

# “Possibilities of a Pleasant Outing”: doing the don’ts in and about Florence in E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*



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**Abstract:** On the threshold of adulthood young Lucy Honeychurch is a product of the upper-middle class Edwardian society, a puppet on a string of stifling conventions. Hers is an “undeveloped heart”, trapped by proprieties of the Victorian type that somewhat define her penchant for spontaneity as dangerous. Will a mini-Grand Tour to Italy, in the company of the typical morose and uptight chaperone, be just as uneventful as expected or will the Tuscan sun exert its summer magic? More than the portrait of a prospective lady, *A Room with a View* (1908) mirrors E. M. Forster’s take on a very particular topic, that of the English abroad. Both tourists and expatriates converge during the holiday season to test their moral stiffness while tempted by the appreciation of beauty, nature and passion. Disruptive characters, like the liberal Emersons, or turbulent events, like the furtive kiss on the hillside, thus become tools for an awakening of sorts on the part of the female self, as Lucy transposes and transcends a strict code of behaviour, and emancipates herself not only from the Baedeker (the famous portable travel guide) but also, and most importantly, from “the surface of things”. If one comes to Italy “for life” and not for anything else, if the room and the view are metaphors for contrasting worlds, what impact does the act of travelling produce in the traveller, and one inexperienced or ill prepared at that? And what are the domestic consequences of what one sees and feels in a country other than one’s own when a return is inevitable? The scope of this article is to assess not only the way(s) in which Forster privileges the search for individuality and feminine agency within the social-comedic plot of the novel, but also to confirm the sense of imbalance that holidays inevitably bring to the holiday-seeker, as hopes are dashed, expectations thwarted or new sensations embraced.

**Keywords:** holidays, decorum, disruption, individuality, coming of age.

**Résumé :** Au seuil de l'âge adulte, la jeune Lucy Honeychurch est un produit de la classe moyenne supérieure édouardienne, une poupée étouffée par les conventions. Considérée comme « *an undeveloped heart* », Lucy est piégée par un décorum de type victorien qui qualifie sa nature spontanée de dangereuse. Le mini-Grand Tour qu'elle effectue en Italie, accompagnée de la typique et ennuyeuse chaperonne, sera-t-il sans histoire, ou bien, au contraire, le soleil de la Toscane exercera-t-il sa magie sur la jeune femme ? Plus qu'un portrait de femme, *A Room with a View* (1908) exprime le point de vue de E. M. Forster sur la question des Anglais en voyage. Les touristes et les expatriés convergent pendant les vacances pour mettre à l'épreuve leur force morale en même temps qu'ils sont tentés par la contemplation de la beauté, de la nature et de la passion. Des personnages perturbateurs, comme les progressistes Emerson, ou des événements troublants, comme le baiser furtif échangé sur la colline, peuvent être alors des instruments de l'éveil de l'être féminin. Lucy transpose et transcende un code de conduite très rigoureux, en s'émancipant non seulement du Baedeker (le fameux guide touristique de poche) mais surtout de la « *surface of things* ». Si l'on visite l'Italie « *for life* » et non pour d'autres motifs, si la chambre et sa vue sur l'Arno sont des métaphores de deux mondes opposés, quel est alors l'impact de l'acte de voyager sur le voyageur, surtout lorsqu'il s'agit d'une jeune femme sans aucune expérience ? Et quelles sont les conséquences domestiques de ce qu'on voit et (res-)sent dans un pays étranger lorsque le retour à la maison est inévitable ? L'ambition de cet article est donc d'étudier la façon dont E. M. Forster privilégie la recherche de l'individualité et de l'« *agency* » des personnages féminins dans l'intrigue socio-comique du roman. Il s'agit ainsi de confirmer la force de rupture que les vacances offrent nécessairement aux vacanciers, qu'elle se manifeste dans les espoirs brisés, les attentes frustrées, ou dans l'expérience de nouvelles sensations.

**Mots-clés :** vacances, décorum, rupture, individualité, initiation.

If our poor little Cockney lives must have a  
*background*, let it be Italian.

A FAMOUS piece of criticism regarding one of E. M. Forster's novels is ascribed to Katherine Mansfield, who condemns *Howards End* (1910) as substance producing hardly any effect: "He never gets any further than warming the teapot [...] He's a rare fine hand at that. Feel this teapot. Is it not beautifully warm? Yes, but there ain't going to be no tea" (Mansfield *apud* Scott 1997: 93). Both the adverb – "beautifully" – and the adjective – "warm" – concur to place Forster's perspective within the highly marked tradition of the novel concerned with themes of Englishness, sensibility and aestheticism. It also draws attention to the function of the author: he puts the kettle on, he diligently warms the teapot and we the readers hope the tea will be exquisite. That it tastes sour or smokier than usual, well then, that may be more a problem of perception

rather than conception. And so it is that when it comes to his third published novel, *A Room with a View* (1908), one has to give Forster the benefit of the doubt and see beyond the niceties of the bourgeois background of his characters,<sup>1</sup> or the light comedic stance of the plot. There are far darker forces at work here – and temperature does unexpectedly rise.

In theory, *A Room with a View* would probably have been the first novel to be published: having started the writing of what constitutes the first part of the novel (the Italian section) around 1903, following his ramblings through Italy with his mother in 1900-1901, the author decided to halt its production and concentrate his efforts instead on presenting the public with *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *The Longest Journey* (1907). He then resumed *A Room with a View* with a focus on the second part of the novel (the English section), set on the outskirts of London, a few months after the momentous journey of the two women protagonists to the Continental south. As we will see, both the Italian and the English sections are inextricably dependent on one another and the “fissures and fractures” (Bradshaw, 2007: 5) suggested in Italy will become fully apparent in the not so comforting home of the Honeychurches.

A room with a view can be found anywhere; but one could argue that the intention is not so much to emphasize the physical spaces involved in the expression (one *within*, the other *without*) but rather to translate them into symbols of a higher nature, in which case, at least for the purpose that matters in these initial pages, the room corresponds to Italy and the view to the enlightenment obtained with the travelling experience. The word ‘enlightenment’ is not here by chance, since it was precisely during the long eighteenth-century that the great Grand Tour itineraries were immortalized in letters, travelogues and even fiction. If it is true that it had long been regarded as a man’s privilege, one that would foster self-improvement, better education and an artistic disposition, during the Georgian era English women cater for adventure and become particularly adept in leaving their own country. Continental travel provided a chance to escape the strait-laced mores at home, but only if one belonged to the aristocracy or to the liberal world, having time, curiosity and idleness to spare. As the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft put it in a letter to her sister, “I am not born to tread in the beaten track” (Wollstonecraft *apud* Dolan, 2001: 57). And like her, many other women who expected their travels not only to lead to “maturity, self-reflection, and the rational analysis of foreign cultures”, but also to “broaden the mind” (Dolan, 2001: 27).

1. David Bradshaw, in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster* (2007), is right to declare that it is no use to pigeonhole Forster “as an old-maidish chronicler of Edwardian England’s endless summer” (Bradshaw, 2007: 4).

The dangers to which women were exposed (some even travelled across the Channel at the height of the French Revolution or, like Mary Shelley, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars) varied from country to country, but were exacerbated if one was to go further south. Sentimental education was a pre-requisite of the Grand Tour for men, should they wish to indulge in it, but not for women who, when not travelling with a male relative (father, brother, husband, lover) had to rely on their own will to remain chaste. Decorum comes a long way. When not fending off the Other in the shape of a suitor, the English female traveller could also observe and confirm the proverbial levity of conduct of foreign women – mostly French and Italian. Furthermore, as it potentially altered one's perception of daily experience and routines regarding matters of sociability, religion and culture, travel stood for instability. Before you knew it, one's behaviour could be twisted and subverted; in short: translated into another language, closer to the senses than to the intellect.

### The challenge of new landscapes

Forster picks up the theme of the *voyage out* (to paraphrase Woolf) to write an account of a *voyage within*. His was a time when travelling for leisure was already a democratic endeavour. The Continental tour had become much more accessible in the nineteenth century and the traveller type was a much broader concept: by the early twentieth-century it was the English middle-class who, armed with their Baedekers<sup>2</sup>, invaded foreign territory, with Italian and Greek landscapes as favourite destinations for their architecture, their picturesque and, dare we say it, their inherent vices. The choice of Italy is not arbitrary. As Ann Ardis discusses in "Hellenism and the lure of Italy", "its monuments and artefacts were a staple of the Grand Tour" in the past (Ardis, 2007: 62); most importantly, by the turn of the century there were already "contact zones" that anglicized Italy just enough for it being a safe place to visit, especially when it came to young women and their chaperones (Ardis, 2007: 63).<sup>3</sup>

The circumstances in which Lucy Honeychurch finds herself is such a one. In the company – or, tolerating the company of her spinster cousin Charlotte Bartlett, the appointed guarantor of propriety, she embarks on a journey of Florentine discovery. Being a woman, and a young and unexperienced one at that, she is prone to attract all sorts of comments, looks

2. A travel guidebook, published by the firm founded by Karl Baedeker (1801-1859), that was all the rage among European travellers in the period prior to and during which the novel is set. Its English competitor was John Murray's guidebook.
3. As most novels by Henry James attest, the trope of the young woman adrift in a foreign country, prone to all sorts of influence, is recognizably one that sold quite well in the late nineteenth century. See, for instance, *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

and misconceptions; Charlotte sees to it that none are addressed to her charge by building an invisible wall that Forster will be most glad to tear down. The Bertolini pensione where the two women are staying is the perfect example of a contact zone: behind the façade of an Italian family surname lies the very site of Englishness abroad. This is, however, a contact zone that fails to fulfil the great ideal of the traveller: that of mingling with the native sort. It confirms the pervasiveness of English characters that “carry their cultural baggage with them – in their physical appearance, gestures, use of language, their intellectual (or anti-intellectual) and moral confrontations with each other” (Landy, 2007: 236).

An early description of the pensione and its guests gives us “two rows of *English people* who were sitting at the table”; “the portraits of the late *Queen*<sup>4</sup> and the late *Poet Laureate*<sup>5</sup> that hung behind the English people”; and “the notice of the *English Church*” (my italics). The immediacy with which the alert Lucy notes the ubiquity of representations of England is apparent in her asking: “Charlotte, don’t you feel that we might be in London? I can hardly believe that all kinds of other things are just outside” (Forster: 23). It is all very Victorian in essence, and even the owner of the pensione has a Cockney accent. To complete the picture of national familiarity, when, after dinner, the ladies retire to the drawing-room, one “which attempted to rival the solid comfort of a Bloomsbury boarding-house” (Forster: 28), they stumble upon Mr Beebe, “a clergyman, stout but attractive” (Forster: 26) whom they have met on a previous occasion in Tunbridge Wells. In short, these are people living in a bubble, acting as if at home, oblivious to the pernicious effects of their own institutional insularity: they are therefore bound to see Florence through the eyes of their fellow expatriates (the resident community) or through the pages of their English-sanctioned guidebooks.

It may as well strike as adequate that our northern European ladies are given north rooms, looking into a courtyard, instead of south rooms overlooking the Arno. This is, however, the instance in which the author gives the reader a glimmer of hope: feeling most vexed at the nature of the rooms assigned to them, they claim a view, and one facing south! If one had to consider a first moment of disruption in these holidays this would be it: the moment they crave for a southern view<sup>6</sup> and place themselves at the mercy both of the generosity of the ill-bred, Socialist Emersons (father and son) and of Forster’s own version of the Grand Tour, that is: “an opportunity for exposure to entirely unanticipated dimensions and categories of experience” (Ardis, 2007: 71). By being, albeit formally, in the Emersons’

4. Queen Victoria (1819-1901).

5. Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892).

6. “Lucy’s affront at being deprived of the room with a view for which she paid suggests that she remains invested, at least for the moment, in the tourist’s spectatorial stance” (Barnaby, 2018: 65).



debt for having accepted to exchange rooms, both women embark on a road of subtle negotiation: Lucy struggles in adhering to social convention; Charlotte does her best to shield Lucy, “who had not yet acquired decency” (Forster: 26), from the perils of inappropriateness – “One could not be too careful with a young girl” (Forster: 31). And yet, it seems inevitable that Charlotte, who considers herself to be “a woman of the world, in my small way” (Forster: 34) will fail the enterprise of knowing “where things lead to” (Forster: 34) and that her cousin shall gather, however belatedly, the fruits of that failure.

That Lucy is a character with a tendency to welcome disruption we are told as soon as she flings wide the windows of her room, breathing the clean night air, as opposed to Charlotte, who immediately fastens the window-shutters and locks the door. As the former invites whatever sensory experience the holiday has to offer her, the latter, longing to be “as safe as in England” (Forster: 31) recoils into her shell. The fear of the unknown and of the foreign – even of the prospective foreignness of their attitudes and feelings – is best illustrated in the sign ‘?’, the interrogation mark scrawled on a sheet of paper that George Emerson leaves behind, appended on the wall. As if, in a proto-modernist way, he asked himself, and others, the question: “Do I dare disturb the universe?” (“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”<sup>7</sup>). To Charlotte, “meaningless at first, it gradually became men-

acing, obnoxious, portentous with evil” (Forster: 34). For her part, Lucy accordingly responds: she leaves her door unlocked and, to Charlotte’s consternation, leans out of the window in the morning before she is fully dressed. Unbeknownst to her, the workings of a new landscape awake her sensibility into welcoming whatever chance may bring. In being sheltered from the world outside, she slowly walks towards it. There is “a rebellious spirit in her” (Forster: 33) already, longing to explore the otherness of things.

On her first outing she heads to Santa Croce with Miss Lavish, a liberated novel writer who reposes herself as an expert in “shaking off the trammels of respectability” (Forster: 27). That Charlotte allows her to do so is yet another instance of the former’s own incuriousness. Lucy is told that what awaits them is a “dear dirty back way” and “an adventure” (Forster: 35), provided the young girl manages to emancipate from the Baedeker; for,



Fig. 1: Gustave Caillebotte, *Jeune homme à sa fenêtre*, 1876 (Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)).

7. Published by the modernist poet T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), it appeared in the June 1915 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

in truth, “he does but touch the surface of things” (Forster: 37).<sup>8</sup> In her unconventional way, the character of Miss Lavish brings Lucy to a state of dislocation, first by theorizing about the absolute need to sever ties with the guidebook – “We will simply drift!” – (Forster: 39); later, by actually leaving Lucy to her own devices of escape, having lost sight of her. Miss Lavish stands as the very blueprint of a *flâneuse*, one who wonders aimlessly, taking in the urban spectacle. Considering that by 1900 she must be in her fifties, she could be the mirror-image, or at least an English version of the mysterious lady passer-by in Gustave Caillebotte’s *Jeune Homme à sa Fenêtre* (1876), a painting where the female figure in the background seems to summon more curiosity than the male one in the foreground.

Disorientation is key to understand how Lucy, upon entering Santa Croce alone, is at pains at recognizing herself as part of a group. Without the cultural crutches represented both by her lost companion and the Baedeker, Lucy “walked about disdainfully, unwilling to be enthusiastic over monuments of uncertain authorship or date” (Forster: 40). As uncertainty is attributed to monuments and dates so it is to Lucy’s state of mind: with no references to guide her, the only thing she is sure of is that she should not be loitering in a public space. And yet, the pull of adventure is there. Instead of joining the tour that the local Reverend Eager is giving to his flock, praising Giotto’s frescoes through the words of art critic John Ruskin,<sup>9</sup> she welcomes the unexpected company of the eccentric Emersons, people who somehow seem to have cast “a spell over her” (Forster: 44) in spite of their being outsiders within the Bertolini sphere. By (un)consciously rejecting the late Victorian doctrines contained in Reverend Eager’s discourse of visual consumption, she steps away from an identification with that mass of English tourists abroad who know things without actually *knowing*.

This scene is perfectly delivered in its comic potential in the film adaptation, when we see Mr Eager solemnly interpreting the frescoes while the group of visitors assembles in the Bardi chapel and move their heads left and right, all in uniform accordance, as their local guide points to this or that Ruskin-approved symbolic features. Lucy does not follow them when they move into another chapel. By staying behind she also lays bare the evidence that her “state of spiritual starvation” (Forster: 26)

8. “The inevitable mark of the tourist, the guidebook had, by Forster’s time, already come to stigmatize its bearer in contrast to all that was indigenous, authentic, and spontaneous” (Buzard, 1988: 155).

9. Ruskin’s *Mornings in Florence: Being Simple Studies of Christian Art for English Travellers*, published in 1881, acted as a filter through which the English tourist must view Italian art and architecture. He hoped that his essays “may be found of use if read in the places they describe, or before the pictures to which they refer” (Ruskin *apud* Buzard, 1988: 157). James Buzard aptly notes that in Forster’s novels, “Ruskin’s reformist text is no better than the established Murrys and Baedekers – as Lucy witnesses, all are instruments of illusion and participate in the manufacturing of *artificial tourist response*” (Buzard, 1988: 158, my italics).

is incompatible with the *status quo* that still informs Edwardian codes of behaviour. She wants more and she wants different.

When old Mr Emerson asks her to “try to understand” his boy, and to “let yourself go”, he is echoing the advice of Miss Lavish to simply drift. The only difference being that her advice applies to the realm of physical space, his to the realm of emotions: “By understanding George you may learn to understand yourself”. The boy worries too much over things that “won’t fit” whereas Lucy worries too much about fitting in a world she is bound to defy. Somehow, Mr Emerson’s liberal plea to “let us love one another” instead of sinking in “world-sorrow” (Forster: 47) triggers in her anxieties towards the new.

### Eros, Thanatos and too much Beethoven

Pull out from the depths those thoughts that you  
do not understand, and spread them out in the sun-  
light and know the meaning of them.

A good example of this apprehension is the moment Lucy plays the piano. Back at the pensione, in the stuffy, gloomy drawing-room made darker by the heavy curtains that protect her from daylight, she embraces a *Sturm und Drang* disposition by brooding over Beethoven’s *Opus 111*. As Forster makes us note, “passion was there, but it could not be easily labelled” (Forster: 50). Simultaneously, we perceive in her romantic choice, one that underscores a narrowing of distances between her and melancholic George, a sexual awakening of sorts: “Like every true performer, she was *intoxicated* by the mere *feel* of the notes: they were *fingers* caressing her own; and by *touch*, not by sound alone, did she come to her *desire*” (Forster: 51, my italics). In the film, Lucy’s character is filmed from behind, with the piano against a wall – to overemphasise stifleness and absence of landscape – and the effect of her exuberant, turbulent musical outpour is achieved by a frame of her long dark abundant hair and her greyish-blue linen-wrapped waist. She has nowhere to go except to music, and it is through music that she reveals “untapped depths” (Langland, 2007: 96). Mr Beebe, who lurks and listens unseen, avows that “If Miss Honeychurch ever takes to live as she plays, it will be very exciting – both for us and for her” (Forster: 52).

A sign that her impulsiveness and tempestuousness strike a chord yet unknown lies in the fact that, after Mr Beebe’s comment, Lucy goes for a



second walk about town. If the first foray into Santa Croce had turned her, unexpectedly, into a solitary walker, this time her solitariness is self-solicited and welcomed. If “too much Beethoven” (Forster: 59) is to be blamed, so be it.

As it becomes apparent, Lucy unconsciously enacts a series of don'ts: she leaves the pensione on her own, flaunting her standing as a young foreign girl in need of an escort; she heads to Piazza della Signoria as dusk falls – “the hour of unreality – the hour, that is, when unfamiliar things are real” (Forster: 62); and she has unclaimed thoughts, like her craving for the beautiful things the world has to offer, “if only I could come across them” (Forster: 60). Thus, wanting to do “something of which her well-wishers disapproved” (Forster: 60) she places herself in the epicentre of a possible disruption, not just by walking around the piazza admiring the manly, disturbing and sensual statues of the Renaissance, but also by tellingly acquiring a reproduction of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. As if to highlight her attuned sensibility to new desires of insubordination, James Ivory, the film's director, makes her defiantly take off her coat just before crossing the square, suggesting heated emotions.

Fearful that nothing ever happened to her, Lucy is confronted with a death scene that will shock her senses to an inevitable personal transformation.<sup>10</sup> The violence of the altercation she witnesses between two local men, followed by a stabbing, is the catalyst for a new apprehension of the real. Analogies have been drawn by most criticism between “the stream of red” that comes out of the dying man's lips and Lucy's symbolic loss of virginity, a sham penetration of sorts. As she swoons, George Emerson providentially catches her in the fall: “She had complained of dullness, and lo! one man was stabbed, and another held her in his arms” (Forster: 62).

Lucy's postcards and photographs, now stained with blood, are thrown into the Arno by George, who recognizes that “something tremendous has happened”. Although she feels that “wings seemed to flutter inside her” and that “she, as well as the dying man, had crossed some spiritual boundary” (Forster: 64), it is George who cannot go back to the pleasantries of the everyday and who declares that life must bear a different meaning from then on:

It was not exactly that a man had died; *something had happened to the living*: they had come to a situation where character tells, and where childhood enters upon the branching paths of youth. (Forster: 66, my italics)

10. This circumstance is in keeping with Ann Ardis' contention that “travelling distils and sharpens her [Lucy] sensory experiences only when she finds herself ‘off the map’ [...], in situations for which she has no prior referent” (Ardis, 2007: 69).

The trauma instils in both characters a sense of innocence lost, and the stillness in which Lucy seems to be trapped by society must, according to George, evolve into an acceptance of the wild, subterranean currents that the world, beyond the barrier of the little that is known, has in store for them. Tainted, like her souvenirs, by a bodily fluid (blood), their souls must yearn for life.

The acknowledgment that Lucy's mind is capable of judging things and places differently after the incident in the Piazza<sup>11</sup> transpires in two moments. The first, a chance encounter with reverend Eager on the street, during which he mentions the inappropriateness of being acquainted with the Emersons. When he accuses Mr Emerson of having murdered his wife, of being a labourer's son and of writing for the Socialistic press, "for the first time Lucy's rebellious thoughts swept out in words – for the first time in her life" (Forster: 75). Opposing the vilifying words of Mr Eager,<sup>12</sup> Lucy defends the Emersons and asserts her own opinion, hitherto uncalled for.

He gazed indignantly at the girl, who met him with equal indignation, she turned towards him from the shop counter; her breast heaved quickly. He observed her brow, and the sudden strength of her lips. (Forster: 75)

At the same time, she begins to realize how unappealing life in England is when compared to the new sensations Italy provides her with. Upon reading her brother Freddy's letter, she

recalled the free, pleasant life of her home, where she was allowed to do everything, and where *nothing ever happened to her* [...] The road up through the pine-woods, the clean drawing-room, the view over the Sussex Weald – all hung before her bright and distinct, but pathetic as the pictures in a gallery to which, after much experience, a traveller returns. (Forster: 77, my italics)

The English "free and pleasant" life she is used to thus becomes a *simulacrum* for the experience of the authentic; imbued with pictorial quality, it lies in stark opposition with the true-to-life landscapes that a foreign country like Italy confronts her with, landscapes which ultimately bring about her coming of age. Not incidentally, by gazing at the statues in the

11. Described as "a moment of recognition, quickly repressed, of life's 'undeniables': violence, death and sexuality", this scene is central to the theory that "the Italian male body plays a crucial role in an allegory of sexual/social emancipation" (Buzard, 1988: 164). See, for instance, Forster's "The Story of a Panic".
12. John Lucas develops this question further by stating that "the appointed guardians of middle-class values, governesses and clerics, are the dedicated representatives of a class-consciousness which, for all its apparent decency and tolerance, kills off all hope of a free individual life; and that they are opposed by individuals who are, therefore, social outcasts" (Lucas, 1998: 169).

square once more, Lucy notices how they now suggest “not the innocence of childhood, nor the bewilderment of youth, but the conscious achievements of maturity” (Forster: 78). A maturity she is to reach soon enough.

Miss Alan, one of the Bertolini lot, knows best what power lies within the Italian people:

The Italians are a most unpleasant people. They pry everywhere, they see everything and *they know what we want before we know it ourselves*. We are at their mercy. They read our thoughts, they foretell our desires. From the cab-driver down to – to Giotto, they turn us inside out, and I resent it. (Forster: 54, my italics)

In the most pivotal sequence of the first part of the novel, Forster unites the conventional and the transgressive in a long, enchanting and overwrought episode. The setting is a hilltop in Fiesole, overlooking the Florentine cityscape. A small party is to enjoy a Tuscan picnic; under the pretence of following the steps of a Renaissance painter (Baldovinetti) who once immortalized the view from the promontory, each character anticipates either distress or delight, according to their whims or expectations. Lucy, in particular, is under a predicament: having avoided George since their violent encounter in the Piazza, she feels that something out of the ordinary, something akin to the *real* had happened that day – not in the Loggia, but by the river. Not knowing what to name it, she “suspected that *he did know*. And this frightened her” (Forster: 80, my italics). This fear is complicated by her equating affinity of feeling with sexual allure, something that runs against the grain of propriety and the ladylike behaviour she is expected to exhibit:

There was really something *blameworthy* (she thought) in their *joint contemplation* of the shadowy stream, in the *common impulse* which had turned them to the house without the passing of a look or word. (Forster: 80, my italics)

It is this sympathy within silence that frightens her and she sets about the expedition intent on recoiling from any act of intimacy with the young man. Forster has other plans, though.

Classical intimations are present as the author aptly names the driver of one of the carriages Phaethon, “a youth all irresponsibility and fire”, who is coincidentally – or not so much – accompanied by a girl whose name is Persephone. The girl allows Phaethon to drive with his arm round her waist – “She did not mind” (Forster: 79) – and further along the road “the two figures on the box were sporting with each other disgracefully” (Forster: 82). When, finally, they are caught kissing, reverend Eager calls

for decency and instructs the girl to leave the party, in spite of voices that urge him otherwise: Miss Lavish “felt bound to support the cause of bohemianism” (Forster: 83) and Mr Emerson “declared that the lovers must on no account be separated” (Forster: 82). Both claims betray Lucy’s perception of love: at once menacing and (hypothetically) pleasant. Faced with its physical, affectionate display, she cannot help but have “a spasm of envy” (Forster: 82). Concomitantly, the defence of love that Mr Emerson undertakes is aligned with his liberal interpretation of emotions:

Do you find happiness so often that we should turn if off the box when it happens to sit there? To be driven by lovers – a king might envy us, and if we part them it’s more like sacrilege than anything I know. (Forster: 83)

Against Mr Eager’s self-declared moral victory, he stands as the ultimate defender of nature in general and the language of the body in particular, exposing the denial of both as sacrilege, and stating that it is defeat when you part “two people who were happy”. The intervention of the older Emerson is, therefore, essential in that it enhances what to Lucy seems undisclosed yet: that joint contemplation and common impulse help to welcome “spring in man” (Forster: 85), not fight it. It also sets the tone for the sense of abandonment to the natural scenery they are to undergo and to its powerful take on George and Lucy’s conduct. In the film, this anticipation is beautifully captured when the camera lingers on the face of Persephone as she is left stranded. Her angelical yet sensual face, her ocean blue eyes, rose-button lips and fair hair, framed as they are against a backdrop of luscious vegetation, are quintessential Botticellian. If her tangible departure may strike as defeat, the goddess of love transcends her own absence by acting through the fulfilment of human desire.

“Italians are born knowing the way” (Forster: 88), we are reminded. It is through the action of the cab-driver, a common man<sup>13</sup> in whose company “the world was beautiful and direct” (Forster: 88), one that can “read our thoughts” (Forster: 54), that Lucy walks straight into the lion’s mouth. Our Phaethon, as it turns out, plays also Cupid by directing Lucy, who is looking for Mr Beebe, towards a sunlit open terrace, “covered with violets from end to end” (Forster: 88). Blue violets may be taken here as symbol of danger, since they are associated with the progressive Emersons, who had, in a previous episode, filled the Miss Alans’ room with them. However, far from the impending threat the flowers potentially represent, the terrace where she meets George is also described as “the well-head, the primal

13. “Charming and open, but with a tendency to cheat and unleash upheaval, the Italian Other has an aura of danger, steeped in British traditional notions of treacherous dark strangers” (Girelli, 2006: 32).

source whence beauty gushed out to water the earth” (Forster: 89). It resonates instead with nature’s abundance and overflow.

Both youths, in contact with what James Buzard calls “the elemental forces of life” (Buzard, 1988: 164) are then attuned to each other’s romantic yearnings: on her way to the promontory Lucy rejoices “in her escape from dullness. Not a step, not a twig, was unimportant to her” (Forster: 88), while George stands at the well-head/terrace, “like a swimmer who prepares” (Forster: 89).

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: 89)

Their kiss represents chaos, out of frame in a world of things and people put in their places, codified as society commands. The touching of lips, a sexual transgression, foreshadowed by the Italian couple’s loose behaviour and soon to be interrupted by a most inconvenient Charlotte, is the “plunge” Miss Lavish said a trip to Italy should be – a dive into physical awakening as well as an emotional and spiritual commitment. Short as it may have been, the intensity of feeling shown by George (here a mirror-image of the native cab-driver, “a youth all irresponsibility and fire” taking the matter into his own hands), and Lucy’s languid acceptance of it, translate into a bigger, and deeper, bond. If the English “gain knowledge slowly, and perhaps too late” (Forster: 90); if, as Ann Ardis contends, the travel experience served to “expose rather than resolve a sense of emotional and sensual alienation” (Ardis, 2007: 62) this is, perhaps, Forster’s way of begging to differ, conferring to both George and Lucy aspects of southern impulsiveness, lack of self-control and spontaneous amorous excess (their, as it were, temporary Italianness),<sup>14</sup> and distancing them, at least morally, from their repressed social milieu and its repressive social rules. For Venus, it is a triumph.

14. Food for thought: “When British characters infringe perceived rules of national conduct, they adopt Italian standards not to relinquish their identity, but to find it” (Girelli, 2006: 33).



## What happens in Fiesole... follows you to Summer Street



There was simply the sense that she had found wings, and meant to use them.

Confused as she is, “shaken by deep sighs”, and overpowered by “silly thoughts” (Forster: 93) – in short, turned upside down but not quite inside out –, Lucy’s return to the pensione and, later, to England, is marked by Charlotte’s admonitions and her dread of being labelled a failed chaperone, one who has allowed drama to irrupt. Knowing that she cannot rely on her cousin to be verbal enough about the facts of life, Lucy fails equally in her intention of being troubled no more “by things that come out of nothing, and mean I don’t know what” (Forster: 94). The “muddle” of life, as Mr Emerson calls it – the Edwardian/Forsterian equivalent to an existential angst – is to cast a long shadow in her subsequent deportment at Windy Corner, the house the Honeychurches inhabit, and is set to influence the remaining plot after a chance encounter takes place between the Emersons and Cecil Vyse, her fiancé, at the British Museum.

Lucy’s predicament, that of repulsing George while not admitting to love him, leads her into a hasty acceptance of a marriage proposal<sup>15</sup> by snobbish Cecil. The young man, living off the family’s fortune (“I have no profession, said Cecil, it is another example of my decadence” – Forster: 110) is, according to practical Mrs Honeychurch, “good”, “clever”, “rich” and “well connected” (Forster: 104). He is also, perhaps ironically, labelled by Mr Beebe as “an ideal bachelor”. Ironically precisely because Cecil’s view of the world, and of the people in it, comes wrapped in lofty idealizations that collide with the new century. He strikes as the most fastidious of characters, like the “saints who guard the portals of a French cathedral” (Forster: 106). As Jeffrey Heath rightfully contends, “in his fascination with the veiled secrets that Lucy adumbrates (he thinks a woman’s vocation resides in charm and mystery) Cecil suffers from what Walter Pater calls ‘the spiritual ambition of the middle ages’” (Heath, 1998: 207).<sup>16</sup> Heath’s analysis compares Cecil to a courtly lover who looks *through* Lucy rather than *at* her. In her carefully studied propriety, Lucy validates the assertion that “repeatedly, Forster’s characters try to own the unownable”

15. As Jeffrey Heath points out, “Forster’s two-faced heroine appropriately plans her wedding for January, the month named for a figure [Janus] that looks two ways at once” (Heath, 1998: 193).

16. “In his courtship of Lucy, it is soon apparent that he cannot conceive of any relation other than ‘the feudal’, that he is incapable of understanding ‘the comradeship after which the girl’s soul yearned’” (Lucas, 1998: 171). Pater (1839-1894), the most revered art critic of Victorian times (after Ruskin), was a staunch advocate of Aestheticism, following the “art for art’s sake” creed.

(Heath, 1988: 197): she is Cecil's property, his Leonardo painting; in short, a Mona Lisa-like figure "whom we love not so much for herself as for the things that she will not tell us" (Forster: 107). In conceding that Italy has brought a most wonderful development to Lucy, one which he does not quite know how to place, Cecil nevertheless indulges in the patriarchal assurance that the shadows applied to the feminine are worthier than the light. That his future wife will conform to society rules, all tight waist and tight corset, and become just another bourgeois lady (like his own dear mother) happy to entertain high-profile guests in the living-room of her well-appointed London flat.

The hints of disruption that Lucy wants to avoid upon her return to England are revived, indeed instigated by Cecil who, for the sake of the Comic Muse, inadvertently places the Emersons (who are looking for a house to let) on the very same street where the Honeychurches live. Soon, Lucy's brother Freddy, who calls Cecil his sister's *fiasco* instead of fiancé, befriends George; from then on, the comparison between both suitors is constantly in the back of the reader's mind. The trap being set by Forster for a series of accidental meetings between the two estranged youths, it is with utmost delight that we witness their gradual blending of souls as a result of Cecil's actions.

During a walk with Lucy, Cecil reproaches her for never wanting to be with him in the fields or the wood "since we were engaged" (Forster: 125). He fears it is because she feels more at ease with him in a room rather than in the open air. Lucy agrees: it becomes apparent that Cecil's demands upon her discourse and behaviour mirror the stifleness and restraint of pensione Bertolini (and to a larger extent, as we have seen, that of English society), whereas George represents the openness of passionate landscapes, especially Italian ones. The attempt at a first kiss – comically described in the book and brilliantly performed in the film – turns sour and bitter as it manifests all the awkwardness prognosticated by Cecil's own theatricals and contradicted by the seemingly idyllic setting. By a pond, under shade-providing trees, Lucy seems ripe for the taking. And yet, Cecil overthinks every step towards the uneventful touching of lips: he asks permission; he has trouble lifting Lucy's veil; he looks right and left to check no one is nearby; he kisses her fearful and ungracefully, causing his pince-nez to fall from his nose.

The experience is as stiff and rigid as Cecil himself. But really, considering that he always thinks of Lucy as a work of art, where to begin when you kiss a beautiful statue? If passion "should believe itself irresistible", if it "should forget civility and consideration and all the other curses of a refined nature" (Forster: 127), then, as he silently admits, it all had been a failure. Too civil and too refined, and not the least manly, Cecil

returns defeated from this bold pursuit. Cut to Lucy's timely reminiscence of her kiss with George, in its "immediate passionate fulfilment" (Gay, 1998: 164), and his fate as vanquished lover is sealed.

As if that was not enough, on a later occasion, while promenading, Cecil, Lucy and Mrs Honeychurch see Freddy, George and Mr. Beebe convivially swimming naked in said pond. Against the formality of Cecil's attire, in all its sartorial flawlessness, George's full bareness arises (pun intended): "barefoot, bare-chested, radiant and personable against the shadowy woods" (Forster: 152). In spite of locking her instincts "behind a selfish barrier of feigned indifference" (Heath, 1998: 196) Lucy's (re)awakening is under way, as she is, time and again, confronted with the vitality that her tryst with George has given her.

As their kiss represents an experience that she has trouble forgetting, a ghost that keeps coming back, "even usurping the places she had known as a child" (Forster: 160), Lucy finds herself facing the conspicuous notion that you can perhaps remove yourself from Italy but you cannot remove Italy from you. This furthermore attests, as Elisabetta Girelli infers, to Italy's "permanence as an unchangeable symbolic space" (Girelli, 2006: 26): that of unrestrained freedom of thought and will, of vast expanses of sight and mind – not to say of perfectly sculpted statues of naked men, something the nude scene in this chapter seems to irrevocably evoke. Haunted thus by recollections of unbridled (sensual) liberation, Lucy, who "never gazed inwards" (Forster: 161) starts to let her defences fall, entertaining "an image that had physical beauty" (Forster: 162). Her mental collapse, though unnoticed, is one of wonder towards "nature", one in which the influence of her Tuscan memories is negotiated.

Again, Cecil must be thanked for being an instrument of reconnection that will set the last part of the novel in motion. By picking up the red book (no colour is innocent) which we know to have been lying upon the garden's gravel path at the start of the chapter aptly called *The Disaster Within*, he sentences his fiancée to an act of resistance she does not really want to perform. The novel-within-the-novel ploy appears as the ultimate disruptive agent, as Cecil mockingly reads an excerpt: its author is Eleanor Lavish and its title rings distant bells – *Under a Loggia*. Florence is there, the violets are there, the natural gesture of one lover enfolding another "in his manly arms" (Forster: 179) is there. Soon we learn – as Lucy and George, who sit by Cecil's side, do – that Miss Lavish has either seen their romantic exchange, filing it in her mind for future literary output, or, worse, had this information shared by cousin Charlotte. Unable to stave off the sexual tension between them, fired by each lusty description, Lucy runs towards the house; George follows her. "She thought a disaster was averted. But when they entered the shrubbery, it came" (Forster: 179).

The disaster, or “it”, is yet another kiss, this time clandestine, and more forbidding. The shocking revelation of this embrace leads to another crisis for Lucy, one in which, at last, George makes her see herself as a living woman, “with mysteries and forces of her own, with qualities that even eluded art” (Forster: 191). Crucially, his speech as they part is imbued with feminist overtones: when he tells her that she can only speak through Cecil’s voice and not her own, or when he declares he wants her to have her own thoughts, “even when I hold you in my arms” (Forster: 187). That same night, when she is breaking off her engagement, Lucy hears her own voice loudly claiming she “won’t be protected” (Forster: 191) or “stifled” (Forster: 192). Later on, talking to Mr. Beebe, she announces that she “must get away, ever so far”: “I must know my own mind and where I want to go” (Forster: 202). In her urgency to escape the realities that her condition as newly unattached young woman brings, she longs, by the novel’s conclusion, for a sense of beginning – and not that of an ending. In wanting “more independence” (Forster: 214) Lucy wants more love, or love as she has never known it – something which George, in his constant pursuit of meaning, can gladly provide her with. Since, according to old Mr Emerson, “love is of the body” (Forster: 223) she is at last shown “the holiness of direct desire” (Forster: 225) and the novel presents us with “the most satisfactory transcendence of the muddle”<sup>17</sup> (Langland, 2007: 95).

Direct desire being attained through a series of last-minute fortunate events – including a *deus ex machina* intervention from cousin Charlotte and a moving conversation with Mr Emerson – the lion’s share of the credits for Lucy’s emancipation must go to the effects of Italy as both country and construct. It seems fitting that *A Room with a View* leads to a final view in a room where the newlyweds have well-deserved moments of *jouissance* (notice how, in the film, Lucy’s hair is dishevelled, suggesting she has been dwelling in intimate languor), and from where they survey the landscape that brought them together in the first place.<sup>18</sup> Critics like Zohreh Sullivan apparently see in this scene the decline of the novel “from its early promise of emotional grandeur to a final arrival at an anti-climactic, middle-class marital stability” (Sullivan, 1998: 186). One could argue instead that there are no fixed developments for characters who dare think and act “outside the box”, who are off the beaten track, even if fleetingly; that their individual liberation or “selfless plenitude” (Heath, 1988: 218) is testament to their will to experience existence otherwise (by doing the don’ts) and that we should not worry too much, in case the edifice of


17. “The ‘muddle’, already alluded to, is ‘what results when people ignore their deepest promptings and respond dishonestly and indirectly to experience as they are expected or told to do’” (Heath, 1998: 190).

18. George, who earlier in the novel postulates that Italy is a euphemism for Fate, is eventually seen as the ultimate model for what an English abroad *is not*: “In leaving Cecil for George, Lucy swaps a pretentious intellectual, who fancies himself ‘italianate’, for someone capable of *blending in* with Italians” (Girelli, 2006: 28, my italics).

protest built by Forster subsides. After all, as James Buzard notes, “rather than the perfectly timed and studied tour, in which stimulus responses meet with resounding efficiency, Forster favours the surprises and disappointments along the way” (Buzard, 1988: 165).

Such surprises and disappointments, in their deliciously tangled nature, bring change upon the characters. All the disruptive elements unfurled as the plot thickens, from dubious acquaintances to dangerous *piazze*, from murders and stolen kisses to providential books out of the shelf, concur to bring the reader face to face with his/her own expectations when abroad; and with the effects of his/her own travel recollections in his/her life. The holiday experience is also an experiment that enables Lucy to go from “touchy” to “touched”, to release her soul – more than the body – from the strictures of sex and class indoors, that is to say: in her own country, where the things that really matter (love, youth, and truth, according to the novelist), the things that ultimately dare disturb the universe, do not seem, alas, to matter at all.

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