

**Emma Sutton and Tsung-Han Tsai, 2020. *Twenty-First-Century Readings of E.M. Forster's Maurice*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp. 281**

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The scholarly ambition and intellectual range of the essays collected in Emma Sutton and Tsung-Han Tsai's new volume suggest that scholarly work on E.M. Forster retains a pleasing energy and vibrancy in the author's anniversary year. These nine chapters—and a comprehensive critical introduction – make an adept and convincing case for *Maurice* (1913 [1971]) as “a more complex and more conflicted book than previously acknowledged” (21). One of the great strengths of the volume is its emphasis on *Maurice's* genesis as the product of queer forms of collaboration—the manner in which it came into being through supportive dialogue and exchange in Forster's wide social circles. Charlotte Charteris, for example, deepens our understanding of Forster's long friendship with Christopher Isherwood by tracing the complexities of the “master” and “pupil” relationship in their respective texts. Her chapter draws on a wealth of theoretical material – late Foucault, Jack Halberstam, Lee Edelman – to suggest how these writers explore the formation of inter-generational queer cultures. Insights on sterility, and the significance of what Edelman calls “reproductive futurity”, are particularly astute. (Forster's “Little Imber” [1961], his science fiction fantasy of male parthenogenesis, might provide an alternative perspective here too).

Gemma Moss's chapter helpfully reminds us that this novel – unlike the child in “Little Imber” – was not the product of an exclusively gay male *milieu*. Her chapter draws

attention to Forster's close friendship with Florence Barger, whose support did much to bolster Forster's confidence in finding a language to express his same-sex desire. Indeed, one of the distinctive contributions of the volume is the manner in which it refocuses attention on the place of women in the novel itself. Anna Watson's chapter suggests that the apparent "flatness" of women characters in *Maurice* is a function of Forster's decision to focalize much of the novel through Maurice and Clive's limited perspectives. Readers will likely disagree on quite where to draw the line between Forster's "problematization" and his "enactment" of this "marginalization" (125). Moss's perceptive discussion of the influence of the "social purity" movement on Forster's work suggests one explanation for the text's often thinly-veiled misogyny: that women, in such discourses, frequently function as the guardians of precisely the normative sexual and domestic traditions that the text aims to challenge.

The collection also enriches our appreciation of the striking ways in which *Maurice* engages with its broader cultural, philosophical and religious contexts. Joseph Bristow examines how Forster looks back to the culture of British Aestheticism and negotiates the early-twentieth century notoriety of Oscar Wilde. Revisiting Maurice's characterization of himself as an "unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort", Bristow situates the novel in the aftermath of Lord Alfred Douglas's 1913 libel proceedings against Arthur Ransome and his *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912). The chapter revisits Robert Martin's influential reading of the novel in terms of a tension between late-Victorian Hellenism and Edward Carpenter's "homosexual democracy", to suggest that the relationship between these intellectual currents in the novel is more complex than this reading acknowledges.

In a similarly astute contribution, Finn Fordham marshals a fascinating range of sources to analyse Forster's sense of the "soul" in *Maurice*, ranging from philosophical and scientific works on Platonism, idealism and materialism to sexological treatises in English and German. In its fraught negotiations between the values of "body" and "soul", Forster's novel reflects prevalent concerns in modernist literature about the uncertain origins of the self. Fordham explores these questions through a dazzling close reading of textural variants between editions of the text by P.H. Furbank (1971) and Philip Gardner (1999), returning us to puzzles of smudged commas (or is it a full stop?) in typescripts at King's College Library. Questions of the "soul" arise in different ways in Krzysztof Fardoński's discussion of the role of religion in the novel. In his closely attentive reading, Fardoński dwells on how character's encounters with orthodox religion – specifically, the Anglican Church – are integral to the structure of the novel, and to its central concern with societal control and repression. His approach is a valuable reminder that the religious

persecution of LGBT minorities is by no means confined to the past, and that Forster's text still speaks powerfully to the plight of these communities today.

The book's third section, "Afterlives," presents a fascinating discussion of *Maurice's* reception and transformation in contemporary literature, film and online fanfiction. David Medalie illuminates the novel's concern with the "social fabric" of Forster's England by positioning it in the context of the "New Liberalism" of the early twentieth century. This is expertly traced in Forster's use of legal and political imagery invoking the "organic". The relationship of gay men with the wider "body politic" in the text comes into sharper focus through a comparison with Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988). For Medalie, the contrast of these texts' visions of the social helps to guard against assumptions of a teleology of gay liberation. There is, though, a danger here of imposing on Hollinghurst's text a rather limited sense of the forms that queer sociality might take. For Medalie, Hollinghurst's text is a dystopian indictment of Thatcherite atomization; others may place a greater emphasis on its keen sensitivity to spaces in which gay men collectively negotiate identity (whether in the gym, or the archive). Howard J. Booth sets *Maurice* alongside Damon Galgut's "biofiction" *Arctic Summer* (2014) to think more carefully about the function of allegory in the respective texts. Close attention to Forster's passing allusions to Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) allows Booth to reveal the text's place in an English literary tradition of dissent and radicalism, for which allegory was a significant resource. Reading Forster alongside Walter Benjamin's work foregrounds the sense of "change, loss and ruination" (204) in a text that balances its moments of melancholy with a quiet if tenacious utopian hopefulness.

The volume's final chapter – and in many respects its most distinctive – is Claire Monk's discussion of the novel's film adaptation by Merchant Ivory in 1987, and the wealth of responses to the text in twenty-first-century online fanfictions. While some contributors to the volume are perhaps too insistent in their arguments for the novel's complexity, for Monk it is precisely the "simplicity" of *Maurice* that has made it such a rich site for readers' subsequent engagement. Strikingly, Monk encourages us to understand the text's composition as underpinned by similar affective investments as fanfiction today: speculation, playfulness, imagination, possibility. These insights are combined with scrupulous archival work on the fraught process of film adaptation by James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, a reminder of the admirable "commitment" and "defiance" (234) of a film produced at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

There are occasional moments in the collection where claims for the novel seem, perhaps, a little too insistent. Forster himself might raise a sceptical eyebrow at the

suggestion that this is a text which “goes to the edge of language and of realist fiction” (128). Debates about Forster’s “Modernism” (with a capital “M”?) still seem to shape readings determined to argue for an unacknowledged formal radicalism in his work. This might lead us to overlook more immediate models for Forster’s fiction, particularly in the case of *Maurice*. Recent scholarship on early twentieth-century middlebrow fiction, for example, might offer alternative ways to account for this text’s shifts of tone (irony, sentimentality, earnestness, hopefulness) and mix of genres (*Bildungsroman*, romance, fairy tale). Overall, though, this is a deeply satisfying collection, diligently edited by Emma Sutton and Tsung-Han Tsai and handsomely produced by Liverpool University Press. It will undoubtedly send readers to the greenwood afresh, copies of *Maurice* in hand.