IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN E. M. FORSTER'S "A ROOM WITH A VIEW"

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Abstract*: The paper explores the issues of identity and alterity in E.M. Forster's novel "A Room with a View" showing how the discovery of the other (another country, other people, another man) helps the heroine, Lucy Honeychurch, ultimately discover her real self, her own identity. The paper will also show that in the novel under discussion the Other is not so different as we might consider it at first sight.*

Keywords*: identity, alterity, encounter.*

As Lionel Trilling notices (1971), Forster's early novels, *A Room with a View* included, are based on a struggle between opposing forces representing Good and Evil: Life and Death, Light and Darkness, Fertility and Sterility, Intelligence and Stupidity, etc. However, neither of these groups of forces comes off victorious, Forster casting doubt on both. In *A Room with a View* (1908), we can view the action as being organized around a series of pairs of contrasting characters: Lucy and Charlotte, Lucy and George, George and Cecil, Mr. Eager and Mr. Beebe and a pair of contrasting countries: England and Italy. The novel itself can be said to present Lucy Honeychurch's fight with and conquering of "the enemy within" (Forster, 1990: 194), i.e. the otherness within herself. All other characters, more or less consciously or willingly, help her do this.

Alterity takes several forms in the novel. First, there is another country that Lucy visits: Italy. Secondly, there are other people that she meets, not just Italians, but also English. Thirdly, there is a man, opposed, but also complementary to the woman. Fourthly, there is a different set of values than the ones she was brought up with, that will make her discover in the end another Lucy, her own, real self. But identity and alterity are closely intertwined in *A Room with a View*. Both the two countries and the characters in the above-mentioned pairs are not so dissimilar as one might consider them at first sight.

The alterity of the country and of its people does not present itself abruptly, but rather gradually. As a matter of fact, in the beginning of the novel, Italy seems to be the same as England. At least, the part of it that the characters (and the readers) are first acquainted with: the pension Bertolini, which might as well have been in England. It is full of English people, its owner, though called "Signora", is from London and speaks with a cockney accent, and on the walls there hang the portraits of the late Queen and of the late Poet Laureate, and a notice of the English church in Florence. Hence, the question addressed to Charlotte by Lucy: "Charlotte, don't you feel, too, that we might be in London?" (Forster, 1990: 22) Once she gets out of the pension, however, she will see that she is no longer in London, but in a different city that she has to discover, inhabited by passionate people. The discovery of this new place occurs in several stages. First, Lucy goes out accompanied by an old lady met at the pension, Miss Lavish. The latter looks for adventure and refuses to ask the way to Santa Croce or to let Lucy look into her Baedeker when they get lost. They manage to find the church by themselves, but there Lucy loses Miss Lavish and finds herself alone until she is rescued by the

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Emersons and later by her cousin. The second walk in the city is taken by Lucy alone and, though it begins in a boring manner, with the girl buying some photographs, it ends adventurously, with her witnessing a murder and being rescued again by George Emerson.

After this first rather shocking contact with the Italians, Lucy meets the Italian spirit again, this time embodied by the driver who takes them to Fiesole, "a youth all irresponsibility and fire" (Forster, 1990: 76) who asks permission to take a girl with him, whom he claims to be his sister, but who proves to be his girlfriend. They kiss in front of everybody and, despite Mr. Emerson's disapproval, they are separated and put in different carriages.

In this novel, Foster is said to approach the English tourist in the tradition of "the guidebook satire", a sub-genre dating from the 1830's and 1840's that made fun at the tourists, making a distinction between them and the travelers. The term *traveler* had a positive connotation, while that of *tourist* had a negative one. In the first decades of the 20th century the anti-tourism discourse became more widespread and stronger and Forster "drew heavily upon it to build his own satirical portraits of the English in Italy". (Ramos de Sousa Sampaio, 2007: 142). There is a rich gallery of tourist portraits in *A Room with a View*. Lucy herself, when asked what she is after in Italy, answers that she is only a tourist. Her role as a tourist is, however, steeped in sexual meanings. During this journey she awakens sexually. Thus, the blood of the murdered Italian is considered evocative of Lucy's loss of virginity.

New people are for Lucy not just the Italians, more natural and passionate, but also the English themselves. Within the gallery of people met at the pension, the Emersons stand in utter contrast with everybody else. Father and son, they show their "otherness" from the very beginning. Old Mr. Emerson interferes in Lucy and Charlotte's conversation on the first day of their being at the pension ("Generally at a pension people looked them over for a day or two before speaking" – Forster, 1990: 24) and offers to change their rooms with the ladies. This offer shocks the other tourists as well and makes Miss Bartlett label him immediately as ill-bred, brutal and gross. Charlotte does not allow Lucy to answer the offer and even thinks of moving somewhere else until she sees Mr. Beebe, a clergyman, who enlightens them as to the character of Mr. Emerson and to the fact that he had the best intentions.

This is the first gesture that singles the Emersons among the other guests at the pension. Later, it seems that old Mr Emerson had taken it upon himself to turn Lucy into a real woman, one who thinks with her own mind and who is not afraid to express herself. He views her from the beginning as the right wife for his son and tries to bring her close to him. It is he who in the end reveals to her that she is truly in love with George and advises her to marry him.

George seems to be somewhere in between the English and the Italians. Though in the beginning he too seems rather reserved and conventional, gradually he will abandon his "shell" and will make several gestures that will show both his attraction to Lucy and the difference between him and the conventional English. If during their first meeting at Santa Croce he does not do much, when he finds Lucy after she witnesses the murder he tries to protect her as well as he can. He catches her when she faints, takes her away from the scene, does not let her go home alone and throws away her photographs to prevent her from seeing them now full of blood. Their next encounter takes place on some hill full of violets, when she falls with the ground and he kisses her. Though Charlotte sees them and makes a terrible fuss about it, leaving with Lucy the next day, George tells nobody about it, not even his father. Another gesture of

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rebellion against convention is represented by his bathing in the Sacred Lake, a pond in the woods near Lucy's house. He does so accompanied not only by Lucy's brother, Freddy, but also by the respectable Mr. Beebe, in what is considered to be "the most overtly homoerotic moment of the novel". (Herbert, 2012: 288) When they run in the woods in order to dry they are seen by Lucy, her mother and Cecil. Later on, while being a guest in their house, George kisses Lucy again. She denies her feelings for him, and asks him out of her house and her life. He, on the other hand, confesses having loved her since the murder in Florence. He tells her his opinion on Cecil and wonders how she can marry such a sterile man, who will always tell her what to do and what to feel, instead of letting her judge for herself. He also declares his intention to fight for her and, after begging her to come to him, he leaves. She does not go to him, but on the same day she sees Cecil as he really is and breaks her engagement.

As we can see, Lucy and George's encounters take place both in Italy and in England, both in closed spaces and in the open air (the city or nature).

> England is associated with repression, control and ignorance, whereas Italy is associated with expression, freedom and intuitive understanding. Italy elicits desires and draws out emotions, even when they are unacknowledged or unrecognized, and therefore has the power to thaw out all but the very coolest of northern visitors. […] Italy may awaken dreams of erotic autonomy and fulfillment, but it is just as likely to call into question the values and beliefs on which such dreams are founded. (Lehnen, 2011: 151)

On the other hand, "the England that Forster represents in this novel does not seem so modern or so removed from the natural rhythms of life." (Lehnen, 2011: 191) Moreover, what is significant is that the spaces that are closed seem to hinder their views and make them narrow-minded as well, and only when they meet in the open do they give free vent to what they really feel and to their real selves.

Lucy has a long way to go from innocence to experience, but she has a lot of potential. Brought up in a house where convention does not play such an important role and refers just to respect to other human beings, be they relatives or neighbours, Lucy has manners good enough to behave appropriately to the Emersons, even if they are rejected by the other guests at Bertolini. She is more appreciated by the others than her conventional cousin and is even perceived by the Italian driver of the carriage as different and capable of understanding and defending him when he is caught kissing his girlfriend in public. However, in the beginning she is not accustomed to think for herself. Left without any authoritative guidance, she does not know what to believe about buildings or about people. Here are her considerations about Santa Croce, and her hesitations concerning the Emersons:

> Of course, it must be a wonderful building. But how like a barn! And how very cold! Of course, it contained frescoes by Giotto, in the presence of whose tactile values she was capable of feeling what was proper. But who was to tell her which they were? She walked about disdainfully, unwilling to be enthusiastic over monuments of uncertain authorship or date. There was no one even to tell her which, of all the sepulchral slabs that paved the nave and transepts, was the one that was really beautiful, the one that had been most praised by Mr Ruskin. (Forster, 1990: 40-41)

> 'Mr Beebe – old Mr Emerson, is he nice or not nice? I do so want to know.'

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> Mr Beebe laughed and suggested that she should settle the question for herself.
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> 'No; but it is so difficult. Sometimes he is so silly, and then I do not mind him. Miss Alan, what do you think? Is he nice?'
>
> The little old lady shook her head, and sighed disapprovingly. (Forster, 1990: 57)

In Santa Croce she hurries when George tells her Miss Bartlett is there and does not understand Old Mr. Emerson's remark who calls her "poor girl" when she does this. After witnessing the murder, she can talk to nobody about what had happened, only briefly to Charlotte. "This solitude oppressed her; she was accustomed to have her thoughts confirmed by others or, at all events, contradicted; it was too dreadful not to know whether she was thinking right or wrong." (Forster, 1990: 67)

Gradually, however, under the Emersons' influence, she begins to evolve. She starts sensing Cecil's limitations, though she does not dare in the beginning to react against them.

> But in Italy, (…) her sense expanded; she felt that there was no one whom she might not get to like, that social barriers were irremovable, doubtless, but not particularly high. You jump over them just as you jump into a peasant's olive-yard in the Apennines, and he is glad to see you. She returned with new eyes.
>
> So did Cecil; but Italy had quickened Cecil, not to tolerance, but to irritation. He saw that the local society was narrow, but instead of saying, 'Does this very much matter?' he rebelled, and tried to substitute for it the society he called broad. He did not realize that Lucy has consecrated her environment by the thousand little civilities that create a tenderness in time, and that though her eyes saw its defects her heart refused to despise it entirely. Nor did he realize a more important point – that if she was too great for this society she was too great for all society, and had reached the stage where personal intercourse would alone satisfy her. A rebel she was, but not of the kind he understood – a rebel who desired, not a wider dwelling-room, but equality beside the man she loved. For Italy was offering her the most priceless of all possessions – her own soul. (Forster, 1990: 130)

Even Cecil realizes that she has changed. When she breaks their engagement, "He looked at her, instead of through her, for the first time since they were engaged. From a Leonardo she had become a living woman, with mysteries and forces of her own, with qualities that even eluded art." (Forster, 1990: 191) However, when asked to explain why she broke the engagement to him, she repeats what George had said about him, which shows that she is not yet mature enough to express her own views, though she can now recognize the truth when she sees it. Cecil accepts everything she says about him as being true and admires her insight.

Her truly mature decision is the one to marry George, taken again under the influence of the latter's father. Though at first she had thought of staying alone and running away from the man she loved by going with the Miss Alans to Greece, she finally yields to passion and truth and does what is right. We cannot yet say that she is perfectly mature in the end of the novel, but she is on the right track and under the right influence.

However strange it might seem at first sight, Charlotte also helps Lucy finally be with the man she loves. Charlotte is the embodiment of convention. She constantly

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censors her cousin. Charlotte does not allow Lucy to answer the Emersons when they offer to change their rooms. She is afraid that by accepting the exchange she would put Lucy under an obligation to people whom they do not know. Even when they accept the rooms, she does not consider it appropriate that Lucy should take the young man's one. Charlotte is rather poor and constantly complains about it and expresses her gratitude to Lucy's mother for the Italian tour (paid by the latter). She is annoying and irritating, constantly worrying about what we might consider trifles, but she seems to consider matters of life and death. She makes a terrible fuss over the kiss George gives Lucy on the cheek and over the consequences of people's finding out about it, but she herself will tell the whole story to Miss Lavish who will include it in her novel. The final conversation between Lucy and George, however, casts doubt on all her actions. George is very sure that it was his room that Lucy stayed in at their first visit at the pension and that Charlotte had a more important role than anyone might have considered in his reunion with Lucy.

The fact that Lucy and her cousin may not be so different from each other after all is also proven by the remark made at one point by Lucy's mother who tells her daughter that she reminds her of Charlotte. This makes us think that Lucy could have become like Charlotte if she had not been shown the right way or that Charlotte could have been like Lucy if she had been given the right advice.

Similarly, George and Cecil may be seen as two hypostases of the same person. They both love Lucy, each in his own way, but they are opposed to each other as a result of the different education that they have received. It is significant that Cecil associates Lucy with a view, while she, when confronted by him, admits that she associates him with a room without a view. "If a room is associated with culture, the mind and limitation, then the view is associated with nature, the body, and imaginative and erotic freedom." (Lehnen, 2011: 184) Still, even when Lucy and Cecil are together in the middle of nature, he still feels oppressed by convention and asks for permission to kiss her (instead of simply doing it, like George). Though he is granted it, nothing feels right for him. On the other hand, as Lehnen notices, in the case of Lucy and George, "although the kiss is between two English people, they are brought together by the Italian driver, and the energy of their attraction seems to come from the Italian landscape. (Lehnen, 2011: 184)

Mr. Eager and Mr. Beebe also seem at first sight to oppose each other, but prove to be equally narrow-minded in some respects. Mr. Eager is the English reverend in Florence. He should represent the freedom and open-mindedness of Italy, but he does not, as he is also very conventional. The one who seems to be open-minded is Mr. Beebe, but this happens only until the end of the novel, when he is very disappointed about Lucy and George's engagement. He had hoped that, after breaking up with Cecil, she would remain alone and pure. There are also hints that he might be attracted to George. (*cf.* Herbert 2012)

Thus, we can say that identity and alterity are not opposed to each other, but rather complementary. People that seem so different from each other are actually so similar. And by discovering the Other, Lucy also discovers herself and the joy of having a partner that accepts the differences between them as a blessing, not as a curse.

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