

Tourism as a Destructive Force in E. M. Forster's Early "Italian" Fiction

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Abstract

The article begins with a brief presentation of the presence of English tourists in Italy, starting from the tradition of the Grand Tour to the mass tourism beginning in the mid-19th century. One of the English tourists who arrived in Italy was Edward Morgan Forster. The article concentrates on the influence of Italy upon Forster's oeuvre, drawing upon the writer's memoirs and speeches. This part of the article concentrates upon the image of Italy to be found in Forster's works, often neglected in critical writings. The main part of the article is an analysis of his short story "The Eternal Moment" presented as an early example of the critical attitude towards the unexpected results of intercultural contacts. The analysis concentrates upon the multifaceted introduction of motifs connected with destruction brought unconsciously by foreign tourists.

Keywords: E. M. Forster, tourism, Italy, "The Eternal Moment", Grand Tour

Abstrakt

Artykuł rozpoczyna się od zwięzłego omówienia obecności angielskich turystów we Włoszech, poczynając od tradycji Grand Tour do masowej turystyki rozpoczętej w połowie XIX wieku. Wśród angielskich turystów znalazł się także w pierwszych latach XX wieku Edward Morgan Forster. Artykuł nakreśla wpływ, jaki wizyta we Włoszech miała na jego twórczość, odwołując się do wspomnień i wypowiedzi pisarza. Omówiony

został przede wszystkim obraz Włoch, jaki wyłania się z jego tak zwanych „włoskich powieści”, temat zwykle pomijany w opracowaniach krytycznych. Zasadnicza część artykułu to szczegółowa analiza młodzieńczego opowiadania Forstera „The Eternal Moment”, stanowiącego wczesny przykład krytycznego spojrzenia pisarza na nieoczekiwane skutki kontaktów między kulturami, skupiająca się na wielowarstwowym wprowadzaniu motywów związanych ze zniszczeniem spowodowanym nieświadomie przez zagranicznych turystów.

Słowa kluczowe: E. M. Forster, turystyka, Włochy, “The Eternal Moment”, Grand Tour

Italy had been a tourist destination long before either Italy or tourism in the modern sense of these words were conceived. After all, all roads lead to Rome, even though Romans apparently found it so obvious that they left coining of the phrase to the French Medieval philosopher Alain de Lille, from whom Geoffrey Chaucer himself was the first to pick it up and translate into English.

It is hardly a wonder that the English were among those who travelled to the Apennine Peninsula in search of beauty, culture, history, and, sometimes, themselves. For most Europeans a trip to Italy could have one or many of four distinctive meanings – political, commercial, religious, and educational. The English, however, in their own inimitable style begged to differ from the others. Until the 19th century they showed only a limited interest in Italian politics – Sir John Hawkwood or Giovanni Acuto being one of few notable exceptions. The English neither sent their kings to Italy nor imported Italian queens, except for the short reign of Mary of Modena in the 1680s. Commercial links were established quite early – Geoffrey Chaucer himself negotiated treaties with Genoa – but distance made commercial exchange limited in size. Religious links, quite strong in the Middle Ages – an Englishman became the pope as Adrian IV – were severed by the Reformation and, except for the few Englishmen who chose “to swim the Tiber”¹, vast majority treated the Papist Italians with distrust to say the least.

The attitude towards Italian universities was a fairly obvious consequence of this distrust. Consequently, young Englishmen chose to study at home, a trip to Italy, however, became from the 1660s on a part of an obligatory addition to university education,

¹ The phrase was used to denote conversion to Roman Catholicism.

the Grand Tour.² Although the official aim of the Grand Tour was educational, the standard itinerary did by no means include institutional education. It was rather travelling for the sake of curiosity and learning in the broadest sense. If a young Englishman wanted university education abroad, he was most likely to choose Heidelberg or Munich. In France one was supposed to master the language, fencing, and dancing. Italy was left for sightseeing, social intercourse, and, ultimately, shopping. The wealthiest brought home original pieces of Ancient art (starting a virtual archaeological industry in Rome and the region), while the less wealthy chose works of contemporary artists (the Venetian *vedutisti* catered almost exclusively to the tastes of their English visitors).

One should remark here that the British attitudes towards the Grand Tour, and especially the Italian leg of the voyage, were quite ambivalent. On the one hand it was an obligatory part of the education of a young gentleman (and, somewhat later, a young lady), on the other hand, however, the voyage took such a young person to places generally perceived as morally ambiguous. Just as much as art collections brought from the Italian voyages were generally admired, imported Italian fashions were often dubbed "Italian vices"³ and young gentlemen who adopted them were called *macaroni* and mocked in plays and novels. The ambivalent attitudes towards the young heroes who recently returned starry-eyed from Italy in the two early novels of E. M. Forster are a distant echo of a social behaviour as old as the Grand Tour itself.

Quite naturally, until the mid-19th century Italy was the destination for very few, rich and powerful enough to afford the voyage. With the arrival of mass tourism in 1841 Italy gradually became accessible also to the British middle-class. The change came as a result of a series of events – the increasing wealth of the British brought by the Industrial Revolution and prosperity which followed the Napoleonic Wars, the growing network of railways which allowed safe and quick passage across the continent, and ultimately, the Risorgimento, which made Italy a safe place to visit after the turmoil of the 1830s-1860s.

One of the tourists who poured into Italy at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century was the twenty-two years old future English novelist Edward Morgan Forster. He first arrived in Italy in October 1901 in the company of his mother for a tour that was to last until September of the following year. Forster was a recent graduate of the University

² Naturally, it had been known and practised before as the example of John Milton's voyage to France and Italy in 1638–1639 amply proves.

³ Oddly enough, the Italians seemed to share the view as expressed in the proverb "Un inglese italianato è un diavolo incarnato", quoted also by Forster in *A Room with a View* (97).

of Cambridge with only vague plans of becoming a writer. He had formerly published only several essays in students' magazines and was trying to work on a novel, *The Nottingham Lace*, which he never completed.

Italy gave Forster much more than he could ever bargain for. It was Italy that made him a writer; she also gave him themes and motifs that he went on exploring during the coming decade. Her influence could first be felt in Forster becoming more and more involved in his writing, ultimately casting aside *The Nottingham Lace* in favour of another novel which seven years later would ultimately become *A Room with a View*. The breakthrough came on May 25, 1902, when Forster took a walk near Ravello to a valley called Vallone Fontana Caroso. Here is how the writer remembered the experience in 1947:

I sat down in a valley, a few miles above the town, and suddenly the first chapter of the story, "The Story of a Panic", the first story I ever wrote, rushed into my mind as if it had waited for me there. I received it as an entity and wrote it out as soon as I returned to the hotel (Forster "Machine" XV).

Twelve years later, in a talk given in Rome and Milan, entitled "Three Countries", the writer added: "Italy pushed [the inspiration] into my mind, almost with physical force, and set me going as a novelist" (Forster "The Hill" 290).

The notes from his diaries and letters prove that Italy almost daily gave him material which he could later work upon. A snippet of an conversation overheard "in a hotel lounge one day – at Siena or that sort of place", a rumour about "an English lady who had married an Italian far beneath her socially and also much younger" (291) became the germ from which his first completed and published novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, would soon grow. His mother's complaints about a *pensione* in Florence which did not have the promised view of the Arno and South aspect, and the consequent move to *pensione* Simi, became material for the opening chapters of *A Room with a View*. The influence was so strong that Forster himself called the two aforementioned novels "mainly Italian" (290).

And yet Forster himself, when recalling these memories for his Italian audiences in 1959, would point to the limitations of his Italian experiences of 1901 and 1902:

Your country had taught me much. Unfortunately she did not teach me everything. She did not teach me the Italian language as Italians have chosen to speak it. ... And she did not introduce me into any section of Italian society, which has been a disadvantage to me

as a novelist. The tourist may be intelligent, warm-hearted and alert, and I think I was that much, but he has to go back every evening to his hotel or pension and he can know very little of the class-structure of the country he is visiting, or of its economic problems (290–291).

Forster goes on to excuse himself some more and finally adds with typical modesty that "Italian friends who have read [*Where Angels Fear to Tread*] say that I have not done so badly" (291).

Forster's modesty seems to have greatly influenced his critics and if their studies touch upon any Italian issues in his works, the critical attention is quite exclusively concentrated on the many ways in which Italy influences English tourists. It is almost striking how both classic studies in Forster's "Italian novels" and the most recent ones such as Tess Cosslett's article "Revisiting Fictional Italy, 1887–1908", published in 2009, avoid speaking about Italy and concentrate quite exclusively on the aforementioned influences while on the other hand on the perception of Italy by the tourists. Even though Cosslett is clearly aware of the lack of a comprehensive discussion of the literary history and novelistic functions of Forster's Italy, and mentions several earlier papers which failed to offer such a discussion (326) in her own article, which deals with the works of three turn-of-the-century novelists, her comments on Forster do not offer many new insights.

The real Italy, often so vastly different from the imagined, "scripted"⁴, "fantasized"⁵ by the tourists seems thus not worthy of a detailed critical comment. Neither are the Italians who become interesting only when they act as impersonations of the "fantasized" country. This critical attitude seems to echo the title of the 6th chapter of *A Room with a View*, quite telling in this respect. A long list of seven English tourists who "drive out in carriages to see a view" ends quite abruptly with the following words "Italians drive them" (Forster "Room" 58). The Italians do not deserve to be mentioned by names.

The present paper is not intended as an attempt to fill this gap in critical writing completely. Instead, it will attempt to concentrate on one specific element of Forster's vision of Italy. Forster's Italy covers most of the Apennine Peninsula (actually going beyond the borders of the Kingdom as they were in the first decade of the 20th century) from Cortina d'Ampezzo in the North, through Florence and San Gimignano to Ravello, and even

⁴ Term used by John Buzzard in his book *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800–1918* (156–159).

⁵ Term used by John Urry in his book *The Tourist Gaze* (3).

further South to Grigenti. The material is vast enough to fill a whole volume, especially now that Forster's diaries have finally been published.

Forster's own modesty in the evaluation of his insight into Italian society is pretty much justified. The writer skilfully avoids major mistakes by filling his Italy almost exclusively with nameless and almost faceless flat characters (to use a term he invented himself). The only fully developed Italian character in his novels is Gino Carella, the son of a dentist from Monteriano who marries the English widow, Lilia Herriton, in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. A comment from one of his Italian friends, however, must cast some doubt on how successful Forster actually was: "one of [Italian friends who read the book], a charming girl, added that I must not think that Gino is a typical Italian" ("Hill" 291).

At least three times, in the novel *A Room with a View* (41), and the short stories "The Story of a Panic" ("The Machine" 22) and "The Story of a Siren" ("The Machine" 153) Forster introduces descriptions of tragic deaths of Italians which in each case awake the English characters from their spiritual slumber and put them on the path to self-awareness. And yet in each case the Italians are merely sketched, the young man murdered in Piazza Signoria in *A Room with a View* does not even have a name.

Forster's vision of Italian society and politics was summed up by Elena Gualtieri:

The sense of distance that separated the Edwardian tourist from contemporary Italy also translated itself into a certain indifference to the political realities of the country, then racked with social conflicts and political instability (101).

Consequently, Forster's Italy does not have any politics. He notices that men gather in "the democracy of cafe" to talk politics but what politics this might be he never bothers to clarify.

There is one aspect of Forster's vision of Italy that deserves a closer look, an aspect which proves his skill in observing the reality. It is the more interesting that it is the reverse of the so well discussed influence of Italy upon the English visitors – namely, the influence of the visitors upon Italy and the Italians. The latter influence is noticed in passing in the two early novels – the most typical example is the cockney Signora, the landlady of the Pensione Bertolini in *A Room with a View*. Young Lucy Honeychurch is "further saddened by the Signora's unexpected [working class London] accent" (2). "Further saddened" because Signora Bertolini failed to provide the promised rooms with a view but it seems that for Lucy the wrong accent is much more of a fault. The Signora goes to great lengths to offer her English guests the comforts they are used to at

home, she speaks their language and complains of other Italians. The result of her attempts, however, is judged only as "curious" (6–7) and mocked by the Reverend Beebe (33). The English guests cannot forgive her for not coming up to their (hardly specified) ideals of Southern hospitality.

The issue of tourists changing Italy rather than the other way round appears in full force in the short story "The Eternal Moment", conceived in Cortina d'Ampezzo (then Hayden in Austria-Hungary) in August 1902, written between March and June 1904, and published in June, July, and August 1905 (in three instalments) in the *Independent Review*. It was republished in Forster's eponymous second collection of short stories in 1928. Recognised as "his first large-scale work of fiction" (Land 33), it was the last major literary attempt before the writer moved on to work on his first completed novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.

The short story, quite universally recognised as one of Forster's best, has not been yet the subject of a separate study. The generally accepted reading may be exemplified here by that of Alan Wilde who reads the story as concentrated on Miss Raby's spiritual awakening. The mildly unconventional middle-aged novelist ultimately understands that some twenty years before the events of the story she reciprocated the love of a young Italian called Feo, and, although she failed to act on her feelings, they "worked subconsciously as the directing force of her life, making possible her career as a novelist and stimulating her need to break down barriers" (Wilde 93). The awakening, however, results in a disappointment. As Wilde concludes "it is a story of compromise and acceptance" (96), Miss Raby⁶ "is Forster's most ambiguous study of relation between literature and life" while the story is praised for psychological depth (161).⁷

It is not my intention to reject the readings established since Lionel Trilling's 1943 study or maybe even since 1928 when the short story was discussed in reviews of the collection in which it reappeared (Gardner ed. 339–355). Forster's established reputation as a symbolist allows numerous readings of his works which, as based on symbols, simply cannot offer only one correct reading. It is my aim to point out that apart from the psychological conflict presented in a masterly matter, the short story has a completely different

⁶ The character of Miss Raby is probably based on the two lady-writers Forster got to know in the period: "Snow" Wedgwood (1833–1913) and Emily Spender (1841–1922). Similarities between Miss Raby and Eleanor Lavish, Spender's comic portrait from *A Room with a View* are pointed out by critics such as Summers 268, Land 34; or Wilde 93.

⁷ Other analyses include: Trilling 44–46; Stone 137–144; Thomson 56–57; Cavaliero 55–56; Summers 266–268; Land 33–44;

theme, so far largely overlooked by critics, except being briefly discussed by Buzzard (305–308).⁸ The theme is the multifaceted destruction of Italy by tourists, in this case unwittingly started by the “mildly unconventional” spinster novelist.

The story opens⁹ in a carriage in which Miss Raby, lady novelist, her chaperone Elisabeth and Colonel Leyland, retired officer, drive from Italy to Vorta in, as Miss Raby calls it, *Italia Irredenta*, more precisely, Austria-Hungary as it can be seen from the colours of the pole marking the frontier. Miss Raby recalls an incident which took place twenty years earlier, a young Italian man, “a porter ... not even a certified guide” (“Machine” 155) fell in love with her and proposed during a mountain expedition. She “screamed and thanked him not to insult her” and the incident was soon over.¹⁰

The very first description introduced the symbolic element of destruction:

The road was built over the debris which had fallen and which still fell from [the mountain's] sides; and it had scarred the pine woods with devastating rivers of white stone (156).

After their arrival in Austria-Hungary (Miss Raby notices that “They still talk Italian for seven miles”, 156), the tourist discuss the choice of hotel. The discussion leads to Miss Raby's novel, *The Eternal Moment*, which made Vorta a prosperous place, and the owners of the best hotel there rich people. She and Colonel Leyland discuss the nature of human intercourse until their carriage reaches the top of the hill from which they can see the whole valley below and mountains that surround it. The village is compared to a white ship “tossing on undulating meadows” on the prow of which there “stood a majestic tower of new grey stone” (159) the bells of which begin to toll in exactly this moment.

⁸ Buzzard, however, concentrates on “The Eternal Moment” perceived as an introduction to *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and, consequently, concentrates on those elements which were continued in the novel while the issues discussed in the present article are only touched upon.

⁹ This analysis concentrates on the issues connected with the destruction of Vorta by foreign tourists purposefully avoiding other issues present in the short story. It is not aimed as its complete summary.

¹⁰ One element of the story returned within a year in the first novel by Forster. Gino Carella and Lilia Herriton are more developed versions of Feo and Miss Raby. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Gino and Lilia do get married, and Gino successfully protects his identity while Lilia proves too weak to change her husband, least of all change his native city. The main topic of “The Eternal Moment” is thus absent from the novel.

The driver informs them that it is the new campanile, "like the campanile of Venice, only finer" (159). Miss Raby rejoices at the view, she realizes that her novel changed Vorta, she was afraid that it was a change for worse but now she finds that "the new thing might be beautiful" (159). The bells from other churches also start to toll, they are, however, not quite as beautiful as they are "tiny churches, ugly churches, churches painted pink with towers like pumpkins etc." (159). The bell concert is followed by a garish show of multi-coloured neon-lights lit up by hotels and pensions to welcome the arrival of the diligence and new tourists which both Miss Raby and the colonel find horrible (160).

Hotel des Alpes, the best hotel in the village, turns out to be "an enormous building... made of wood" which "suggests a distended chalet" (160). The use of the word "distended", meaning "blown up" or "swollen" and thus quite peculiar in this context, is characteristic for Forster. The word is typically used in medical language to describe a distended stomach or bladder. Miss Raby gets curiously depressed at the sight of its splendour, the place does not remind her at all of her friend, Signora Cantu, to whose family it allegedly belongs. As Miss Raby learns from her chat with the waiter, the old Signora Cantu still lives in the old pension, the Albergo Biscione, while the new hotel belongs to her son who quarrelled with his parents. Miss Raby immediately decides that she must move to the Biscione.

The second part of the story opens with an account of Miss Raby's book, *The Eternal Moment*, and, consequently, of a side effect of its success, the rise and progress of Vorta. Miss Raby is unhappy at what she finds after the twenty years' long absence, and Forster used the opportunity to sum up the disquieting images of the first part:

Her arrival was saddening. It displeased her to see the great hotels in a great circle, standing away from the village where all life should have centred. Their illuminated titles, branded on the tranquil evening slopes, still danced in her eyes. And the monstrous Hotel des Alpes haunted her like a nightmare (165).

Here the word "branded" attracts reader's attention, the hills are branded by the neon-lights like cattle branded by their owners or a criminal branded as a part of his punishment.

The Biscione is not changed much since her last visit, it is a place which was not spoiled, characterized by an antique spirit, "the great manner, only to be obtained without effort" (165). The rooms are furnished with beautiful objects and old paintings. However, in the morning Miss Raby thinks that "never had she seen people more unattractive and more unworthy than her fellow-guests" (166). She sits opposite the most famous

painting in the albergo, a fresco variously attributed by the owner to Titian or Giotto, showing four Sybils, holding prophecies of the Nativity.

Miss Raby learns at the breakfast table that tourists “co-operated and forced the hotel-keepers into action” (167), as a result of which priests only ring their bells for the evening mass. Even religion has apparently been sacrificed to please the visitors. The same co-operation was used to stop the local peasants from their weekend meetings and nightly singing.

Miss Raby sits outside the albergo and looks at the campanile, still willing to see some good in it. Even though the narrator remarks “A critical eye could discover plenty of faults in its architecture. But [Miss Raby] looked at it with increasing pleasure, in which was mingled certain gratitude” (168). A German waitress comes to inform Miss Raby that she chose a place “where the lower classes ate” (168). When asked for how long she has classified her guests according to their birth, this “admirable woman” replies: “For many years. It was necessary” (168). The democracy of the valley is also long gone.

Miss Raby takes a walk across the village, she is now “fully conscious of something new; of the indefinable corruption which is produced by the passage of a large number of people” (169). A long description of the crowded place follows, of people whose main occupation seems either eating or going to some place where they can eat. Forster once again sums up: “the family affection, the sane pastoral values – all had perished while the campanile which was to embody them was being built” (169).

Miss Raby returns to the Biscione to meet Signora Cantu. The meeting does not go well, the discussion moves quickly to people who died recently, and then to Signora’s misfortunes, the most significant of which is a landslide which destroyed her farm.

A landslide in that valley, never hurried. Under the green coat of turf water would collect, just as an abscess is formed under the skin. There would be a lump on the sloping meadow, then the lump would break and discharge a slow-moving stream of mud and stones. Then the whole area seemed to be corrupted; on every side the grass cracked and doubled into fantastic creases, the trees grew awry, the barns and cottages collapsed, all the beauty turned gradually to indistinguishable pulp, which slid downwards till it was washed away by some stream (170).

The landslide, is first like “an abscess formed under the skin”, then “a lump” meaning cancer (170), and it becomes a symbolic representation of Miss Raby’s or, more likely, tourists’ influence upon Vorta. It is the most open and extended use of the medical discourse permeating the text of the short story.

Signora proceeds then to complain of her son, his wife and the concierge of his hotel who, as she says, "take all her guests" and "mean to ruin her and want to see her die" (171). As Miss Raby learns, the concierge, Feo Ginori, is the man who confessed his love to her twenty years earlier. The discussion is broken by a car which hits one of the tables standing in front of the albergo and some guests are hurt in the accident.¹¹ Miss Raby fails even to beg pardon as she originally intended.

The third part takes place in the lounge of Hotel des Alpes. Miss Raby and Elizabeth came here to meet Colonel Leyland who is out. Miss Raby is ultimately left alone with the concierge, a man once apparently handsome, who now started turning fat. Miss Raby recognizes in Feo "one of the products of *The Eternal Life*" (175). After several failed attempts she reminds Feo of their earlier meeting. He, however, apparently remembers nothing and when she insists, he recalls it with alarm and only the arrival of Colonel Leyland brings their unpleasant conversation to a halt.

Miss Raby tries once more to make up for the harm she wrought by offering to bring up the youngest of Feo's children but her offer is rejected. Miss Raby is apparently unaware of the true meaning of her offer, the implicit assumption of national and class superiority, both of which she takes for granted. It is obvious to her that Great Britain is a more appropriate place for a child to be brought up (she is quite similar in this attitude to Mrs Herriton from *Where Angels Fear to Tread*) than Italy. The rejection comes to her a surprise because Feo, again implicitly, refuses to accept her vision of the world and rejects her claim to superiority. This is a moment of greatness for the concierge, presented by the novelist with little sympathy, when he rejects possible gain for himself and possible social advancement for his son even if he seems little aware of his own motives.

The two gentlemen quite successfully try to change the subject of the conversation. When the bells of the campanile begin to toll, Feo remarks:

A gentleman went to see our fine tower this morning and he believes that the land is slipping from underneath and it will fall. Of course it will not harm us up here (182).

¹¹ For Forster car was one of the symbols of changes for worse brought by civilisation. It features prominently in *Howards End* e.g. last meeting of Margaret Schlegel with Mrs Wilcox and their visit to Howards End is called off because the other Wilcoxes have an accident and come back early from their trip to Yorkshire (84–85). Another car accident is a key moment in *A Passage to India* (80–83)

Having thus learned that the only beautiful result of the change she brought is destined to fall apart, Miss Raby leaves them alone, accompanied by a, rather comforting in fact, vision of her solitary old age. The two most important men in her life choose to conclude that she went mad rather than try to listen and understand what she attempts to say.

This image of a small rural world destroyed by a book is quite obviously exaggerated. Miss Raby overestimates her own influence, although she may rightly blame herself for triggering the changes, they were caused by a much larger combination of conditions and influences. Her self-representation as a demiurge, unaware of possible effects of her creation, verges on ridiculous, and Forster had not yet sufficiently mastered the art of irony to get the balance right. We must remember that this is his first completed work of this length, Forster is still a twenty-four year old writer with a tendency to over-dramatized, emotional flights of fancy. It is quite striking that he sees possible outcome of a writer's work only as destructive – and it is a question whether Miss Raby's views are shared by anyone and whether the inhabitants of Vorta, except Signora Cantu, would prefer to go back to their previous status.

Although the plot and character drawing are not always handled with the skill which the writer soon mastered and which he perfected in his later novels, even at this early stage Forster brilliantly weaves into his narrative symbolic elements of catastrophe (landslide, the fall of the campanile), sickness (abscess, lump, distension), and examples of moral as well as social decay. Forster proves in this short story the acuteness of his vision of social changes. As the 20th century was soon to prove, his diagnosis of side-effects of tourism, even though delivered in a less than perfect form, was correct. It was, however, so much ahead of its time that Forster never returned to the subject, while the destructive force of intercultural contact became the subject of his greatest work *A Passage to India*.

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