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‘PLACE-FEELING’ IN THE FICTION OF

IN E.M. FORSTER AND ELIZABETH BOWEN

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In *Aspects of E.M. Forster*, the novelist Elizabeth Bowen expresses gratitude to E.M. Forster, saying that she can think of ‘no English novelist who has influenced me more. . . . [H]e considerably affected . . . my *way* of writing’. Bowen highlights Forster’s ‘place-feeling’, something first encountered in *The Celestial Omnibus*, finding the ‘action was not only inseparable from its setting but constantly coloured by it’. For his part, Forster acknowledges Bowen’s own ‘place-feeling’ in a footnote to his pamphlet *Virginia Woolf*, writing: ‘Elizabeth Bowen is . . . the only novelist who has assimilated the bombed areas of London into her art; descriptions of them are of course frequent’.

In this paper, I examine the way Forster creates ‘place-feeling’ in ‘The Curate’s Friend’, *The Longest Journey* and *Howards End.* I then consider how Bowen creates ‘place-feeling’ in four war-time short stories, three of which are the ones to which Forster was referring.

Keywords: place, light, chalk, Demeter, Pan, myth, atmosphere, fragment/fracture, war/war-time

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In her unfinished autobiography *Pictures and Conversations*, the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) writes that few people show curiosity about the places in her fiction. ‘Why?’ she asks, ‘Am I not manifestly a writer for whom places loom large?’ (*Pictures* 34) We can trace that importance of place back to E.M. Forster, for in ‘A Passage to E.M. Forster’, her contribution to *Aspects of E.M. Forster*, Bowen expresses gratitude for the influence which Forster, twenty years her senior, had on her as a schoolgirl, highlighting something she terms Forster’s ‘place-feeling’, which she first encounters in *The Celestial Omnibus*.

> Ultimately . . . the central, most powerful magnetism of the *Celestial Omnibus* stories was in their ‘place-feeling’. In each of [these stories] action was not only inseparable from its setting but seemed constantly coloured by it and, in one or two cases, even, directly and fatefully set at work by it . . . My own tendency to attribute significance to places, or to be mesmerised by them even for no knowable reason . . ., became warranted by its large reflection in E.M. Forster. Formerly I had feared it might be a malady. (‘Passage’ 5)

For his part, Forster acknowledges Bowen’s own ‘place-feeling’ in a footnote to the 1942 pamphlet version of his 1941 Rede Lecture on *Virginia Woolf*. He writes, ‘Elizabeth Bowen is, so far as I know, the only novelist who has assimilated the bombed areas of London into her art; descriptions of them are of course frequent’ (*Woolf* 21).

What does Bowen mean by ‘place-feeling’? ‘The situation or the idea is something I see pictorially and it is always surrounded by some sort of atmosphere or time of day or season of the year, even though the story may move to and fro’ (*Weight* 26). For her, place and light are more than elements, they are actors. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan tells us ‘[f]eelings and ideas concerning space and place . . . grow out of life’s unique and shared experiences’ (*Space* 19). Both Forster and Bowen draw on their experiences of particular places for their fiction. In this paper I will restrict myself to Forster’s ‘place-feeling’ in the chalk lands of Wiltshire and Hertfordshire, and to Bowen’s ‘place-feeling’ in war-time London, which draws on atmosphere and light for much of its effect.

Forster’s chalk-land place-feeling stems from his rootedness in the English countryside and from his encounters with the mythologies of Italy and Greece. In ‘The

Curate's Friend', picnicking on 'a small chalk down, crowned by a beech copse and a few Roman earthworks', the curate and his party admire the land, 'perhaps the most beautiful in England' (*Selected* 72; 73). '[H]ere is the body of the great chalk spider who straddles over our island – whose legs are the south downs and the north downs and the Chilterns, and the tips of whose toes poke out at Cromer and Dover' (*Selected* 73). But despite 'the oldest of our temples' being built on the back of this great chalk spider Forster fails to find a vernacular mythology, asking in an authorial passage in *Howards End* , 'Why has not England a great mythology? . . . Deep and true as the native imagination can be, it seems to have failed here' (*Howards* 228). A caravanning holiday in Kent soon after the publication of *The Longest Journey* might have given Forster an opportunity to explore English mythology, but a poem at the time shows him still firmly entrenched in classical myth, for the Greek gods are implicit.

> Ten shadows flecked the sunlit road,
> Ten shadows passed, yet we remain
> Still marching to the Dorian Mode
> Still summoning the gods to reign.
> Gods of the country! Still in Kent
> The music of that pipe rings plain
> Through places where ten shadows went;
> The shadows passed; but we remain. (Cited Furbank 156)

Determined that England *shall* have a mythology, Forster creates his own by importing the Greek gods Demeter and Pan, as well a Roman Faun, into the chalk lands. Even that most positive of critics Lionel Trilling found Forster's mythology 'inappropriate to his theme' (Trilling 49). But I would argue that there is little difference between importing Greek myths into literature set in the English countryside, and importing classical myths into, for example, Wiltshire's Stourhead Gardens by landscaping and installing monuments. In 'The Curate's Friend' the party are setting up their picnic when, seen only by the curate, the Faun lays his hands on every one of them: each has an epiphany. In the case of the curate, he becomes aware that the earth is a living thing.

> [T]he chalk downs [sing] to each other across the valleys, as they often do when the air is quiet and they have had a comfortable day. . . . [A]s night came on [he] knew for certain that not only was the Faun asleep, but that the hills and woods were asleep also. The stream, of course, never slept, any more than it ever freezes. Indeed, the hour of darkness is really the hour of water, which has been somewhat stifled all day by the great pulsings of the land. (*Selected* 77)

Bowen remarks on this ability of humans to be aware of the pulsings of the land, when she writes: '*The Longest Journey* is governed by passions which are not [sexual]: Stephen

Wonham's passion is for the earth on whose breast he sleeps at the very end of the novel' ('Passage' 11). Stephen's behaviour is mercurial and capricious: these characteristics, together with his association with trees and shepherds, imply that his mythological counterpart is Pan. Indeed as Robert L. Caserio points out, after the Figsbury Rings episode, Rickie recognises his half-brother as Pan and enshrines him in his stories *Pan Pipes*, and when Stephen's/Pan's life is threatened by mechanisation in the form of the train, it is Rickie who saves him ('Edwardians' 85). The constellation Orion appears at least three times, and it is worth noting the association between Orion and Demeter: in *Works and Days*, the Greek poet Hesiod describes peasant life and how the constellations, particularly Orion, dictate when work is to be done, saying 'Set your slaves to winnow Demeter's holy grain, when strong Orion first appears'.[1] We might expect Demeter to be represented by the chatelaine of Cadover, surrounded by fields and countryside. But Mrs Failing is effectively an anti-Demeter, who is bored 'unspeakably' by 'the ways of the earth "our dull stepmother"', to whom her 'farm is a mystery', and who warns Rickie to beware of the Earth (*Longest* 86; 87; 275). Demeter herself *is* present in the novel, not as a person, but reduced to two dimensions in the print of the sculpture of the Demeter of Cnidus, and banished by Mrs Failing from her drawing room to Stephen's bedroom (*Longest* 118). Here, in the draughty attic of Cadover, she is never still. When Rickie goes to the room in search of his Dryad manuscript he is 'quite startled' by the print, 'shimmering and gray' (*Longest* 140). But before Stephen's daughter is carried out to sleep on the open ground, she says to the picture 'Good night . . . stone lady … your faces are pink' (*Longest* 288).The implication is that Demeter is becoming flesh and that the young girl will inherit her role as she sleeps alongside the counterpart of Pan, learning a passion for the chalk turf.

In *Howards End* Forster's place-feeling is concentrated on the house based on Rooks Nest, his childhood home in the chalk lands of Hertfordshire. Forster stresses that Howards End is intrinsic to the landscape and to those who have inhabited it. Both Demeter and Pan are still present: Mrs Wilcox is the Demeter figure, but she is an English meadow Demeter, associated not with corn but with hay. As well as her importance for crops and harvests, Demeter was a lawgiver. In Ovid's *The Rape of Proserpine*, Calliope sings 'Ceres [Demeter] was the first to break up the sods of earth with the crooked plough, she first planted corn and cultivated crops, she imposed the first laws on the world. All we have we owe to Ceres.' (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 125) If Pan the disrupter is dominant throughout *The Longest Journey,*

[1] http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/works.htm ll.597-608 (accessed 17 May 2021)

then it is Demeter the lawgiver who presides over *Howards End*. Indeed, I would argue that Forster playfully uses hay by inflicting hay fever as a punishment on those creatures of sprawling urbanisation and the motorcar, the other Wilcoxes and Tibby.

Mrs Wilcox swiftly assesses the situation between Helen and Paul, laying no blame, calmly sorting things out. Similarly, throughout the novel Margaret weighs matters up, resolves them, and holds the balance. Forster tells us it is Mrs Wilcox who first detects a deeper sympathy and a sounder judgement in Margaret (*Howards* 55). This causes their friendship to blossom, and after the apparently unsuccessful lunch, they shake hands 'with a newborn emotion' as Mrs Wilcox leaves (*Howards* 67). When Mrs Wilcox bequeaths Howards End to Margaret, she also intends her to assume the role of Demeter.

Margaret's assumption of the role of Demeter develops gradually. When she first enters Howards End, clutching a bunch of weeds (not yet grass or hay), she is aware of the heart of the house beating, faintly at first, then loudly (*Howards* 173-172). At Oniton she weighs up what is best done after the Jacky debacle. Now, grass 'trickle[s] through her fingers like sand' and she leaves a 'long trickle of grass,' reminiscent of Mrs Wilcox's handfuls of hay in the opening pages of the novel (*Howards* 212; 4). But it is her discovery of Helen's pregnancy which causes her to finally assume the role of Demeter, decisively taking possession of Howards End and bolting the door on Henry (*Howards* 249). After Leonard's death, when she agrees that Henry may sit down if he 'will consent to sit on the grass', we know that Demeter will prevail (*Howards* 285).

If Demeter is represented by Mrs Wilcox and Margaret, then who is Pan? Perhaps Forster felt that Pan had been too conspicuous in *The Longest Journey* for he writes in *Howards End*: 'Of Pan and the elemental forces, the public has heard a little too much – they seem Victorian, while London is Georgian – and those who care for the earth with sincerity may wait long ere the pendulum swings back to her again' (*Howards* 92). Nevertheless, we do find an etiolated Pan in Leonard Bast. The Schlegel sisters 'guessed him as the third generation to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization had sucked into the town; as one of the thousands who have lost the life of the body and failed to reach the life of the spirit' (*Howards* 98). Leonard is Pan in a mutant state, but a Pan still able to cause panic – Forster often uses the words 'panic/panic and emptiness' close to mentions of Leonard (*Howards* 28-29; 79; 267). A chain of disruption starts with Helen taking his umbrella and leads to the further deterioration of his circumstances, the near break-up of Margaret's engagement to Henry, Helen's pregnancy and his own death. Leonard symbolises the gradual decline and ultimate death of Pan from the oppressive forces of the modern age. His sorties into the

countryside are an ineffective attempt to reconnect himself with his origins, at odds with his attempt to educate himself by reading Ruskin or attending concerts.

Despite the deaths in their closing passages, each novel closes radiant with the hope represented by the children of the male, Pan-ic, characters. By his own death at the hands of mechanisation, Ricky saves the life of Pan, who goes on to have a daughter who will become a Demeter figure. And when the boy Tom asks if 'baby is old enough to play with hay' we anticipate that Leonard's son will be able to hold the forces of mechanisation at bay and retrieve his ancestors' foothold (*Howards* 286).

Bowen's 'place-feeling' develops in a different way to that of Forster. Before she began writing, Bowen had thought she was going to be a painter. An ability to start from an image or pattern rather than an idea would lead to what she terms 'verbal painting', and although she says 'When I did begin [to write], I do not mean that I copied [Forster]' she adopts a similar approach to the one she finds in Forster: in her 1945 'Notes on Writing a Novel' she insists 'The locale of the happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it' ('Passage' 12; *Orion* 22). She says as much in her chapter on 'Places': the world of her own fiction is composed of fragments, 'something of a mosaic'. It is not something which she herself has assembled, 'it is something that assembled itself. Looking back at my work, I perceive that the scenes of my successive, various stories predetermined themselves. And not only that, but they predetermined the stories to a greater extent than I may have known at the time' (*Pictures* 37).

Among the revelations that Bowen experienced on first reading Forster was that a writer did not have to keep to the rules. Rules which Bowen would go on to break include those of syntax, evolving an idiosyncratic style whereby she arranges her prose in unusual ways in order to achieve visual effects: Forster is perceptive when he uses the verb 'assimilate' rather than 'describe' of her work. Although Bowen's novel set in war-time, *The Heat of the Day*, had not been published in 1942 when Forster made his remarks, several of her war stories had already appeared. In the monologue 'Oh Madam' (1941) a housekeeper is welcoming her mistress back to her bombed house. This is from the opening page.

> OH, MADAM. . . . Oh, I'm quite all right, madam. I made some tea this morning. . . . Do I? Oh well, that's natural, I suppose. I'd be quite all right if I wasn't feeling so bad. Well, you know how I always was—I don't like a cup to go. And now. . . . If you'll only sit still, madam, I'll go and get you something. I know you don't take tea, not in the regular way, but it really is wonderful what tea does for you. . . .
>
> Sherry? I'll go and try, but I really don't know —the dining-room door won't— I'm afraid, madam, I'm afraid it's the ceiling in there gone. . . . And as you know,

> Johnson's got the key to the cellar, and Johnson went off after the all clear. I said, "You did ought to stay till madam's with us." But he didn't seem quite himself—he did have a bad night, madam, and you know how men are, nervous. . . . I don't know where — back to his wife's, I daresay: he didn't vouchsafe. . . .
>
> The girls? Oh, they're quite well, I'm thankful to say. They were very good through it, really, better than Johnson. They'll be back for their things, that is, if— well, oh dear, madam, wait till you see. . . .
>
> No, I'm all right, madam, really. . . . Do I? Not more than you do, I'm sure. This is a homecoming for you— after that nice visit. I don't know what to say to you—your beautiful house! (*Collected* 578)

The monologue continues in this fragmented vein for a further four pages. By fracturing her syntax, Bowen achieves a picture of what the housekeeper is describing: the fracturing of the home. The frequent use of ellipses and dashes, as well as unfinished sentences, reflect not only the housekeeper's own state of shock, but the shock to the house itself. We *see* the shards of fractured syntax, the lumps of broken phrases, the dust of the ellipses, the door that will not open. Bowen has taken her prose beyond pure verbal description and created a visual representation.

The monologue reflects the atmosphere in the house, but light does not play a part in this particular story. How light is affected by the war lies behind several of her other war stories, as she explains in the introduction to the American edition, *Ivy Gripped the Steps*.

> Painters have painted, and photographers who were artists have photographed, the tottering lacelike architecture of ruins . . . and the untimely brilliance of flaming skies. I cannot paint or photograph like this – I have isolated; I have made for the particular, spot-lighting faces or cutting out gestures. (*Ivy*, xiv)

A different form of syntactical disturbance comes in Bowen's most celebrated war story 'Mysterious Kôr' (which was published in 1944 after Forster wrote his footnote). It opens on a surreal landscape.

> Full moonlight drenched the city and searched it; there was not a niche left to stand in. The effect was remorseless: London looked like the moon's capital – shallow, cratered, extinct. It was late, but not yet midnight; now the buses had stopped the polished roads and streets in this region sent for minutes together a ghostly unbroken reflection up. (*Collected* 728)

As Hermione Lee points out, in the final phrase, with her peculiar sentence construction Bowen expresses the oddness and dislocation of the wartime experience (Lee 159). The story ends with the dream of the protagonist about the mythical city of Kôr, the setting of Rider

Haggard's *She*, in which Neil Corcoran feels that Bowen conjures up a 'mysteriously almost De Chirico-like cityscape' (Corcoran 166).

> With him she looked this way, that way, down the wide, void, pure streets, between statues, pillars and shadows, through archways and colonnades. With him she went up the stairs down which nothing but moon came; with him trod the ermine dust of the endless halls, stood on terraces, mounted the extreme tower, looked down on the statued squares, the wide, void, pure streets. (*Collected* 739-740)

These scenes bleached by light are very different to those in 'The Demon Lover' (1941) in which Bowen creates an atmosphere of menace, this time with a diminished amount of light. In London for the day Mrs Drover returns to her shut-up house, watched by 'no human eye', to look for several things she wants to take back to the country. Once inside 'no light came down into the hall'. But Mrs Drover unshutters a window whose light illuminates a letter lying on the table. Mystified as to how the letter arrived in the shut-up house she takes it to her bedroom to read. The menace mounts as Bowen tells us 'the sun had gone in; as the clouds sharpened and lowered, the trees and rank lawns seemed already to smoke with dark'. Bowen then gives us the back story to the threatening letter, which appears to have come from a former fiancé, reminding Mrs Drover of a promise she had made as he was about to leave for France in the First World War. This promise, to meet him that very day, their anniversary, had been extracted in the dark, with only 'spectral glitters in the place of [the writer's] eyes'. But the fiancé had perished twenty-five years earlier in 1916: how could he have written this letter? Completely unnerved, Mrs Drover quickly leaves the house and takes the sole taxi on the nearby rank. The driver sets off without being told where to go, but when she scratches at the glass panel between the two of them, he brakes and turns to look at her. Their eyes meet and she begins to scream, to scream unceasingly as the driver, accelerating without mercy, makes off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets. (*Collected* 661-666)

At times Bowen does more than spot-light: she discovers strong light in the city streets, which illuminates previously unnoticed aspects, and uses it in the forms of reflection and floodlight or of darkness, to create the atmosphere of a scene or to make a social comment. 'In the Square' (1941) opens on a 'hot bright July evening' on a completely empty square.

> [A] whitish reflection, ghost of the glare of midday, came from the pale-colour façades on its four sides and seemed to brim it up to the top. . . . The sun, now too low to enter normally, was able to enter brilliantly at a point where three of the houses had been bombed away; two or three of the many trees, dark with summer, caught on their tops the illicit gold. . . . The painted front doors under the balconies and at the

> tops of steps not whitened for some time, stood out in the deadness of colour with light off it.
>
> When the bell was not answered, the man on the steps frowned at the jade green front door, then rang again. (*Collected* 609)

Once in the house, the man remarks 'How curious that light is,' as he looks from the first floor drawing room window across to the gap between the houses opposite. As Bowen writes in her introduction, the house's hostess 'has not learned with grace to open her own front door' while '(t)he ghostly social pattern of London life . . . appears in the vacant politeness of "In the Square"'. (*Ivy* ix; xiii) 'That light' has revealed a newly created perspective not only on the changes wrought in the environment, but also on the changes in the *mœurs* of the inhabitants.

Both Forster and Bowen have used place as an active participant in these examples, but the way they use it differs. Early in *The Longest Journey*, Rickie looks at the elms from Ansell's window. 'Those elms were Dryads – so Rickie pretended, and the line between the two is subtler than we admit' (*Longest* 4). Like Rickie, Forster finds that the line between nature and the mythological is 'subtler than we admit', and he is able to cross that line into the deep time of the chalk land. He will bring back into the present elements of the *genius loci* to form a web on which to weave his narrative, creating a kind of palimpsest. Forster is retrieving and holding on to the past, resisting change. During the war, anywhere in London was under threat of obliteration and change was unavoidable. For Bowen, place has become ephemeral: change will happen *faute de mieux*. What Bowen is depicting is the transitional stage between the past and the future, with no indication what that future might be: her places are fragmented, her characters in a liminal situation. In comparing the 'place-feeling' of these two authors we see how modernism moved on from the years before the First World War to the years of the Second World War.

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