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E. M. Forster's Geography of Homosexual Desire

When the geographic locations which can be found in E. M. Forster's fiction are put together, they chart a map which, on the one hand, commemorates his voyages during the first two decades of the 20th century. On the other hand, however, this imaginary map emerges as curiously close to the image of foreign countries popular among the educated and wealthy British homosexuals at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century. The task of the present paper is to retrace the voyages which first took Forster to places conventionally perceived as homosexual havens and then back to England where he created a homosexual haven of his own making.

The belief that there is a distant foreign place more appropriate and sympathetic for gay people can be traced back to the Ancient times when the theme of homosexual love was introduced into the myth of Arcadia (Woods 1998: 17-31). The belief is strongly present also in modern gay culture, as Henning Bech describes it:

> Happiness is not now, at most in existing memory or in yearning; and it is not found here but in another

> country, a foreign country – [which is] a stock theme in the homosexual experience (1997: 37).

Specific location of such a foreign country has been changing over the years and largely depends on local cultural traditions or fashions.[7] At the turn of the 19th and the 20th century the geography of homosexual desire of the educated wealthy British concentrated almost exclusively on two places: Greece and Italy. It was reflected in the terms "Greek love" and "Italian vice" which were used as popular synonyms of homosexuality.[8] They came to be associated with homosexual love primarily due to the Ancient literary tradition the works of which, such as Platonic dialogues, were in those times the only generally available "gay literature" (Jenkyns 1980: 282).

In the case of Italy it was also widely believed that this country was more willing to accept or at least tolerate homosexuality. The association had been quite common in Great Britain for several centuries. Obviously, for the majority it was a negative association, hence "the Italian vice". It was one of the qualities which constituted Italy as a morally dangerous place

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[7] These days middle-class Western Europeans would probably choose Gran Canaria or the Greek island of Mykonos, while Americans would prefer Fire Island.

[8] However, this meaning of the adjective "Greek" should not be applied to Forster's works. "While it would certainly be simplistic to suggest that Forster meant Greek as a code word for homosexual, much as Dorian, Platonic, or Sapphic had become, it would be equally misleading to attempt to explain Forster's "Greek" without including in the ideas of harmony, peace, nature, and so on, the idea of an accepted and recognized place for the homosexual relationship" (Martin 1977: 70).

("the academy of crime") along with her Catholic faith and effeminacy.

However, there were also those who found the popular belief rather promising and wanted to use the opportunity. Their list includes such well-known Victorians as John Addington Symonds, Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo), and Horatio Forbes Brown who either wrote about their erotic liaisons with Italian youths or settled down in Italy giving grounds to the belief that homosexual practices were possible there rather than in other European countries (Rahman 1988: 54).[9] On a more mundane level, it was important that Italy belonged to the countries the legal system of which had been influenced by the Napoleonic Code in the early 19th century and did not penalize homosexuality, which in Great Britain from the latter part of Queen Victoria's reign to the 1960s was considered a criminal offense.

The myth of Italy as a homosexual haven was also strengthened by graphic arts, especially photographs of Wilhelm von Gloeden and his followers. The subjects of the photographs of von Gloeden and Rolfe, most often teenage boys from Taormina or Venice, should draw our attention to the fact that the conventional vision of homosexuality connected with the Mediterranean (and also the Orient) was that of ephebophilia (love of older men for boys).

[9] "For Forster, undoubtedly, Italy was the place where homophobia was irremovable . . . but not particularly high" (Altman 1978: 538), [Italy] "was associated in Forster's mind with homosexuality, as [it] was notorious since the Renaissance as the land where homosexual pleasures could be procured" (Rahman 1988: 54).

It is difficult to state with any certainty to what extent Forster was aware of all that when he first visited Italy with his mother in 1902. It is certain, however, that his early works such as the two novels: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908) are characterized by the extensive usage of foreign settings. The actual setting of his early fiction is not limited to Italy but, especially in the short stories, includes also Greece. The importance of Greece in these works is almost equal to that of Italy and the two influences tend to mingle for example in such works as the short story "Albergo Empedocle", the action of which takes place in Grigenti, a Greek colony in Italy, and in "The Story of a Panic", where English tourists encounter the Greek god Pan in the North of Italy. To be more precise then, one might say that the two locales tend sometimes to be perceived as one.

I am by no means the first to attempt to discuss the issue. Peter J. Hutchings sees it in an extremely simple way, claiming that

> Forster's sexual geography [is as follows]: Italy, for heterosexual romance, Greece for homosexual love, Constantinople as a gateway to polymorphous perversity (1995: 224).

I find the matter, however, somewhat more complicated. Hutchings seems both misled by the final draft of *A Room with a View* and not curious enough to read closely *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, not to mention the fact that Constantinople plays an extremely minor role in Forster's fiction, only as the aim of the voyage of the Misses Alan in *A Room with a View*. Hutchings

seems to have mistaken here Forster for Gustave Flaubert, Pierre Loti or, which may be the most probable, for Evelyn Waugh and his *Brideshead Revisited*.

Robert K. Martin more precisely describes Forster's usage of the Mediterranean settings as follows:

> Throughout most of his stories, Forster opposes a Greek world to a more modern, English world, or in some cases, an Italian, Mediterranean world to a northern, Anglo-Saxon world. His use of the Italian theme is almost identical to that of Henry James, who consistently opposed the sensuality and moral complexity of Italy to the materialism and moral simplicity of England (Martin 1977: 70).

The first source of Forster's interest in the Mediterranean was his preoccupation with the Antiquity which started already in secondary school and was strengthened during his stay at Cambridge and studies in history and Classics (Furbank 1979, 1: 44-80). The influence of such people as Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson or Walter Pater combined with very wide reading both in the classics and contemporary studies in Ancient culture.[10] The voyages to the Mediterranean, which Forster began upon his graduation in 1902 and was to continue until the 1950s, only further strengthened this interest.

Still it would be limiting to point out his interest in Classic literary tradition and travels as the only sources of the use of such settings. It would be just as wrong to present these interests as of exclusively personal origin. The latter half of the 19th century

[10] See for example Forster's reading list from 1899 in Furbank 1979, 1: 70.

was a period of increased preoccupation with the Antiquity especially in Great Britain. Victorian culture ascribed to the region new meanings which fit the needs of the emerging empire. Perception of Greece and Rome was greatly influenced by the famous distinction between "hebraism" and "hellenism" formed by Matthew Arnold, who

> did not condemn the Victorian cultivation of the private conscience, which he called 'hebraism' (in allusion to the Old Testament Hebrews) and he defined as 'strictness of conscience' but he thought it needed supplementing. The culture with which he wished to supplement hebraism he called 'hellenism' in allusion to the ancient Greeks and defined as 'spontaneity of consciousness' (Gillie 1983: 57).

Forster initially follows Arnold in his works though he treats his concepts only as a point of departure (cf. Ross 1980). He was further influenced by the works of Symonds and Lowes Dickinson, who developed this distinction so that it meant not only freedom of the soul as opposed to moral rigidity, but also sexual freedom as opposed to the rigid patriarchalism and heterosexuality associated with hebraism (Martin 1977: 70).

Mediterranean culture becomes in Forster's fiction "the stimulus to the physical, instinctive self" (Adams 1980: 113) yet at the same time any attempts at revealing one's true identity are perceived and presented as potentially dangerous. The curate from the short story "The Curate's Friend" is a perfect example of this attitude, as speaking of his friendship with a faun, which may be read as a veiled presentation of homosexuality, he says:

> if I breathed one word of that, my present life, so agreeable and profitable, would come to an end, my congregation would depart, and so should I, and instead of being an asset to my parish, I might find myself an expense to the nation (Forster 1997: 74).

Especially in the earliest works the influence is far from exclusively beneficial and

> one easily recognizes a pattern common in Forster's early fiction: a symbolic journey to Italy or Greece, the realization of an identity with the Greek spirit, and a sudden transformation, into madness or death (Martin 1982: 102).

This is what happens to the hero of the short story "Albergo Empedocle" who discovers his "affinity" with an ancient Greek in Akragas (Agrigento) and as a madman is sent to a lunatic asylum. Achieving awareness of one's own homosexuality through the influence of a foreign setting is thus presented as madness, clearly reflecting Forster's own attitude to his situation in the period. Yet the rejection of the spirit can be equally devastating as its acceptance. It is so in the case of Mr Lucas in "The Road from Colonus",[11] who is "saved" by his daughter from accepting the ancient influence only to survive as a living dead.

The influence is far less dangerous when felt outside Greece itself as it occurs in "The Story of a Panic" (though in this case the ending is left open) and in

[11] However, this short story does not allude to homosexuality in any way.

"The Curate's Friend" quoted above. In both stories the Greek half-gods (Pan and a faun) appear without their element and exercise a more beneficial influence.

The Greece of Forster's early works was rather a variation on the ideal Arnoldian Greece than the actual country, of which he had at the time extremely limited experience. Judith Scherer Hertz goes as far as to claim that

> the very earliest of the strategies Forster developed to contain his sexual energy was the creation of a fantasy landscape. Often in Greece, sometimes in Italy, or even in an England inhabited by the semi-divinities, it is the place where one encounters one's true nature, where one is allowed one's real sexual identity, not the one so incongruously provided by the Peaslakes, the Tytlers and the Worters (1978: 255).

This view is not accepted generally and Forster's presentation of the Mediterranean is elsewhere (e.g. Michońska-Stadnik 1980: 428-429) praised for realism and lack of idealisation. One has to agree, however, that Greece itself plays a secondary role in Forster's fiction. It has decidedly meant very much to him yet

> in his early work . . . it is an ideal to be approached with awe and reverence. Possibly too much awe and reverence is shown; for it is contemporary Italy rather than ancient or modern Greece that provides Forster, in his early novels, with the world to be opposed to his contemporary English scene (Warner 1954: 8).

An explanation for that attitude may be found in *A Room with a View*, where the reverend Beebe confesses:

> I haven't been to Greece myself, and don't mean to go, and I can't imagine any of my friends going. It is altogether too big for our little lot. Don't you think so? Italy is just about as much as we can manage. Italy is heroic, but Greece is godlike or devilish – I am not sure which, and in either case absolutely out of our suburban focus (Forster 1977: 177).

These conclusions may be partially Forster's own, as rather quickly he concentrated on Italy as a more appropriate setting of his fiction. In this respect he belongs again to an established

> Romantic tradition of embracing Italy as the home of brilliance and passion, of emergence from the English fog and snobbery. Like Shelley and Browning, Forster finds Italy rich in moral and emotional extremes that make the stuff of melodrama (Crews 1962: 71).

Yet just as it was in the previously presented cases, Forster immediately departs from a tradition only to use it in his own way. Although his Italy may, indeed, be perceived as the Italy of the Grand Tour, of Shelley and of Pater, it has, nevertheless, certain special features.

> Italy is seen as a land of spontaneity; its social traditions and moral restraints are either ignored altogether, or else shown as wonderfully and inexplicably encouraging the free play of impulse. In Italy what you ought to do, and what you are expected

> to do, and what you do mysteriously tends to be one and the same thing (Cockshut 1978: 173).

Italy becomes thus for Forster a place for a

> rebellion against middle-class conformity and the possibility of escape – often literally and usually to Italy (Altman 1978: 537-538),[12]

where such a rebellion seems quite acceptable. A place where lovers who offended the system can find at least temporary refuge, as it is *A Room with a View*. It is quite telling that if anyone stands in the way of lovers (cf. Forster 1977: 69-79), it is always the English, not the Italians. Naturally, in the published texts Forster writes only about straight lovers.

Apart from the Classical tradition the choice of Italy as the ideal refuge was also influenced by Forster's perception of Italian society marked with masculine domination "free from feminine criticism" (Wilde 1973: 295), which makes the country an ideal of Forster's vision of homosexuality even though he is ready to recognise that it happens at the expense of women.

> Italy is such a delightful place to live in if you happen to be a man. There one may enjoy that exquisite luxury of Socialism – that true Socialism which is based not on equality of income or character, but on the equality of manners. In the democracy of the caffe or the street the great question of our life has been solved, and the brotherhood of man is a reality (Forster 1975: 35-36).

[12] The issue of escape or self-imposed exile in E. M. Forster's fiction was presented in Fordoński 2003.

Quite obviously, though the choice of place just as that of references in the text (e.g. repeated allusions to Michelangelo or poems of A. E. Housman) may lead a queer oriented critic to notice that Forster's foreign settings are homoerotically charged, it is more a matter of allusion or unspoken mood than of anything that can be specifically pointed out. The fact is that as the surviving manuscripts prove Forster consciously removed from the texts submitted for publication anything that might have suggested homosexuality or homoeroticism.

Yet even so, in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* we can find this surprising description of an encounter of the main hero Philip Herriton with a group of young Italian gentlemen in the Monteriano opera, during which

> Philip would have a spasm of horror at the muddle he had made. But the spasm would pass, and again he would be enchanted by the kind, cheerful voices, the laughter that was never vapid, and the light caress of the arm across his back (Forster 1975: 97).

More recent analyses of the novel, such as that of Nicholas Royle published in 1999, attempt to prove that a queer subtext is much more prominent in the two novels that it might seem at the first glance:

> Forster's novel mixes the crude and ambiguous; it plays with the sexual suggestiveness of language, with innuendo and double meaning. [Two] brief examples: in Forster's novel a 'knowing person' does not enter the back door of the house but rather 'take[s] the edifice in the rear', at the opera Philip finds 'amiable youths bent . . . and invited him to enter' (Royle 1999: 9-10).

Even if it is disputable whether we should unconditionally accept at face value Royle's statement that "a queer reading of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is absolutely necessary" (1999: 11), yet it surely offers a new approach to the text.

Such a reading is of little value in the case of *A Room with a View* and even Royle agrees that "the novel's 'queer emanations' are only of limited force and value" (1999: 41). This, however, becomes more comprehensible when we realise that the published text is the third version of the novel. The two early drafts survived at least in part and a comparison is possible that explains the direction which Forster's self-censorship[13] took to make the novel the heterosexual romance it is now.

The most striking change applied to the first crucial event in the novel, the murder in the Piazza Signoria in the "Fourth Chapter":

> [In *Old Lucy*] the most significant incident, "a catastrophe," is the death of a young Italian in the Piazza Signoria, an incident similar to the murder which brings Lucy and George Emerson together in *A Room with a View*. But in the early draft, Lucy is not present. Narrated from Arthur's [in later versions: George's] point of view, the episode consists largely of a lurid and erotic description of the dying "naked youth". The sight of "the young Italian's perfect form lying on the fountain brim" (*Old Lucy* 37) causes Arthur to renounce art in favour of life, as he tells Lucy "to promote human intercourse and bring about the brotherhood of Man" (*Old Lucy* 47). Forster

[13] Forster's own attitude to it is best summed up in a sentence from his 1958 appendix to the novel entitled 'A View without a Room' – "It is not my preferred novel – *The Longest Journey* is that – but it may fairly be called the nicest" (Forster 1977: 210).

> did not include this piece of adolescent homosexuality in the finished novel; by 1903 in *New Lucy* his story became a heterosexual romance (Rosencrance 1982: 87).

Similar changes made in the early drafts brought about a text in which most of the more direct representations of homoerotic atmosphere are all but gone. The changes, however, did not touch such basically homosexual characters as Cecil Vyse "the ideal bachelor" of "the sort who can't know any one intimately" (Forster 1977: 171) and the Reverend Beebe who

> was, from rather profound reasons, somewhat chilly in his attitude towards the other sex, and preferred to be interested rather than enthralled (Forster 1977: 32).

The Italian novels were actually quite successful, sufficiently so as to have a number of successors such as Norman Douglas's *South Wind* (1917), Huxley's *Those Barren Leaves* (1923), and Elisabeth Bowen's *The Hotel* (1927), which followed his descriptions of Italy "as a liberating force on Anglo-Saxon temperaments" (Cavaliero 1979: 63).[14] Yet the author himself was decidedly not satisfied with the direction his work took and the way censored homoerotic foreign settings were presented in his novels. The year 1908 with the publication of *A Room with a View* marked a temporary departure from the Mediterranean themes in his fiction.

[14] In a somewhat different way *A Room with a View* was also the inspiration behind Virginia Woolf's debut *The Voyage Out* (1915).

The next stage of Forster's voyage in search for a homosexual haven took him to the Orient, India and Egypt, unsurprisingly, as according to Edward Said[15] it was

> the place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe. Virtually no European writer who wrote on or travelled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest (1991 : 190).

Forster's first voyages there were no exception. They were voyages of discovery in a number of ways – not only cultural or literary but also physical and personal. It was in Alexandria that he found his first sexual experience and then fulfilment in love. India, although only when Forster visited it again in the early 1920s, also gave him a chance to have sex as freely as never before.

These experiences, however, came quite late in Forster's creative life, or, as Wendy Moffat seems to suggest in her recent biography, they put an end to his creative life as a writer. Consequently, the number of works which refer to them is quite limited. Just as was the case of the Mediterranean themes, the officially published works such as *A Passage to India* or *The Hill of Devi* allude to homosexuality in most oblique ways. According to Parminder Kaur Bakshi, in the former novel

[15] An analysis of *A Passage to India* in the context of Said's studies can be found in Bakshi 1996: 207-234.

> ironically, while Forster endeavoured to use the racial and political prohibitions of the friendship of Fielding and Aziz to signify the wider oppression of homosexual love, the political issues of the time proved to be so powerful that they completely subsumed homoerotic desire in the text (1996: 208).

Much more direct depictions of the erotic aspect of the Orient can be found in his posthumously published works, of which the most accomplished is certainly the short story "The Other Boat" and the most direct an autobiographical fragment "Kanaya" (Forster 1983: 310-324), first published from the manuscript in the critical edition of *The Hill of Devi*.

Forster returned to the Mediterranean settings temporarily in 1913 when he started to write his only overtly homosexual novel *Maurice*, which he was to go on correcting for another forty years. The beginning of the novel offers a direct presentation of the influence of Classical Greek culture upon the heroes – students of Cambridge Maurice and Clive. Borrowing and discussing Plato's *Symposium* become the first signs of their affection (cf. Dowling 1994). The reader is to a point led to believe that the heroes follow the rules set by the Victorian understanding of homosexuality. The impression is the stronger as there was still some degree of acceptance for homosexual behaviour in the academic setting, although not quite as much when the behaviour was discussed in public, as the controversy over Alec Waugh's *The Loom of Youth* was soon to prove (Byrne 2010: 18-20). All such expectations, however, are soon proven wrong.

As his relationship with Clive drags on Maurice grows more and more disillusioned with Greece,

"a heap of old stones without any paint on it" (Forster 1999: 92), just as he is more and more frustrated with his sexless relationship. Clive, who finally goes to Greece alone, "Against [his] will . . . become[s] normal" (Forster 1999: 97). Greece is no longer a storehouse of art but simply a reminder of last things, with its culture dead, and thus an appropriate place for Clive to 'become normal'. It is thus relegated to museums, which is symbolically done in Chapter XLIII of the novel. Greek antiquities remain in the British Museum where they belong while Maurice and Alec go to "a place" to spend the night together. In further chapters it is the English "greenwood" that takes the place of Greece as the idyllic location where gay lovers can find refuge. This change quite naturally followed a change in Forster's interests and his choice of English settings so visible in *The Longest* Journey and *Howards End*.

According to Martin's probably most influential essay "Edward Carpenter and the Double Structure of *Maurice*," this change marks Forster's rejection of the Victorian (one might call it "Platonic") vision of homosexuality in favour of a more modern one professed by Edward Carpenter. A similar opinion was voiced almost contemporaneously by Tariq Rahman in his article "*Maurice* and *The Longest Journey*: A Study of E. M. Forster's Deviation from the Representation of Male Homosexuality in Literature," in which he argues that *Maurice* is a groundbreaking novel, the first to move from describing ephebophilia (love of boys) or erotic friendship between men towards androphilia (love of men) (1988: 74).

Forster both in his life and his works started from re-charting the map of homosexual destinations of the previous generations. His life and his works, however, belonged to another generation and he had to find a new path both for his life and for his writing, create a new geography of homosexual desire for himself. This process of defining himself and his works led him to a surprising discovery both in his personal life and in his writing – that if one is ready to accept the price, the place where homosexuality is possible, the place which he sought far away, can exist here and now as it happened for the heroes of *Maurice* and Forster himself in his uneasy and unconventional relationship with Bob Buckingham.

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