

Foreword

The idea of dedicating an entire issue of *Merope* to E.M. Forster stems not so much from the desire to furnish yet another series of essays on the novelist but rather from a reflection on the status of theory and method in contemporary Forsterian criticism. The vibrant and sustained interest in Forster's work has given us the possibility to gauge the hermeneutic viability and durability of the enormous quantity of critical material that floods our desks, which more often than not has been produced with job prospects or funding opportunities in mind. In a moment in time in which the same articles on the same aspects are continuously being published in various parts of the world, in a moment, that is to say, in which a scholar ends up by confronting his own work with that of other scholars in a sort of endless metacritical vertigo, Forster has become an author whose work poses to the critics of the third millennium a whole spectrum of issues that seriously undermine, or at least question, the certainties underlying their work. In an interesting inversion of roles, we the critics are not the ones who raise questions and turn to Forster's novels for answers, but rather, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, it is Forster who questions us and invites us to set aside the worn-out formulas, modes and tendencies of contemporary criticism which seems to be entrapped in a sort of autotelic self-referential representation that very rarely addresses the issues raised by the texts themselves.

In a memorable verse Wallace Stevens writes: "Real and unreal are two in one". Forster was well aware that life's enigma lies precisely in this unity between real and unreal, between truth and falsehood. He in fact had perfectly understood that the fluid reality in which we are immersed is quite different from the reductive and simplistic dichotomies which Forsterian criticism at times tends to propose. Unfortunately, too many critics seem to have forgotten that when Forster talks about connection, he is not merely postulating a union between "different classes, sexes, and sides of the individual self", as David Bradshaw writes, but is rather hypothesizing the ability to go beyond the Victorian conception of society and of the individual so as to construe instead a world in which everything can be destabilised and nothing is certain with the exception of the shadowy uncertainty of things. Forster can thus be considered as neither a traditionalist nor a modernist, and his novels are part of a greater change that encompasses the status of the work of art and of the product of the human imagination.

In many respects, the closing essay of the volume by Ivan Callus offers the sort of answer — one that is extreme but also highly original in its constant construction and deconstruction of a series of assumptions — that Forster's work prompts a critic to formulate. Significantly enough, nearly all the essays question and re-question in a site of negotiation and creative tension the criticism that has been produced on Forster which, as Francesco Marroni demonstrates, cannot be read without continuously confronting it with his novels. In an analogous vein, the essay by Gloria Lauri-Lucente examines a number of filmic adaptations of Forster's novels and relentlessly confronts them with the criticism that they have inspired. Clearly, the Forster we have tried to depict does not attempt to offer the reader a definitive study of the author. Rather, as in the case of Tania Zulli's contribution, our depiction takes on the cast of a scene that is constantly fluctuating, in which innumerable possibilities have the ability to indefinitely promote and renew thoughts and counter-thoughts, statements and counter-statements. Out of this multifariousness, what emerges is not so much one distinct voice but rather a reverberation of voices which contradict one another without fearing contradiction in and of itself. Within such a framework, the essay by Anna Enrichetta Soccio focuses on the way in which the spatial elements in *Howards End* constitute a modality of simplification in a horizon that is in reality much more complex, and in so doing, it highlights the inability on Forster's part to build a narrative text which encompasses entirely reality's complexities. From a different perspective, but again with a somewhat similar focus on incompleteness, Raffaella Antinucci's *Arctic Summer* studies the way in which in this unfinished novel, the nostalgic treatment of the theme of gentlemanliness limits Forster's perspective and ultimately ends up by curtailing his imagination. As a result, the narration is transformed into an anachronistic discourse that is no longer viable and is unable to reach a conclusion, thus leaving the reader with a series of unanswered questions.

Again, complexity lies at the core of the anthropological study by Stefania Michelucci who argues that a simple text like "The Story of a Panic" contains within it a more complex text which exemplifies Forster's refusal of any simplistic interpretative formula. It is as if in all of his works Forster himself is constantly reminding us that "[t]he novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not so simple as you think'", as Milan Kundera has put it in *The Art of the Novel*. Forster does not court complexity, he does not display it with the

prosopopeia of someone who exudes certainty, but, on the contrary, he lives it, he experiences it and, in the process, he reveals its obtuse superficiality. In this respect Neval Barber's essay on the homoerotic work *The Heart of Bosnia*, which has never been published and still in manuscript form, further illustrates the strong link between the representation of complexity and Forster's personal life through which he explores the type of masculinity that is permissible in the South, where it is still possible to encounter an untainted and authentic sexuality. It is precisely the South — in this case Italy — that is the focus of James Corby's essay on the "intriguing complexities" which a term such as "muddle" denotes, a term whose semantic vectors seem to gesture towards a vision of the world in which there is no longer any room for clarity and in which sexuality itself has become a structural element of confusion that is to be understood as the complexity of life, of one's actions and of one's sentiments.

It is quite evident even to the reader who casts only a cursory glance at the novels and at the works of non-fiction referred to in this issue of *Merope* that the essays we have gathered actively engage with one another as they strive to demonstrate that writing about Forster — that is to say, writing about the "spirit of complexity" that lies at the heart of Forster's work — constitutes an indirect response to the simplifications of a consumer culture which is driven by the needs of the market and is consequently incapable of furnishing discourses that are not riddled by superficial statements and platitudes. We live in an epoch in which simplicity seems to exert a dangerously seductive allure particularly in the creation of themes and characters in narratives that are immediately recognizable and that are completely devoid of any type of hermeneutic depth. Forster lies at the very antipodes of such an attitude, which is why his work beckons its readers to be constantly aware that "[t]hings are not simple as you think".

The Editors