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James Corby

*E.M. Forster: Muddling Through Italy*

In June 1901, at the age of twenty two, Edward Morgan Forster came down from Cambridge with decidedly uncertain prospects, both professionally and personally. Unsure of which career to follow, he briefly explored the possibility of becoming a schoolmaster. He wrote to "O.B.", Oscar Browning, the famously energetic and snobbish don of King's, Forster's college at Cambridge, asking for advice<sup>1</sup>. Browning was not encouraging: he suggested that with Forster's "not very good degree" (he took a Second in the Classics Tripos and then switched to History where he was awarded another Second) he would be better off first acquiring a further qualification from a teacher training college (*FL*, pp. 79-80). With his ambitions rather dampened by Browning's lack of enthusiasm, Forster explored other possible avenues of employment. His Aunt Laura was particularly keen to get him set up somewhere, perhaps at the Education Office, where her cousin worked, or the South Kensington Museum, or possibly a junior clerical position at the House of Commons (*FL*, 80). But Forster himself was in no immediate hurry — he was not, after all, financially obliged to take a job; he was able to live quite comfortably off the interest of £8000 capital left to him by his great-aunt Marianne Thornton (*FL*, p. 24) — and as the summer of 1901 wore on he thought less of employment and more about how he might get away from England altogether for a while and see more of life

<sup>1</sup> P.N. Furbank, *E.M. Forster: A Life*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1978, p. 53. All subsequent references to this work will be included parenthetically in the text, designated *FL* and followed by the relevant page number.

and culture abroad. It is perhaps tempting also to assume that confusion — or, to use Forster’s word, *muddle* — in his personal life regarding his sexual identity contributed just as much as professional uncertainties to this decision. But to imagine Forster’s European trip as a bold and rebellious break for freedom would be to ignore the facts of the matter, which paint a decidedly more staid and conventional picture. He was to travel with his mother, Lily (Alice Clara Whichelo), an extraordinarily dominant matriarchal figure whose relationship with Forster, or Morgan as she called him, was shaped by the death of her husband when the infant Forster was only twenty two months old and by the subsequent deaths of several of Forster’s siblings. They decided on Italy, a trip that was to last over a year and take in Austria and Sicily too. Lily enthusiastically arranged to give up their house and put all of their furniture in store, Forster, meanwhile, Baedeker travel guide in hand<sup>2</sup>, began to plan their journey, a sort of contracted, Edwardian middle-class version of the Grand Tour.

At that time, the Baedeker guide books, along with the Murray guidebooks and one or two others, led the way for countless British tourists travelling on the continent. In *A Room with a View* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* Forster is gently mocking of the Baedeker approach and of the type of tourism that such books represent — the way they attempt to catalogue the many splendours of Italy, translating them in the brisk, unfeeling language of respectable late-Victorian, early-Edwardian paternalism — but Forster himself was in fact utterly dependent upon them and not insensible to what, in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, is referred to as “the hidden charms of Baedeker”<sup>3</sup> (and in this respect he is like Philip in that book who “could never read ‘The view from the Rocca (small gratuity) is finest at sunset’ without a catching at the heart”)<sup>4</sup>. In a letter of 1 December 1901 to Nathaniel Wedd, his

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Moffat, *E.M. Forster: A New Life*, London, Bloomsbury, 2011, p. 57. All subsequent references to this work will be included parenthetically in the text, designated *FNL* and followed by the relevant page number.

<sup>3</sup> E.M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), London, Penguin, 2007, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13. Peter Vassallo comments perceptively on how, in Forster’s

former supervisor at King's, Forster wrote that "the orthodox Baedeker-bestarred Italy — which is all I have yet seen — delights me so much that I can well afford to leave the Italian Italy for another time" (*FL*, p. 85). And in another letter Lily recounts how after being too late to buy omnibus tickets and subsequently also missing the train, they then boarded another bus, but then,

M. begins clapping himself all over with a wild eye, which always makes my heart sink. He had forgotten his Baedeker, just bought for 11/-, so he got out and back he ran for it... (*FL*, p. 95).

At this juncture it is instructive to consult the 1906 version of Baedeker's guide to Northern Italy, which, going by publication dates, is the version Lucy herself lost in *A Room With a View*, when on a visit to Santa Croce, she hands it to the flighty Miss Lavish, who then disappears across the square upon spying an acquaintance<sup>5</sup>. The first paragraph of the Baedeker volume is illuminating. Whereas contemporary guidebooks such as the *Rough Guides* or *Lonely Planet* series are presented as offering knowledge that will take you off the well-trodden path to a more intimate, a more "authentic" experience of a people and their culture, Baedeker promises to inform and educate the tourist while allowing him to remain independent and as untouched as possible by such experiences. The preface begins:

day, "Murray's handbooks and Baedeker's popular guidebooks had become established constraints on the British traveller's perception of the Other". Vassallo places such guidebooks alongside the influence of John Ruskin, "another dominant cultural authority against whose presence the intelligent and perceptive traveller had to contend" ("E.M. Forster, John Ruskin and the 'Pernicious Charm' of Italy", *British Writers and the Experience of Italy (1800-1940): Studies in Anglo-Italian Literary Influence*, Malta, Malta University Publishing, 2012, p. 71.)

<sup>5</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (1908), London, Penguin, 2000, Chapter 2: 'In Santa Croce with no Baedeker'. All subsequent references to this work will be included parenthetically in the text, designated *RV* and followed by the relevant page number.

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The objects of the Handbook for Italy, which consists of three volumes, each complete in itself, are to supply the traveller with some information regarding the culture and art of the people he is about to visit, as well as regarding the natural features of the country, to render him as independent as possible of the services of guides and valets-de-place, to protect him against extortion, and in every way to aid him in deriving enjoyment and instruction from his tour in one of the most fascinating countries in the world<sup>6</sup>.

The guide warns that begging, which has always been “one of those national nuisances to which the traveller in Italy must accustom himself” is on the increase. Baedeker offers the following advice:

As the profits of street-beggars too frequently go for the support of able-bodied loafers, travellers should either give nothing, or restrict their charity to the obviously infirm. Gratuities to children are entirely reprehensible. — Impor-  
tunate beggars should be dismissed with “niente” or by a gesture of negation<sup>7</sup>.

And in the section on accommodation, would-be travellers are warned that:

The popular idea of cleanliness in Italy is behind the age; but the traveller in the N. part of the country will rarely suffer from this short-coming even in hotels of the second class, though those who quit the beaten track must be prepared for privations. Iron bedsteads should if possible be selected, as they are less likely to harbour the enemies of repose. Insect-powder or camphor somewhat repels their advances<sup>8</sup>.

Forster’s experience of Italy, then, was conditioned by this

<sup>6</sup> Karl Baedeker, *Northern Italy*, Leipzig, Baedeker, 1906, p. V.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

rather prim and defensive attitude to travel and, indeed, he later reflected that his first Italian trip “was a very timid outing” (*FL*, p. 96). But this should not occlude the fact, as Forster’s Italian stories novels attest, he was indeed interested in the consequences of breaking through that timidity, throwing off the inhibiting mores of conventional, middle-class Edwardian Englishness, and that although its impact might have been delayed somewhat, he was aware of there being something potentially transformative about the experience of Italy, the sense that it might offer the *prospect* — and I choose the word carefully — of a clarification of the sort of muddle that he was experiencing in his life, but which, it is clear, he saw as more generally characteristic of modern urban Western civilisation.

Muddle is an interesting word. Rather like Forster himself, its rather gentle and familiar qualities mask intriguing complexities. Used as a noun to indicate a confusion, disorder or bewilderment, it is actually quite recent, 1818 being its earliest recorded appearance according to the *OED*. The word, and its variants, is clearly very important to Forster, who seems to have been aware that its modern, demotic and arguably democratic quality might raise an eyebrow or two. In *A Passage to India*, for instance, he writes of “a spiritual muddledom [...] for which no high-sounding words can be found”<sup>9</sup>. As a verb, to muddle, it has been around a lot longer, the *OED* tracing its usage back to the middle of the sixteenth century and offering an etymology that connects it with mud (in Middle English) and *moddelen* in Middle Dutch, the frequentative of *modden*, meaning to “dabble in mud”. Today we commonly use the verb “to muddle” to mean “to confuse” or “to mix up”, and in order to understand the early usages of the word these senses ought to be taken quite literally rather than in any figurative or abstract sense. The *OED* notes that it could mean “to make muddy; to render (liquid) turbid by stirring up the sediment” (there is a bartender’s tool known as a muddler, a wooden stick which serves precisely this purpose), and, another definition of “to muddle” offered by the *OED*, is “to destroy the clearness of”. This

<sup>9</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924), London, Penguin, 1989, p. 212.

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latter idea, muddling being something that destroys clearness, and muddle, by implication, being the absence of clearness, is, as we will see later, particularly important for understanding a key concern of Forster's fiction and the role that Italy plays in that fiction.

Forster's own experience of the Continent, in spite of the best efforts of Baedeker, was muddle from the start. At Calais he and Lily encountered problems with the train, in Paris there was, according to Forster biographer P.N. Furbank, "a violent altercation over tickets and they got parted from their luggage. Nor could they find any food for the journey". The porters distained the smallness of Forster's tips, which inclined him to reduce them still further. Lily became ill and could neither eat nor drink for three days. But then, as they reached Italy and made their way south to Lake Maggiore, the landscape started to act as a restorative and they felt themselves "simply battered about by the dazzling scenery" (*FL*, p. 81). Forster, the Baedeker-conditioned tourist, took it all in but still felt strangely removed from it.

I missed nothing [he writes in his diary] — neither the campaniles, nor the crooked bridges over dry torrent beds, nor the uniformity of blue sky, nor the purple shadows of the mountains over the lake. But I knew that I must wait for many days before they meant any thing to me or gave me any pleasure (*FL*, pp. 81-82).

This slowness of feeling, although personally felt, was in fact something that Forster saw as more generally characteristic of the English, in contrast with a more natural immediacy that he fancied could be glimpsed enduring in Italy. In the essay "Notes on the English Character", Forster contests that the English character is "essentially middle-class" (p. 3), though perhaps *muddle*-class rather than *middle*-class would, from Forster's perspective, actually be more accurate<sup>10</sup>. The English are formed, he suggests, by an education system that produces "well-developed bodies, fairly

<sup>10</sup> E.M. Forster, "Notes on the English Character" (1926), in *Abinger Harvest and England's Pleasant Land*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1996, p. 3.

developed minds, and undeveloped hearts. And it is this undeveloped heart”, he goes on, “that is largely responsible for the difficulties of Englishmen abroad. An undeveloped heart — not a cold one”<sup>11</sup>. This last point is important. It is not that Forster believes the “Englishman can’t feel — it is that he is afraid to feel. [...] He must bottle up his emotions, or let them out only on a very special occasion”<sup>12</sup>. A sense of appropriateness takes precedence over sincerity and this retards any emotional response by the English. It is not the case in Forster’s view, therefore, that there is no emotional response, just that it must emerge slowly. This is what Forster calls “the *slowness* of the English character”. “The Englishman appears to be cold and unemotional”, he writes, “because he is really slow. When an event happens, he may understand it quickly enough with his mind, but he takes quite a while to feel it”<sup>13</sup>. So too, with Forster’s experience of Italy, in contrast with how it might be experienced by Italians themselves or indeed by other Continentals of a more southerly persuasion. In “Notes on the English Character”, Forster tells the following anecdote:

Once upon a time a coach, containing some Englishmen and some Frenchmen, was driving over the Alps. The horses ran away, and as they were dashing across a bridge the coach caught on the stonework, tottered, and nearly fell into the ravine below. The Frenchmen were frantic with terror: they screamed and gesticulated and flung themselves about, as Frenchmen would. The Englishmen sat quite calm. An hour later the coach drew up at an inn to change horses, and by that time the situations were exactly reversed. The Frenchmen had forgotten all about the danger, and were chattering gaily; the Englishmen had just begun to feel it, and one had a nervous breakdown and was obliged to go to bed. We have here a clear physical difference between the two races — a difference that goes deep into character. The Frenchmen responded at once; the Englishmen responded

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

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in time. They were slow and they were also practical. Their instinct forbade them to throw themselves about in the coach, because it was more likely to tip over if they did. They had this extraordinary appreciation of *fact* that we shall notice again and again. When a disaster comes, the English instinct is to do what can be done first, and to postpone the feeling as long as possible. Hence they are splendid at emergencies. No doubt they are brave — no one will deny that — but bravery is partly an affair of the nerves, and the English nervous system is well equipped for meeting a physical emergency. It acts promptly and feels slowly. Such a combination is fruitful, and anyone who possesses it has gone a long way toward being brave. And when the action is over, then the Englishman can feel<sup>14</sup>.

It is this priority of pragmatism over emotion that dictates the tone of Baedeker (Baedeker being German, of course, not English, but sharing, one might imagine, a northerly undervaluing of emotion), making those volumes, at least in this context of Englishness, as much a guide to life as a guide to Italy.

So, if this reading of the English character is at all accurate, we might reasonably expect some sort of delayed authentic unmediated response to Italy on the part of Forster himself. There is little sign of it initially, though, and the immediate prospect appears to be one only of deepening muddle. The hotels and *pensiones* “seemed entirely inhabited by elderly English ladies” (*FL*, p. 82). One can imagine him being in complete sympathy with Lucy Honeychurch in *A Room With a View* about whom, in an early draft of the novel, he writes: “It was for this that she had given up her home, made elaborate preparations, crossed the channel in a gale, had endless railway journeys and four customs examinations — that she might sit with a party of English ladies who seemed even duller than ladies in England” (*FL*, p. 82).

Upon arriving in Florence Forster and his mother checked into the Albergo Bonciani, but, seeking a view of the Arno, soon decided to move to the Pensione Simi, which the 1906 Baedeker mentions

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.



in a list of Florence pensione considered to be “generally good” and which served as the model for the Pension Bertolini<sup>15</sup>. This is mentioned in a letter to Edward Joseph Dent, where, once again, Forster seems anxious that he is not responding to Italy with sufficient naturalness and immediacy:

Dear Dent,  
Your very welcome letter came this morning. We go to morrow to the Pension Simi, 2 Lungarno delle Grazie. We have been here three days, and very comfortable, but my mother hankers after an Arno view and a South aspect, so we are not stopping ...  
Everything about the Pension Simi seems nice except the lady who keeps it, who scatters Hs like morsels and calls me “the young gentleman”. But perhaps this is fastidious ...  
I have done little sight seeing as yet, and my mother none, as we are both rather knocked up, I don’t know why. This afternoon I have been to the Uffizi and two rooms of Tuscan pictures.  
Yesterday I went to St Lorenzo. I had got ready all the appropriate sentiments for the New Sacristy, and they answered very well. More spontaneous perhaps were my feelings at seeing the cloisterful of starved and maimed cats ... (*FL*, p. 83-4).

Eventually they move on to Assisi and then Perugia, where once again Forster finds himself among a coterie of elderly spinsters, this time more marked by the spirit of adventure, the cast from which, we might suppose, Miss Lavish and perhaps even the Miss Allens, who are not insensible to the temptations of Romance, in *A Room With a View* emerge. Writing to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickenson, Forster comments:

The pall of tragedy has been affixed to the unfortunate city, and the elderly ladies of the hotel make midnight excursions in the well lighted streets in search of blood and adventure, and come back breathing desolation & woe. The exalted

<sup>15</sup> Baedeker, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

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level is sustained by an old lady who is understood to be waiting for an inspiration to write a book, and by an old lady who had really written one, which was squashed by the landslide at Amalfi (*FL*, p. 86).

The very same day his mother wrote a letter offering a similar account:

There is a Miss Spender here [the great aunt of Stephen Spender, as it happens], who writes books and we see several copies of her book "Romance of Perugia" for sale in the hall. If her books are like her conversation, I should think they were wearisome. So gushing about nothing. "Oh, I had such an adventure. I went out in the evening and saw a dark hall and a man going across with a Roman lamp, and *that* is what I call an adventure" — and the gushing red haired maiden says "Oh Miss Spender, how delightful, I wish I had been with you, you are so brave" (*FL*, p. 87).

Forster, it is important to underline, did not necessarily cut a striking contrast in the midst of all of this. Indeed, still beset by the muddle of his sexuality and his relationship with his overbearing mother, as well as his own English middle-class conventionality, he was, if anything, even less adventurous and perhaps even more spinsterish than the old ladies. And here let us recall F.R. Leavis's perceptive though perhaps rather cruel criticism of the "spinsterish" quality of some of Forster's writing<sup>16</sup>. The possibility of escaping these multiple inhibitions through some sort of unadulterated, immediate experience of Italy, which we might suppose is what Forster was seeking, was seemingly made even more remote by two accidents Forster suffered. While staying at Rome in the

<sup>16</sup> F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (1952), New York, New York University Press, 1964, p. 264. Leavis attributes this insight to Rose Macaulay, whose book *The Writings of E.M. Forster* was the first full-length study of Forster's work. Later, in an influential essay, Jeffrey Meyers comments on "the spinsterish and effete quality that sometimes obtrudes in his fiction" ("Vacant Heart and Hand and Eye: The Homosexual Theme in *A Room With a View*", *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 13, 3 (1970), pp. 181-192 (p. 186).

Pensione Hayden, which Furbank describes as being “crammed with English old ladies” (*FL*, p. 88), Forster slipped down the stairs and sprained his ankle. Then, when just about recovered, he fell up the steps at St. Peter’s and broke his arm, making him the focus of attention for the old ladies’ fuss and well-intentioned but perhaps rather officious kindness (*FL*, p. 89). His mother was chief nurse. In a letter, she gives a sense of her rather indulgent care:

Everybody has been kind. 2 young ladies brought M. a “Marie tozzi” for his tea — a bun — another brought him ivy from Cicero’s villa and an old coy spinster, who seems to have taken a fancy to Mr Spencer, gave him a branch of mimosa for his bedroom.

I dress him entirely and he makes me laugh. He says he thought I was a good washer, but that he is “simply muddled” [?] He always uses heaps of soap and never rinses properly. He looks splendid now I do him. It is a long business — but now I get quicker and he always has a beaten up egg in the middle.

...Poor M., added to his other misfortunes, is bitten all over with fleas, his bad arm especially. M. said this morning:

Morgy’s so clean

He feels in a dream.

Very true, I keep him “beautifully” (*FL*, p. 89).

Somewhat despondent, and more muddled than ever, he wrote a letter to Dickinson (using his left hand) saying “though I do love Italy she has had no such awakening power on me as she has on you”. He blames this on the weather, saying: “When the sun is in she is uninteresting and even ugly — perhaps all ought to be — and unless the sun is out continuously her beauty never develops” (*FL*, p. 89). Interestingly, though not surprisingly, this accords with the views of Baedeker, who although warning that “The height of summer can hardly be recommended for travelling” admits that “[t]he scenery, indeed, is then in perfection”<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Baedeker, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

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When not waylaid by injury, Forster seemed, even to his own mother, to be an entirely inept tourist. Besides losing his Baedeker, he lost his gloves and Italian dictionary (*FL*, p. 84). Lilly judged her son to be “dreadfully impractical” (*FL*, p. 84) and, in Pisa, told him, rather unkindly, that “it would be just his luck if the Leaning Tower fell on him, he was ‘so lamentably unfortunate’” (*FL*, p. 94). However, just when English muddle seems to have prevailed, Forster, as slow to feel as his analysis of the English character would suggest, had his first unnervingly real, but delayed, experience of Italy. This happened as he travelled down past Naples, where the warmer, sunnier weather he had longed for unsettled him and “he became consumed by erotic dreams about men” (*FNL*, p. 61). It was at Ravello that he became particularly intoxicated by the spirit of the south, and forty years later he recounts an event that was to signal his first literary response to Italy of any substance. He writes:

I think it was in the May of 1902 that I took a walk near Ravello. I say down in a valley, a few miles above the town, and suddenly the first chapter of the story rushed into my mind as if it has waited for me there. I received it as an entity and wrote it out as soon as I returned to the hotel. But it seemed unfinished and a few days later I added some more until it was three times as long (*FL*, p. 92).

That line, “the first chapter of the story rushed into my mind as if it has waited for me there” is interesting, for once again it seems to affirm the delayed emotional response of the English, who are too muddled to experience things spontaneously and directly. The story in question is “The Story of a Panic”, a tale told from the perspective of a rather narrow, middle-aged, middle-class family man on holiday in Italy. He is travelling with his wife and two daughters and staying with a mixed group of tourists, including the obligatory spinsters (the two Miss Robinsons) and their nephew, a boy of around fourteen called Eustace, whom the narrator calls “indescribably repellent”<sup>18</sup>. The story concerns a daytrip to the

<sup>18</sup> E.M. Forster, “The Story of a Panic” (1904), *Selected Stories*, London,

chestnut woods above Ravello for a picnic. Following a heated discussion about the exploitation of Nature, during which the name of the “great God Pan” is invoked and declared dead, a terrifying though indeterminate event occurs that scatters all of the travellers down the hillside in fright, with the exception of Eustace who has been strangely transformed by what we gradually glean to be some sort of encounter with Pan himself. The only person who is able to understand the manically animated Eustace is Gennaro, a young, “poor Italian fisher-boy” (*SP*, p. 15). Perhaps the most important symbol of Eustace’s transformation from a mollycoddled and peevish boy to a wild and natural creature exulting in the sensuality of nature is his rejection of his room on the grounds that it has no view. The narrator calls out to the boy:

“Eustace! what on earth are you doing? Come in at once”.  
He stopped his antics and said: “I hate my bedroom. I could not stop in it, it is too small”.  
“Come! come! I’m tired of affectation. You’ve never complained of it before”.  
“Besides, I can’t see anything — no flowers, no leaves, no sky: only a stone wall”. The outlook of Eustace’s room certainly was limited; but, as I told him, he had never complained of it before.  
“Eustace, you talk like a child. Come in! Prompt obedience, if you please”.  
He did not move (*SP*, p. 15-16).

It is, of course, very tempting to read all of this in light of Forster’s anxiety over his sexual identity and his longing to free himself of muddle, Eustace and the conventional middle-class narrator seeming to embody the two extremes of Forster’s personality. Indeed, the sexual undertones of the story caused something of a stir among his Cambridge friends. As biographer Wendy Moffat recounts,

Penguin, 2001, p. 1. All subsequent references to this work will be included parenthetically in the text, designated *SP* and followed by the relevant page number.

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Someone gave the manuscript to Maynard Keynes, who shared it with Charles Sayle, a university librarian who cultivated a baroque effeminacy. "Oh dear oh dear, is this Young King's" Sayle asked in knowing mock horror. "Then he showed Maynard what the Story was about. B[ugged] by a waiter at the hotel, Eustace commits bestiality with a goat in the valley where I had sat. In the subsequent chapters, he tells the waiter how nice it has been and they try to b[ugger] each other" (*FNL*, p. 62).

At the time, Forster, aged twenty three, was "horrified" by Sayle's interpretation, but years later he came to recognise some truth in it. "[N]o thought of sex was in my mind", he recalled, but in hindsight he acknowledged that "I had been excited as I wrote and the passages where Sayle had thought something was up had excited me most" (*FNL*, p. 63). He had a similar experience of excitement when writing the passage in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* where Gino tortures Philip, twisting his broken arm (*FL*, p. 114).

It is at about this time (1902) that Forster begins to draft an idea for a novel that would develop the idea of a view as symbolic of the prospect of deliverance from muddle and inhibition (indeed, it might be said that for Forster a view is quite literally a prospect of deliverance), and of course this is where the definition of the verb "to muddle" as "to destroy the clearness of" becomes so significant. "Muddle", this rather casual, imprecise-sounding term, starts to take on a remarkable exactitude in Forster's lexicon meaning viewlessness, which, in turn, comes to signify, broadly, a repressed, emotionally enfeebled state of over-civilisation<sup>19</sup>. At this early stage the idea for a novel that would develop into *A Room With a View* was referred to as his 'Lucy' book, and indeed he would break

<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is reinforced in *Howards End*, where muddle is equated with an inability to grasp life in its complex totality. Margaret Schlegel reproves Henry Wilcox because he "cannot connect": "No one has ever told what you are — muddled, criminally muddled" (E.M. Forster, *Howards End* [1910], New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1998, p. 219).

away from it and write *Where Angels Fear to Tread* before returning to it and completing it.

It is, as one might expect, the tale of the tensions between muddles and views, between English convention and Italian naturalness. Both Lucy Honeychurch and George Emerson are, in their own ways, beset by muddle and in want of views. Indeed, an unsigned notice that appeared in *The Observer* of 8 March 1908 asserted that *A Room With a View* “might also have been called ‘A Young Woman in a Muddle’”<sup>20</sup>. That Lucy is of the muddling set, but has at least the potential for naturalness and light, as her name and affinity for music suggest, is made clear by her role in the argument about whether or not she and Miss Charlotte Bartlett should accept the offer made by George’s father, Mr Emerson, to switch rooms, thereby allowing the ladies to enjoy the view. When Mr Emerson meets her the following day in Santa Croce, significantly after she has been dispossessed of her Baedeker, he senses this and says “You are inclined to get muddled, if I may judge from last night. Let yourself go. Pull out from the depths those thoughts that you do not understand, and spread them out in the sunlight and know the meaning of them. By understanding George you may learn to understand yourself. It will be good for both of you” (*RV*, p. 25).

For George is muddled too. The similarities between George and Eustace of “The Story of a Panic” are interesting and worth noting. Both are taciturn and ill-at-ease with society. This becomes clear to Eustace after the revelation of the great God pan and he admits to Gennaro that he “can’t make men out a bit” (*SP*, p. 19). George takes muddle to new metaphysical heights. Mr Emerson explains to Lucy that his son suffers from “The old trouble: things won’t fit”. “What things?” asks Lucy. “The things of the universe. It is quite true. They don’t” (*RV*, p. 25). This talk unnerves Lucy, no doubt because its directness violates social hierarchy and offends the overly refined sensibility of her class. She responds by rehearsing the appropriate matronly disapproval of her type, thus

<sup>20</sup> Philip Gardner, ed., *E.M. Forster: The Critical Heritage*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 109.

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retreating deeper into muddle.

Towards the end of the book, after Lucy has seen the light, as it were, and broken off the engagement with Cecil Vyse, she has a pivotal encounter with Mr Emerson. "It seems to me", he says, "that you are in a muddle". He goes on:

"Take an old man's word: there's nothing worse than a muddle in all the world. It is easy to face Death and Fate, and the things that sound so dreadful. It is on my muddles that I look back with horror — on the things that I might have avoided. We can help one another but little. I used to think I could teach young people the whole of life, but I know better now, and all my teaching of George has come down to this: beware of muddle" (*RV*, p. 188).

He then reminds her of her earlier muddles:

"Do you remember in that church, when you pretended to be annoyed with me and weren't? Do you remember before, when you refused the room with the view? Those were muddles — little, but ominous — and I am fearing that you are in one now" (*RV*, p. 188).

It then suddenly dawns on him that though she might not realise it she is in fact in love with his son, George. Love, Mr Emerson believes, will always survive muddle, though it might be subject to it: "You can transmute love, ignore it, muddle it, but you can never pull it out of you. I know by experience that the poets are right: love is eternal". Lucy tries to flee, sobbing and frightened, but as the narrator tells us, as Mr Emerson spoke "the darkness was withdrawn, veil after veil, and she saw to the bottom of her soul". On her way out, Mr Emerson cries "Give George my love — once only. Tell him, 'Muddle'" (*RV*, p. 189). Finally, Mr Emerson bestows a kiss on Lucy at her request and she is somehow fortified and, in Mr Emerson's words, able to "see the whole of everything at once" (*RV*, p. 191).

If Lucy is aptly named, then no less so is Mr Emerson, his name recalling Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great American thinker



whose ideas inspired the American Transcendentalist movement<sup>21</sup>. It is surely no coincidence that Emerson, in one of his most important and influential essays, “Nature”, places so much emphasis upon attaining a poetic clarity of vision, an unmuddled view of the world. He writes:

There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet [...] To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood'. Then ‘all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God<sup>22</sup>.

I take this to be instructive as to how to interpret the sort of cure of muddle that Mr Emerson and, one imagines, Forster, recommend. To emerge out of muddle is not to reject complexity or contradiction — both these things exist just as forcefully, if not more so, in Forster’s Italian ideal as they do in the English middle-class of which he was so critical. Just think of Gino in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* — shiftless, irresponsible and capable of physical cruelty, but also magnanimous, innately self-assured and beautiful. Rather, the cure for muddle is to accept complexity and contradiction as being part of life, the part of life that Edwardian society would rather ignore or make sense of, the part of life for which there is emphatically no Baedeker guide, but which is still acknowledged in Forster’s ideal Italy. Accept complexity and contradiction, but not confusion. As Mr Emerson himself says, “all life is perhaps a

<sup>21</sup> Tellingly, when Mrs Honeychurch hears the name Emerson she is keen to establish that her new neighbours are not related to the philosopher, whom she judges to be “a most trying man” (*RV*, p. 106).

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” (1836), *Nature and Selected Essays*, London, Penguin, 2003, pp. 38-9.

knot, a tangle, a blemish in the eternal smoothness. But why should this make us unhappy?" (*RV*, pp. 25-6). The point is that knots, tangles and blemishes, as long as they are affirmed rather than repressed, are not muddles. Art, of course, is able to dissolve muddle by affirming the order of the whole. Indeed, in the essay "Art for Art's Sake", Forster calls it "the one orderly product which our muddling race has produced"<sup>23</sup>. Lucy instinctively knows this when she is drawn to the knotty complexity of Beethoven, whose music seems to dispel muddle by confronting and acknowledging it, much to the discomfort of her middle-class audiences. In another essay called "London is a Muddle", Forster asserts that when considered aesthetically, muddle can actually be pleasant. After quoting some of *The Waste Land*, he writes: "T.S. Eliot has felt and has well expressed the muddle of London — the muddle which need not be unpleasant"<sup>24</sup>. George himself emerged from his metaphysical muddle following his swim in the sacred lake with Freddy and Mr Beebe. The muddle now cleared in both, the path to enlightened happiness is unbarred and the final chapter of the novel sees them on their honeymoon, back in the Pension Bertolini, staying in a room with a view.

And so it ends — or does it? Well, the novel ends there, but the lives of Lucy and George continue and we catch up with them again in Forster's 1958 essay, "A Room Without a View", in which he tries to imagine what would have become of them. Forster imagines them still in love, with children and grandchildren, but living in a more troubled world, the comparatively comfortable "fag-end of Victorian liberalism"<sup>25</sup> having given way to the muddled horrors of twentieth-century warfare. The pervading sense of flux and uncertainty is indicated by Forster's inability to say where they now live. "But where do they live?", he asks. "Ah, that is the difficulty, and that is why I have entitled this article 'A View

<sup>23</sup> E.M. Forster, "Art for Art's Sake" (1949), *Two Cheers for Democracy*, London, Edward Arnold, 1972, p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> E.M. Forster, "London is a Muddle" (1937), *Two Cheers for Democracy*, London, Edward Arnold, 1972, p. 352.

<sup>25</sup> E.M. Forster, "The Challenge of Our Time" (1946), *Two Cheers for Democracy*, London, Edward Arnold, 1972, p. 54.

Without a Room'. I cannot think where George and Lucy live"<sup>26</sup>. He goes on:

The George Emersons now had two girls and a boy and were beginning to want a real home — somewhere in the country where they would take root and unobtrusively found a dynasty. But civilization was not moving that way. The characters in my other novels were experiencing similar troubles. Howard's End is a hunt for a home. India is a Passage for Indians as well as English. No resting-place<sup>27</sup>.

During World War II George rose to the rank of "corporal, was wounded and taken prisoner in Africa, and imprisoned in Mussolini's Italy, where he found the Italians sometimes sympathetic as they had been in his tourist days, and sometimes less sympathetic"<sup>28</sup>. When Italy collapsed he travelled up to Florence and although he could ascertain that the district where the Pension Bertolini was located had been entirely untouched by the war, he was unable to find the building itself. Forster, still on the side of the view, still watchful against muddle, but less idealistic, indeed rather decidedly pessimistic, concludes thus:

George had therefore to report to Lucy that the View was still there and that the Room must be there, too, but could not be found. She was glad of the news, although at that moment she was homeless. It was something to have retained a View, and, secure in it and in their love as long as they have one another to love, George and Lucy await World War III — the one that would end war and everything else, too<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> E.M. Forster, "A View Without a Room" (1958), *A Room With a View and Where Angels Fear to Tread*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, p. 219.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221-2.