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The Symbolic Usage of Water in A Room with a View by Edward Morgan Forster.

I.

{203} The editor of the Abinger Edition of A Room with a View and one of the most noted Forster specialists, Oliver Stallybras characterised the novel in his introduction as follows:

light in touch it may be, but it is very far from lightweight; indeed, it is as cunningly organised and complex a novel as any Forster wrote (Forster: 18).

In order to further define this organisation and complexity, Oliver Stallybras provided quite a long list of:

contrasted pairs, related images, symbols, leitmotivs and highly charged words (...) which give the novel its extraordinary resonance. [These are:] rooms and views; light, shadow and darkness; spring and autumn; colours; violets and other flowers; water, baptism and blood; Christian rituals and pagan deities; faith and love; clothes and nudity; the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; Leonardo and Michelangelo; various composers; art and life; muddle; peevishness; the preposition across. (Forster: 18-9).

This is too varied a list to discuss exhaustively in a short paper; therefore, I will concentrate on the presence of one image: water. Water imagery, it seems to me, is the most prominent of the purely symbolic elements of the novel.¹

¹ A few other points listed by Oliver Stallybras were discussed in the following studies: Sullivan, Zohreh T. “Forster’s Symbolism: A Room with a View, Fourth Chapter.” Journal of Narrative Technique 6 (1976): 217-223 and Summers, Claude J.
The meanings connected with water in *A Room with a View* reflect most of those listed by readers in symbolism both in literary studies and in psychology. Water is, first of all, often interpreted as a sexual symbol. In a more defined form, it is used as a symbol of feminine sexuality. Water becomes, consequently, a symbol of life (giving birth), reflecting thus certain aspects of nature. It is also a symbol of purity and purification. It is one of the four elements, placed in opposition to fire, the masculine element. It is important that in *A Room with a View* this opposition is not used, the fire images do not appear. Water is a symbol of change, fluidity and variability. It may also carry negative connotations, such as that connected with an image of a river in flood and its destructive power. Such variety makes water one of the most potent symbols of nature: beneficial but cruel and untamed depending on the situation.

The aim of this paper is to present the usage of water imagery within the novel, its place among the variety of images that can be found there, relation with other images and means of introduction of the imagery into the text of the novel. It is not intended as a comparative study of the usage of water imagery (or imagery as such) in the fiction of the period. It should be, therefore, treated only as a step towards a wider and more general presentation of the symbolism of Forster's early fiction.

II.

The symbolism of water is closely connected with such divisions employed within the novel as that between "the people of the view" or "of the Renaissance" and those "of the Middle Ages" or "of the room","n

to use the terms applied within the novel by Forster. A large part of the symbolic references of the novel is based upon polar oppositions such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the room and the view or England (home) and Italy. The characters of the novel can be consequently divided into two groups according to their attitude to those oppositions. Such characteristics or references to those divisions can be traced in the text of the novel, e.g. Cecil is described as medieval while George as Michelangelesque.

These divisions, naturally, not only affect the usage of the water imagery. Very often it is specifically the water imagery that serves as a means of their introduction. Consequently, for the characters of the view water introduces changes for the better, while for others water is only a nuisance from which they have to protect themselves for example with mackintosh squares as Miss Lavish does to avoid damp grass during the outing to Fiesole.

{205} A presentation of the usage of water imagery is impossible without two remarks which shall be made here. The first is that it is quite impossible to draw clear cut divisions in such an analysis and separate completely various symbols which can be found in *A Room with a View*. Even though water is the most prominent of them, it is usually presented side by side and works in co-operation with other symbols, creating multi layer meanings as it will be clearly seen from examples provided further on in the article.

The second remark is that E. M. Forster employs the water symbolism quite selectively, concentrating mainly on the positive meanings connected with the symbol. It is especially visible when *A Room with a View* is compared with such later works of the English Modernism as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf. In the Forster's novel water does not mean
"death by water" with the single exception of the murder in Piazza Signoria which takes place by the fountain.

Especially the first work quoted above abounds in water imagery but contrary to *A Room with a View* *The Waste Land* presents water as impotent, unable to fertilise the barren land. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, however, belongs to the modernism, the poem expresses the post-war feeling of hopelessness, an end of the known world, while Forster, though he is aware of and believes in change and its necessity, can still (in 1908) hope for a peaceful change.

III.

The first example of the imagery of water can be found as early as in the second paragraph of the novel:

[Lucy] looked at the two rows of English people who were sitting at the table; at the row of white bottles of water and red bottles of wine that ran between the English people. (Forster: 23)

Forster introduces here one of the polar oppositions of his novel: that between water and blood as well as a reference to mass and thus to Christian rituals mentioned by Stallybras, and finally, points out that his heroes, "the two rows of English people" belong to two different worlds, suggested already in the title - of the room and of the view. Such multiplicity of meanings can be noticed in almost every reference to water.

[206] The opposition of water and blood brings to mind the purifying quality of water which is used on various levels within the novel. First, in its mystical sense - water is the fluid that can wash away blood - which may metaphorically mean cleansing the soul, washing away sins, as during baptism. For the first time this meaning is
invoked in a scene which takes place in Piazza Signoria in Florence. George tries to wash away blood from the photographs dropped by Lucy, in the water from the fountain. He fails and throws them to the river Arno, further explaining his decision as follows: "it seemed better that they should go to the sea" (Forster: 64). The conclusion seems thus that water retains its purifying quality only in nature, in the open. When bound, it loses it.

This difference between fountain and the stream is rather surprisingly and ironically used in a comparison of the Italian language spoken by Italians and that of the English:

> Italian in the mouth of Italians is a deep-voiced stream [...] in Mr Eager's mouth it resembled nothing so much as an acid whistling fountain [...] till it was abruptly turned off with a click. (Forster: 83).

The purification is also used in a less lofty sense. "Bath" (or more often "bathe", used as a bath taken in the open) is one of the key words of the novel. It appears for the first time when Miss Bartlett wants to thank Mr Emerson for the exchange of rooms. George's answer is: "My father is in his bath, so you cannot thank him personally." The comment is "Miss Bartlett remained unequal to the bath" (Forster: 32), but the reader learns that it was not quite so as half a year later Miss Bartlett will say "I thought him a cad when he said his father was having a bath" (Forster: 183).

Full irony of the scene has been lost to us. In those times and social circles even mentioning the necessity of washing was considered extremely improper just as discussing anything connected with the body and its functions\(^{ii}\). It is, however, typical that it is George who

\(^{ii}\) This can be more clearly seen in the attitude of Miss Allans towards Mr Emerson who dared utter the word "stomach" in public. (Forster: 56)
raises such "inappropriate" subject, as one of the qualities of "the
people of the view" is breaking social conventions. The attitude of Miss
Bartlett towards bathing can also be traced further when Lucy recalls
that she used to bathe in the Sacred Lake but Miss Bartlett found her
out and forbade to do so.

The second important bathe takes place when young Freddie
Honeychurch invites newly arrived George Emerson and local parson
Mr Beebe to swim with him in the Sacred Lake, a pond in the woods
near Summer Street (Forster 148-50). It seems worth noticing that
only gentlemen bathe in the novel, as Mr Beebe comments:

Can you picture a lady who has been introduced to another lady by a
third lady opening civilities with "How do you do? Come and have a
bathe'? And yet you will tell me that sexes are equal. (Forster: 145).

During this scene water washes away the conventions and the
bathe is described as a parody of a scene from a Wagnerian opera,

the three gentlemen rotated in the pool breast high, after the fashion of
the nymphs in Gotterdammerung (Forster: 149)

thus introducing one more of so numerous in the novel allusions
to composers and the world of art. This scene is also important as its
continuation, naked frolics of the three gentlemen in the wood, result
in Lucy seeing George naked, that is as he really is and not as she had
imagined him to be. Her intentions which she summed up in the
phrase:

I will bow [...] I will not shake hands with him. That will be just the
proper thing (Forster: 153)
only become ridiculous. When finally she does bow, her stiff behaviour, which would seem so appropriate in a room, for which it was designed, makes her look almost as ridiculous as naked George does wearing only a bowler hat. The water of the Sacred Lake washed away the conventions which Lucy attempted to impose upon George.

Water is repetitively used as a symbol of nature, from which the benighted try to protect themselves by mackintosh squares or umbrellas\textsuperscript{iii} (Forster: 87). It is worth noticing that when Lucy starts lying to George and Cecil, she buys herself such a square. It is, however, not the only such context. Water becomes the touchstone for the medieval. The medieval Cecil Vyse feels its influence but cannot quite react to it, as it can be seen in the scene of his kiss with Lucy (Forster: 127). For the Michelangelesque\textsuperscript{iv} George Emerson the message is clear, for him the Sacred Lake becomes "a momentary chalice of youth" (Forster: 152).

Rain also plays an important part in the novel, usually marking the moments of crisis. It is most often after some meaningful event that moves forward the process of Lucy’s awakening that the rain comes, such as after the exchange of rooms or the kiss in Fiesole. It \{208\} is worth pointing out that absence of rain in such a moment is commented by Mr Beebe: "we shan't have rain, but we shall have darkness" (Forster: 204) when Lucy informed him of her decision to escape from her love to Greece. The rain will come just in time to make her meet Mr Emerson in the rectory who, as the only one, who will see

\textsuperscript{iii} It is, therefore, meaningful that George refuses a ride from Fiesole and walks home without an umbrella during rain and thunderstorm (Forster: 90-2)

\textsuperscript{iv} References to George being similar to an unspecified work of Michelangelo appear twice in the novel, first on p. 45 and than on p. 149
through her pretences. The rain, thus, as it is in nature, is followed by the sun.

The image of rain leads to the image of river in flood. It is first used in the description of the day after Lucy's arrival in Florence. This image reappears as in the evening of that day Lucy stops by the Arno with George on their way back to Pensione Bertolini from Piazza Signoria where they witnessed murder. This time

Lucy contemplated the river Arno, whose roar was suggesting some unexpected melody to her ears (Forster: 66)

This melody returns when Lucy marries George and comes back to Florence for their honeymoon. The last sentence of the novel is:

The song died away; they heard the river, bearing down the snows of the winter into the Mediterranean. (Forster: 230)

The water imagery can also be combined with that of light, they merge into a double symbol of life, as in this description of a drawing room:

A poet [...] might have compared the curtains to sluice gates, lowered against the intolerable tides of heaven. Without was poured a sea of radiance; within, the glory, though visible, was tempered to the capacities of man (Forster: 101).

This close relation is finally established by George who says after his encounter with Lucy: "I meet you and all the world is glorious water and sun" (Forster: 187).

The multiplicity of meanings connected with the water imagery is, as follows, quite big. As it was already hinted at, apart from introducing meanings directly connected, water usually serves two
more purposes. The first of them is the introduction of symbols from other groups listed by Oliver Stallybras (as the Medieval and the Renaissance), the second is marking turning points of the novel.

IV.

{209} The very means of introduction of the water imagery is also an interesting point to ponder upon. It takes place in three ways: direct, veiled and indirect. The first, most often quoted so far, takes place in those scenes in which characters classified as these of the view or the Renaissance are present. These included bathing, Cecil's kiss or the murder by the fountain. An important factor is that in such scenes the word "water" is mentioned and they usually take place outside (to be closer to Forster's idiom, "without" or "in the view").

The second method of introducing the water imagery is more veiled. Such references deal more often with the other group of the characters, "the people of the room". Typically, water means for them wet as in: "Italy is ugly in the wet" (Forster: 52). Their reaction to water is that of self-defence, ridiculed in the novel though quite often justified as Mr Beebe learns after his bathe when he is found naked by his parishioners.

Water sometimes enters their life more as a part of imagination than reality (e.g. Cecil "recasting" his kiss, which he judges as failure, sees Lucy "standing flowerlike by the water" Forster: 127) but if it is real, it is always civilised, methodised (to use Alexander Pope's phrase). For Charlotte Bartlett water appears in the disguise of "broken boiler, bath and cistern that need to be cleaned" (Forster: 156-7). The important outcome is that water, even if entering the plot of the novel in such a way, still influences the heroes. The arrival of Charlotte,
caused by the broken boiler, will be one of the reasons of the crisis which will ultimately end in marriage of Lucy to George.

The third way of introducing the water imagery is an indirect way, the best example of which can be found in the following passage:

Light and beauty enveloped her. She had fallen onto a little open terrace, which was covered with violets from end to end. [...] From her feet the ground sloped sharply into the view, and violets ran down in rivulets and streams and cataracts, irrigating the hillside with blue, eddying round the tree stems, collecting into pools in the hollows, covering the grass with spots of azure foam. This terrace was a well-head, the primal source whence beauty gushed out to water the earth.

Standing at its brink, like a swimmer who prepares, was the good man. [...] For a moment [George] contemplated her, as one who has fallen out of heaven. He saw radiant joy in her face, he saw the flowers beat against her dress in blue waves. He stepped quickly forward and kissed her. (Forster: 88-9)

This passage includes twelve words connected with the water imagery, even though the very word "water" appears only as a verb. And yet Forster successfully paints an image seemingly full of water and certainly of its symbolic meaning.

He succeeds also in his other aim: presents a scene which should bring to mind of a reader a painting by Sandro Boticelli *The Birth of Venus* exhibited in Galeria Uffizi in Piazza Signoria in Florence\(^v\). The scene has, thus, an additional meaning: Lucy who tried to access life by means of middle-men, buying postcards instead of visiting the museum which was just a short walk away, is put in the position of Venus. And yet all the symbolic wealth of the scene is insufficient to stop her from running away, first to Florence and then to Rome when

\(^v\) Some readers might remember that the photographs of works of art bought by Lucy in Alinari's shop included that of the painting of Boticelli's (Forster: 61).
she meets Cecil Vyse. Lucy has yet to understand what is happening to her to make the final decision.

Indirect appearance of water in the scene characterises Lucy as "a person of the room" (where she struggles to stay even though she becomes more and more dissatisfied with her position and, which she finds even more surprising, aware of her dissatisfaction) as such an indirect introduction of the water imagery generally characterises this group of Forster's characters. Very often this imagery is introduced by means of one word only as "plunge". It appears for example in the following passage:

[Mrs Allan] chatter about Italy, the plunge it had been to come here and the gratifying success of the plunge (Forster: 30).

Other examples of such words can be found in such passages as: "Cecil was stranded with dowagers" (Forster: 115) or

Mrs Vyse was a nice woman, but her personality, like many another's, had been swamped by London" (Forster: 141).

Lucy is first "plunged in despair" (Forster: 138) and then she states "I am all at sea" (Forster: 182) meaning she doesn't know what to do. All this imagery disappears completely when Lucy meets Mr Emerson in the rectory and finally accepts her love for George. Indirect imagery is replaced at that point by "real" water: Lucy bursts in tears (Forster: 223).

In his article "Symbolism and the Student" Walter Havighurst defined symbolic story as one which:
represents a middle degree of the figurative, between Allegory and Realism" as "in the symbolic story the writer means what he says and he means also something which he suggests (Summers, 1991: 325).

I hope that this presentation of one symbol only could prove that Edward Morgan Forster was a successful symbolist novelist while A Room with a View is one of the most successful symbolic novels in the English literature, one that within the works of E. M. Forster can only be surpassed by A Passage to India.

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