

The Tangle that is Italy

The Setting of "Where Angels Fear to Tread"

by Roger Brunyate

By the time our three-act opera *Where Angels Fear to Tread* reaches the stage of Peabody's Miriam Friedberg Concert Hall on February 25, 1999, it will have been almost exactly seven years since the composer Mark Lanz Weiser and I first began talking about adapting the Forster novel. Mark had a desire to write a comedy with serious overtones. His first opera, a one-act piece based on Yeats' play *Purgatory*, had been performed at Peabody while he was still a student, so he had worked straight tragedy out of his system for a while. We had just come off a production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, for which Mark (at that time a piano major) was rehearsal accompanist, so perhaps something of Mozart's spirit of serious comedy had gotten into our souls. Anyway, it seemed a natural *segue* to think of basing an opera on that most Mozartian of modern novelists, E. M. Forster.

Specifically, I think it was Italy that attracted us. For some weeks, we were discussing Forster's *A Room with a View*, which had been a big hit as a movie. I felt that the earlier and less well-known *Where Angels Fear to Tread* might be more suitable, largely because of its different approach to the Italian setting. The first half of *Room with a View* is set in Florence, but its culminating action all takes place in England. *Angels*, by contrast, seemed more concentrated, opening in England but moving to Italy for all the latter part of the book. And its Italian setting was not the well-known Florence, the popular destination of every grand tour, but the tiny out-of-the-way medieval city of San Gimignano (called Monteriano in the book), tucked away in the hills. This early novel is also more melodramatic than the later one. Monteriano is a confused jumble of a place, where life is lived more intensely than elsewhere, and danger lurks around the corner. It is an apt setting for the violence which seems to erupt out of nowhere towards the end of the book – something that, in its balance with Forster's delicious comedy, was immediately attractive to both of us.



The title of the book is a reference to Pope's line: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." The fools implied by the title are the members of the stuffy middle-class Herriton family. Mrs. Herriton, the matriarch, rules the roost in her small village of Sawston in England. Her daughter-

in-law Lilia, recently widowed on the death of the eldest Herriton son, has been sent abroad to recover, in the company of the vicar's daughter, the good sensible Caroline Abbott. But Lilia writes from the small Italian hill town of Monteriano that she is engaged to a local notable. Philip Herriton, the younger son and a recently-admitted lawyer, is sent to investigate and to stop the marriage if necessary. He is too late. Lilia has already married her Italian, Gino Carella, and he turns out not to be a notable at all, but just a young man of the town, without visible means of support other than Lilia's money. After some months of an increasingly unhappy marriage, Lilia dies in childbirth. Hearing of this, Mrs. Herriton (who had cut Lilia off completely until now), dispatches Philip and his termagant sister Harriet back to Italy to get the baby, partly to stop the child, as she declares, "from being brought up as either Papist or Infidel," and partly to prevent Caroline Abbott from adopting him first.

So the three English people descend on Monteriano once more. It would spoil the story's many surprises to continue the synopsis here. But it is at this point, fully half-way through the novel, that the main emotional action begins: two days filled with frustration and enchantment, blossoming love and burgeoning self-knowledge, tragedy and ultimate reconciliation, all enfolded in that terrible magic which is Forster's view of Italy.

And what is this view? It is supremely operatic, for one thing. Monteriano, based on the tiny city of San Gimignano, perched improbably on a Tuscan hill-top and crowned by a dozen precariously leaning towers, seems almost like a stage set itself. The novel even has a very funny scene taking place during a provincial performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The place seemed made for opera! It was an easy decision to eliminate the English scenes entirely and to set the whole opera in Monteriano.

There are times in the novel when Monteriano seems almost like a character in its own right. Forster endows it with human qualities, describing it as a tangle of "beauty, evil, charm, vulgarity, mystery." His Monteriano has an emotion and drama of its own, reflected in its history, its architecture, and the collective life of its people. It is a disturbing setting rather than a comfortable one. It challenges convention and complacency, bringing out the strongest reactions in the other characters. Clearly, it means something more to Forster than just a place.

In general, Forster's attitude to foreign countries (it is seen also in *A Passage to India*) could be described as that of the superior tourist. Not for him the superficial visits to the major sites and an early departure; he wants to linger. He wants to imagine what it would be like to *live* in a place. But he never does live there himself, even in his imagination, to the point where the exotic becomes humdrum. He needs always to remain a visitor, aware of the exoticism as something different from his everyday life. The foreign setting becomes a screen upon which he projects needs and desires which come as much from within himself as from the other culture. It is the

place where feelings can be allowed free rein. For Forster was very reluctant to express feelings in any other way.



I knew Forster at Cambridge. That is to say, he would open his rooms in King's College to any young men who cared to visit him, and I was one of many who found our way there for a glass of port or sherry and a couple of hours of maddeningly elusive conversation. For while Forster loved to talk, it would always be of things outside himself. He would seldom speak of literature, and never of his own work. He might talk about music for hours, including his friendship with Benjamin Britten, but would steer the conversation gently away when it came to his one direct collaboration with the composer, as librettist for *Billy Budd*. So saying that I knew Forster is wrong: I was enthralled by his conversation, culture, and enthusiasms; but the only thing I truly *knew* about him was the fact of his extraordinary emotional reticence.

And there you have the central paradox of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*: the conflict between head and heart. The book's main character, Philip Herriton, seems almost a self-portrait of the author, at least in the defensive persona of his later years: a connoisseur of art, but reluctant to express that passion which gives art its purpose and fire. And yet, Forster's awareness of passion lies between the lines throughout. You feel it in his evocation of the Italian setting, especially his sense of the violence lying just beneath the beauty. You feel it in his portrayal of the Italian characters, particularly the open-hearted but dangerous Gino Carella. And you look for it in the reactions to Italy of the two main English characters in the piece, Philip Herriton and Caroline Abbott, and by extension in the developing relationship which they find with one another.

The English encounter with Italy seems more than a mere conflict of cultures; it is a symbol of the clash between a life conducted according to convention and one truly ruled by the heart. As is now well known, this clash had a very personal meaning for Forster, who, as a homosexual, felt he could never publicly express the true feelings of his own heart. Eventually, it caused him to abandon the writing of fiction altogether. For the time being, however, he managed by projecting himself through a kind of wish-fulfillment into situations and places which were deliberately foreign to him. But in his writing for the mainstream characters he proceeds mainly by hints, though always treating them with a wondrous sympathy and understanding.

Caroline, in particular, is a fascinating creation. At the start of the book, when the main female character seems to be Lilia, she appears to occupy a secondary role, as the dowdy English spinster companion. But Lilia dies. Soon Monteriano works its magic, and the true Caroline gradually emerges. She becomes the heroine, not only by virtue of her place in the plot,

but also through her simple humanity and the depth of moral courage which she reveals. Philip, who had at first dismissed her, soon comes to respect her keen mind, and then finds himself moved by her capacity for feeling. By the end of the story, he too has come to display extraordinary moral courage, and although he will scarcely admit it, he has also begun to feel. One of the things we had to do in making the novel into an opera was to take this process of gradual emergence a lot further, and be more explicit about the characters and their feelings.

The other need was to make the maximum use of Forster's setting, because that is the primary reflector of what is going on with the characters. Our decision to set the entire opera in Monteriano gives extraordinary importance to the stage picture. Tony Cisek of Washington's Arena Stage has designed an evocative and mobile set whose crumbling beauty and looming masses will be a constant force throughout. And the same is true of the music and words. In looking back at the book, I realize that phrases I remember from it do not appear in so many words; without knowing it, I have concentrated Forster's prose descriptions into passages of verse more highly colored than the lighter tones of the novel – even at the risk of veering towards a purple which he would have abhorred!



Throughout his novels, Forster is always present as a detached, witty narrator. At the moment when Philip first seems to be falling in love with Caroline, for instance, the author comments thus:

Philip smiled, and was shocked at himself for smiling, and smiled again. For romance had come back to Italy; there were no cads in her; she was beautiful, courteous, lovable, as of old. And Miss Abbott – she, too, was beautiful in her way, for all her gaucheness and conventionality. She really cared about life, and tried to live it properly. And Harriet – even Harriet tried.

This admirable change in Philip proceeds from nothing admirable, and may therefore provoke the gibes of the cynical. But angels and other practical people will accept it reverently, and write it down as good.

There is certainly feeling here, but it is directed at the *place* rather than towards another person. Furthermore, it is described obliquely, in the author's charmingly offhand voice. Forster seldom lets an emotional moment pass without bringing his gentle cynicism to bear in dissecting it. This is not an unattractive quality on his part, for he is always witty, his wit is genial and without malice, and his detachment gives the novels perspective and depth.

But it will not do for opera. What we need here is a love duet, or something that approaches so close to one as to make no matter. All through the piece, emotional reactions that are merest hints in the original must be brought to the surface and proclaimed for what they are. If music

cannot be allowed to do what it does best – expressing passion – there would be little point in writing opera.

Our techniques for making the necessary translation involved first of all the conversion of many of Forster's descriptions into direct speech. So, at the moment mentioned above, our Philip now sings:

He apologized? Why, then it's true:
There are no cads in Italy after all!
Caroline – Miss Abbott – thank you:
Beauty and love and honor have returned to Italy,
And you have been their messenger!

But this is still connective tissue; opera requires arias and duets, moments when the words become less literal, and the music takes over. So a little later, Philip looks out of the window at one of the medieval towers of Monteriano, and begins an aria (the concentrated essence of several descriptive passages in the novel) which sums up much of what Italy seems to represent for Forster:

Beautiful and terrible. Those aged stones
Burnished by the copper sun
Are spattered at their base with ancient blood.
The tower that stretches up to heaven
Reaches also down to hell.
Violence and splendor, mystery and charm,
Knotted in the tangle that is Italy –
The story of the ages seeps into the soul,
Leaving a legacy of passion,
Ready to erupt in violence,
Or blossom into beauty.

Finally, to end the scene, Caroline does something that her counterpart does not do at all in the novel: for the first time, she struggles to express her personal feelings directly, in an aria which soon becomes a duet:

All winter long, I found myself awakening
To beauty and to splendor and to light.
And when spring came,
I knew I had to fight the pettiness I hated.
I failed, and fled in my disgrace.
Now coming back, I waken once again
To beauty, tinged with terror, hope, and shame.
Perhaps the splendor is a flame
That burns within us *anywhere* we go,
A spark of passion we can *each* embrace?

But these are mere words. The function of words in a libretto is to inspire music, and the quality of Mark Weiser's wonderful response cannot either be described or contained by them.

The result of his Herculean labor of love – over four years of sketching, revising, and scoring – will be heard only on February 25, 1999, when the people of Forster's Monteriano finally take wing in song.

2,350 words (2,100 plus quotations)

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