would seem to be impossible for him, whereas Forster would

have us believe that passion, whether in love or in death, is exactly the province of Italy. The tendency toward violence is again depicted as a sort of timeless but culturally specific animal instinct, a tragic flaw within the Italian ethnic character rather than an understandable human response to a contemporary social issue: this time, that of poverty. The scene—like the novel more generally—is decontextualized from the specific problems of urban Italy at the turn of the twentieth century, problems that might trigger desperation and violence in any society that faced them. As Elena Gualtieri rightly notes, “the sense of distance that separated the Edwardian tourist from contemporary Italy also translated itself into a certain indifference to the political realities of the country, then racked with social conflicts and political instability” (101). Forster’s disinclination to position the violence in the novel as a symptom of such challenges re-encourages a primitivist view of Italian behavior and again discourages the reader from acknowledging the Italian nation’s membership in contemporary global society. As the decades advanced and Italy ceased to be a focus of Forster’s fictions, writers such as Ernest Hemingway would take up the question of violence, social experiment, and Italianness in ways that communicated a somewhat more updated, less stereotyping consciousness of Italy’s sociopolitical identity. In Forster, however, the primal, dehumanizing quality of Italian violence only emphasizes Italy’s distance from the contemporary world of which England is emphatically a part.

Finally, this distancing tendency within Forster’s work is visible in his rather unique approach to Italian high culture—its deep traditions of painting and opera, or even its feats of architecture—which he repeatedly downplays in favor of the primitive earthiness that he sees in Italy. The orientation away from these traditions plays an essential part in Forster’s critique of Edwardian tourism and of stuffy suburban Englishness; as I have previously noted, in this respect, novels such as *A Room with a View* form an important counterpoint to texts like Ruskin’s, which largely dominated the English tourist’s approach to Italy at one time. Nevertheless, the secondary effect of this orientation is to widen the perceived gap between English and Italian society by advancing a one-dimensional portrait of the latter, deemphasizing elements of its

culture that would be understood as “civilized” from the reader’s perspective. Nowhere is this clearer than in Forster’s portrayal of Florence, which markedly deemphasizes the richly developed artistic culture of one of the world’s most generative cities, instead highlighting the primitive and crude in the midst of the sophisticated and complex. Consider, for example, the description of the Basilica di Santa Croce in *A Room with a View*, which privileges details such as “the Italian notices—the notices that forbade people to introduce dogs into the church—the notice that prayed people, in the interest of health and out of respect to the sacred edifice in which they found themselves, not to spit” (23). Despite their subversive quality as tools for challenging the prevailing value system of cultural authorities such as Ruskin, such moments also challenge Lynne Hinojosa’s claim that “the novel associates Italy with the Renaissance and England with the Middle Ages” (79) and Phillip C. Wagner, Jr.’s suggestion that Forster’s Florence “is full of the vitality of the spirit *as signified in the art of the city*” (279; emphasis added). It is as though the text, in its haste to critique the tourist culture that over-reverences these conventional treasures, does Italy the inadvertent disservice of marginalizing a rich tradition of creative production, one with as much relevance to the country’s contemporary national identity as to its Renaissance history—and one that might partially serve to counter the patronizing and jingoistic tendencies that the novel by turns challenges and reinforces.

Similarly, at the opera in Monteriano, where we might expect to see Italy blossom in this respect, Forster’s Italy is instead imagined as unabashedly coarse. It is not simply that the rural patrons’ response to artistic culture is raucous and to some degree self-concerned: that “the audience accompanied [the music] with tappings and drummings, swaying in the melody like corn in the wild” (88); that “people in the pit hailed their brothers and sons in the chorus, and told them how well they were singing” (89); or that a male operagoer snubbed by the leading lady “hurled a bouquet at her” (90). Although the insistence of Forster’s narrator on comparing the audience to plants and animals is again noteworthy (they also “murmured like a hive of happy bees” [89] at the sound of the lead soprano’s voice and let out “roars” [90] at the

height of the action), the descriptions of the production itself are the most arresting. The theater is decorated with “a drop-scene, representing a pink and purple landscape, wherein sported many a lady lightly clad, and two more ladies lay along the top of the proscenium to steady a large and pallid clock” (87). The soprano behaves ridiculously when “a kind of bamboo clothes-horse, stuck all over with bouquets” (90) is introduced on stage during the opera’s mad scene, breaking character in her interactions with the audience: “Nonetheless did it unloose the great depths. With a scream of amazement and joy she embraced the animal, pulled out one or two practicable blossoms, pressed them to her lips, and flung them into her admirers” (90). The opera at Monteriano might be many things—it might even serve to affirm “the existence of beauty” (89)—but it is an exemplar of Italy’s uninhibited crudeness rather than its high culture. In a passing reference to how the theater “spraddled and swaggered with the best of them, and these ladies with their clock would have nodded to the young men on the ceiling of the Sistine” (88), Forster’s narrator only furthers the contrast between the bygone refinement of the Italian Renaissance and the cheeky vulgarity of contemporary provincial Italy and Italians.¹⁴ Thus, readings like that of Fillion, who notes how the scene “captures small-town Italian opera culture with devastating wit” (28), occlude the larger significance of Forster’s chosen emphasis and the inadvertently patronizing subjectivity of Forster’s gaze. This type of humor does as much to assert Italy’s difference—and, in a sense, its inferiority—as do the descriptions of Gino’s uncontrollable anger.

“Therapy” and Killing Off Forster’s Foreigners

We might look to the close of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* for some resolution of these tensions in Forster’s work, noting that in Gino’s later willingness to forgive the death of his child and to embrace his continuing friendship with Philip, masculine connection at least appears possible across national and ethnic divides that are perhaps not as wide as Forster’s narrator has led us to believe. Nevertheless, I would argue that the more striking aspect of the novel’s close is a peculiar, implicit hierarchy in which the life and happiness of the Italian are subordi-

nated to—or employed in the service of—the intellectual and emotional quickening of the formerly repressed and misguided English aesthete. Paul Peppis has commented that

Forster uses these tools of melodrama and unexpectedly shifts generic gears, swerving between comedy, romance, and tragedy, to maximise the likelihood of transforming readers. Ideally, such formal shocks will shake them into a more humble and humane Englishness. *Where Angels Fear to Tread* thus presents a therapeutic parable about the condition of Englishness, diagnosing a malady of nationality and offering its most responsive characters and readers possible cures: encounters—sometimes shocking—with difference. (51)

Although Peppis is not wrong that this is how the novel functions, what is disturbing about such readings is their contentedness with a form of narrative resolution in which we are taught to care more about the transfiguration of the dominant society than the unjust imposition of violence and pain onto the Othered society—as though, in the end, it is acceptable to view a foreign nation merely as a playground for the development of the English psyche. The problem is even more visible in the murder witnessed by the distraught Lucy, to which George responds by remarking on his newfound desire to truly live. He tellingly proclaims that “something tremendous has happened; I must face it without getting muddled. *It isn't exactly that a man has died*” (45; emphasis added). That the narrator later uncritically echoes this remark aligns the general bent of the narrative with George's self-oriented perspective. Even the physical experience of the Italian's death is positioned as part of a world that revolves around Lucy rather than as the center of the man's own tragic narrative: “He frowned; he bent toward Lucy with a look of interest, as if he had an important message for her. He opened his lips to deliver it, and a stream of red came out between them and trickled down his unshaven chin. That was all” (43).¹⁵

In noting this pattern, we might think of Wilfred Stone's commentary on “the cruelty with which Forster treats the lower-class lovers” and how “it seems to be the function of the lower classes to die or suffer to

save the upper classes—and to get no thanks for their pains” (395–96). In *A Room with a View*, George thanks Italy out loud for “fighting” (196)—this word choice is significant—to bring him and Lucy together. Still, to construct the narrative in such a manner does disturbingly suggest that the “function” of Forster’s poor Italians is to sacrifice their bodies and their most fundamental relationships in the service of the Englishman or Englishwoman’s complex and fraught inner life. This narratorial design does not just indicate the limits of Forster’s resistance to class hierarchies; it also signals the existence of a problematic hierarchy of peoples and nations within Forster’s approach, one that belies the famed Forsterian emphasis on broadmindedness and egalitarianism. We cannot carefully read Forster’s Italian novels without seeing these fissures in an often enlightened vision of ethnic and national culture—and recognizing in Forster a microcosm of the persisting primitivist impulse that colored Anglo-American literary representations of Italy even after the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁶ Challenging the meaning of Italy’s membership in the European community of nations, the Italian novels bracket Italy and Italians as uniquely, subtly subordinate within the boundaries of the “civilized” world.

Notes

- 1 For instance, Jameson uses *Howards End* as evidence of how “the traces of imperialism can . . . be detected in Western modernism, and are indeed constitutive of it” (63). *A Passage to India* has inspired similar critiques, like those of Langland, who claims that “Forster does not shake himself free of certain Western ideologies” and that “his liberalism and focus on the individual human stop him short of grasping fully the predations of imperialism, patriarchy, chauvinism, and sexism” (101). For related comments regarding *Howards End* and imperialist-patriarchal ideology, see Langland’s article in *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gender(ed) Criticism*. At the same time, as the contradictions endure in Forster, so do the inconsistencies in our view of his writing. *A Passage to India*, for instance, continues to receive praise as what Gopinath calls a “narrative critique of the intersection of racist, sexist and heteronormative ideologies” (211). Likewise, Armstrong specifically challenges Jameson’s view of Forster in his recent article in *Modern Fiction Studies*.
- 2 In her introduction to *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Colletta emphasizes the transformative, freeing quality of Forster’s Italy: “In Forster’s novel, Italy allows for

- wholeness and a range of human emotions and experience that Sawston does not; human experience is complex and messy, but it is 'the kind of mess that comes of life, not of desolation'" (viii). Deepening this interpretation, Ardis remarks that "Forster's characters . . . are transformed in a positive way by their actual travels to southern Europe, provided that they can relinquish their investment in class distinctions, their assumption of moral, intellectual, and social superiority, and their confidence in 'civilization' while abroad" (72).
- 3 Levine's 1984 article argues that in Forster's novels, "the sexual potency of the [foreign or working-class] savage arises out of his being a 'natural' man in the Rousseauian sense" (72); Womack's 2000 essay refers to the lure of Italy's "convivial natives" (140). Neither author effectively engages the problematics of applying such potentially racist or colonialist discourse to Italy.
 - 4 Likewise, Sampaio acknowledges that Italy functions as the Other in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* but does not probe the problematic hierarchical vision that is implicit in the opposition Forster generates between English and Italian culture.
 - 5 Importantly, a similar means of imagining Italy also manifests in American "Italian novels" and short fiction by nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers as diverse as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Edith Wharton, James Baldwin, and Patricia Highsmith.
 - 6 While the Baedeker Guides were a real series of guidebooks used quite commonly by travelers like Lucy, this particular entry is fictionalized.
 - 7 We can read this comment as a more veiled and ostensibly genteel version of a remark made by the first-person narrator of Forster's short story "The Story of a Panic" (1904), who argues that "promiscuous intimacy" with Italians is unseemly and warns against such "intercourse with social inferiors" (12), asserting the joint importance of nationality and class to social hierarchies.
 - 8 Cosslett, among others, has commented on this characterization of Philip.
 - 9 In the earlier draft of *A Room with a View* referred to as "Old Lucy," Forster's desire to satirize Ruskin is even clearer; as Stallybrass notes, "Forster's treatment of Ruskin is amusingly exaggerated" (27) and includes a humorously inaccurate list of aspects of contemporary Italy against which Ruskin supposedly "fulminated," including "butcher's [*sic*] shops, cab stands, microscope evenings for children & circulating libraries" (22), and other supposed social evils.
 - 10 Because this subject has been thoroughly addressed by Goscilo, Martin, and many others in the last two decades, this essay will not probe the details of the homosexual relationship narrative that Forster subtly inserts into *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.
 - 11 Gibson notes that "Forster viewed England as being irreparably damaged with the rise of mobile technologies (including the railway and the motor car)" (162).
 - 12 In *A Room with a View*, for instance, Lucy complains about having to "sit three to a side" in her mother's carriage because "the trees drop" (185) after a rain-storm. Of course, earlier English texts such as *Jane Eyre* use a similar trope of

- violence to characterize the English countryside, but in Forster's work, no such references to England appear. If anything, this correspondence between Forster's Italy and Brontë's England furthers Forster's assertion that twentieth-century Italy belongs to an earlier time.
- 13 For instance, Markley refers to Philip's "mix of disgust and attraction toward Gino" (277); more omniscient moments of narration encourage such mixed emotions in the reader.
- 14 Interestingly, Forster's narrator also mentions "the nervous vulgarity of England" and "the blinded vulgarity of Germany" (88) in this passage, suggesting a certain degree of cultural affinity between North and South even as the boundaries between the three cultures become more clearly delineated. In this moment, as throughout, the complexity of the narrative asserts itself and thwarts efforts to categorize Forster as either a champion of international egalitarianism or a jingoistic Englishman.
- 15 Within Forster's Italian fiction, this pattern appears even earlier in "The Story of a Panic," which ends with the liberation of an upper-class English boy through the same events that ultimately cause the death of a working-class Italian one.
- 16 Indeed, there are canonical American texts that make similar narrative moves: *Giovanni's Room* is one particularly compelling example.

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