

WINDOW VIGNETTES: VIEWERS AND VIEWED IN E. M. FORSTER'S "A ROOM WITH A VIEW"

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Forster's "*A Room with a View*" can be regarded as a nuanced exploration of the human psyche. As the author places his personages within unfamiliar environments, we bear witness not only to the imminent character growth of some, but also to their ability to retain, render, and recall past experiences which define their current present. The paper aims at a portrayal of images that present a central element of the novel: to view and be viewed are privileges and phenomena that lead to inevitable personal development for those willing to elicit knowledge from their formative past.

Key words: time, memory, experience, growth, Henri Bergson

Initial Reflections

The following analysis offers an attempt at a phenomenological reading in order to better understand the finespun concepts of E. M. Forster's "*A Room with a View*". A primary focus is to examine some instances when characters are active viewers of scenes, the viewing of which bears certain weight of not only their associations with past experiences, but also the formation of new, core memories. Whilst some characters may be intensely depicted as viewers, they are also ones *viewed*, which in turn creates a peculiar juxtaposition: protagonists such as Ms Lucy Honeychurch, Cecil Vyse, Charlotte Bartlett have the roles of "active" onlookers, yet they are also *perceived* by others, including the narrator themselves. This, in turn, creates a metaphysical environment in which one is left wondering "*Who viewed first?*" and "*How important exactly is the process of viewing?*" These questions coincide with one of the main points that will be discussed further, namely how our ability and privilege to view serve as the initial steps to the formation of memories. Whether the information we assimilate

becomes encoded within our psyche is dependent upon our selective attention and the emotional significance we ascribe to certain events. Rich visual experiences often leave a lasting mark that becomes something inherent to our cognitive functions. As these processes of viewing lead to the gaining of experience and shaping of memories, their collision leads us to a statement by Forster himself in his “Aspects of the Novel”: “It is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel” (Forster 2002: 23). Time exists beyond us, even when we are no longer here; it is a tangible, fluctuating and ever-so-changing unity of existences, both past, present and future.

As the characters experience the world, as they gaze at and observe and contemplate their surroundings, they begin to collect facts, which comprise their knowledge gained through experience, which in turn forms their perceptions of the reality they inhabit. These facts become fundamental for the development of their perceptions as experiences begin to dictate their actions and serve as a purpose for their personal growth in time. Memory, according to French philosopher Henri Bergson, is precisely “the survival of past images” (Bergson 1990: 65-6). These past images constitute our contact with the surrounding world and the way we perceive time. To him, there is a difference between measured time and duration (*durée*): “Every perception fills a certain depth of duration, prolongs the past into the present, and thereby partakes of memory” (Ibid. 244). Real time, the one we inhabit and the one which supposes duration, is one which flows without any clear boundaries. It is not static and spatialised, but fluid and omnipresent. This continuous aspect of time is felt within Forster’s novel as well, which is precisely why the current analysis relies on Bergson’s principles in order to exemplify how time’s fluidity spreads to, and influences, these characters’ perceptions of reality. We glimpse reality through their own point of view, and their point of view encompasses not only present endeavours, but past ones as well, as we later see.

These moments that show the impressionable nature of humans and their vulnerability are mainly told from the perspective of Lucy Honeychurch. The novel is regarded originally by Forster himself as “The Lucy Novel” (Moffat 2011: 67), which showcases that Lucy is deliberately posited as a chief viewer and perceiver of events. The introspective account of reality we receive would not have been as effective if the chief narrator was someone stringent, such as Cecil for example. An important factor in Forster’s writing is, as Jeffrey Heath mentions, that “Forster values direct human experience – often profoundly human experience on a grand scale – over limited and edited accounts of it” (Heath 1994: 394) – this is quite

evident in *A Room with a View* as all characters bear the weight of their past experiences which form the perceptions of their current reality.

The first two chapters of the novel could be regarded as foundational, due to the fact that they introduce the feeling of multiviewedness and reflectory behavior present within the novel, and mark the beginning of Ms Honeychurch's growth and development from an inexperienced individual to a knowledgeable being upon grappling with society's practices in a foreign environment. Two of the main protagonists, the English cousins Ms Lucy Honeychurch and Ms Charlotte Bartlett, open the novel by going to Florence on a trip, which serves to enrich Lucy's mindset as she comes of age. The trip, planned and executed in a Grand-Tour-esque way, is the threshold that leads our heroine from juvenility to maturity.

At the time of our characters' introduction, we see that they have been faced with a hindrance upon their arrival at the pension: They have received a room which faces the courtyard, rather than the river Arno as originally promised. They begin to argue over who would get the first vacant room with a view, when a man called Mr Emerson suddenly exclaims "I have a view, I have a view" (Forster 2005: 34) and offers to switch rooms with Lucy and Charlotte, who will in turn get Mr Emerson and his son George's oh-so-desired room with a view. Despite their initial reluctance, Lucy and Charlotte successfully switch their rooms with the assistance of the reverend Mr Beebe, who is the initial mediator between the Emersons and the two cousins.

Charlotte's Trump Card

Charlotte's apprehension is one reason for the prolonged altercation. She proves to be much wary of her communication with the Emersons, compared to Lucy who is more candid and carefree. This introduces us readers to Lucy and Charlotte's characters as a whole and how they are somewhat distorted mirror images of one another – seemingly common characteristics between the two such as aloofness and uneasiness become warped as we gain a better idea of the depth of Lucy and Charlotte's personas.

Once the switch between rooms has finished, Lucy and Charlotte part ways for the night. Here, the differences between these two characters become even more evident, despite their initial similitude. Once Lucy "... reached her own room she opened the window and breathed the clean night air, thinking of the kind old man who had enabled her to see the lights dancing in the Arno and the cypresses of San Miniato, and the foot-hills of the Apennines, black against the rising moon" (Forster 2005: 43). The image

of Lucy looking out the window, appreciating not just the scenery but also the kindness of Mr Emerson is in stark contrast with Charlotte's experience: "Miss Bartlett, in her room, fastened the window-shutters and locked the door, and then made a tour of the apartment to see where the cupboards led, and whether there were any oubliettes or secret entrances" (Ibid.).

Evidently, the latter heroine is much more closed-off as a personage, confined to her own inner world and worries, rather than open and appreciative of her environment and vistas. This unreceptiveness of Charlotte's is seen in other instances as well, most notably later in the novel when she visits Lucy at Windy Corner: "She felt sure that she would prove a nuisance, and begged to be given an inferior spare room—something with no view, anything" (Forster 2005: 169). Her detachment from the outside world is indicated by the fact that she requests a subpar, even viewless, space in which to reside while visiting her extended family,. The distrustful nature she possesses has isolated her from her surroundings. Polish academic Fordoński makes the following observation: "It is, however, the undeveloped English heart which plays the most important role in Forster's fiction" (Fordoński 2016: 34). He stipulates a twofoldedness present within Forster's characters – they are often unable to showcase and communicate their feelings, while simultaneously repressing them, and they are incapable of responding to other people's sensations and reactions, especially in foreign places, such as Italy in our case (Ibid.). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Charlotte is indeed so apprehensive, given the fact that she is not only in a foreign setting, she is also a person who is haunted by past regrets.

Further evidence of Charlotte's failed romantic endeavors are hinted in chapter 20: Lucy begins recounting her frustration over her cousin's actions which lead to numerous contretemps, due to the fact that she shared the story of Lucy's embrace with George in the meadows of Italy to no other than Mrs Lavish, a renowned romance author. She begins her musings with the words "How like Charlotte to undo her work by a feeble muddle at the last moment" (Forster 2005: 235). In addition to Charlotte's tendency to apparently act more rashly and tardily, she is also regarded as the black sheep of the family. Due to her tendencies to travel and act independently of others, Mrs Honeychurch deems her own daughter a copy of Charlotte: "Oh, goodness!" her mother flashed. "How you do remind me of Charlotte Bartlett!" (Ibid., 220). She continues further, "I see the likeness. The same eternal worrying, the same taking back of words. You and Charlotte trying to divide two apples among three people last night might be sisters" (Ibid.). To Mrs Honeychurch, bouts of rebellion and a want for autonomy are associative of Charlotte, who from an individual becomes a mere derogative

personal name. Unfortunately, this disparaging has grown into Charlotte's character who now seeks a ghostly guise, hidden from view and attention.

Charlotte is to such an extent caught up in her own past that she vehemently avoids anything that would remind her of it, but ultimately, it manages to seep into her life regardless of efforts due to the fact that, as Bergson puts it, "there is for us nothing that is instantaneous. In all that goes by that name there is already some work of our memory, and consequently, of our consciousness, which prolongs into each other ..." (Bergson 1990: 69). It is implied in chapter 17 that Charlotte had denied herself the chance of marriage: "Lucy entered this army when she pretended to George that she did not love him, and pretended to Cecil that she loved no one. The night received her, as it had received Miss Bartlett thirty years before" (Forster 2005: 201). In this scene, Lucy is left bewildered after George abruptly kisses her while she is still engaged to Cecil. She ends up breaking off her engagement due to these circumstances, as she not only feels guilt for cheating on her betrothed, she also cannot return his love.. This is perhaps an echo of Charlotte's situation which is yet another explanation for her rigid social stance and behavior. Her apprehension towards the Emersons is a depiction of her reluctance to let new people in her life, especially men. The past has turned her present into a viewless window – confined and finite, mundane and prosaic. Her scapegoat is Lucy in whom Charlotte sees an opportunity to not repeat the past. It is not coincidental that George, at the end of the story, tells Lucy that perhaps Charlotte is the one who brought them together, the hidden *deus ex machina* of the novel.

Lucy's Temporal Shifts

Lucy, similarly to Charlotte, is bound by her past, yet she attempts to somehow spare herself from becoming a cocoon filled with past regrets. Her experiences in Italy – meeting the Emersons, getting lost in Florence and relying on herself rather than a Baedeker, witnessing cold murder in the middle of the Piazza Signoria, indulging in a heartfelt moment with George, appreciating artistic Italian triumphs are the antecedents for her characterization and further development in Part 2 of the novel. Her curiosity proves to be one of her strongest virtues, yet it is also a sign of unfeigned naiveté. Had she not been so lacking in experience she would have reached a solution to her circumstantial problems more promptly and placidly. However, it is precisely this credulity of hers that becomes a driving force for her personal growth. As a displaced foreigner in an uncanny, unfamiliar environment, Lucy's only option is to adapt and evolve as a person. With its

pictorial views and rich history, Italy enchants Lucy, a person so used to the customs of the rigid British society.

Despite being transposed as an *other* in this foreign setting, she still manages to maneuver between situations and become a *self* within the scope of her new surroundings. Scholar R. Yang takes notice of this as he deems, “Italy has given Lucy the most precious thing she possess in the world – her own mind” (Yang 2024: 79). This shift in character is not immediate, however – it takes time for it to form. Her varied adventures lead to a culmination in chapter 19, when for the first time Lucy openly admits that the thing she truly wants is independence (Forster 2005: 220). In a candid confession, she exclaims “I’ve seen the world so little—I felt so out of things in Italy. I have seen so little of life” (Ibid., 219) – although her Italian escapades showcased naiveté, we finally see self-realisation within her persona and become just as self-aware as the heroine that she indeed was not as prepared for the world as she may have wanted to be. Yet this fact is not something negative. Due to the progression of time, on a fundamental level, we are never the same – we change and shift minute by minute, second by second, mostly without even realising it. At the very minimum, our biology shifts as we age, but our mind too shifts and ages. Similarly to Henri Bergson, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the essence of time is our subjective experience within its realm:

There is no related object without relation and without subject, no unity without unification, but every synthesis is both exploded and rebuilt by time which, with one and the same process, calls it into question and confirms it because it produces a new present which retains the past. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 279-280)

Time, to Merleau-Ponty, is something we inhabit with our very being. Our senses and subjective existence are what keep the past, present and future afloat and these relations mark temporal unity. Conversely, our being in the world is further validated by the being of others, and our senses are what keep us moving through temporality. Without myself as a being and without a being to perceive, time ceases to exist: “The person who, in sensory exploration, gives a past to the present and directs it towards a future, is not myself as an autonomous subject, but myself in so far as I have a body and am able to ‘look’.” (Ibid., 279) In the case of Lucy Honeychurch, her shift in mindset and becoming a self-aware person come much after her trip abroad, not because her experiences there were minute or inconsequential, but because time does not follow a strict timeline or any rules whatsoever. Bergson and Merleau-Ponty both take notice of the fact that time is an

evershifting phenomenon and our experiences are its fundamental aspect. We are in need of the temporal difference between present and past in order to grasp what has happened before and proceed towards the future which encompasses both of these entities. Lucy is proof that experiences leave a lasting-impression and if one is more discerning and introspective, these experiences prove to be the source of imminent shift in character.

Francesca Pierini observes that Italy is the catalyst for Lucy's temporally shifting persona as well: "In the novel, Italy plays a crucial and symbolic role in the heroine's transformation and in her discovery and acceptance of honest, genuine, and unaffected values" (Pierini 2023: 218). Lucy, being the keen observer she is, assimilates her surroundings precisely through her perception. Merleau-Ponty argues that "when I perceive, I belong, through my point of view, to the world as a whole" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 384). So while Italy becomes a means through which Lucy manages to embark on her bildungsroman-like journey, her ability to acculturate herself to a foreign setting and her keen observations become essentially the tools through which she survives upon her displacement abroad. The subjectivity of her experiences stipulates her position and existence within the world. A contemplative individual, such as Lucy, is one who is able to view and assimilate received information in a more observant, analytical manner. These skills assist her in facing the "new world" of Continental Europe, a place much different, more turbulent, than the safety and familiarity of her hometown in England. It is perceivable that Forster's "... early work assigns the young tourist to a central position in the narrative, thus providing an ideal arena for studying questions concerning travel and identity" (Peat 2003: 140). As Lucy is able to place herself in the position of the other, as can be seen in Chapter 4 of the novel, which is later examined, she is not only able to better understand herself through the other person's experiences, we as readers are able to better understand her surroundings as we are 'peeking into' the story through the lenses of a very keen observer. The distance she is able to provide as a foreigner abroad is something that greatly enriches the narrative of the story. The Italian adventures we embark on as readers are mainly through Lucy's point of view.

These moments, even *views*, she witnesses and experiences come up in different junctions of time through the progression of the story in the form of memories and recollections, as, in essence, no matter how much we would like to evade our past experiences, they manage to come through subconsciously and affect our current perspective on extant matters (Bergson 1990: 95). However, the image that comes to mind "...is the image most similar to the present perception that will actually do so" (Ibid., 96) –

our associations are not conjured up arbitrarily, our body and minds dictate how our awareness may shape memories that link our past experiences to our current actions. So, while Lucy may seemingly be looking out through a window, or peering at others as is the case in chapter 14 when she perceives Cecil in the garden reading a book, her gaze is almost always heavy with memory.

Tranquility No More

One moment that proves to be crucial for Lucy's development is the homicide in Chapter 4. This is the only chapter in the first part of the book that bears no name other than its numerical order. The reason for this is not adventitious. Its namelessness echoes a moment that seems to be still in time, a framed narrative that moves in slow motion, but which moves hastily through Lucy's memories as it becomes an innate part of her psyche. We are introduced to this moment by being immersed in the narrative through Lucy's remark that nothing ever happens to her, as she enters the Piazza which now contains marvels already familiar to her (Forster 2005: 69). However, the Piazza is cast "in shadow" (Ibid.), the statue and fountain of Neptune is overbearing, the Loggia dei Lanzi resembles a supernatural cave filled with prophesized deities, the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio seems like "unattainable treasure throbbing in the tranquil sky" (Ibid.) as it "...was the hour of unreality—the hour, that is, when unfamiliar things are real" (Ibid.). Precisely at this mystical hour, Lucy's wish for something to happen comes true. The darkness of the scene and the observant statue of one of the dividers of the world foreshadow what is to come. Two Italian men squabble and one is killed in cold blood.

The scene is depicted from Lucy's point of view – she feels as though she is being perceived and regarded by the fallen man: "He frowned; he bent towards Lucy with a look of interest, as if he had an important message for her. He opened his lips to deliver it, and a stream of red came out between them and trickled down his unshaven chin... That was all." (Forster 2005: 70) The gruesome scene ends as if drapes are being drawn and suddenly as if watching a curtain call, the crowd emerges "out of the dusk" (Ibid.). While the act is playing out, George Emerson is there, standing across, as if taking the place of the fallen man, while looking fixedly at Lucy (Ibid.). George becomes Lucy's pillar of support in the succeeding moments. She faints as she thinks to herself "'Oh, what have I done?'" (Ibid.). Guilt immediately starts to seep in: A witness of the whole situation, she feels as though she is the one responsible for the murder. Suddenly from a mere viewer, she

becomes an accomplice. The shock she experiences does not really stem from the fact that she is the one who caused it, but more so from the fact that she did not prevent it from happening. George, however, appears unaffected by the situation. Lucy again asks herself what she has done to which George simply replies ““You fainted”” (Ibid.), disregarding the fact that Lucy is actually experiencing survival’s guilt. While for Lucy “the whole world seemed pale and void of its original meaning” (Ibid.), George is assumedly undisturbed as his first concern is to go back to the pension with Lucy. She pleads that George assist her with finding some photographs she had dropped due to the incident to which he complies. Immediately when left alone, Lucy attempts to flee but is stopped by George who says ““The man is dead—the man is probably dead; sit down till you are rested”” (Ibid., 71).

Initially, George seems placid but as it turns out he is actually also struggling to grasp what has happened before him. Although we do not see the scenario from his point of view, the mere fact that he corrects himself by saying the man is *probably* dead enhances his disillusionment regarding the situation. His worry may be further pinpointed by the fact that upon retrieving Lucy’s photographs, he sees they are covered in the fallen man’s blood and throws them in the river Arno. Lucy becomes frustrated and questions his actions to which he responds ““I did mind them so, and one is so foolish, it seemed better that they should go out to the sea—I don’t know; I may just mean that they frightened me”” (Forster 2005: 72). On the surface level, Lucy’s reactions seem more genuine and establish her as a sensitive, empathetic person, while George is of a more composed nature. However, as it turns out, he is just as affected and frightened as Lucy is. A. Markley states that “Forster relies on the reader's visualization of the action in order to understand the import of what takes place” (Markley 2001: 271), meaning that for the majority of the time, when we are not peering into the story through the perspective of more observant characters such as Lucy, we are given subtle hints as to certain characters’ dispositions. George’s grief and shock are hidden from our view but the effect the incident has on George is undeniably existent. The whole situation, however, turns out to be a necessary evil as “...both Lucy and George need new directions to their lives; in other words, they need a renewal”, according to Philip Wagner (Wagner, Jr. 1990: 277).

The multiviewedness mentioned earlier is present even at such a crucial moment. Lucy is gazing at the Italian, who in turn is staring at her, whereas George is an onlooker of the whole scene, taking in Lucy’s reactions and the fate of the Italian, while we, as readers, are observers through the intrusive narrator of the whole momentum. Each of these beings

create a *representation*, a mental image in order to understand the surrounding world. This mental image, or object, according to Bergson, is “entirely different from that which is perceived in it, that it has neither the color ascribed to it by the eye nor the resistance found in it by the hand” (Bergson 1990: 10). These attributes are independent of the mind and are sole characteristics of the object itself. We have the ability to perceive things but each object exists as “a self-existing image” (Ibid.). Our perception is subjective and our memories and psyche are rendered precisely through these subjective experiences. The ability of a person to *view* stipulates their ability to fathom subjectivity. What Lucy saw is different than what George saw. What the final moments of the Italian truly were is something only he could discern and vouch for. Nonetheless, regardless of individual perceptions, none of the two protagonists remain the same.

The scene haunts Lucy further on. So caught up is she in this new reality that she pays no heed to familiar things such as the weekly magazine *Punch*: “They were now in the newspaper-room at the English bank. Lucy stood by the central table, heedless of *Punch* and *the Graphic*, trying to answer, or at all events to formulate the questions rioting in her brain. The well-known world had broken up, and there emerged Florence, a magic city where people thought and did the most extraordinary things” (Forster 2005: 84). Had this happened in her homeland perhaps she would not have been as affected and shocked. But by being transposed into a different, unknown environment, she needs to come to terms with the fact that her new, unfamiliar world is not as magical as she makes it out to be. Whatever has happened to her is something only she gives value to and her new reality requires recognizing the fluidity and interconnectedness of time, memory, and perception. It is the mark of the end of her youth: “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” (Ibid., 73). Albeit that a living being ceased to exist, the real tragedy for the narrator is the emotional toll and scar that is left upon those who perceived the incident. The weight of their guilt is compared to being almost as devastating as losing one’s life. That is not to say that one diminishes the effect and result of the other, more so it emphasizes the fact that those who are left living need to deal in their own way with what they have faced. Staying alive after witnessing such an event leads to emotional turmoil to those more perceptive and one is left in constant dubious questioning as to whether they have made the right decision by standing still, or whether this proved to be a grave mistake that led to something that could have been prevented. Lucy shall

remain a changed person from here on after as she bears the cross of the inert observer – one who neither undertakes action, nor stays nonchalant.

A viewer is a privileged person who bears responsibility for whether they would act humanely in time of need. Lucy, however, is not able to fulfill her duty. As time, memory and experience collide, our heroine realises that they are an innate, preordained part of our existence. The realization she reaches somehow calls for an idea Levinas articulated in *Time and the Other*: “I touch an object, I see the other. But I *am* not the other. I am all alone” (Levinas 1987: 42). While Lucy might not have physically touched the fallen Italian, she *perceived* him – her ability to view in essence bears the tactile functions of her body. She does not perceive the rest of the world through touch, but through gaze. The inability of her gaze to encompass the view of the other leaves her not only with feelings of guilt, but also with feelings of solitude, as the experience she underwent through is something very partial to her own self; she would never know what the victim felt. Her palpable silence does not indicate her want to be silent: It is indicative of her inability to grasp the other’s perception and assist in a time of dire need.

Concluding thoughts & reflections

A feat of Forster’s, according to Lionel Trilling, is that “he is content with the human possibility and content with the limitations of it” (Trilling 1942: 172). The novel exemplifies this statement very well – it is an account of displaced figures in foreign settings, who strive to survive in a new, unfamiliar world, despite their own personal restrictions. They breach these limitations through their experiences, which become formative for their personas, while they also remain their authentic selves. This is supported by the above explorations, which strive to illustrate, through the integration of insights by philosophers such as Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the influence that the fluidity of time has, and how it shapes one’s views and perceptions, which permeate their past, present and current experiences. Visual experiences, as depicted in the scenes of the murder in the Piazza Signoria, evidently symbolise one’s emotional and existential shifts, and create a layered reality for the characters where they have to navigate between the interplay between memory, perception, and the flow of time. Despite lacking physicality, Forster’s characters are so humanely relatable that they feel like a pertinent, integral presence, which transcends the confines of the pages.

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