Othering the Mediterranean in E. M. Forster's Italian Novels: A Levinasian Perspective

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Abstract

In order to put the current challenges faced by the Mediterranean into perspective, this article discusses the cultural aspects of the othering of Italy by the English at the turn of the 19th century. This issue is illustrated by Edward Morgan Forster's Italian novels – *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908) – and the analysis is supported by Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of alterity, with glances at Edward Said's and Homi K. Bhabha's approaches to the problem of otherness. The interpersonal relation between Levinasian *same* and *other* has been transposed here to international relations. It is demonstrated that the characters of Forster's novels represent the challenging endeavors of the English at handling the "strangeness" of Italy. The consequences of this encounter point to the need for more human relations between nations, in which they would go beyond political borders and offer their neighbours welcome and hospitality.

Keywords

E. M. Forster - Italian Novels - Levinas - Othering - Anglo-Italian Relations

The current challenges faced by Italy, as part of the Mediterranean, to define herself against the alterity of other nations can be fruitfully contextualised by pointing to the reversal of her position in Europe since the nineteenth century. In order to put the present sensitive matters into perspective, this article aims to discuss the cultural aspects of the othering of Italy by the English in the past. The contemporary challenge of defining her stand towards African and Middle Eastern refugees and its moral implications are in fact reminiscent of the attitude of the English towards the Italians, and the Mediterranean in general, in the nineteenth and well into the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The texts that will serve to exemplify this phenomenon are two novels by the English writer Edward Morgan Forster – *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

(1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908)[1], which will be read here against Emmanuel Levinas's[2] philosophy of alterity, with glances at some cultural approaches to the problem.

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical thought is preoccupied with the nature of the relation of the *same* with the *other*. The *same* (or the self) refers to the subject and its thoughts, while the *other* is its exteriority, that is, everything and everyone «outside, above and beyond the powers of the subject» (Davis 2013, 40). For Levinas this interpersonal relationship should be based on a mutual desire of *the face-to-face encounter* (Davis 2013, 45). This concept serves him in expressing the quality of this encounter, which is not yet an exposure to another person, but rather an awareness of their presence and a readiness to adopt a welcoming attitude towards them. The term *face* is an ambiguous one, since Levinas defines it as something that cannot be simply seen, because to see the *face* would mean reducing it to the scope of our knowledge. The *face*, then, is not the object of perception but rather an «epiphany» or «revelation», the *infinity* which cannot be devoid of its otherness (Davis 2013, 46)[3].

The identity of the *same* is constituted by its relation to the *other*, which is not an easy one since, as Levinas writes, «Nothing is more foreign to me than the other; nothing is more intimate to me than myself» (Levinas 1994, 85). To defy its alterity, the *same* attempts to confine the *other* within the limits of its knowledge. In order to manifest his opposition to such an ontological reasoning and instead advocate an ethical stance on alterity, Levinas adopts two other terms, that of the *saying* and the *said* (Levinas 1981). The *saying* stands for an encounter of the *same* with the *other*, whereas the *said* stands for statements and assertions taken for granted. In Levinas's words, «To say is to approach a neighbour [...]. This is not exhausted in "ascriptions of meaning" [...] which are inscribed, as tales in the Said [...]. Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure» (Levinas 1981, 48). The concept of the *saying* enables Levinas to express what he finds to be the most important aspect of the face-to-face encounter – that of the responsibility for the other, since «saying is responsible for others» (Levinas 1981, 48). In other words, the identity of the self is constituted by its obligation to the Other.

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[1] E. M. Forster's journey to Italy in 1901 set him going as a novelist, as then, as he expressed it, "the creative element had been freed" (quoted after Stallybrass 1976b, 8). Italy became the setting of his earliest short stories as well as two first novels – *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908). Forster's Italian travel also initiated his preoccupation with the English reaction to otherness, a theme that culminated in A Passage to India (1924).

[2] In order to avoid confusion, in what follows the surname of the philosopher will be spelled without an accent, since this is the practice of all the critics referred to herein.

[3] This conviction constitutes the essence of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* (1961), in which context *totality* stands for the ontological attempt of the same to locate the Other in the domain of its understanding, while *infinity* demonstrates the impossibility of the self to perceive the Other.

This interpersonal relation between Levinasian *same* and *other* has been translated into international relations, since it has been recognised that the idea has a potential of bringing a new – ethical – dimension to the domain of politics (Denboer 2010, 60). Levinas rejects ontology as the self's exploitation of such preconceived ideas as reason, spirit or history in order to suppress alterity. It has been argued that this idea corresponds to the practices of ontological politics in which «political actors utilize the institutions of the state apparatus to totalise the Other» (Eubanks and Gauthier 2005, 25). This totalisation serves the purpose of differentiating the self from the Other and thus creating and strengthening the self's identity. In practice, a given nation categorises other nations considering the features of their representatives as definite and characteristic of them all. Levinas opposes such a standpoint and in turn calls for an ethical politics, that is, for the realisation that the identity of a nation is conditional on its acceptance of the Other's incomprehensibility as well as its capability to play host to other nations.

Levinas considers Europe as playing a particular role in his vision of ethical politics, given the fact that this continent is an exceptionally diverse entity whose identity has been an effect of cultural exchanges and tensions between nations as well as of the influences of global culture. Europe's religious and historical heritage demands that it is governed by the ethical and pledges it not only to make difference a constituent of its own continental unity but also to take responsibility for other continents (Drabinski 2011, 4-5). Nevertheless, the fact that, just like interpersonal relations, European international relations have been shaped by ontological assumptions renders the vision of ethical politics a considerable challenge.

In some respects Levinas's philosophy of alterity coincides with contemporary cultural theories. For the purpose of this article it will suffice to mention Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha. Edward Said, considering the relationship between the West and the East, describes the opposition between peoples in terms of imaginative territories, which are either "ours" or "theirs":

> A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call "the land of the barbarians." In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs" is a way of making geographical distinctions. […] It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our own minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from "ours." (Said 2003, 54)

The identity of the self may thus be defined only against its alterity. If the Other is all that is beyond the boundaries of the homeland, the self is exclusively within these

boundaries. Boundaries guarantee a safe distance, which enable the self to take a stance on its Other and create particular visions of it, against which it will define its identity. These visions, as Homi K. Bhabha in turn claims, originate either from admiration or fear:

> The fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it. (Bhabha 2004, 107)

Thus, borders are the sources of contrasting visions and misconceptions which clash whenever someone ventures to cross them, be they travellers, colonists, migrants or refugees. These theoretical deliberations appear to be certainly applicable to the discussions of the phenomena taking place in Europe in the colonial period as well as in the present day.

The interrelation between the political and ethical consequences of the encounter with the Other may be well exemplified by E. M. Forster's fiction. *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* are the author's early novels, in which he developed an interest in the relations between the English and other nations. Among the other novels that continued in the same vein is *A Passage to India* (1924), owing to which the writer has become entangled in colonial and post-colonial discourses. Even though today E.M. Forster is considered «the great debunker of imperial pomposity» (Morey 2007, 255-6), he still counts among those Edward Said termed as «Orientalists», that is, Europeans producing texts on the colonised parts of the world, which were dominated by binary oppositions between «west and east, self and Other, us and them», and which, as a consequence, have constituted a dominant discourse on the non-west in opposition to the west (Morey 2007, 255-6). Drawing on Said, Peter Morey points out:

> As outsiders to the cultures they describe, Orientalists offer an act of representation that always focuses on certain already acknowledged attributes of their subjects. In short, they give edited and subjective "highlights" of those characteristics deemed recognisable and "authentic". Such representation is never neutral. (Morey 2007, 255)

Nevertheless, as Morey indicates, this time referring to Homi K. Bhabha's thought, these representations of the binary opposition between the coloniser and the colonised aiming at the former's self-definition are continuously disrupted by the unexplainable forces of various nature symbolised by the Forsterian Marabar Caves (Morey 2007, 259). For this reason, Forster's characters are marked by their failure at

cross-cultural communication. His Italian novels already foreshadow these tendencies, even though they are concerned with cultural rather than political imperialism.

The English-Italian intercourse in the nineteenth century was marked by the former's attempt at self-definition. Given their country's insular position, the English defined their national identity by opposition to the continent. The Italians were one of the main nations that served them as a reference point, due to the popularisation of the Grand Tour in the previous century. The notion of Englishness at the time was constructed by either exclusion or identification with the conceptions of Italianess (McAllister 2007, 2).

Given their country's unceasing engagement in imperial expansion, the English's imagining of Italy had the hallmarks of their missionary attitude towards their colonies. Even though England had no political control over Italy, the fact that hordes of English tourists had flooded the peninsula ever since the opening of the continent in 1815 (Buzard 1993, 19) created a kind of economic dependency. Moreover, given Italy's unstable political situation, it was patronised by the British government, set by its citizens as an example to follow. What is more, at the time the English would consider themselves as legitimate descendants of the Romans (Pemble 1988, 64). Therefore, they not only cherished Italian culture and art but also assumed the role of protectors of the Roman heritage, which frequently took the form of purchasing and appropriating valuable artworks and artefacts. Thus, the image of England as a political, economic and imperial power mingled with the vision of Italy as a backward, indolent and politically inadequate yet picturesque and artistically-inclined nation.

Furthermore, the concept of nation, which was understood by the English as the extension of home with the very same moral backbone, would be incongruous with their image of Italy. The Victorian need to strengthen the standards of personal morality evolved in reaction to the moral frivolity of the previous age, the conviction of which was formed partly by the English going on their seemingly educational Grand Tours to Italy. This is why Victorians would particularly value their English hearth and home, in which a particular role was played by a woman, who was expected to be a proper lady. In other words, the English lady was supposed to be decorous, devoted to her husband and family, and above all domestic. Although the English did travel as much as before, their journeys to the South were considered as potentially threatening to their ideals. In particular, given the feminine ideal, at the time it was considered unbecoming for women to travel that far and particularly to travel without a male escort to the Mediterranean, since it was assumed that their propriety would be endangered by southerners, whom they tended to comprehend on the basis of a number of contradictory stereotypes. They considered them «as the Noble Savages and the Wild Men […] effeminate yet potent seducers, dirty peasants yet sophisticated

artists, simple and childlike yet cunning and manipulative, morally bankrupt yet primarily innocent» (McAllister 2007, 2).

The English framed the Italians within the bunch of these characteristics, which were as much appealing as threatening, so that it would be easier to create mechanisms of self-protection against them. An example of such mechanisms was the popular handbooks used by British tourists in the continent, particularly those by John Murray and Karl Baedeker. As James Buzard observes, the handbooks created particular visions of European countries and nations; they «assembled a "tourist's Europe" between the covers of their volumes», in which manner they «encouraged acts of imaginary appropriation» (Buzard 1993, 77). These small red-jacketed books «accompanied the tourist (...) directing gazes and prompting responses» (Buzard 1993, 75). It was particularly English women travelling to the South unaccompanied by male guardians who were advised to follow the guidance offered by the handbooks (Buzard 1993, 148-9). The handbooks would not only educate female travellers on tourist attractions and works of art but also provide information on security and sanitation as well as advising against too intimate contacts with the local men (Buzard 1993, 148-50). In a way, then, the guidebooks served the purpose of shielding the tourists once they had crossed geographical boundaries between the familiar and the foreign.

Thus understood concepts of identity, nation and home, as well as the character of Italian-English relationships, have been captured by the literature of the period. Rachel Hollander considers the English novel of the long nineteenth century (that is until 1914) as particularly preoccupied with the encounter of the self with the Other (Hollander 2013, 1), and thus having the potential of «narrative hospitality», which manifests itself when, she claims, «characters and authors open themselves to that which is other and suggest the value of recognizing rather than overcoming the limits of knowledge» (Hollander 2013, 3). E.M. Forster's Italian novels represent this notion well.

Even though the Italian novels are set in the Edwardian period, that is, between 1901-1910, they to a great extent draw on the previous century. The vision of the world and of Italy that emerges from the novels is permeated with the British colonial ideology and shaped by the Baedeker handbooks. The protagonists of the two novels are English tourists to Italy who endeavour to handle its otherness. They appear to be far from consistent in their attitude towards Italians and Italy, which always appears to them a mixture of «[b]eauty, evil, charm, vulgarity, mystery» (Forster 1976b, 104). The longer they stay in the country, the more involved they are in the life of its inhabitants. Thus, the relation between England and Italy is not only of a national but also of a personal nature; in other words, the notions of the domestic and the national interweave. Therefore, it may well be claimed that the misalliance in personal relations

as portrayed in Forster's Italian novels reflects the English-Italian incongruity throughout the long nineteenth century.

A Room with a View is a novel about a desire for a view of a true life that is to be found in Italy. The novel opens with a scene in the Pension Bertolini in Florence. English travellers Miss Bartlett and Lucy Honeychurch are disappointed since, despite having been promised south-facing rooms with a view over the Arno River, they are given north-facing rooms looking into a courtyard. They finally do have a view thanks to two other guests, Mr Emerson and his son George, who offer to switch rooms. Rooms with views reappear in the novel, always juxtaposing two worlds – that of Surrey in England and Florence in Italy. The former is always associated with the darkness of the room, the latter with the light of the view. Darkness stands for the "muddle" of English social standards, English hypocrisy and prejudice against Italy. The light expresses a desire for beauty and truth, a real experience of life and the exposure to otherness. The characters of the novel are classified into «those who forget views and those who remember them» (Forster 1990, 156).

When in Florence, Lucy, being one of those «who remember the views», has a chance to defy English conventionality, superficiality and snobbishness, but she seems unable to do so. This is clearly manifested when she sets out to go sightseeing at the Church of Santa Croce equipped with her Baedeker's handbook, but suddenly has it taken away from her by Miss Lavish. At first, without her manual she does not know what she is supposed to think about the place:

> Of course, it contained frescoes by Giotto [...] But who was to tell her which they were? She walked about disdainfully, unwilling to be enthusiastic over monuments of uncertain authorship or date. There was no one even to tell her which, of all the sepulchral slabs that paved the nave and transepts, was the one that was really beautiful, the one that had been most praised by Mr. Ruskin. (Forster 1990, 18)

Without her little red book Lucy appears as if incapable of appreciating the foreign country unfolding before her eyes. It is of interest that this unfavourable attitude may be observed also in Forster's *Sentimental Essays*. When entering the Pantheon for the first time, Forster writes, «I at once sat down [...] and began to read about the building» (Forster 2008, 161). Only after doing his reading for half an hour does he dare to enthuse about the building: «So supreme was the triumph of architecture that we forgot we were beneath a roof» (Heath 2008, 162). This unquestioning reliance on guidebooks creating a particular vision of the country visited and the refusal to make their own judgments was still typical of English tourists in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Without her Baedeker, Lucy appears deprived not only of guidance but also of a shield against all the perils awaiting her in the unfamiliar place. In fact, she will have to realise that, as Miss Lavish explains, «[o]ne doesn't come to Italy for niceness [...] one comes for life» (Forster 1990, 15). She experiences this very soon when she witnesses the murder of an Italian man who, before dying, «bent towards Lucy with a look of interest, as if he had an important message for her» (Forster 1990, 40). This face-to-face encounter with the Other could have proved enlightening to her if she had not rejected it. But such atrocity is not what she came to Italy for. Thus, she belittles the incident, being more preoccupied with her lost photographs than with the dead man. She is angry that by fainting she might have uncovered her true self. She fears that by facing the man she might have entered into a spiritual dialogue with him: «Again the thought occurred to her, "Oh, what have I done?" – the thought that she, as well as the dying man, had crossed some spiritual boundary» (Forster 1990, 41-42). In Levinasian terms, dialogue with alterity is accomplished only in this «risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, in the breaking up of inwardness and the abandonment of all shelter, in exposure to traumas, in vulnerability» (Levinas 1981, 48). This is the lesson that Lucy could not learn from her Baedeker.

Lucy faces the what appears to her as the *real* Italy for the second time when she encounters George Emerson who, with his spontaneity and passion, becomes for her the embodiment of Italy. He is not typically English and seems to have acquired Italian ways, and thus at first Lucy has mixed feelings about him. Just like his father, he «is not tactful; yet», she realises «there are people who do things which are most indelicate, and yet at the same time – beautiful […]» (Forster 1990, 9). The moment he kisses her for the first time is enlightening, as it gives her a view of the beauty of life:

> From her feet the ground sloped sharply into view, and violets ran down in rivulets and streams and cataracts. […] But never again were they in such profusion; this terrace was the well-head, the primal source whence beauty gushed out to water the earth. Standing at its brink, like a swimmer who prepares, was the good man […] George had turned at the sound of her arrival. For a moment he contemplated her, as one who had fallen out of heaven. He saw radiant joy in her face, he saw the flowers beat against her dress in blue waves. The bushes above them closed. He stepped quickly forward and kissed her. (Forster 1990, 67)

But the incident is also unexpected, unexplainable and definitely inexcusable from the perspective of Lucy's English propriety. As Andrew Gibson argues, Levinas's conviction is that

the Other whom I encounter is always radically in excess of what my ego, cognitive powers, consciousness, intuitions would make of him or her. The Other always and definitely overflows the frame in which [the self] would seek to enclose the Other. (Gibson 1999, 25)

The Other has escaped the frames of Lucy's imagination, and this revelation appears too much for her. In an attempt to protect herself against vulnerability, she accuses George of being unrefined, thus taking a typical English stance on the Italians.[4]

The fact that Lucy and George do finally get married and appear to be happy starting their new life in Italy does not really mean that Lucy is willing to receive it as it is. She may have accepted George with his Italian ways, but she has never truly exposed herself to Italy. Even now when she returns to Italy she still acts like a typical English tourist – she stays in the Bertolini Pension which, with its exclusively English guests, actually «might be London» (Forster 1990, 1). Lucy remains a stranger rather than a guest welcomed into the home.

A more determined attempt at a face-to-face encounter between England and Italy is portrayed in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Lilia Herriton, the main protagonist, leaves behind the family of her late husband, as well as her daughter, and travels to Italy accompanied only by another female, Caroline Abbott. Just like Adela Quested in *A Passage to India*, who wishes to «see the *real* India» (Forster 1976a, 25), Lilia dreams about the *real* Italy where she would be freed of the never-ending rigidity of English social conventions. When she falls in love with Gino, an Italian man, she hopes for an authentic relationship. However, this English-Italian romance is already doomed to failure since, unlike in *A Room with a View*, the protagonists of this novel do not wish to accept nor incorporate *anything* of what is unlike themselves. Mutual understanding between individuals is not possible because of the disparity of their cultural origin.

Typically, the English in the novel, before they encounter Italy, create a vision of the country based on what has already been written about it. It is well exemplified by the scene in which Mrs Herriton, Lilia's mother-in-law, discovers that she is staying in the Tuscan hill town Monteriano. She instinctively looks the place up in nineteenth-century classic texts on Italy, and finally finds the entry in the Baedeker (Buzard 1993, 311). Yet, having crossed the borders of the country, the characters soon realise the inaccuracy of the vision and, as a consequence, are overwhelmed by fear of all that is Italian; they find it, in Said's words, «the land of barbarians» (Said 2003, 54). On his arrival in Italy, Philip feels uncomfortable if not endangered – he has crossed the boundary of the territory which is "theirs":

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[4] Lucy's reaction is analogous to that of Adela's charge against Dr. Aziz in *A Passage to India*. In consequence, both Lucy and Adela leave the "hostile" country and return to England.

> He was in the enemy's country, and everything – the hot sun, the cold air behind the heat, the endless rows of olive-trees, regular yet mysterious – seemed hostile to the placid atmosphere of Sawston in which his thoughts took birth. (Forster 1976b, 34)

In a manner similar to Said, Levinas recognises this fear that the self has of the strangeness of the Other. As Peperzak puts it,

> [t]he encounter with the human other is not the union of an act by which two potential beings identify with one another in the transparency of a perception or a concept but rather a shock [...] The other "shows itself" in a different manner; his/her way of "being" is other. (Peperzak 1993, 62-3)

The characters of the novel are overtly shocked by Italy's strangeness, and again their national prejudice is transposed to their personal relations with Italians. There is a potential of "narrative hospitality" in the novel, which the characters fail to realise. On the one hand, it is Italy that is to play host to a stranger, that is Lilia. On the other hand, it is the English, the Herritons, who need to allow a stranger into their family. Nevertheless, the family of Lilia's late husband find the prospective marriage a misalliance «bringing discredit on the family» (Forster 1976b, 23). Thus, Mrs Herriton sends Philip to Monteriano so that he can prevent this ill-fated relationship:

> The man may be a duke or he may be an organ-grinder. That is not the point. If Lilia marries him she insults the memory of Charles, she insults Irma, she insults us. Therefore I forbid her, and if she disobeys we have done with her for ever. (Forster 1976b, 31)

Even though Mrs Herriton claims that neither «a duke» nor «an organ-grinder» would do, the difference in social status does matter, since Lilia belongs to the aristocracy while Gino is merely the son of a dentist. The prospect of being related to Gino is intolerable to Philip. He cannot face him even when sitting with him at the table:

> [...] Philip had seen that face before in Italy a hundred times – seen it and loved it, for it was not merely beautiful, but had the charm which is the rightful heritage of all who are born on that soil. But he did not want to see it opposite him at dinner. It was not the face of a gentleman. (Forster 1976b, 41)

He uses this argument to discourage Lilia from marrying Gino: «It is not possible that you, a lady, accustomed to ladies and gentlemen, will tolerate a man whose position is – well, not equal to the son of the servants' dentist in Coronation Place» (Forster 1976b, 43). He also warns Gino against marrying a rich woman:

> I have come to prevent you marrying Mrs. Herriton, because I see you will both be unhappy together. She is English, you are Italian; she is accustomed to one thing, you to another. And – pardon me if I say it--she is rich and you are poor. (Forster 1976b, 46)

Yet, Philip's efforts are of no avail, since Lilia and Gino are already married. Though they seem to be in love, the difference between them prevents them from being truly happy:

> She was so much older than he was, and so much richer, that he regarded her as a superior being who answered to other laws. He was not wholly surprised, for strange rumours were always blowing over the Alps of lands where men and women had the same amusements and interests. […] Now that he knew her better, he was inevitably losing his awe. (Forster 1976b, 54)

In Levinas's terms, it may be said that the encounter between Lilia and Gino comes to them as a shock, and the only way for the self to cope with this shock is confining the Other within the limits of the familiar, within the *said*. Thus, Gino is marked by Lilia's English vision of a passionate, charming yet unrefined Italian, whereas Gino expects her to act like an obedient Italian wife. «I do not see why an English wife should be treated differently», he says, «this is Italy» (Forster 1976b, 59). However, she would never sacrifice her Englishness, just as he would never change his Italian ways:

> It would have been well if he had been as strict over his own behaviour as he was over hers. But the incongruity never occurred to him for a moment. His morality was that of the average Latin, and as he was suddenly placed in the position of a gentleman, he did not see why he should not behave as such. Of course, had Lilia been different – had she asserted herself and got a grip on his character – he might possibly – though not probably – have been made a better husband as well as a better man, and at all events he could have adopted the attitude of the Englishman […] But had Lilia been different she might not have married him. (Forster 1976b, 63)

Their marriage is in fact a struggle between «the social ideals of North and South» (Forster 1976b, 63). In Philip's words: «He's a bounder, but he's not an English bounder. He's mysterious and terrible. He's got a country behind him that's upset people from the beginning of the world» (Forster 1976b, 88). There is no chance for reconciliation between them. Thus, their love ends tragically – Lilia dies in childbirth and her English relatives try to take the baby away to England but it is killed in an accident. This personal tragedy may be considered in broader, national, terms as England's inability to overcome her prejudices and Italy's failure at unconditional hospitality.

It is not only Lilia and Gino who fail but also Philip. A typical English Italophile, he, too, has in his mind an ideal vision of Italy – a Baedeker Italy. He also idealised Italians confining them within his own value system – within the *said*. After all, it was him who urged Lilia to go to Italy and to «[l]ove and understand the Italians, for the people are more marvellous than the land» (Forster 1976b, 19). When finally exposed to this foreign country, he cannot accept it as it is and hence becomes disillusioned:

> Italy, the land of beauty, was ruined for him. She had no power to change men and things who dwelt in her. She, too, could produce avarice, brutality, stupidity – and, what was worse, vulgarity. It was on her soil and through her influence that a silly woman had married a cad. He hated Gino, the betrayer of his life's ideal, and now that the sordid tragedy had come, it filled him with pangs, not of sympathy, but of final disillusion. (Forster 1976b, 71)

No longer does Philip romanticise Italy; on the contrary, he is more than sceptical of Italy's hospitality, resenting her for bearing violence and vulgarity. In fact, Italy is here represented as an unwelcoming and hostile land on whose soil the English – the title's «Angels» – fear to tread. On the other hand, England appears here incapable of resigning from her imperial inclinations. After all, Philip, just like Ronny in *A Passage to India*, considers himself an «emissary of civilization» who went to the «land of barbarians» to «continue his mission» (Forster 1976b, 130-1).

E.M. Forster's Italian novels are by no means optimistic and leave no doubt about the consequences of the English-Italian encounter. His characters never experience Italy outside of their preconceived ideas; they are mere tourists just as the author himself in one of his lectures admitted to have been while there:

> The tourist may be intelligent, warm-hearted and alert […], but he has to go back every evening to his hotel or pension and he can know very little of the class structure of the country he is visiting, or of its economic problems. My limitations

were grave. Fortunately I was unaware of them and plunged ahead. (Forster 1976b, 8)

Forster, too, had no knowledge of Italian society and thus appears to have enclosed it within his English values, such as class structure or economic position. Unalarmed by his ignorance, he "plunged ahead" and wrote a novel based on a story he overheard in his hotel from other English guests: «I overheard an English lady talking to another English lady about a third English lady who had married an Italian far beneath her socially and also much younger, and how most unfortunate it was» (quoted after Stallybrass 1976, 8). Notwithstanding the fact, it can be claimed that the writer calls for a change in the moral attitude of the English towards Italy as its Other.

In the nineteenth century Italy served for the English as the point of reference against which they could define their own superiority, prosperity and morality, for which purpose they would patronise, appropriate and sympathise with her. As has been exemplified, Forster's characters, accordingly, either attempt to adapt Italy to suit their needs of either identification and moral salvation, like in *A Room with a View*, or exclusion and superiority, like in *Where Angels Fear to Tread.* Even though in the novels there are moments of face-to-face encounter that bring the English and Italians closer to reconciliation, in neither of them are they successful. Therefore, Forster's characters are by no means paragons of Levinasian hospitality – they claim to have comprehended their Other while clearly disengaging from them and claiming their superiority. And Italy, in turn, has always defended itself against such confining frames. The problem here is not then, in Gibson's words, «a disenchantment of a world that fails to correspond to the subject's expectations, but a disenchantment of the self that seeks to contain the world within its perspective» (Gibson 1999, 25).

Written at the beginning of the twentieth century, E. M. Forster's Italian novels are permeated with an English imperial ideology of the previous age, yet already betraying a modern admission of the impossibility of confining the world within the limits of one's knowledge and thus pointing to an alternative mode of international relations. The novels' uneasiness about the English-Italian relationship appears to have heralded the present-day moral malady of international politics, that is, the conflict between the irresistible need to appropriate other nations and the call for the recognition of their incomprehensibility and the acceptance of an unconditional responsibility to them. The consequences of the English-Italian encounter point to the need for more human relations between nations in which they would be able to go beyond political borders and offer their neighbours welcome, hospitality and refuge. Italy, whose position in the international arena has changed considerably since the nineteenth century, has now been given a chance to rise to this challenge, hopefully learning the lesson of history.

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