

Review:
Emma Sutton and Tsung-Han Tsai (eds.), 2020.
Twenty-First-Century Readings of E. M. Forster's
***"Maurice"* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press)**

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Surprising as it may be, this is the first book-length publication entirely devoted to E. M. Forster's *Maurice*. It appears almost fifty years after the novel's official introduction to the public (1971) and over a hundred years after its first manuscript was presented to Forster's friends (1913). The first critical voices regarding the novel tended to centre around one topic, that is homosexuality, be it of the characters or of Forster. As a result, other important issues deftly interwoven into the novel's structure, have been generally neglected or marginalized. The book, therefore, strives at presenting *Maurice* anew by reflecting upon it from various perspectives and from different angles. The collection of essays adds significantly to the discussion on *Maurice* and its place amongst other Forster's writings.

The book is an aftermath of the 2012 Forster conference sponsored and organized by the School of English at the University of St Andrews. The conference was prompted by the centenary of E. M. Forster's *Maurice*. The novel written in the wake of WWI but waiting for a "happier year" to be published, is quite special in Forster's oeuvre for a couple of reasons. To name but a few, until it was eventually published posthumously in 1971, the book had been undergoing endless revisions of the author. And that constantly altered and modified version of the original manuscript had been privately offered to a very small and select readership (all details regarding the history of *Maurice* can be found in the Introduction as well as in the chapters, since the contributors frequently make references in their discussions to this creative process, too).

Once published, the novel was (too) quickly classified as a gay romance and as a result, the scholarly attention it obtained was limited in scope and nature. Although Forster's collection of short stories published shortly after

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Maurice, i.e. *The Life to Come and Other Stories* (1972), made the researchers have another look at the novel, it is only the twenty-first century that re-discovers the story about Alec and Maurice to wider audiences and offers a whole range of new readings of the text as well as discussions related to its style, narrative techniques, themes and motifs, the figure of the narrator and the novel's influence on other writers, fanfiction creators included. Nevertheless, although for some time now *Maurice* has ceased to be regarded only as a naïve and utopian work, the debate over *Maurice* seems to be still in need to move beyond the queer studies towards more comprehensive and systematic readings. And *Twenty-First-Century Readings of E. M. Forster's "Maurice"* edited by Emma Sutton and Tsung-Han Tsai is definitely a step towards such a thorough *Maurice* study. As we can read in the Introduction, it focuses "exclusively on the novel and its legacies" (4) and consequently, explores the text in a variety of contexts. The essays analyse the novel in relation to politics, philosophy, religion, queer studies, art and Aestheticism, film studies and fandom sequels.

The goal of the volume, as we read in the Introduction, is twofold. First, it aims at gathering at one place the most recent as well as past ideas referring to *Maurice* and its posthumous publication. Second, it strives at generating further exchange of ideas about the book, particularly when it comes to "the shifting constructions of queer and modernist canons" (5).

The book starts with an introductory chapter which offers an extended description of the socio-political and historical background underlying the novel and its reception and effectively synthesizes the material of the volume. Among others, the chapter offers a handful of information as for the chronology and problems related to *Maurice* and its publication, its manuscripts, its place within the academic and non-academic circles. Also, the introductory chapter explains Forster's understanding of the term 'queer' and how it functioned in the past, before the emergence of the queer studies. As pointed out by the editors, several essays in the volume use the term 'queer' in Forster's manner, namely to indicate a certain style and type of writing which is highly complex, full of suggestiveness and in which homosexual identity is used as a means to communicate other substantial points at issue. Accordingly, the seemingly unambiguous, utopian story about male homosexuality turns out to be an intricate and disquieting tale of desire, social ostracism, religion, familial relations and many more. In addition, alongside the plot, there exist "marginalized networks and relationships" (5) which offer a comment on Forster's approach to politics, philosophy, art, or religion.

The collection of essays discusses the novel, on the one hand, in relation to the modernist times within which the text was written, considering its socio-political and cultural background, its writers and thinkers. On the other, the publication extensively comments on the reception of *Maurice* after its release in the second half of the twentieth century, pointing out to its links with the original manuscript, and scrutinizing the fate of the novel after the year 2000. Most importantly, the publication sheds light upon other aspects, themes, and motifs of the novel that have been neglected due to the book's 'homosexual love-story' label. Furthermore, as we can read in the Introduction, the chapters are meant to "gesture towards new ways to reassess some of Forster's other works" (17). For instance, through *Maurice*, the contributors frequently reflect on other characters from other novels by Forster. The Introduction, which in itself is a pleasure to read, effectively encourages to explore the content of the collection.

The book is divided into three, thematically as well as chronologically organized, parts, which additionally expose many other cross-volume networks and connections. Each part is further subdivided into three chapters. The last pages of the book contain a comprehensive bibliography, notes of the contributors' profiles and the index of names and issues, the part always most welcome by the researchers.

Part one, "Forebears and Friends", is devoted to the influence of Oscar Wilde, Florence Barger, and Christopher Isherwood on Forster, and particularly, on his writing of *Maurice*. The selection of the names alone makes the reader interested in the content of the chapter since they are not the most obvious choice (for when reflecting over the creation of the novel, we would rather think of Edward Carpenter and George Merrill, the people that the writer himself acknowledged as the most important for the process of writing *Maurice*). The opening essay by Joseph Bristow entitled "'An unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort': E. M. Forster, Maurice and the Legacy of Aestheticism", focuses on the way Wilde's Aesthetics shaped Forster's understanding and perception of homosexuality. In the text, the connections with Wilde, paradoxically, are shown partially through the disconnection of the protagonist with the very figure: Maurice does not find anything remarkable about Oscar Wilde, unlike the judge Charles Darling presiding over the case of Lord Alfred Douglas (1913 libel case against Arthur Ransom). Yet, the connections are also suggested through the references to Hellenism and Aestheticism. In other words, Wildean elements in *Maurice* discussed by Bristow include both direct references

(Maurice's conversations with doctors), and indirect ones (Maurice's views on art).

The second chapter, "Women In and Out: Forster, Social Purity and Florence Barger", by Gemma Moss discusses the novel in the context of women and presents their very much negative and false image offered by Maurice. In her investigation, she employs a historical perspective, setting her analyses against the social purity movement of the late 19th century. The author supplies facts about the movement, such as its origin, ideals or representatives. Next, Moss examines its influence on *Maurice*, for according to her, there is a close relationship between the movement politics and the structure of *Maurice* as well as its theme. She comes to a conclusion that the radicalism and sexual conservatism of the movement should be counted among the main reasons for almost excluding women from the novel and for having the male narrator. Subsequently, she argues that Forster criticizes the movement, its social narrowmindedness and orthodoxy, rather than women. Illustrating her thesis, she also underlines the important role of Florence Barger during the creation of *Maurice*.

Charlotte Charteris, the author of the third chapter entitled "The Master and the Pupil. E. M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood and the Forging of a Queer Aesthetic", reveals the importance of yet another friend of Forster, namely Christopher Isherwood. The impact of the young writer on the older one is, according to her, visible in Forster's re-thinking of some ideas about *Maurice*. Meeting young Isherwood the same year when his mentor Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson died (1932), in the author's words, "truly galvanized this creative process, providing renewed impetus for the articulation of a queer culture" (76). Furthermore, Charteris sees the correlation between this relationship and the later ideas of Foucault. She argues that Forster's views on homosexuality presented in *Maurice* forestall those expressed in Foucault's 'Friendship as a Way of Life'. Charteris also looks closely at the language of *Maurice* and decides to centre her discussion around such terms as 'leader', 'leadership', 'boss', 'fascism', etc, rather than 'culture' or 'aesthetics', thus drawing her discussion towards the socio-political context of the novel. The chapter shows homosexuality as defined with a leader-follower dynamics within the context of the 1930s (the rise of fascism), where the 'bosses' were the men of middle class and good financial standing and the 'bossed' the 'vulnerable', 'victims', the young men of working class (the picture offered by the newspapers). Accordingly, the essay offers a convincing interpretation of the seemingly

unequivocal textual surface. It turns out that in the process of close analysis of Forster's narrative, many of the conventional vocabulary items suggest a new, more convoluted and idiosyncratic meaning: they tell a story of a homosexual friendship viewed through the leader-follower structure. She supports her argument on the master-pupil (same sex) relation and its power dynamics by referencing the contemporary BBC television mini-series *A Very English Scandal* (2018) as well as Bethan Robert's novel *My Policeman* (2012) which in turn clearly refers to the relationship between Forster and Buckingham. It shows that such relations are not rare and that the complications and struggles stemming from them are timeless.

Part two entitled "Contemporary Context", begins with Anna Watson's "Flat pieces of cardboard stamped with a conventional design': Women and Narrative Exclusion in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*". The chapter clearly continues the discussion started in the earlier essay by Gemma Moss. For Watson also draws our attention to the marginalized position of female characters in *Maurice*. However, she argues that this exclusion of women from the life of Maurice and Clive and generally from the public is done on purpose. In her own words, this is Forster's conscious project "to problematize the position of women in society and the role of man - even gay men - in perpetuating their oppression" (103). Watson convincingly demonstrates that in *Maurice*, by presenting female characters as marginalized figures, Forster actually strives to make the reader reflect over the socially muddled situation of women. In other words, the negligence of women in the novel mirrors their real-life marginalized position in the society.

The second essay in this part, "Maurice: Beyond Body and Soul" contributed by Finn Fordham, treats about the titular notions of body and soul and their confluence. Fordham underlines the fact that these concepts would frequently feature in Modernist writers' discussions on homosexual identity and the identity as such. He gives several examples of writings (by Conrad, Woolf, Joyce, Lewis) in which the 'soul' is considered. Subsequently, he argues that Forster in *Maurice* makes an effort to bind rather than separate the two elements in order to show that homosexuality is not merely spiritual or merely physical but it is both, additionally with the borders and the nature of each element hard to establish. As Fordham notices, Forster is himself uncertain as for the degree and type of this physical-spiritual relationship yet suggests that in *Maurice* windows can be viewed as symbolic constructions which "function as thresholds between spiritual and physical space. As framing of air, they combine the material with the immaterial. Crossing their boundary marks both transgression

and unification" (150). And this lack of concrete answer, the blurred points of connections between body and soul as well as their mutual influences, he argues, was typical not only of Forster but generally of modernism. Moreover, this state of irresolution is further reinforced by Forster's employment of irony and experimentation expressed via, as Fordham says, "the textual confusion" visible in "the drafting and redrafting of the novel" (128) which stimulates hesitation and induces metaphysical questions.

Fordham's discussion is followed by the chapter on "*Maurice* and Religion" which also deals with 'soul' but this time in reference to the Church of England. The author of this essay, Krzysztof Fordoński, focuses on the function of this religious institution in the novel. He explains that only seemingly religion comes second to the law since the characters of the novel live, or rather are expected to live, according to religious teachings and regulations. Religious upbringing not only influences the way the characters think but also the way they are perceived by the society. Consequently, they are invariably judged through religion and religious practices. Fordoński points out that Forster makes use of certain religious terminology and metaphors in order to stress, on the one hand, the importance of religion in the lives of the characters, and on the other, to underline the fact that it functions as an oppressive element, "a part of the system of control and repression" (155). Additionally, the author looks upon the Church of England as an institution, comments on its structure, power dynamics as well as buildings.

The third and final part of the book is entitled "Afterlives". The authors of the respective chapters deliberate over the place of *Maurice* in the contemporary, twenty-first century, culture. The first chapter by David Medalie, "A man embedded in society': Homosexuality and the 'Social Fabric' in *Maurice* and Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*", which is an extended version of his article "The Line of *Maurice*: Forster, Hollinghurst and the 'Social Fabric'" (*English Studies in Africa*, 60.1 [2017], 46-59), compares *Maurice* with Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Medalie discusses social forms of oppression when it comes to homosexual men presented in both books. The author contemplates the marginalization and alienation of gay men in the context of contemporary New Liberalism as well as the concepts of masculinity and manliness considered against the 'social fabric' of Edwardian and Victorian times. Medalie argues that in *Maurice* Forster obviously comments on the vision of society. This is the society which, historically speaking, chose to treat male homosexuality as a deviation from the healthy and the normal, and to classify

it as some sort of criminal activity. It would thus cherish the image that had nothing to do with the nature of the same sex desire. But unlike in Hollinghurst's novel, where "devastating exile" is all that in the end awaits those who dare to be "heroic" and show their homosexual desire, Forster's characters manage to escape into the utopian greenwood.

The second chapter of this part, "Sexuality, Allegory and Interpretation: E. M. Forster's *Maurice* and Damon Galgut's *Arctic Summer*" by Howard J. Booth, discusses the function of allegory within the two works which, similarly to the considerations offered in the previous chapter, "explore coming through in the face of society's hostility to homosexuality" (203). Booth ponders over the degree to which the forms of both texts are affected by this topic as well as over the degree of openness of each text in communicating and commenting on the issue of same-sex desire. In his analyses, the author points to different areas and levels of allegorical representations, for example, the intertextual (*The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan), the spatial (descriptions of the world dominated by "loss and ruination" (204)) or the narrative (the employment of a specific genre, in this case biofiction, in order to introduce the topic of homosexuality: a fictional Forster; employment of particular techniques). Booth concludes that Forster's *Maurice* is more open for interpretation than Galgut's *Arctic Summer*. Forster's use of allegory, according to the author, is "less straightforward as he moved to render the plot more believable and realistic" (214) which allows for different readings of the novel, while Galgut's application of allegory is subdued to the strictly controlled narrative form and directed towards evocation of "political and creative possibilities" (228) and leaves thus no space for other voices.

The final chapter of part three, and at the same time the closing chapter of the book, entitled "Maurice without Ending: From Forster's Palimpsest to Fan-Text" by Claire Monk, starts off with a paradox embedded in Forster's novel: the *Maurice* finished in 1913 is at the same time still an unfinished text. On the one hand, this is due to Forster's endless re-writings and modifications of the manuscript and on the other, this is thanks to the present day fans who actively engage in writing sequels and develop the undeveloped, that is open, ending of the story. Monk suggests that the authors of the first reviews and comments that concentrated on highlighting the simplicity of plot of *Maurice* and on belittling the novel's aesthetic value, refused to go deeper into their analyses just to mask the horror of admitting that the writer who committed such a "woman's-magazine fairy tale" (229) revolving around the interclass, same-sex

love story, experienced such a life himself. And it is only the twenty-first century which may offer, according to Monk, a true re-evaluation of the novel. What is more, she argues that the professed generic simplicity of the text “stands as its great strength” (230) and is responsible for its survival. Following, the author discusses the reception of *Maurice*, both official and unofficial, in the present century but contextualizing the novel within its socio-political history. Monk takes a closer look at various novel’s adaptations and paratexts as well as a number of fan creations available online. Then, she outlines the development of *Maurice* as a book/text/film and discusses it in terms of the novel’s reception. All in all, the words of Jesse Matz which Monk quotes in her essay, may serve as a succinct conclusion to her own discussion. We read that it is obvious now, in the twenty-first century, indeed more than before, that *Maurice* “even as it waits for its future [...] looks to the past”; that “while waiting for its interpretative community to assemble [it is] perpetually revisited and refinished” (231).

Summing up, within well over 250 pages, the contributors survey a broad area of material connected directly or indirectly with *Maurice*. Accordingly, the collection represents a broad spectrum of concepts dealing with the novel and its various contexts. The book raises important questions as for the directions of further research and discussion. The sources which the contributors recall and consult during their deliberations are representative of different areas of study thus offering the reader a multidisciplinary view of *Maurice*. Nevertheless, the texts are interrelated due to the ‘queer’ aspect discussed in a forsterian manner, the theme of same-sex love and desire and the issue of Christianity – the areas which clearly function as springboards to the reflections on other important topics, such as the position of women in society, the pitfalls of (sexual) education, the role of church).

The whole book as well as its individual parts facilitate and contribute to an understanding of the subject area under discussion. The arrangement of the collection is well thought out and logical and as a result the gradual development and the change of attitudes towards the novel are transparently and convincingly delineated. Consequently, the goals posed in the introductory part are well covered. The contributors conspicuously substantiate that the novel is far more than a homosexual romance, the plot cantered popular fiction, a simple reading. As they repeatedly demonstrate in their analyses, *Maurice* is truly exceptional among Forster’s novels. The authors inexorably prove that the novel has more to offer than meets the eye. What is more, while reading

the collection, it becomes self-evident that the book is written by the scholars and researchers specializing in the life and works of E.M. Forster which might suggest that the publication is for the alike readership. However, I would recommend this selection of essays also to those who simply want to enrich their knowledge about *Maurice* as well as about its author, to those who study and research English literature as well as to the fans and lovers of Forster's fiction. As for the language of the collection, even though each author has its own style of writing, the general impression is that of coherence, clarity, and forcefulness. The whole publication reads very well and, accordingly, the respective chapters are seamlessly connected not only by the idea of the novel but also the way *Maurice* is written about.

The closing part includes a comprehensive bibliography which consists of both the well-established in Forster studies publications and the most recent sources. Additionally, some chapters include interesting and rarely seen material obtained from King's College Library in Cambridge, Special Collections and University Archives of the University of Oregon and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library of the University of California, Los Angeles, which makes the collection still more attractive.

As a Forsterian myself, I have read *Maurice* or its parts several times and yet, to my surprise, this recent collection of essays makes me want to reach out for the book once more, not only to re-read it for pleasure but above all to re-think certain points or to give more attention to those that have laid unnoticed, shrouded in thick layers of recognized and acknowledged interpretations. Henceforth, I would absolutely recommend the book. *Twenty-First-Century Readings* ... not only encapsulates and expands the present state of research concerning *Maurice* but above all, it invites and creates space for further *Maurice*-related discussions. Walking in Forster's steps, and thus following *Maurice* tradition, it finishes with an open ending. A real treat for the fans of *Maurice* and its author.