

# The Education of an Aesthete's Eye: The Visual and the Moral in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

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## Introduction

It is sometimes said that E. M. Forster's first novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) has much in common with Henry James's *The Ambassadors* published two years earlier.<sup>1</sup> Both are concerned with the protagonists' encounter with foreign cultures. At first they are fascinated by what their mother countries do not possess, then disillusion follows to modify their enthusiasm, and in the end they return to their own places with a newly acquired moral consciousness. In *The Ambassadors*, Strether is described as a man whose visual sensitivity keeps him in the state of moral naïveté: with his acute sense of beauty, he is thoroughly mesmerized by his experience in France and has not realized the truth about Chad and Madame de Vionnet until he *sees* them together on the boat. The scene on the river "crystallizes James's distinction between impressions and knowledge"<sup>2</sup>—so far he has been conscious of numerous impressions, but until this moment he does not understand what they actually *mean*. Despite this gap between impression and knowledge, however, the novel's motif of visual impressions as educative is consistent.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge is brought about by the visual, not by the verbal. Strether is callous to whatever other people (even including Madame herself) insinuate, and all the verbal information is finally unified by *the sight* on the river which indicates truth.

Seeing is patently out most powerful metaphor for knowing, and this tradition is traced back as far as Plato's parable of the sun and the cave in *The Republic*.<sup>4</sup> The major premise of literary realism with its concomitant "omniscient" narrator is also that knowledge about human life is attained through the description of visible materials.<sup>5</sup> By the first quarter of the twentieth century, however, this assumption had been undermined so much as to, for example, make Virginia Woolf write "Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown." This essay first read at Cambridge in 1924 ostensibly attacks the materialism of the Edwardian novelist, but also indicates the loss of such a shared code of realistic representation.<sup>6</sup> This article is an attempt to examine how Forster, a novelist caught between realism and modernism,<sup>7</sup> deals with this destabilized relationship between sight and knowledge in his first novel. Philip Herriton the protagonist has a sensitive eye for beautiful things, but he must go through an educational period before he acquires true knowledge of the world. He has to realize that there are important things other than beauty, and "the improvement of Philip"<sup>8</sup> is deeply complicit with that of his eye. The novel certainly criticizes his aesthetic view of life, but, far from distrusting the act of seeing, it after all testifies to the significance of having sensitive sight.

About Philip's taste for art, we are told that at the age of twenty his sense of beauty caused him "to catch the art from Burne-Jones to Praxiteles" (*WAF* 70).<sup>9</sup> In the light of Victorian aesthetic trends, it is telling that he likes these two artists in particular. As a mentor of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, John Ruskin praised early Italian paintings before Raphael as a prelapsarian state of art: they are often not as finished as the High Renaissance art in terms of skill, but superior in their purer expression of faith.<sup>10</sup> Though a recent study on the Brotherhood reveals that the influence of Ruskin was, at least in their initial formation of art theory, not as predominant as once assumed,<sup>11</sup> they certainly shared both Ruskin's preference for the early Christian art over High Renaissance classicism and his idea that a work of art must be morally improving. Even their realism did not clash with Ruskin's demand for spirituality. He approved of it as a putting into practice of his phrase in *Modern Painters*, "go to nature, rejecting nothing"<sup>12</sup>—an appeal to forsake the rigid principle of the Academy and to be once again in touch with the world as God's creation. In the second-half of the Victorian era, however, as a reaction against two decades of Pre-Raphaelite realism, interest in the classical values of the High Renaissance was revived.<sup>13</sup> Edward Burne-Jones as the last major artist in the Brotherhood represented this tendency, growing out of the influence of Ruskin and in his later career showing more interest in Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Da Vinci. His choice of mythological subjects, and the idealistic, sculptural forms and Michelangelesque qualities of his later works, reflect the broader trends of the classicism and aestheticism in the Victorian High Art of that period.<sup>14</sup> With Philip's liking for the Greek sculptor Praxiteles, whose name became widely known with the discovery at Olympia in 1877 of *Hermes with the Infant Dionysus*,<sup>15</sup> his taste for art may probably be the one seeking a classical formal perfection rather than a moral in the object.

The problem about Philip is that he has adopted this standard to his real life as well. He sees life as a spectacle whose beauty sometimes strikes his sensibility but does not contain anything which actually affects himself. When he went to Italy for several years earlier, "there he absorbed into one aesthetic whole olive-trees, blue sky, frescos, country inns, saints, peasants, mosaics, statues, beggars. He came back with the air of a prophet who would either remodel Sawston or reject it" (*WAF* 70). He saw and judged everything according to his aesthetic standard. Nature, art, building, people—they all merged into one beautiful entity, and he thought that it should be so in his hometown Sawston. But reality contains things irreconcilable to this palatable vision, and it was due to his failure in realizing this that he did not succeed in adjusting its environment. Now he needs to learn that "human love and love of truth sometimes conquer where love of beauty fails" (*WAF* 71).

Philip's troublesome way of seeing things is most typically seen when he calls on Gino's house under Mrs Herriton's strict order to bring back his sister-in-law's baby. Philip steps in and finds Caroline, Gino, and the baby together. For Caroline, this visit is a revelation. It makes her realize that there is something in the world that cannot and should not be apprehended by the cold morality of Sawston. She has been always thinking of "its welfares, its soul, its morals, its probable defects," but the actual baby has an overwhelming reality: "It did not stand for a principle any longer. It was so much flesh and blood, so many inches and ounces of life . . ."

(W<sup>A</sup>F<sup>T</sup> 117). She sees that between Gino and his son there is an inviolable tie of blood and love, and gives up her original intention of adopting the child. The bathing of the child on the terrace is, therefore, a kind of secular ritual to confirm her recognition and decision. But Philip is completely blind to this. With his revived sense of beauty from the previous night's opera, what he sees there is "the Virgin and Child, with Donor" (W<sup>A</sup>F<sup>T</sup> 126). His aesthetic sense is so elevated that he finds beauty in such an ordinary scene, but he savors it without acknowledging any real emotion involved. For him the scene is a static tableau of formal beauty, and its moral content is not present to his eye. He then goes on to the negotiation with Gino, which ends in a failure and later drives his sister Harriet to steal the baby from the house. Philip's eye always seeking beauty in both art and life thus arrests him in the state of moral blindness.

## 2

The inclination to formalism and moral deterioration are connected in Ruskin's criticism, too. He thinks that a desire for formal completion always marks the starting point of degradation in art and that perfect finish must not be sought for its own sake since it tends to neglect moral content. Any degree of unskilfulness should be condoned as long as it is the only way for the artist to express—as it is always expected in Ruskin's writings—his religious belief. Ruskin values the Gothic period over the Renaissance for its dynamic expression of the craftsman's piety, and attacks his contemporary Britain proud of its manufactural technology, which produced things perfect in form but meager in spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Although Forster's works always show Ruskinian antipathy to materialism, he apparently does not share Ruskin's puritanical piety as the very basis of his writing, and in consequence sometimes ridicules his Victorian moral seriousness (Leonard's use of passages from *Stones of Venice* for describing his odious flat in *Howards End* may be the most unforgettable example). In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, too, Forster seems to tease Ruskin through the treatment of medieval frescos in Monteriano. The town's main church is given a star in Baedeker thanks to its frescos, which are allegedly by Giotto. Ruskin praises Giotto most highly, thinking that he fused the formality of Byzantine art and the Gothic imagination in an ideal way.<sup>17</sup> Giotto "never finished highly"<sup>18</sup> and his works are sometimes rather rough in quality, but "[a]ll his important existing works are exclusively devoted to the illustration of Christianity" and he is "the undisputed interpreter of religious truth, by means of painting, over the whole of Italy."<sup>19</sup> As for the frescoes in Monteriano, on the other hand, Forster puts even their origin into question: "for the inside Giotto was summoned to decorate the walls of the nave. Giotto came—that is to say, he did not come, German research having decisively proved . . ." (W<sup>A</sup>F<sup>T</sup> 94). The theme of the frescos is the life of Santa Deodata, who lived and died in the medieval Monteriano, but her holiness is reported with typical Forsterian banter:

So holy was she that all her life she lay upon her back in the house of her mother, refusing to eat, refusing to play, refusing to work. The devil, envious of such sanctity, tempted her in various ways. . . . When all proved vain he tripped up the mother and flung her downstairs before her very eyes. But so holy was the saint that she never

picked her mother up, but lay upon her back through all, and thus assured her throne in Paradise. She was only fifteen when she died, which shows how much is within the reach of any schoolgirl. (WAF 94)

The religious zeal of the artist that Ruskin might see in the fresco no longer has much impact on the seer. Here the life of the saint is not assessed in the eyes of God, but viewed in the light of common sense, and her stillness even in the crisis of her mother is facetiously criticized.

The sacred subject of the frescos is now exposed to secular moral consciousness, and the most severe attack against Philip's view of life as a spectacle is conducted beside one of them. Just after the scene in Gino's house, Caroline, who has already gone through a moral awakening of her own, has a long talk with Philip in the church. She says that Philip understands the whole situation wonderfully, but he does not try to do what seems to be right at present: "You told me once that we shall be judged by our intentions, not by our accomplishments. I thought it a grand remark. But we must intend to accomplish—not sit intending on a chair" (WAF 134). This conversation takes place in front of one particular fresco on the death of Santa Deodata. Philip's unwillingness to take any action is apparently paralleled to the saint, who achieved glory by doing nothing but watching what happened around her. Finally Caroline indicts Philip for all the time being "dead-dead-dead" (WAF 134). Christian morality as a basis for Ruskin's art criticism is in this way replaced by the issue of action and intention, which would be further developed in *Howards End*.

### 3

It is in the scene of baby's death that Philip's lack of conscience finds a climactic expression in the form of his literal blindness. Philip and Harriet are leaving Monteriano with the baby, which is actually stolen from Gino's house by infuriated Harriet. But Philip, being insensitive to the bond of affection between the Italian father and son, guesses that Gino gave up the child perhaps for money and feels depressed. Their carriage is running in complete darkness, and Philip thinks that the baby is crying and wants to see him. Again and again the match goes out and they cannot see anything clearly. At last, "for a full quarter-minute they contemplated the face that trembled in the light of the trembling flame" (WAF 144), but the next moment the carriage overturns and the baby is killed. Here the text seems to intentionally omit the precise description of the baby's countenance in order to suggest Philip's inability to see the real, heartfelt emotion between men. The baby might be symbolically weeping over his forced separation from his father, but his face, which must have been observed in "a full quarter-minute," was beyond Philip's ken. The loss of the baby's life is an ultimate punishment for Philip: it arrives as an undeniable fact concerning life and death and opens his eyes to his responsibility for it. For the first time in his life, then, he makes up his own moral decision: going back to Monteriano to tell the news to Gino.

Back in Monteriano Philip is tortured by grief-stricken Gino, but Caroline intervenes and saves them. As Stretcher in *The Ambassadors* comes to realize the truth not by what is said but by the vision presented to him, it is at *the sight* of Caroline consoling Gino that Philip's moral

numbness is cured and his education completed:

Philip looked away, as he sometimes looked away from the great pictures where visible forms suddenly become inadequate for the things they have shown to us. He was happy; he was assured that there was greatness in the world. There came to him an earnest desire to be good through the example of this good woman. He would try henceforward to be worthy of the things she had revealed. Quietly, without hysterical prayers or banging of drums, he underwent conversion. He was saved. (*WAF* 152)

S. P. Rosenbaum argues that this moral awakening of Philip is “a Platonic conversion” satirizing the Christianity of both Harriet’s violent Protestantism and Monteriano’s effete Catholicism: without relying on any religious authority, his growing love for people and truth leads him up from his love for beauty to love of the good.<sup>20</sup> If his conversion can be called Platonic, it is also appropriate that Philip looks away at the crucial moment. Plato originated the distinction between two kinds of sight, a sensible sight (which recognizes physical objects) and an intelligible sight (which leads one to spiritual knowledge),<sup>21</sup> and what happens in this scene is Philip’s sensible sight’s giving way to the latter. Philip’s eye also undergoes a conversion when the visible forms of Caroline and Gino yield to a higher moral understanding that they have brought about.

To have taste for beauty is in this way proved to be morally rewarding without being supported by the Ruskinian piousness. It is also presented as a possible antidote to the Sawstonian stiff moral doctrine. Sawston as upper-middle class suburbia is a stronghold of Victorian social respectability, and, according to Caroline, is saturated with “petty unselfishness,” not “petty selfishness.” People spend their lives in making sacrifices for those who they actually do not care for, forgetting to enjoy themselves (*WAF* 76). One of the problems about the Victorian philanthropic mind is the sharp and almost excessive polarity between egoism and altruism, which makes it fairly difficult to achieve a positive description of purely private forms of self-cultivation or self-assertion.<sup>22</sup> As Forster says against the evangelical Clapham Sect, with which he was connected by his mother’s benefactor Marianne Thornton, the Sawstonian society is presumably the one in which “[p]oetry, mystery, passion, ecstasy, music, don’t count”<sup>23</sup> as they are not visibly beneficial to others. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, salvation is available only to a few who have maintained a sense of beauty in spite of this atmosphere. While this possibility is entirely denied to Mrs Herriton and Harriet, who are simply indifferent to beautiful things, Caroline and Philip achieve salvation through their responsiveness to the beauty of Italy. The relationship between seeing and knowing once put into question in the form of Philip’s aestheticism is to be filled up in the end, and sight is once more trusted as an ability inherent in man to acknowledge truth: a person with a keen sense of beauty is more likely to achieve this state than those without it.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4

In spite of these points, however, simply to say that the improvement of Philip is Platonic

may overlook its ambiguous nature. Plato's ethics are those of knowledge, insisting that in order to be good, people must see the paradigmatic Idea of good. Knowledge is the ultimate solution, and practical conduct is expected to follow naturally. This is also the case for Philip's conversion: since Caroline has proved by her deeds that "good" really exists, he feels a strong desire to be like her. But what is not very clear here is, to remember Caroline's words, whether this is "just intending" or "intending to accomplish." Her remark itself is to some extent obscured by omitting the verb's object, and the sheer difference between the two concepts seems to bother the novel's ending. With Harriet's rapid recovery from her mental illness, it looks unlikely that the converted Philip will this time succeed in improving Sawston. Caroline is determined to go back to her daily duties, and Philip's love for her is unrequited. Surely Philip is now a better man with his newly-acquired knowledge of good, but whether he can achieve something good in reality from now on is another matter.

Probably because of this recognition, Philip in the last scene seems to be retreating into his former aesthetic view of life, transfiguring Caroline into a beautiful goddess in the myth of Endymion. For him the crude fact of her love for Gino is a revelation of the world's greatness since he now sees that, behind Caroline's return to Monteriano, there was not only her good will to save Philip but her self-sacrifice. He imagines how hard it must have been for her to see her beloved man so soon after she had determined never to see him again. This revelation leads Philip into profound loneliness which is almost the one found in modern epiphany: "For the thing was even greater than she imagined. Nobody but himself would ever see round it now. And to see round it he was standing at an immense distance" (*WAF* 160). When the creation of spiritual value depends on an individual character's mind, he or she is existentially isolated from the rest of the world to attain a moment of subjective realization.<sup>25</sup> It is largely because the story finishes right after this scene that the final vision of Philip merely appears to be his aesthetic daydream.

Still, this ending of the novel shows that one possible consequence of substituting Christian morality with the Platonic, idealistic ethics is complete withdrawal from the outside world. G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903), which is generally regarded as the backbone of Forster's ethics and aesthetics, is a revival of Platonism in that it sets knowledge, not action, as its goal.<sup>26</sup> Moore dismisses the attempt to define "good" in any perceptible form including psychological states as "naturalistic fallacy," and asks what kind of objects possess "intrinsic value" in absolute isolation from anything else in the world. Although what he singles out under this test, personal relationships and the beautiful, are certainly the things that Forster values most, the distance between Moore's principle and his novels, which never cease to take the "outer" world of action into consideration, should not be overlooked. David Medalie rightly points out this problem as follows:

Moore's criterion for assessing intrinsic value is that things must be good even when they exist 'in absolute isolation'; Forster's concern with 'connection' includes the implication that nothing exists 'in absolute isolation'. His work (like Virginia Woolf's) problematises what Moore offers as desirable in absolute terms; what is more, it presents as a quandary the relationship between right conduct and aesthetic value

which Moore proposes as a necessary harmony.<sup>27</sup>

*Where Angels Fear to Tread* aspires to a synthesis of beauty and good through Philip's moral awakening, and the disruption between his acts of seeing beautiful objects and knowing good is eventually overcome. Nevertheless, as soon as the Platonic ethics of knowledge is thus approved through sight, the novel recognizes another gap opening up beyond.<sup>28</sup> The issue of knowledge and actual conduct is not further explored in this novel, but Philip in the last scene is suspended in "absolute isolation" to maintain the value of his moral superiority just attained. Not only psychologically, but also geographically he is suspended: on the train going back from Italy to England, he is practically nowhere, and there is no way to know if his experience abroad will help him in his own country. The problematic relationship between the ethics of knowledge and the aesthetics of isolation, which would later lead Forster to his qualified formalism, already emerges in his first novel while it is struggling to find a remedy for the "formalism" of the protagonist's eye.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is suggested by the critics focusing on the moralistic aspects of Forster's novels. See, for examples, Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster: A Study* (London: Hogarth, 1944) 51-52, and Frederick C. Crews, *E. M. Forster: A Peril of Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964) 80-81.

<sup>2</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence, and Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 180.

<sup>3</sup> Torgovnick 177.

<sup>4</sup> Despite his general distrust in sense experience, sight is given a privileged status in Plato as a sort of bridge between the phenomenal world and the world of Idea. *Phaedrus* also has a passage on the sight's possibility: talking about the Form, Socrates says that "the Form of Beauty may be more readily recollected than the other Forms, since its image is discerned by sight, the keenest of our sense." R. Hackforth, trans. and intro., *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1952) 92.

<sup>5</sup> A concise summary of this assumption of realism and its highly ambiguous nature pointed out by Frederic Jameson is found in Karen Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and the Visual Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2001) 47-49.

<sup>6</sup> The Edwardian novelists she has in her mind in this essay are H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy. Forster is classified into "the Georgians" with D. H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot, but accused of still trying to use the Edwardian method instead of throwing it away. Virginia Woolf, *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth, 1950) 90-111.

<sup>7</sup> David Medalie's *E. M. Forster's Modernism* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002) concludes that Forster's modernity lies in his very inability to reconcile these two modes. Medalie meticulously examines how Forster's belief in liberal humanism and the Edwardian "romantic realism," which allows character the space to somehow escape from society, gradually wanes and reluctantly yields to his qualified formalism.

<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Robert Trevelyan, Forster declares: "The object of the book is the improvement of Philip." Mary Lago and P. Furbank, eds., *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, vol.1 (London: Collins, 1983) 83.

<sup>9</sup> All citations from the novel are from E. M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 2001), abbreviated as *WAFT* in this article.

<sup>10</sup> The religious content of the early Italian art apart from its aesthetic completeness was first advocated in Alexis-François Rio's *De la poésie chrétienne* (1836, appeared in English translation in 1854 as *The Poetry of Christian Art*). Rio's book triggered an important change in the evaluation of early Italian art in the Victorian age. See Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 97-101.

<sup>11</sup> Marcia Werner, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 19-49. Scrutinizing Ruskin's ideas of beauty in the second volume of *Modern Painters* and the Pre-Raphaelite manifesto organ *The Germ*, Werner proves that their formative ideas were mostly free from Ruskin's influence.

<sup>12</sup> In the preface to *Pre-Raphaelitism*, a pamphlet he wrote in defense of their art, Ruskin quotes this phrase of his own from the first volume of *Modern Painters*. Eric Warner and Graham Hough eds., *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism, 1840-1910*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 70.

<sup>13</sup> Fraser 129.

<sup>14</sup> As for the detail about this change in his works in relation to the trend of Victorian High Art, see Fraser 125-32. The study by Werner, which discusses the Pre-Raphaelite Realism in the wider contexts such as the realism on the continent and the empirical tradition of British philosophy, excludes Burne-Jones with William Morris from its scope of research. See Werner 2.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Beard and John Henderson, *Classical Art: From Greece to Rome*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 100-02.

<sup>16</sup> For Ruskin's typical distrust of formal perfection, see "The Nature of Gothic," *On Art and Life* (London: Penguin, 2004) especially 20 and 26.

<sup>17</sup> John Ruskin, "Giotto and His Works in Padua," *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds., E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, vol. 24 (London: Allen, 1903) 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Ruskin, "Giotto" 35.

<sup>19</sup> Ruskin, "Giotto" 28.

<sup>20</sup> S. P. Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury: The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group*, vol. 2 (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1994) 84-85.

<sup>21</sup> Daniela Carpi, ed., *Why Plato?: Platonism in Twentieth Century English Literature* (Heidelberg: U of Heidelberg P, 2005) 11.

<sup>22</sup> Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 65-66.

<sup>23</sup> E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*. Abinger Ed. 11. Ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Arnold, 1972) 188.

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, earlier in the novel Philip's eye is already described as responsive to beauty even when his mind is not. Philip on the way to Monteriano to stop Lilia's marriage is too furious to pay attention to the scenery around, but "his eyes had registered the beauty, and next March he did not forget that the road to Monteriano must traverse innumerable flowers" (*WAF* 36). This sensibility implanted in him later cultivates his soul.

<sup>25</sup> Morris Beja defines modern epiphany as "a spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it." *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Owen, 1971) 18. As it is a fully subjective experience, the person going through it inevitably experiences isolation from the surrounding world at the same time.

<sup>26</sup> G. E. Moore declares that "[t]he direct object of Ethics is knowledge and not practice." *Principia Ethica* (Mineola: Dover, 2004) 20. Wilfred Stone locates the Cambridge Apostles in the tradition of philosophical idealism and English romanticism, and sees the revolutionary aspect of their ethics in their internalization of morality: they put emphasis on the inner condition of the individual, being indifferent to action and achievement. Wilfred Stone, *The Cave and the Mountain: A Study of E. M. Forster* (Stanford:

Stanford UP, 1966) 51.

<sup>27</sup> Medalie 112.

<sup>28</sup> This problem is not seen in *The Ambassadors*. James is a much more aesthetic writer than Forster in that when the truth is presented in visual form, the moral end of the novel is thought to be attained. The novel does not linger on how to put the knowledge into practical action to improve the present situation.