

Posing as Pastoral: The Displacement of the “very poor” in *Howards End*

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Abstract

There is a yearning for the pastoral idyll that lies at the heart of *Howards End*, but Forster’s veneration for the rural is often complicated by its dependence on lower-class characters who do not feature prominently within the text. Instead, the author’s penchant for pastoral imagery is more commonly aligned with his upper-middle-class protagonists, who come to find peace and beauty among the natural surroundings of the English country-house. This paper seeks to examine the degree to which Forster might have been conscious of this displacement of the “very poor” within the novel, and to critically untangle his offhand-claim that he was “not concerned” with the lives or livelihood of such people who nevertheless contribute their labour in service of an idealized pastoral landscape he so passionately admires. In determining Forster’s intentions behind contrasting two so distinctly opposing socio-economic groups, we might also unearth some of the author’s more intricate anxieties about the Edwardian class system, and how the author might reconcile what many critics have labelled his ‘bourgeois-liberal guilt’ with his unmistakable admiration for a rural working-life so emblematic of the pastoral condition.

Keywords: Forster, *Howards End*, pastoral, poor, rural

For a novel so attuned to matters of money and wealth, readers and critics often come unstuck by an aloof narratorial aside found early in *Howards End*: “We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet” (Forster 2000, 38).¹ Although the bulk of the novel is indeed centred around the upper-middle-class Schlegels and the affluent, business-minded Wilcoxes, such absolutist hyperbole is compromised by Forster’s continued and transparent interest in Leonard Bast (a lower-middle-class clerk who comes to know the Schlegels) as well as his wife Jacky, and their eventual descent into “the abyss” of poverty (38). By the novel’s conclusion they have fallen into a state of destitution from which there is no return, and neither resemble the “gentlefolk, or those who are obliged to pretend they are gentlefolk” (38) for whom in his earlier statement the narrator proclaims such a marked interest. As a result, Forster’s sardonic remark parodies Wilcoxian indifference towards the poor whilst simultaneously promising to dissect the Edwardian social system that prevents Leonard from achieving some semblance of financial security and which keeps the “very poor” in their place.

Yet the “very poor” might also allude to the numerous characters and shadowy figures existing at the fringes of the plot who might stake a claim to poverty, as understood by the author at the time the novel was written. From Miss Avery (*Howards End*’s housekeeper) and Annie (the Schlegels’ maid at Wickham Place), to the oft-observed but unnamed servants, farmhands, woodcutters, and cab-drivers, there exists multiple individuals who act in continuing states of servitude to the prosperous Schlegels and Wilcoxes, and whom could not be said to quite bear strong enough a resemblance to the lower-middle-class Basts (at least not as they appear in the first half of the text). Whilst Forster cannot be said to fully explore the possibility of hardship befalling any of these minor characters to the same degree as Mr Bast, they do nevertheless exist as more than irrelevant and/or unimportant appendages to the plot, often pictured among rural settings and painted as contributing (or as even essential) to the idealized pastoral landscape coveted by the author. Whilst Forster posits the Basts in the tradition of Victorian fictions which sought to portray the working-poor amidst grimy and unsanitary urban conditions, and as deserving of charitable philanthropy that might only be provided by the generous middle-classes (as in novels such as Gaskell’s *North and South* and Dickens’ *Hard Times*),² minor

¹ All further references to the novel are listed in-text by page number only, and are taken from this edition.

² For further reading on how Dickens and Gaskell might be situated in the tradition of nineteenth-century British social reform writing, see Lenard 1999.

lower-class characters working at Howards End are instead often witnessed cutting fields and trees, passing beyond hedgerows and into the rain, and continuing to work outdoors and past sunset whilst the Wilcoxes retire indoors. As Lionel Trilling argued, Forster “put his faith in the men of the English countryside” (1959, 104) and posited the lower-classes as belonging to the natural environments they so often cultivate themselves.

Yet despite these characters’ ‘rightful’ spot amongst pastoral traditions Forster so clearly underscores as being established by their ancestors, they are often obscured by his veneration for – and identification with – the upper-middle classes (particularly the financially stable Margaret and Mrs Wilcox), who come to be most associated with the pastoral imagery found in the text. As a result, analyses of *Howards End* have largely failed to attribute the pastoral atmosphere as deriving (at least in part) from the actions of the farmhands and servants who tend to the property, mirroring how within the novel itself working-class characters aside from the Basts fade into the background, and continue to be ‘displaced’ within pastoral settings by those who reap the benefits of their labour.

It is thus within Forster’s idolization of the pastoral mode that we might come to recognize more fully his genuine attitudes towards the masses of “the very poor” whom the narrator candidly dismisses early in the text. Although they are usually depicted as in some kind of employ – and thus have not fallen into a state of complete financial destitution like the Basts – these marginal individuals’ jobs are by no means secure and were unlikely to have afforded them much leisure or freedom. As Helen C. Long asserts, by the Edwardian period “working people were worse off [than the late nineteenth-century], as prices had risen a little whilst wages had stayed the same” (1993, 6). Domestic workers and farmhands in 1910 thus undoubtedly belonged to the “lowest socio-economic group” of the era, whose plights would have been attributed to their “low level of wages” or “the uncertainty or irregularity of [such] employment” (Powell 1996, 13). Although Forster transfers such plights onto Leonard and Jacky within *Howards End* (and undoubtedly conflates to some degree the financial worries of the rural labouring-classes and the urban poor), this paper nevertheless claims that there exists within Forster’s narratorial statement an element of truth – namely, that there is little genuine concern for the fate of “very poor” who reside and work among the distinctly pastoral sites of country-cottages, open fields, and outside spaces. Whilst the author’s devotion to the preservation of the English countryside undoubtedly shines through, it is within such imagery that we might therefore begin to interrogate the extent to which the author consciously constructed his pastoral idyll as a precarious

site of struggle between these two opposing socio-economic groups; and examine why those who belong to the lower-strata of English life rarely emerge from this backdrop as three-dimensional individuals worthy of critical reflection.

Although *Howards End* is painted as more rural cottage retreat than country-house proper, Forster draws on the traditions and symbols of the country-house panegyric popularised by Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst"³ and expanded upon by novelists such as Jane Austen⁴ to underscore his predilection for the English countryside; as a result, the author's invocation of pastoral imagery often seems reserved exclusively for the upper-middle-class characters with whom *Howards End* is most concerned. In Helen's letters to Margaret that form the opening of the novel, for instance, her first impression of *Howards End* is also ours: she paints it as "old and little, and altogether delightful" in its lack of opulence, upending her expectations it would resemble the "expensive hotels" the sisters already associate with the Wilcoxes (3). She is also struck by the "big wych-elm [...] leaning a little over the house" and cannot help notice that "the air here is delicious" – containing a sweetness that emanates from "a great hedge of [dog-roses...] magnificently tall [and falling...] down in garlands" (3–4).

Whilst *Howards End* and the eponymous country-house of Jonson's poem are not exact replicas – the latter being far larger and grander in reality than Jonson described – the language and tone adopted by Forster does nevertheless recall the poet's adoration of a house which quietly evokes the beauty of its natural surroundings. Just as Penshurst is not "built to envious show / Of touch or marble" and sits "Beneath the broad beech and the chestnut shade" (Jonson 2006, 1–2/12), *Howards End* lies under the protective covering of an ancient tree and possesses a kind of beauty in its relative modesty. Helen's sensory perceptions of the titular property thus offer a picturesque view of England borne out of country-house traditions, where the pastoral mode is configured as "the intense reaction to beauty [...] innocence and purity [...] amid [the] peace [and] calm" (Segal 1981, 3) of the English countryside – in the same manner "the rustics" of Theocritus *Idylls*' were "characterized with – relative – naturalness" (Lyne 2009, xiii).

³ First published as part of his 1616 collection *The Forest*, Jonson's "To Penshurst" is widely regarded as one of the earliest examples of the country-house panegyric, although Amelilia Lanyer's "Description of Cookham" was published five years earlier. For a detailed deconstruction of each poem, see Pohl 2003, 224–232. For further details on the origins and traditions of country-house poetry, see McClung 1977.

⁴ To see how the country-house poem ("To Penshurst" in particular) would later go on to influence Austen's depiction of the country-house, see Graham 2002.

At *Howards End* Margaret too is overwhelmed by the sense of tranquillity she finds there. She is portrayed as savouring “one of those delicious gales of spring, in which leaves still in bud seem to rustle, swept over the land and then fell silent,” and she takes joy in “children playing uproariously in heaps of golden straw” (229). Forster’s imagery lunges at our senses, tempting us to taste, feel, see, and hear the beauty laid out before his heroine so it is unmistakably intertwined with the silence and peace that follows. Here the author amalgamates what Paul Alpers refers to as “the usual ideas of nostalgia and idyllic retreat” typical of the pastoral elegy (1997, 92); the natural world configured as offering both joy and stability in the evocation of its “delicious” surroundings. Although Evelyn Cobley has detailed how “unlike Ruth Wilcox... Margaret is an urban figure” (Cobley 2009, 262), the latter “does find the “peace of country entering into her” (269) by the novel’s close. In a similar vein to how Mrs Wilcox earlier admits that “*Howards End* [...] nearly [being] pulled down [...] would have killed [her]” (71), Margaret also finds that she has “grown quite fond of England” and that to leave it would entail “a real grief” (268). Here England and *Howards End* become synonymous, their loss akin to a family death, and in utilising pastoral conventions to describe the latter Forster appears to covet an old order that contains value in the peace and unassuming beauty of rural life.

As the original owner of *Howards End*, Mrs Wilcox’s affinity with the natural world – and by extension, pastoral life as envisioned by Forster – is captured early in the text, right from her first appearance when she comes “trailing noiselessly over the lawn [...] with] a wisp of hay in her hands” to resolve the chaotic scenes between Aunt Juley, Helen, and her sons Charles and Paul (19). Confronted with the “social counterpart of a motorcar” at Margaret’s luncheon party, she is again akin to “a wisp of hay [or] a flower” that “withers” (63) at the onslaught of frantic, cosmopolitan conversation; an uncompromising embodiment of the countryside that cannot withstand the alert, self-conscious intellectualism of London, just as “the roses and the gooseberries of the wayside gardens” of Hilton (the nearest town to *Howards End*) are “whitened” (16) and therefore tarnished by the dust from the Wilcoxes very own motorcar. Despite the luncheon’s failure Margaret is nevertheless “conscious of a personality that transcended their own and dwarfed their activities” (65), language that foreshadows Mrs Wilcox’s ‘transcendent’ death just a few pages onwards. Her funeral beside *Howards End* is embedded in the rural: it takes place amid “unspoilt country of field and farms” (75) where Henry quietly reflects how his wife “knew no more of worldly wickedness and wisdom than did the flowers in her garden, or the grass in her field” (76). In associating Ruth with the gentle, “unspoilt” innocence of the floral countryside, it is easy to discern

how Henry's affection for Mrs Wilcox parallels Forster's reverence for rural life, and so firm is the author's commitment to adjoining her with the natural beauty of Howards End, he even denies her a spiritual ascent to heaven:

Hour after hour the scene of the internment remained without an eye to witness it. Clouds drifted over from the west; or the church may have been a ship, high-prowed, steering with all its company towards infinity. Towards morning the air grew colder, the sky clearer, the surface of the earth hard and sparkling above the prostrate dead. (76)

The quasi-religious imagery of Mrs Wilcox's funeral initially connotes the possibility of resurrection or afterlife; being buried alone without "an eye to witness it" creates the spatial potential for a spiritual awakening, and the metaphorical depiction of the church as a "high-prowed ship" that might penetrate the "clouds drifting" above "towards infinity" clearly signals the possibility that such an afterlife exists for Ruth after her death. The subsequent sentence, however, reminds the reader that even if such a transcendent activity took place, Mrs Wilcox cannot escape the same earthly fate as others; bluntly characterised as little more than the "prostrate dead" she is reduced to a physical corpse, buried beneath the "hard" earth in a "cold" atmosphere – adjectives that might equally describe her remains.

Despite critics affirming Mrs Wilcox's "continuing spiritual presence as presiding over the twists and turns of the narrative" following her death (Cruz 2015, 404), she is repeatedly described by Forster as being "under the earth" (77), buried beneath a ground that "might freeze over her forever" (80); the very words 'Ruth/earth' even share a monosyllabic, phonetic similarity that points to the permanence of their relationship. Margaret's reflection that "no dust was so truly dust as the contents of that heavy coffin [...] no flowers so utterly wasted as the chrysanthemums that the frost must have withered before morning" (88) continues to propel this notion; Mrs Wilcox quite literally morphs into the "dust" which forms part of the earth underground, and the chrysanthemums are wasted because, being a "flower" at risk of "withering" herself, Ruth has no need for them. Having fulfilled the notion that "she seemed to belong[...] to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it" (19) Forster clearly positions her as "a counterpoise to the disruptive change and flux that he associates with modernity" (Hoy 1985, 222). Both Margaret and Mrs Wilcox – two women for whom money is no object – are thus tied fervently by the author to pastoral ideals of rural peace and the unpretentious charm of the natural world.

To rid his reader of any doubt that such wealthy characters covet a pastoral landscape and lifestyle, Forster juxtaposes his pastoral vision as the most serene and idealized space in which his upper-middle-class characters might flourish with the unwelcoming and suffocating atmosphere of the city; as Teresa Topolovská asserts, in many ways the “country versus city dichotomy may be regarded as one of *Howards End*’s principal elements” (2017, 72). On the surface, London is certainly represented in the tradition of Victorian philanthropists – as one of many “vast manufacturing cities” supported by “complex machinery” and an “industrious [...] dense, population” (Engels 2010, 15). As Margaret and Mrs Wilcox trail the London streets, Forster’s narrator sees the city as “satanic” with ever-seeming “narrower streets oppressing like galleries of a mine” and eliciting a “darkening of the spirit” for those who travel among the fog (72). The simile conceives the city as oppressive and restrictive for both the body and soul, the blackness of a mine and the lack of light underground metaphorically imposing themselves upon Margaret and Mrs Wilcox’s dampened spirits as they conclude their Christmas shopping, and the atmosphere invoking William Blake’s famous vision of the early days of the Industrial Revolution (1994, 319).

That such impressions are wrought immediately after Margaret refuses an impromptu offer to see Howards End posits the titular house as the luminous alternative, and if London evokes the suffocating fires of Hell in those moments it foreshadows Margaret’s first look upon Howards End as something almost heavenly. As she approaches the property alone “it was as if a curtain had risen” and she truly “saw the appearance of the earth” – the narrator outlines “greenage trees” and “vivid colours” where “Tulips [shone like] a tray of jewels” alongside leaves “of black and palest green,” whilst Margaret is additionally “struck by the fertility of the soil; she had seldom been in a garden where the flowers looked so well” (170). In place of the darkness of the city, or the “gray tides of London” (92) that permeate life in the capital,⁵ Howards End offers a world of vibrant colours amid fertile earth that leads to internal revelation for Margaret:

Her evening was pleasant. The sense of flux which had haunted her all the year disappeared for a time [...] She recaptured the sense of place, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and, starting from Howards End, she attempted to realise England. She failed [...] but] an unexpected love of the island awoke in her. (174)

⁵ Julie Brown Smith offers a detailed deconstruction of Forster’s use of the colour gray in Smith (2013, 247–250).

Rather than signal a hurried pace, Forster's short, measured sentences and excessive punctuation evoke an overwhelming sense of calm. The "continual flux of London" and "eternal formlessness" of the city (156) are dismissed in favour of a profound sense of belonging; after just a few moments awestruck and alone, a contented Margaret "decided that the place was beautiful" (171). Here Margaret and Mrs Wilcox's affiliation with the natural world and longing to leave London recalls the "pastoral impulse to escapism" (Gifford 1999, 76), whilst Forster's determination to pit the peaceful confines of Howards End against the velocity of city life equally evokes the "pleasures of rural settlement [against] the threat and loss of eviction" (Williams 2016, 22). Forster's contrasting imagery thus establishes a clear dichotomy between country and city, affirming the latter as capable of stifling communication between friends and instilling shadowy feelings of regret; the former as a pastoral haven in which the upper-middle classes are warmed by the nurturing embrace of mother earth.

For the women who own and inherit Howards End, the idyllic rural landscape of the country-cottage becomes a place of refuge from this dark, unwelcoming city. Whilst Margaret is able to capture a sense of contentment among the calming, natural environment of the property, it is in death that Mrs Wilcox also becomes one with the earth around her "beloved, pastoral nirvana" (Womack 1997, 258). Anne Wright identifies how the novel "does not crudely oppose city and country" for its own sake but as a way of drawing "on the literary tradition of the pastoral which sees in the growth of the city a destruction of an old order" (1984, 32). Confronted with the social ills of modernity, Margaret's experiences at the eponymous house hark back to "the past of England [and] its true values" (Harai 1998, 111) embodied by Mrs Wilcox, who Lionel Trilling believes is "descended from the yeoman class to which Forster gives his strongest sympathies" and therefore possesses a "wisdom which is [both] traditional and ancestral" (1959, 103–4). In continuously pairing Howards End and its wealthy owners with this "nostalgic celebration of traditional English life" (Cobley 2009, 246), the author thus constitutes both women as unmistakably pastoral figures, symbolic of the idyllic and peaceful rural surroundings in which they so often find themselves.

Insomuch as Howards End is paired with Ruth, and then Margaret – women who do not work for a living and might be said to comfortably occupy the upper-middle-class life Forster himself enjoyed – it is easy to see how critics have often perceived the property – and by extension, the pastoral mode employed by the author – as "permanently linked with privilege" (Bradbury 1966, 135). John Colmer summarises this privilege when he contends that "of the labour of farm-workers and factory-workers the novel has nothing

to say” (1983 102), but whilst such figures certainly lack definition in the shadows of their upper-middle-class counterparts, this is not an entirely accurate assessment of how the working-classes are represented in the text. On some occasions Forster does shift his depiction of *Howards End* from pastoral idyll to counter-pastoral garden, and it is in these moments working-class figures (albeit marginally obscured) often come into view.

Defined by Raymond Williams as the “practice of agriculture and trading within a [rural] way of life in which prudence and effort are seen as primary virtues” (2016, 19), the counter-pastoral – also known as “the realistic side of pastoral” (Segal 1981, 4) – stresses the reality of rural life as opposed to Forster’s idealised picture of *Howards End*. Nowhere is ‘reality’ more suddenly imposed upon the novel as in the news of Mrs Wilcox’s passing, and before she is buried peacefully underground (as described above) Forster details her funeral with the reactions of “only the poor [who] remained” by her side (75). A local woodcutter, for instance, is depicted as “perched high above their heads, pollarding one of the churchyard elms” and listening to the “rooks [who] cawed,” as if they “knew too” of Mrs Wilcox’s passing (75). The gravedigger is also shown having “stayed a little longer, poised above the silence and swaying rhythmically” (76) whilst finishing his work, before critically observing the “sheaf of tawny chrysanthemums” which he deems too colourful for an occasion so solemn as a funeral (76).

Here Forster shifts his portrayal of the titular property from pastoral idyll to counter-pastoral cemetery; working figures are pictured in the throes of their labour, “pollarding” overgrown trees and dealing with the messy and unkind ‘reality’ of unexpected death. In such moments these workers are also illustrated as possessing an affinity with their natural surroundings, discerning the mournful cries of sorrowful birds and seeing past the Chrysanthemum’s “symbolic status... of death in Catholic areas of Europe” (Goody 1993, 290). Instead the gravedigger’s heightened awareness of the “coloured flowers” (76) permits him to label them as inappropriate by virtue only of their physical, visual qualities – qualities that went unnoticed by the cultured and urban Wilcoxes. Here workers are portrayed by Forster as being endowed with an innate understanding of their arable surroundings, adapting what William Empson called the “trick of the old pastoral, which [...] was to make simple people express strong feelings... in learned and fashionable language” (1966, 17). In *Howards End* Forster abandons the pretensions of “fashionable language” and instead depicts these outdoor manual labourers as emotionally and practically attuned to nature’s way of doing things.

As in Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden” (1681) and Alexander Pope’s “Windsor Forest” (1713) before him, Forster draws on the literary traditions of the counter-pastoral

typified by Virgil's *Georgics* to also evoke the techniques of agriculture and servitude amid the natural landscape as bringing about this sense of peace, rather than such peace belonging inherently to nature itself. Just as Virgil insists that "the Father of agriculture / [...] decreed it an art / To work the fields" and "would not allow his realm to grow listless from lethargy" (2009, 55: 121–4) the labourers around Howards End continue to tend to the fields and crops of hay; as a result, nature provides "a calm security and a life that will not cheat you / Rich in its own rewards" (Virgil 2009, 85: 467–8) – a description that succinctly foreshadows that 'sense of peace' established and nurtured at the country-house. Poets such as Marvell were some of the first to shift Virgil's sentiments from the hills of Italy to the gardens of England:

How well the skilful gard'ner drew
Of flowers and herbs this dial new;
Where from above the milder sun
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;
And, as it works, th' industrious bee
Computes its time as well as we.
How could such sweet and wholesome hours
Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers! (Marvell 2006, 1712, 65–72)

Here applying agricultural skills and proving industrious amid the natural landscape is essential for the narrator to recognise the "sweet and wholesome hours" offered by life outdoors; the air is "fragrant" from the pollination of hard-working insects and the "flowers and herbs" only inspire peace and joy once they have been subjected to the attentions of the watchful gardener.

The tranquillity Margaret and Helen find at Howards End similarly depends on such people. Safely lodged at the property following Helen's return from abroad, Forster asserts how Margaret only found "the peace of the country [...] entering into her" after the departure of Miss Avery, who "crossed the lawn and merged into the hedge that divided it from the farm" – literally disappearing into and being subsumed by the greenery surrounding the house (269). The sense of renewal at the close of the novel, where "the air was tranquil now" (286), also relies on "Tom's father [who] was cutting the big meadow" (286). In each instance a moment of peace is preceded by the efforts of a servant or agricultural labourer, so that both Schlegels and Wilcoxes might benefit from "such a crop of hay as never!" (293) and adopt the natural world for their own. That

these labourers exist within *Howards End* as marginal working-class characters but are still essential to what Marvell calls the “happy garden-state” (2006, 1712: 57) suggests that Forster was not unaware of how such pastoral environments rely on the agrarian traditions of labour and toil of the earth – just as the titular property relies on the farmhands and servants who tend to its grounds.

Simon During has suggested that although *Howards End* is “still connected to agrarianism, it is not now, and never was, a landed estate [...] and bears no trace of feudal or Austenian class hierarchy” (2012, 114). This claim does not, however, truly consider Forster’s hierarchical construction of the pastoral idyll or his thin characterizations of those workers he professes to admire. In fact, lower-class individuals in *Howards End* would fail Forster’s own estimations of what constitutes a three-dimensional character. In some ways his continuous pairing of farmhands with uncomplicated counter-pastoral virtues (obedience, hard-work, omnipresence) sees them as “constructed round a single idea or quality” (Forster 2005, 73); a characterization the author attributed himself to ‘flat’ characters possessing little substance or autonomy. In a series of lectures later collected and published as *Aspects of the Novel* (1927),⁶ Forster divided characters into ‘flat’ and ‘round’ to draw a distinction between those in whom he believed an author invested the capacity to surprise, and those who existed merely to serve the machinations of the plot and/or whose “dominant impression [...] can be summed up in a formula” (Forster 2005, 78–9).

By his own standards, the gravedigger, Tom’s father and even “silly old Miss Avery” (172) therefore fail to make a lasting impression. They are marred by “pastoral descriptions” that posit them as “rough and unpolished [...] diamonds” (Hoggart 2009, 5) – as vital to the safeguarding of the English country-house and therefore remotely admirable, but drab and spiritless when viewed independently from the novel as a whole. Miss Avery in particular functions merely as a “comic character [...] of pastoral myth” who is designed to “make profound remarks [...] with unexpectedly great effects” (Empson 1966, 32) – as when she bumps into Margaret at *Howards End* and mistook her “for Ruth Wilcox” (172). Instead, it is the upper-middle-class characters served by these working individuals who come to be most frequently associated with the pastoral idyll.

⁶ Forster was invited to give the annual Clark Lectures, in the field of English literature and sponsored by Trinity College, Cambridge, in the academic year 1926–7. It was the first time a novelist was chosen to deliver the lecture series. For more information see Stallybrass (2005, xix–xxix).

There is, however, some indication that Forster's evocation of this pastoral idyll nevertheless recognises the ill-treatment of the "very poor" at the hands of those possessing more comfort and privilege. Whilst Margaret is initially searching for a replacement home after the Schlegels are evicted from Wickham Place, for example, she asks Henry directly: "can't you turn out your tenant [at Howards End] and let it to us?" (132). Forster does just that, painting the tenant Mr Bryce as a criminal who "had no right to sublet" and offhandedly declaring that to "define him further [would be] a waste of time" (168).

At first sight it once again appears that lower-class characters are meanly displaced in favour of the wealthy Schlegels. But although the undefined Mr Bryce *is* eventually evicted in favour of the Schlegel sisters, the authorial/narratorial tone in both scenes remains uncertain and indistinct; it hints at Forster both acknowledging *and* pointing the reader to recognise the inherent flaws of his pastoral heroine. The conversation between Henry and Margaret, for instance, is immediately followed by an exchange between the pair over socialist values, which Margaret hypocritically defends – just moments after Forster has depicted her playfully but sincerely inquired about inhabiting Howards End, which she knows to be occupied. Similarly, the discussion about Mr Bryce in Henry's office at the Imperial and West African Rubber Company is observed by the narrator with a note of disapproval. Whilst it is Margaret herself who inquires into Mr Bryce's personality, her request comes off as little more than a polite attempt or bourgeois display into the interests of the lower classes. Rather than insist upon knowing Mr Bryce, she meekly accepts that "nobody cared" and permits the Wilcoxes to "on his misdeeds... descant [him] profusely" (168). Yet instead of indulging the reader with the details of their disparaging remarks the narrator moves on swiftly, compressing the conversation into a short, five-line paragraph before concluding Margaret's visit entirely; a compression that hints toward some degree of discomfort in how the lower-classes are discussed by those who might have them evicted from their home at any given moment. If "Virgil's *Georgics* were poems [...] concerned with industrious means of living in an imperfect world" (Harris 2016, 179) it stands to reason that Forster's allusion to such verses suggest there might be something 'imperfect' in the pastoral idyll the narrator of *Howards End* has already professed to admire.

Building upon David Bradshaw's tentative suggestion that it might be "just possible that Forster wishes us to *disapprove* of the Schlegel's blinkered immersion in Literature and Art" (2007, 155; original emphasis), we might see how the author similarly wishes his reader to disapprove of this hostile and ignorant treatment by the Schlegels and Wilcoxes toward the working-class characters who do feature in the text. Disembarking

at Shrewsbury on her journey to Oniton Grange Margaret, for instance, dismisses her chauffer as an “Italian [...] who dearly loved making her late” (179); and later at Howards End, Dolly Wilcox dismisses Miss Avery as “only a farm woman” from whom Henry can “get good value out of” (227). Both characterisations lack colour or insight, and expose the flippant prejudices of the ruling-classes toward those who help make their comfortable lives possible. Forster’s own affection for the working-classes is instead illustrated in Leonard’s final trip to Howards End, where the clerk hails the croppers and haymakers of the countryside as “men of the finest type” and “England’s hope” (276). Although they are not shown the meanest gratitude by their employers, such heroic descriptions imply Forster as recognising the inherent virtues in the working-classes who undertake such counter-pastoral activity, despite no longer working the land for themselves. Whilst “Margaret operates under the nostalgic assumption that feudal ownership of land allowed human beings to live harmoniously within nature” (2009, 277), Forster’s invocation of the Georgic mode appears to instead tacitly acknowledge that it was in fact “the depopulation of the British countryside after the Corn Laws [that] was precisely what made it possible for the bohemian fringe of the middle class to move into their country cottages and play at being rustics” (Delaney 1988, 290). In these moments, Forster attempts to emphasise the resilience of the working labourers at Oniton Grange and Howards End who literally support the class structure which the pastoral idyll depends upon to survive; in acknowledging them as “the finest type,” he suggests their displacement at the hands of Mrs Wilcox and Margaret might not necessarily be for the benefit of countryside and nation.

The narrator of *Howards End* is not, however, always so generous toward working-class individuals. David Cannadine asserts how it was only at the turn-of-the-century that “the worship of the country house [became] a national obsession” (1994, 245) and properties such as Howards End began to be coveted by those outside of the aristocracy and landed gentry such as the Wilcoxes. This obsession drew on a “nostalgia” for the pastoral that presumed “country houses were the setting for a way of life more exquisite, more cultivated and more refined than that which lesser mortals are capable of living” (Cannadine 1994, 243), and we can see in Forster’s novel how – despite cultivating the peace and tranquillity that Mrs Wilcox and Margaret assume for themselves, the “very poor” characters in the novel are often portrayed as such “lesser mortals” unworthy of belonging to country-house (and Forster’s interpretation of pastoral) traditions.

Once installed at Oniton, for example, Margaret amalgamates the servants and reduces them to the “lower wheels of the machine” (188) – an industrial metaphor

that pairs them with the unpleasant associations of the city *and* which robs them of their individuality. Although the third-person narration is focalised through Margaret, there is little suggestion the narrator is opposed to her somewhat patronising label for those who ensure her stay in the country is comfortable (unlike the scene concerning Mr Bryce). Consequently, she reflects how these nameless “wheels” were simply “paid to be serious, and enjoyed being agitated” (188), absolving herself of any responsibility to mark them out as individuals and pay them any proper or extended courtesy. The healing properties of the countryside are once again undermined by the casual dismissal of the lower-classes, and in this instance, Forster fails to challenge Margaret’s unconscious bias.

The woodcutter at Mrs Wilcox’s funeral is treated with similar disdain, described by the narrator as one who “grunts” and is currently “mating” (76) – animalistic language that relegates him beneath the good manners and civility of the upper-classes. Throughout the text, these marginal workers are repeatedly derided as either too wild, too robotic or too inconsequential to ‘belong’ to the pastoral idyll, and whilst the peace proffered by Howards End might rely on the sweat and labour of such characters, they are unable to truly partake in it. Just as Stefan Collini asserts how “for the respectable Victorian [...] work was the chief sphere in which moral worth was developed and displayed” (Collini 1994, 105–6), Forster too betrays a middle-class, Edwardian weakness for finding value in the working-classes only when they are shown happily toiling the land and mutely serving their social superiors. As a result, these “theories of modern pastoral” to which the author often subscribes “go some distance in disestablishing the liberal merits of Forster’s ‘only connect’ rhetoric” (Christie 2013, 14).

In adopting the style of the *Georgics* there does exist some semblance of admiration for those hard-working labourers in *Howards End* – for counter-pastoral virtues exhibited plainly and with modesty. Yet as fully realised individuals such characters remain ‘flat’ and obscured, often depicted in ugly and unflattering terms and never emerging from the background of the novel to surprise the reader “in a convincing way” (Forster 2005, 81). Being “himself firmly a Schlegel” (Gransden 1962, 55), Forster renegades on his vision of such workers as “England’s hope” (276) on multiple occasions and seemingly partakes in the very prejudice he is trying to expose, conforming to the notion that nineteenth-century “liberals [often] showed a lack of sympathy for the urban and rural poor” (Pilbeam 1990, 239). Instead, he repeatedly readjusts the pastoral arcadia of Howards End to better suit the class privilege of Margaret and Mrs Wilcox, leaving little room for proper redistribution of wealth or for any meaningful future improvements amongst

the conditions of the working-classes. In their toil of the arable land and servitude to the primary characters, these labourers thus ensure that the eponymous property – and by extension, their position within it – continues to not merely survive but positively flourish “as never” (293) before by the novel’s end.

Although Forster’s upper-middle-class characters never take it upon themselves to advance the lives of these “very poor” characters in the manner the Schlegel sisters take up their cause in assisting the lower-middle-class Leonard, there does exist within the pastoral environments of *Howards End* some indication that the author at least anticipates the impending socio-economic improvements due to those on the other side of the Edwardian class divide. John Benson touches upon Forster’s reticence in identifying with (or improving the lives of) his working characters when he labels the years 1875–1914 as “a period neither of unthreatened stability nor of revolutionary change [but] rather a transitional period in the history of work [...] which acquiescence was probably as common as struggle and continuity almost certainly more common than change” (2016, 81). Instead there are moments where the pastoral idyll is constructed as conscious of – and a harbinger for – the social change he recognizes as on the horizon, and it is within such moments that privileged characters such as Mrs Wilcox and Margaret are forced to contend with the possibility that their superior social status is as fragile as their displacement of the “very poor” in the rural spaces they so covet and admire.

Mrs Wilcox’s description of the wych-elm that occupies the boundary between the garden and the meadow, for instance, captures her fondness for scientifically inaccurate – but sentimental – rural superstitions:

There are pig’s teeth stuck into the trunk [...] The country people put them in long ago, and they think that if they chew a piece of the bark it will cure the toothache. The teeth are almost grown over now, and no one comes to the tree. (61)

By using a non-possessive determiner Mrs Wilcox confirms the otherness of “the country people” in opposition to herself; they belong to the labouring rather than the leisure classes, Forster once again positioning agrarian workers as subservient to the pleasures of the owners of *Howards End*. Yet he also displays her fascination with the rural traditions that once took place in the grounds of her country-cottage. Margaret too expresses her “love [for] folklore and all festering superstitions” (61), and Surabhi Banerjee has noted how the wych-elm offers “constant suggestions of companionship” (1995, 8) for both women over the course of the novel.

The pleasure they might derive from such a tale, however, is bittersweet. Mrs Wilcox's observation that "no one comes to the tree" anymore suggests those woodcutters and servants currently working at Howards End no longer abide by simplistic country folklore. If the Elementary Education Acts of 1870–1893 increased access to education, set a lower age-limit for school leavers and ensured a certain standard of education must be achieved by such leavers,⁷ it is not unreasonable to assume that working-class children who benefitted from such changes might have become field labourers and domestic workers such as those installed at Howards End, and no longer subscribe to some of the superstitions valued by their forebears. Such fantastic superstitions reinforce Mrs Wilcox's subconscious opinions of the "very poor" as simple-minded, uneducated country folk, and the metaphor of the wych-elm highlights how the upper-middle classes are happy to exhibit a trivial interest in the lives of such workers, but cannot quite stomach the prospect of genuine social change. Margaret and Mrs Wilcox's fondness for the wych-elm and the folktale of the pig's teeth thus unmasks deeper anxieties about the social progression of those "country people" who serve them, with Forster utilising a natural symbol situated within the pastoral idyll of Howards End to illuminate how increasing access to education is dampening the simple pleasures of country life for the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes.

That the (re)construction of the pastoral within *Howards End* betrays a longing for rural simplicity *and* is nevertheless influenced by the precarious foundations upon which such a tradition has begun to crack suggests its function as the idyllic retreat for the upper-middle classes is predicated on at least some degree of uncertainty. When Margaret observes how "even the weeds she was idly plucking out of the porch were intensely green" (170) on her first visit to Howards End, for instance, the author complicates natural imagery once more; despite attempting to remove the unwanted weeds infiltrating the property, Margaret cannot help but admire the strength and vibrancy of their appearance. The plants attempt to cross the threshold of the country-house becomes a metonymic representation of the ascension of the lower classes, and although Margaret is not quite ready to welcome them with open arms, she does begin to see them as more than peripheral figures.

Outside of Howards End, the narrator invokes a shifting natural world to exhibit these feelings of unease, especially during the Schlegel's seaside holiday in Swanage.

⁷ For more information on how the working classes were educated in the era in which *Howards End* was written, see Stephens 1998 (77–98).

Following a quarrel between the two sisters, Helen laments the Wilcoxes reliance on “telegrams and anger” (148) and Margaret is forced to defend their “public qualities” (149) that heavily contributed to the building of England’s infrastructure; indeed she goes as far as to assert that both sisters “couldn’t sit here without having our throats cut” if it were not for families like the Wilcoxes, who stamped out the human urge to “savagery” (149). In the silence after their heated exchange, the narrator moves their gaze to the Dorset coastline:

England was alive, throbbing through all her estuaries, crying for joy through the mouths of all her gulls, and the north wind, with contrary motion, blew stronger against her rising seas. What did it mean? For what end are her fair complexities, her changes of soil, her sinuous coast? (150)

Forster extends his metonymic England beyond the confines of Howards End, and here the nation does not sit peacefully in the present but is active and “alive.” Full of “contrary motions” but nevertheless “crying for joy” and “blowing stronger” against her borders, England is represented as something both tumultuous and exciting; physically taxing but spiritually invigorating for the Schlegel sisters as they observe English life at its perimeter. That such emotions are equally elicited from the pair’s debate just moments prior heavily indicates at the connotations behind such imagery, “changes of soil” implying imminent changes in the composition of social groups in English society; the “sinuous coast” signalling the now fractious but flexible Edwardian class-structure. Forster depicts the rural coastline as a physical manifestation of the social changes taking place at the time, and for sisters and narrator there is both “joy” and “confusion” (illustrated in the chapter’s concluding rhetorical questions) to be found in such changes. E.P. Thompson has detailed how many nineteenth-century liberal observers found the poor “unsightly, a source of guilt [and] a heavy charge on the country” (2013, 860), and in relegating such characters to the borders of the text it is difficult to imagine how the author largely differs from such a description. But whilst Forster (like Margaret) is not quite braced for the social revolution that is to come, these somewhat conflicting impressions of England’s natural landscape do suggest he recognizes the need for – and inevitability of – at least some degree of social change.

Ultimately, however, it is the Schlegels who are welcomed by the most celebrated pastoral space of Howards End by the novel’s close. Forster shows some affection for his working-class characters and is keen to absolve his failures of representation by

commenting how authors such as Dickens' "immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness [of character] than the severer critics admit" (Forster 2005, 76). Yet this admits merely a scant awareness of his own privilege (as illustrated in the blurred authorial/narratorial tone and self-conscious depiction of the English landscape) and does not constitute an authentic allegiance to those lower-class individuals who are repeatedly displaced from the natural world and disparaged by their employers throughout the text. In the conclusion of the novel Forster instead betrays his predilection for individuals who resemble himself. Arriving at the property several months pregnant with Leonard's child, Helen is framed by the trappings of nature in a fashion that recalls the beauty of the pre-Raphaelites: whilst "one of her hands played with the buds" hanging over the porch "the wind ruffled her hair [and] the sun glorified it" (246). Similarly, it is Margaret who captures a sense of tranquillity once finally installed at Howards End, observing how the "present flowed by [her and Helen] like a stream. The trees rustled. It had made music before they were born, and would continue after their deaths, but its song was of the moment" (269). The pastoral idyll is thus reconstituted as a 'safe haven' for the immoral individual cast out by the dominant middle classes, and offers auditory confirmation that the Schlegel sisters' way of life will be immortal; it signals that they will inherit Howards End, and that Helen and Leonard's child will "continue" to benefit from the rural landscape and the expenditure of those who cultivate it.

Forster's assertion that he is "not concerned with the very poor" has been cited as evidence that he is guilty of a "casual dismissal" (Turner 2000, 341) of those most-in-need in Edwardian society, but his inclusion of so many "very poor" characters within *Howards End* suggests he was also aware of the difficulties he faced in portraying such individuals with genuine empathy and insight. Yet just as "Jacky and Leonard appear [to some as] little more than embodiments of period liberal sloganeering" (Christie 2013, 25), the "very poor" fail to emerge as three-dimensional figures. It thus appears that Lionel Trilling's early argument that "the class struggle [in the novel is] not between the classes but within a single class – the middle" (Trilling 1959, 102) set an unintended precedent that saw such minor characters in Forster's oeuvre as rarely worthy of closer critical inspection. Yet the "very poor" remain, and in being so obviously and prominently displaced within pastoral environments by Margaret and Mrs Wilcox, "*Howards End* spotlights not the sturdiness of Forster's liberal values, but their relative frailty" (Bradshaw 2007, 171). In his affection for such upper-middle-class characters over the pastoral manual labourer, Forster betrays his

own reticence toward genuine social change; his fear that “every Westerly gale might blow the wych-elm down and bring the end of all things” (286), including pastoral folklore and the life of the countryside to which he subscribes; his willingness to modify the pastoral mode to evict “the small independent farmer” who embodies the “moral life” of peace in Virgil’s *Georgics* (Lyne 2009, xxv–xxvi); and, finally, his determination to create a new rural order that is symbolised by *Howards End*, and reserved only for the wealthy individuals who reside there.

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