

Jason Finch, 2011.

***E. M. Forster and English Place. A Literary Topography*
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E. M. Forster and English Place by Jason Finch is an important and, in a sense, pioneering work of literary criticism which adds a new dimension to Forster studies. Examining representations of English place in the writer's oeuvre, Finch takes an unusual approach, as he not only concentrates on Forster's writings, but also devotes much time to research the actual localities reflected in these writings, completing his investigations with personal visits to specific locations. In other words, his method of critical analysis—which he himself calls “deep locational criticism”—consists in giving careful and consistent attention to literary representations of existing places *and* to the places themselves, but in his concentration on the real world Finch also stresses the significance of the writer's biography, which records his actual encounters with places appearing in his fiction. As a result, the question of locality in literature, which is usually treated as unimportant and rarely analysed in depth by existing criticism—including that of Forster—comes to the foreground. However, the importance of the book stems not only from its strong emphasis on the significance of place in literature but also from—and this cannot be overemphasized—the scope and depth of research devoted to the phenomenon of place in the writings of one writer.

With his approach Finch places himself firmly against the tradition of literary analysis represented by New Criticism and deconstruction with their emphasis on text studied in isolation from extra-textual reality. The kind of analysis that he advocates shifts the focus of attention towards the interplay between fiction and the real world—thus the critic is supposed to assist readers, offering them superior knowledge in several fields: literary and general theory, the writer's life and his writings concerned with particular localities and, finally, the topography and often history of these localities. In short, the critic provides assistance that is necessary for the understanding

of the writer's representation of the phenomenon of space/place, which is, besides time, one of the two most essential coordinates of human existence.

The structure of the book is clear and well organized. In the first part of the introductory chapter, Finch provides an assessment of the existing critical work on Forster, focusing on studies concerned with spatial issues. He is right here to point out that these studies usually concentrate on the opposition between the English and the foreign, as well as that between the country and the city, whereas precious little criticism deals with the sub-national and regional complexities characterizing localities represented by Forster. In fact, as Finch argues, most important insights into the role of place in Forster's fiction were offered during the last years of the writer's life and shortly after his death by critics like Lionel Trilling and John Beer.

However, even during that period the main view of Forster's oeuvre was different—the writer was seen, especially in the United States, as a humanist sage, while the significance of place in his work was almost completely ignored. In the last decades of the previous century the perspective on Forster changed, as he started to be analyzed in the light of post-colonial and Marxist theories. Although these readings acknowledge the importance of spatial issues in Forster's writing, they focus on power struggles and view his England as a state representing imperial force rather than a land consisting of highly distinct regions and places.

A survey of theory follows in the second part of the introductory chapter, in which Finch describes various perspectives he found useful in his work. The book is certainly an interdisciplinary study, as the complexity of human experience of space/place and its representation in literary works calls for an intricate theoretical framework, but, as might be expected, apart from frequent references to literary theory—Finch devotes considerable attention to narratology, rightly blaming it for reinforcing the habit of prioritizing time over spatial issues in critical thought—it is theoretical work dealing with the concept of space/place that is most important in the study.

In his review of spatial theory, Finch elegantly outlines a very complex modern history of the idea of space/place. Indicating the ambiguity and nebulosity of the concepts of space and place, he decides that it is the latter that will be his favourite, as he considers it to refer to something local and real, in contrast to the former, which he believes to be a more abstract concept. The choice is obvious in the light of his desire to give much emphasis to individual experience and of his decision to assume a bottom-up approach

in his study, which thus starts from the local and particular and then works its way upwards towards some kind of synthesis—in contrast to the kind of analysis which sets off from an overarching theory and then moves downwards to particular cases. Obviously, this does not mean that theory is not important in his study, but only that it is used in a more heuristic than systematic way.

The introductory chapter ends with a more detailed presentation of Finch's own method of analysis, which is concerned with three fields of research: the physical place, literary loco-referentiality and intra-textual landscapes. The idea of the usefulness of physical encounters with places has its origin in the existing criticism which concentrates on experiential aspects of literature, but Finch also takes a hint from travel writing. As a result, he assumes an approach demanding personal involvement of the researcher in his material, which in his case means visits to the places appearing in the writer's works; Finch's knowledge of the local history makes these encounters even more fruitful. The research concerned with the second field demands focus on the question of textual reference to a place. Here the critic may consider the distance of the place from the communicative persona but also from the author and the reader, as well as the amount of descriptive detail in text, which indicates the writer's assumption about the degree of the audience's familiarity with the place. Finally, his method of literary analysis involves the study of intra-textual landscapes, which concentrates on the way in which the writer represents a place in his text, including the arrangement and organization of its physical features, as well as more subtle features like the particular atmosphere or symbolism.

The following analytical chapters form the core of Finch's work and cover all the English places that could be associated in a meaningful way with Forster. The order of the examined localities reflects the history of Forster's relations with them. Thus, Finch starts with Sawston, a fictional suburban area which appears in both *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *The Longest Journey* and is based to a large extent on the real-world areas of Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells in Kent. Sawston and other similar localities in Forster's writings—Finch mentions here the setting of "The Celestial Omnibus" and the prosperous suburb of London appearing in *Maurice*—are given by Forster a particular identity, strongly associated with a specific outlook on the world which he criticizes and which represents the narrow-mindedness

and emotional repression of the wealthy upper middle class into which he was born.

The next chapter, entitled “Wild England,” concentrates on Forster’s imaginative places that are supposed to represent remains of the past wilderness surviving in the highly developed country. According to Finch, Forster associated this idea with forested regions and the old, land-based economy, but he found models for his Wild England not in the North, as could be expected, but in the county of Wiltshire and other areas of southern England; he was also able to detect traces of it under the urban surface of London. As the chapter makes it clear, Forster’s attitude to this type of place is ambiguous: sometimes the writer is optimistic about its chances of survival, but on different occasions he seems to be resigned to its inevitable disappearance.

Chapter 4 focuses on the county of Surrey, and specifically on the Surrey Hills area, which features in *A Room with a View* and several other shorter pieces. Forster’s Surrey is a nice place covered with sandy pine woods and crossed with railway lines connecting the wealthy inhabitants with London, but it is also a place with a strong undercurrent of political disagreement. Here Finch devotes considerable attention to the importance of county identity in the novel—this strong identification with a place is for him a clear signal that criticism seeing in Forster a writer focused solely on national or imperial issues should be put in question.

In Chapter 5 Finch moves on to London. Forster lived in the city and intermittently wrote about it throughout his long career, but his London received relatively little critical attention. Finch argues that this is a significant lacuna in the existing criticism and shows that apart from London of *Howards End*, which has attracted some attention, Forster’s writings offer other perspectives on the city, which contribute together to a far more complex idea of London than that presented in his fourth novel. In fact, Finch argues convincingly that even in *Howards End* London is not represented in such a one-sidedly negative way as critics tend to believe.

Chapter 6 takes the reader to Cambridge, where Forster was a student and later an Honorary Fellow at King’s College. As Finch argues, there are two Forsterian Cambridges, one for the general audience and one for insiders, the latter group sometimes limited to the writer himself and his “Locked Journal.” The official image of Forsterian Cambridge is that of the writer’s spiritual home and the place of intellectual freedom and brotherhood.

However, the lesser-known writings which represent the other Cambridge offer a different view—a place that could be filled with personal feuds, bitter to the point of “bitchiness.”

The last analytical chapter is concerned with Rooksnest and the county of Hertfordshire. Rooksnest is the house in which Forster spent some years during his childhood and which served as the model for the eponymous house of *Howards End*. Houses were important in Forster’s writings but *Howards End* is by far the most famous of them and most frequently analyzed. Here again Finch offers a reading which challenges the usual critical assessment of *Howards End* as a symbol of national dimension and insists on seeing it in the local context.

All the analytical chapters start with a brief introduction describing in general terms the relationship between the place and Forster’s life, after which Finch describes his own visits to the place in question. These accounts frequently constitute wonderfully evocative pieces of travel writing, but they also offer opportunities for drawing a more tangible picture of Forster—the bodily experience described by Finch feels sometimes as if he was traveling in time and reliving the life of Forster himself.

The accounts of physical encounters with Forsterian places are useful for shedding some light on the atmosphere of the localities appearing in Forster’s fiction—in many of the visited places Finch is able to recognize or at least imaginatively reconstruct the ambience of the place as it was in Forster’s time. But these encounters also allow Finch to come up with deeper insights into particular works. For example, analyzing the exact physical position of Rooksnest/*Howards End* in relation to the neighbouring town on the one hand and the manor on the other, Finch is able to offer interesting reflections on the social position of the house dwellers.

During his investigations Finch demonstrates that the local-historical knowledge as well as various sources of empirical data concerned with broadly understood spatial analysis can also be of benefit to the critic. Thus, for example, Finch uses the socio-economic atlas of Britain and its account of the changing geography of religion in Britain after 1850 to explain the waning social significance of Anglican clergy as it is represented in *A Room with a View*. Forster’s “spatial” biography is another source of interesting insights. Finch indicates, for example, that the writer’s focus on the details of rural life does not mean that he idealizes it, as it is sometimes interpreted. As Forster shows the same kind of attention to other localities he inhabited

or visited frequently, like King's College in Cambridge or west London with its homosexual undertones, Finch thinks it justified to claim that what appealed to the writer was the local, not the rural.

What is especially commendable is that Finch gives careful consideration both to works in which the significance of place has been noticed by critics – although he is often able to offer fresh and original readings – and to works like *Maurice*, in which critics virtually completely ignored the question of locality. Finch is also able to point out interesting differences between Forster's treatment of the same place in various writings coming from different times. Late in his life, for example, Forster noticed that he ceased to care for the house in *Howards End*, and, as a result, he realized the barrenness of the novel's characters. Finally, treating fairly equally Forster's writings from all periods of his career, he defies the existing habit of breaking Forster's career into two unequal periods – that of novel-writing and the following one, when, it is suggested, nothing of merit was created by the writer.

No major objections can be raised to Finch's analysis, which is well-argued and convincing. His own method of literary criticism, applied to Forster's writings with admirable clarity and consistency, allows him to challenge but also complete the existing critical views of the writer. The only weakness noticed by this reviewer appears in the sphere of theoretical background, where certain omissions might be considered to be responsible for impoverishment of analytical apparatus at the disposal of the critic.

The first problem seems to be caused by Finch's apparent occasional disregard of the ambiguous nature of spatial terminology, in spite of the fact that he himself acknowledges its nebulosity. Writing about Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* he locates it in the tradition of continental spatial theory and dismisses it almost as soon as he mentions it, whereas the book can be seen as a very good example of the analysis of the experience of what Finch defines as place – in Bachelard limited primarily to the house and its surroundings – as well as its literary representation. This disregard seems even more pronounced in view of Finch's repeated declaration that in his study both imaginative construction of a place and its real-life model are equally important: Bachelard, examining both literary representations of places and his own thought processes, shows in a clear way how imagination can re-work the actual experience of an existing place.

Another of the slight shortcomings of the book stems from the fact that the theoretical framework developed by Henri Lefebvre is not explored further

to deepen the study in some areas. As Finch himself points out several times, the French thinker not only based his theory on the notion of lived experience but also recognized the individual character of actual places existing at particular times, and thus his theory seems to be ideal for the kind of analysis that is carried out by Finch. Moreover, Finch often notices the layered nature of social space in certain localities mentioning Lefebvre in this context, but he never uses the Frenchman's conceptual apparatus concerning the development of social space in time.

The last theoretical deficiency noticed by this reviewer concerns lack of any reference to phenomenology or phenomenological geography, which uses insights developed by philosophers conducting various kinds of phenomenological investigations. Phenomenology, which aims to describe and explain human experience of the world, seems to be particularly appropriate for the kind of investigation that is conducted by Finch, as it includes, among others, Martin Heidegger's study of the phenomenon of dwelling, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's research into bodily experience, or, indeed, Bachelard's phenomenology of imagination.

However, given the enormous scope of Finch's study, minor deficiencies of this kind could be expected. In fact, in the conclusion of the book Finch himself admits that certain theoretical approaches to space/place indicated by him deserve closer attention. Furthermore, he offers this kind of attention in a more theoretical development of his method of literary criticism published in 2016 under the title *Deep Locational Criticism. Imaginative place in literary research and teaching*. Finch recognizes here, for example, the significance of phenomenology for this kind of investigation.

All in all, Finch's book is a superb achievement, working simultaneously on several levels. It is as much an interesting account of Forster's life—a kind of non-linear biography seen through the filter of place—as an engaging history (sometimes quite distant, frequently more recent) of the places that were important for the writer. It is part travel writing, part exercise in erudition. But, first of all, it is an insightful piece of literary analysis carried out from a rare perspective, as Finch not only rehabilitates the role of the writer's biography in criticism, but also challenges a long-established belief in the firm boundary between literary text and the external world. Judging from the results he achieves, this kind of approach should be recommended as loudly as possible, whereas Forster aficionados can only be extremely pleased that he is the very first writer subjected to this kind of literary criticism.