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Poets, Empire-builders and Proles
Class Conflict and England's Destiny in E. M. Forster's *Howards End*

Who shall inherit England?

> 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? Does she belong to those who have moulded her and made her feared by other lands, or to those who have added nothing to her power, but have somehow seen her, seen the whole island at once, lying as a jewel in a silver sea, sailing as a ship of souls, with all the brave world's fleet accompanying her towards eternity? (Forster, *Howards End* 165)

The last question posed by this passage deals with one of the crucial issues in *Howards End*: "To whom does England belong?", or—as Lionel Trilling first put it—"Who shall inherit England?" (102). The answer is not easy: "England here is a feminized national body whose ownership is disputed between two highly romanticized factions or castes, the nation-builders and those capable of imagining the nation—the soldiers, that is, and […] the poets. But this division not only simplifies but, in some respects, actually falsifies the national conflict that the novel presents" (Parrinder 301). In fact, although the novel is structured around the contrast between the Wilcoxes, wealthy businessmen, and the Schlegels, "aristocratic" intellectuals, the plot includes a third element that complicates this too simple polarization: the Basts, whose social position is more difficult to describe. One could label them as pauperized petit-bourgeois: Leonard, whose ancestors were dispossessed-and-urbanized farm labourers, is a low-level clerk, and his prospective wife Jacky is an ex-prostitute: "One guessed him

as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization has 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 End* 109). With the three families who represent different social strata, *Howards End* (1910) can be read as an analysis of class relations in England at the turn of the 20th century, with the ambition of prophecy. Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) was thirty when he composed it: the England represented in the novel was for him "the here and now, and formed a sad contrast with the world he saw vanishing" (Page 76).

The story could be briefly summarized as the encounter of the Schlegel sisters, on the one hand, with Leonard Bast and his humble, dull life that is only enlightened by his passion for books; on the other hand, with the Wilcoxes and their country-house. Two narrative lines interweave: a love plot—with Margaret who marries Henry Wilcox, and Helen who first falls for his son Paul and then lives a one-night affair with Leonard, which leads to the birth of a child—and a "political" plot, with a class conflict that involves the three families as well as the English social structure in the years before the First World War. [1]

The terms I have chosen for the first part of my title are intended to define the three groups of characters at a metaphorical level as well as at a sociological one: the enlightened bourgeoisie (the poets), the ruthless capitalists (the empire-builders) and the representatives of the half-submerged yet aspiring lower-middle class (the proles). The last word—which overtly recalls George Orwell's "swarming disregarded masses, 85 per cent of the population of Oceania" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (59)—probably renders well the Basts' condition "on the verge of the abyss," although they cannot be properly identified as working class.[2] The

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1 Rex Warner, acknowledging his debt to Trilling, writes that "*Howards End* is a novel about England's fate. It is a story of the class war" (22).

2 According to H. G. Oliver, "Leonard is more satisfying as a symbol than as a character in a novel; and he symbolizes, roughly, the British working class that, deprived of its place on the land, has never quite come to terms with the modern 'civilization' that is offered it instead" (48).

difficulty of assigning Leonard "a definite status" is acknowledged by the narrator at the beginning of Chapter VI:

> The boy, Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility. He was not in the abyss, but he could see it, and at times people whom he knew had dropped in, and counted no more. […] Had he lived some centuries ago, in the brightly coloured civilizations of the past, he would have had a definite status, his rank and his income would have corresponded. But in his day the angel of Democracy had arisen, enshadowing the classes with leathern wings, and proclaiming, "All men are equal—all men, that is to say, who possess umbrellas," and so he was obliged to assert gentility, lest he slipped into the abyss where nothing counts, and the statements of Democracy are inaudible. (44)

What seems to be suggested, here, is that class confusion rules modern times, and Democracy is only social sham; and yet, Democracy has always been at the centre of Forster's intellectual vision and creative imagination. It is no coincidence that he chose, for his collection of essays, articles and broadcasts, the title *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951). In "What I Believe" (1939), the best known piece of the book, he says he believes in aristocracy, of which he gives an interesting definition: "Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos" (82).

Forster is clearly evoking Matthew Arnold's "best selves," the "*aliens*" of each class, "persons who are mainly led, not by their class spirit, but by a general *humane* spirit, by the love of human perfection" (Arnold 109).[3] But Forster's aristocracy is a wider entity than Arnold's; it is formed by the best members to be found not only in "all classes"—that is, the Barbarians, Philistines and Populace, as the aristocratic, the middle and the work-

[3] On Arnold's influence on Forster, see McGurk. The sentence "to see life steadily and see it whole," which often recurs in *Howards End*, is also taken from Arnold's poem "To a Friend", referred to Sophocles: "Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole;/The mellow glory of the Attic stage,/Singer of sweet Colonus, and its child" (Arnold 2).

ing classes are named in *Culture and Anarchy*—but also in "all nations." The twentieth-century writer's view is more inclusive than the Victorian's; though they share liberal-humanist values, Forster transcends class distinctions to adopt a truly democratic and cosmopolitan perspective, as later witnessed by the multiracial and multiethnic vision of *A Passage to India* (1924).

Howards End, like the latter novel, is much more ambitious in scope than Forster's earlier fiction, as it focuses on the condition of England in Edwardian times and England's destiny: "The period it deals with is the high-water-mark of economic and intellectual expansion. It is no accident that the heyday of the Schlegels (the 'Bloomsbury' liberal people in the book) was also the heyday of the Wilcoxes (the Tory business people)" (Gransden 55). Forster seems to evoke these two families, and recall what they stand for, in "What I Believe," where he speaks explicitly of "the world of personal relationships and the world of business relationships" (78).

Further on in the essay, he writes of his ideal "aristocrats," whose temple is "the Holiness of the Heart's Affection, and [whose] kingdom, though they never possess it, is the wide-open world" (83). Interestingly enough, "affection" is invoked by Margaret in the novel as a fundamental value. She defends it when she tries to silently help her younger sister Helen in a moment of crisis, using "the voiceless language of sympathy" (10): "The affections are more reticent than the passions, and their expression more subtle" (10); when she bitterly realizes that it is lacking in her husband, who surrounds himself with the wrong sort of people and who seems, anyhow, not to care much for them: "If Henry had shown real affection, she would have understood, for affection explains everything. But he seemed without sentiment" (194); and when she tells him how fond she is of her sister: "It all turns on affection now. […] Affection. Don't you see? […] I like Helen very much, you not so much […] And affection, when reciprocated, gives rights" (271).[4]

[4] Forster wrote in a later article, "De Senectute" (1957), that "[t]he true history of the human race is the history of human affection. In comparison with it all other histories—including economic history—are false" (18).

It is evident from these passages that some of the main issues in *Howards End* are taken up and developed in "What I Believe" and in other pieces of *Two Cheers for Democracy*. As Frank Kermode has pointed out, some of the recurring elements in Forster's thought that are present in that essay are "touchstone passages" which he cites from "great works of the past […], assuming in his audience a decent or sufficient acquaintance with them" (132). Among these scholarly allusions, for instance, the order/muddle antithesis, borrowed from the Italian of the thirteenth-century Spiritual Franciscan poet Jacopone da Todi, and related by Forster to the praise and the defense of art (Kermode 133-34), is particularly interesting. *A Passage to India* is, in fact, based on that contrast: "India is a muddle" is one of the novel's leitmotifs, as opposed to England's supposed order.[5]

The plot of *Howards End* is based on contrasts which, in this case, coincide with the opposite worldviews of the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes: inner life and personal relationships *vs* the world of "telegrams and anger," art and culture *vs* money, freedom of the mind *vs* social conventions. According to Norman Page, what are particularly interesting in this novel are "the structural principles that underlie the deployment of character, incident and setting; and here we find ourselves on familiar ground, for Forster turns again to symmetries and antitheses similar to those used in his earlier novels" (78). But while the behaviour of such peripheral characters as Charles, Evie and Dolly Wilcox—whom we could call "flat" (to borrow Forster's own narrative category)—seems to confirm those clear-cut dichotomies, some of the statements uttered by the main characters (or expressed through free indirect speech) contradict them. David Bradshaws's question—"*are* the Schlegels the *antithesis* of the Wilcoxes?" (154)—highlights the novel's ambiguity. Giving examples that prove "the Schlegels' blindness, crassness, hypocrisy, and bigotry," and support the

[5] "Forster's folk are famously always in a muddle: they don't know what they want or how to get it. It has been noted before that this might be a deliberate ethical strategy, an expression of the belief that the true motivations of human agents are far from rational in character. […] But what interests me is that his narrative structure is muddled also; impulsive, meandering, irrational […]" (Smith 2003).

view that "Forster never intended us to be as favourably disposed towards them as the first few chapters of the novel seem to encourage us to be," Bradshaw argues that "Forster's aim may have been to discredit the Schlegels by exposing them as merely skin-deep progressives" (157). This is a rather controversial statement, that becomes even more challenging if we add to the previous question another one introducing issues of narrative technique, and concerning the omniscient narrator's role and the point of view: to what extent is Margaret the author's mouthpiece?[6]

Places and people

> A place, as well as a person, may catch the glow. Don't you see that all this leads to comfort in the end? It is part of the battle against sameness. (*Howards End* 314)

There is no doubt that the pivotal image in *Howards End* is the eponymous country-house in Hilton, Hertfordshire.[7] This is the fulcrum of the text not only because it is here that the novel opens and closes and that its important episodes take place, but also because it carries a strong political and ethical significance: it stands for rural England, its traditions and cultural heritage, as well as for liberal values and the life of the spirit. In Margaret's free indirect speech, Howards End "was English, and the wych-elm that she saw from the window was an English tree" (192). Although it is a relatively modest farmhouse, not an aristocratic country-mansion, affective relations, a crisis of inheritance and family feuds unfurl around it: "[Howards End] is the main link between a realistic plot which can be grasped at one reading and

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6 Barbara Rosecrance calls the attention on the narrator's voice in the use of the techniques of self-dramatization and manipulation of the reader, and in the frequency and length of intervention, as well as on "the tendency of the narrator to step out of the action to formulate its larger significance. […] No other Forster narrator establishes so personal a hegemony" (121).

7 Howards End was modelled on Forster's own childhood home in Rooksnest, north of London, located near Stevenage, Hertfordshire, where he and his mother lived from 1883 to 1893.

a pattern of symbolism which throws the events against a wider background and makes them illuminate the modern world in general" (Beer 101). Its crucial role is also rendered by the different ways in which the various characters relate to it. For Ruth Wilcox, who descends from English yeoman stock, the Howards, it means much more than her family's property, her inheritance and her own past: it represents a whole community of resident workers who for decades shared the land and the house with its owners; for Henry, instead, it is merely an old estate, "one of those converted farms" (128) that needs repairing, refurbishing, and some rebuilding; for Margaret, it embodies a mystic link to Ruth, as she is the only other character in the novel who feels its magic:

> Her [Margaret's] evening was pleasant. The sense of flux which had haunted her all the year disappeared for a time. She forgot the luggage and the motor-cars, and the hurrying men who know so much and connect so little. *She recaptured the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and, starting from Howards End, she attempted to realize England*. She failed—visions do not come when we try, though they may come through trying. But an unexpected love of the island awoke in her, connecting on this side with the joys of the flesh, on that with the inconceivable. (191, my emphasis)

Howards End is the place where Margaret will try to reunite and "connect" the three families—three classes, actually—and construct the England of the future. So, if we take the house as the main signifier in the text, the question of who will inherit it after Ruth's death (as she is the last member of the Howard family), can be considered as the *mise en abîme* of the bigger question of the novel: "who shall inherit England?".

Howards End is defined, in spatial terms, not only by its country house, but also by a series of urban spaces, each of which is connected to a character or to one of the households who inhabit the text. So, the offices of the Imperial and West African Rubber Company are Henry Wilcox's reign, as Howards End is Ruth's. The description of these offices—which are wholly consistent with the world of "telegrams and anger"—is shot through with irony. When Margaret goes there for the first time, she hopes to get a clearer idea of the "main sources of [Henry's] wealth" (183): "Not that a visit to the office cleared things up. […] But

perhaps she was seeing the Imperial side of the company rather than its West African, and Imperialism always had been one of her difficulties" (183). A difficulty she has inherited from her father, Ernst Schlegel, a German "idealist, inclined to be dreamy," who defended poetry, philosophy and music, and attacked any sort of imperialism—either Pan-Germanism or British Imperialism—as his was "the Imperialism of the air" (28).

The neighbourhoods in which the characters live and their residences are very important in this novel: in London, Wickham Place (the Schlegels), Camelia Road and Tulse Hill (the Basts) and Ducie Street (the Wilcoxes); in the rest of England, Howards End, Hertfordshire, and Oniton Grange, Shropshire. But also such briefly-mentioned places as Charles Wilcox's houses in Epsom and Six Hills, and Aunt Juley's in Swanage. Wickham Place, where the Schlegel family had been living for years, is very much loved by Margaret and Helen; so, when they have to leave it because its lease has expired, and "[t]he particular millionaire who owned [its] freehold […] desired to erect Babylonian flats upon it" (103), the removal becomes an intensely dramatic event, whose description can be compared to that of a funeral:

> Houses have their own ways of dying, falling as variously as the generations of men, some with a tragic roar, some quietly, but to an after-life in the city of ghosts, while from others—and thus was the death of Wickham Place—the spirit slips before the body perishes. […] Then it fell. Navvies came, and spilt it back into the grey. With their muscles and their beery good temper, they were not the worst of undertakers for a house which had always been human, and had not mistaken culture for an end. (239-40)

London is very much present in *Howards End*. The introductory paragraphs, at the beginning of Chapter XIII, render the physical changes it goes through with great narrative strength; the narrator compares the city to a living organism that "rose and fell in a continual flux," ineluctably expanding, and damaging the landscape as well as human beings: "Nature withdrew: the leaves were falling by midsummer; the sun shone through dirt with an admired obscurity. […] We reach in desperation beyond the fog, beyond the very stars, the voids of the universe are ransacked to justify *the monster,* and stamped

with a human face" (102-03, my emphasis). The encroachment of suburbia on the countryside is well expressed by Margaret's sad remark, at the end of the novel, that "London is creeping" (316), and will probably extend as far as Howards End. This reminds us of the *incipit* of H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1909), with the description of London's continual growth and unnatural expansion, which, in its turn, evokes William Cobbett's "Great Wen:" in all these cases, London is compared to a diseased body or a monster.

Throughout *Howards End*, one can sense a note of nostalgia for times past, when the countryside was still a source of inspiration; a nostalgia that is expressed by several allusions to pastoral memory and national folklore. One of the finest passages occurs in Chapter XXXIII, on Margaret's second visit to Howards End; wholly captivated by the beautiful landscape, she wonders why England has not "a great mythology," and her folklore has "stopped with the witches and the fairies." At this point she makes a comment that might be Forster's own:

> The great estates that throttle the south of Hertfordshire were less obtrusive here, and the appearance of the land was neither aristocratic nor suburban. To define it was difficult, but Margaret knew what it was not: it was not snobbish. […] In these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole, group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth, connect—connect without bitterness until all men are brothers. (249-50)

This passage seems to focus on the possible destiny of the English nation, wondering whether its future may lie in a rural economy. A question that had already found a positive answer in the final soliloquy of Forster's *The Longest Journey* (1907), with uneducated and inarticulate Stephen Wonham—a Wiltshire boy who chooses to work on the land—as the inheritor of the nation (Parrinder 299-300). *Howards End* undoubtedly "takes up and expands the theme touched on at the end of *The Longest Journey*: who shall inherit England?" (Colmer 86), but can we equate its conclusion to that of the previous novel? It is certainly more complex and problematic, as it is Leonard and Helen's child who will come into possession of the house, and, symbolically, of England: that is, the offspring of two different

classes, who will live in the (however small) estate of the Howards, the representatives of the landed gentry.[8]

It is a fact that several contradictions arise when the narrator seems to exalt the stability of the countryside and of the traditional country-house as opposed to the "transitoriness" of the metropolis and of a London office. For instance, Oniton Grange, which belongs to Henry Wilcox, and where his daughter Evie gets married, is represented as a holiday site for rich townspeople; and yet, being an "historically determined place" like London, it is more authentic than Ruth Wilcox's "mythic" house (De Zordo 161-63). Then, towards the end of the novel, on Leonard's visit to Howards End with the intention of confessing his "sin" to Margaret (the "seduction" of her younger sister), two typologies of Englishmen appear on Hilton's Arcadian landscape as England's eligible inheritors: the yeoman and the Imperialist. We see them through Leonard's gaze: the first type, "half clodhopper, half board-school prig," is "England's hope;" the second "is not what he thinks or seems. He is a destroyer. He prepares the way for cosmopolitanism, and though his ambitions may be fulfilled, the earth that he inherits will be grey" (301).

At this point we should ask a further question: whether this "version of pastoral" (if I may borrow the expression from William Empson's book) is Forster's way of dealing with the two interrelated crises that, according to Peter Widdowson, *Howards End* represents: the crisis of Liberalism and that of the realistic novel in the 20th century. This text is a type of "fantasy," a fictional mode that has always been to Forster's taste (being one of the "aspects of the novel" in his eponymous essay), "a device for affirming an uncertain social vision against the logic of more 'empirical' perceptions. And it is here, of course, that the two 'crises' intersect" (Widdowson 14-15). Since the world can no longer be "'realistically' *described* without exposing the inefficacy of liberal-humanist values, […] the world has to be *remade*, by fictional contrivance, to accommodate

[8] Paul Peppis shares the view of those critics who read *Howards End* as a "condition of England" novel, and argues that "most of Forster's literary works can be understood as national allegories that diagnose an ailing nation and offer literary cures for the malaise they anatomise" (47).

them" (15). But this is only a—not wholly successful—attempt on the writer's part that confirms the complexity and ambivalence of *Howards End*: "[the] movement between 'realistic' specificity and generalizing rhetoric […] is characteristic of the novel as a whole, and bears witness to its uncertainty of mode" (20). Widdowson's argument is very convincing, also because his wide-ranging analysis takes into consideration the broad contexts in which this novel should be read.[9] Virginia Woolf, who held Forster in high esteem, had already expressed similar doubts in "The Novels of E. M. Forster," an article published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1927); she considered *Howards End* a novel with all the qualities of a masterpiece but without being one, owing to the conflict of mode—the gap between realism and symbolism, poetry and satire, comedy and morality (110).

On the other hand, one of the strong points of the text lies in the narrative threads that "connect" its different parts: characters as well as places. So, the end of the novel is foreshadowed in Chapter XI: Mrs Wilcox's bequest of the farm to Margaret—which stands for the bond between rural virtue and the liberal ideal—somehow prefigures Margaret's decision to bequeath it, in her turn, to Helen and Leonard's son, as announced by Henry to his children in the last chapter. So, the heir of Howards End will be somebody who "synthesizes earth and intellect and embodies what hope remains for England's survival" (Rosecrance 108). And all this is made possible by the presence/absence of Ruth Wilcox, a character, who, like Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India*, "means" more after her death than before it, and whose role in the plot "is at once practical and highly symbolic" (Crews 111).

"Only connect…"

> Not even to herself dare [Margaret] blame Helen. She would not assess her trespass by any moral code; it was everything or nothing. […] Christ was evasive when they questioned Him. It is those who cannot connect who hasten to cast the first stone. (*Howards End* 290-91)

[9] According to David Medalie, *Howards End* is "a late-Edwardian response to what came to be known as the New Liberalism" (39).

The gospel of the "only connect", apparently preached by Christ, and endorsed, here, by Margaret in order to accept Helen's "trespass" (her sexual encounter with Leonard) without a word of blame, is advocated by the narrator throughout the novel either by direct intrusion into the text, or through free indirect speech. The day after accepting to marry Henry, Margaret sets about contributing "to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. […] Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer" (174-75).

As the author's presumed mouthpiece, Margaret reiterates this "sermon" over and over again, proposing several versions of it, such as the following: "The business man who assumes that his life is everything, and the mystic who asserts that it is nothing, fail, on this side and on that, to hit the truth. […] It [truth] was only to be found by continuous excursions into either realm, and though proportion is the final secret, to espouse it at the outset is to ensure sterility" (182). From this statement it seems that attaining proportion is a process that requires direct knowledge of both the worlds of the visible and the invisible; in other words, the world of "telegrams and anger" cannot be dismissed too easily by liberal-minded intellectuals.

Although the novel's epigraph seems to prefigure, or hope for, the reconciliation of "the seen" and "the unseen," "the prose in us with the passion," the world of "telegrams and anger" and that of personal relationships, one wonders whether this message comes through by the end of the novel, and, more importantly, whether it is what the author *does* look forward to. Actually, the famous motto of *Howards End* proves to be more wishful thinking rather than an actual message, as it expresses only an aspiration to social harmony and inner equilibrium; these values are, instead, somewhat contradicted by the events that constitute the plot.

Forster's critics have extensively questioned this text's intentionality as regards the real differences between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, and the narrator's unease with Leonard. Some of them have identified the main feature of the novel in its ambivalence. Rosecrance speaks of a tension between "Forster's

efforts to 'prove' his humanistic values and to sustain Western society through reversion to rural virtues, and a countercurrent of disbelief, […] a vision of cosmic disorder and loss of meaning," and concludes: "The rhetoric affirms connection, but the undercurrent describes collapse" (110); Widdowson argues that "[t]he rich ambiguity, the fundamental *irresolution* of *Howards End* are key factors in its importance as a novel" (12); and Bradshaw (underwriting the latter critic's opinion) maintains that, "despite its narrator's poise and its assured (if sparse) social comedy, […] it is not *Howards End*'s certainties that catch the eye but its hesitations, tensions" (151). To judge from these evaluations, "it may be that we should see the novel as not so much presenting a case as conducting a debate" (Page 79).

Several antitheses are debated in *Howards End*; one of them is death *vs* money: "indeed, the whole direction of the novel as a narrative-pattern (running counter, as so often in Forster, to the dabbed-on generalizations) shows that money or property may be a more important inheritance than ideas" (Gransden 57). In spite of the moral superiority of Art and Culture, it is money that allows the Schlegels to exist; and even Howards End, in spite of its symbolic value as an embodiment of English history and tradition, would not exist without money. To Margaret's statement that the house "cannot stand by bricks and mortar alone," Mrs Wilcox answers: "it cannot stand without them" (73). As to confirm this opinion, Leonard—the only character in the novel who has real problems with money—says to Helen, after losing his job at the Dempster's Bank: "the real thing's money, and all the rest is a dream" (222).

Forster's concern for the economic origins of a secure and sheltered life—the one enjoyed by both the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes—and the affinities between the Schlegels' intellectual attitude and material interests and those of the writer are explored by Paul Delaney in "'Islands of Money': Rentier Culture in *Howards End.*" By discussing Forster's association with the rentier class (represented, in the novel, by the Wilcoxes, who are involved with imperial projects abroad, and whose capital goes overseas), he argues that the writer "had a lifelong preoccupation with the morality of living on unearned income," and that in this

novel "his aim was to move from his own experience of privilege to a comprehensive judgment on the kind of country Edwardian Britain was, and should be" (67). More in general, Forster's intention is presumed to be that of laying bare "the tangled economic roots of complacent liberalism," the premise of Delaney's thesis being that the writer, like Marx and Freud before him, "is possessed by the idea of *unmasking*" (67).

This leads to a further reflection as regards class conflict in the novel: the real opposition, here, is not between "telegrams and anger" and "personal relations," but between those—the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes—who "stand upon money as upon islands," and those like the Basts who "are down below the surface of the sea." This is Margaret's view as she illustrates it to her aunt, Mrs Munt:

> "You and I and the Wilcoxes stand upon money as upon islands. It is so firm beneath our feet that we forget its very existence. It's only when we see some one near us tottering that we realise all that an independent income means. Last night, when we were talking up here round the fire, I began to think that the very soul of the world is economic, and that the lowest abyss is not the absence of love, but the absence of coin."
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> "I call that rather cynical."
>
> "So do I. But Helen and I, we ought to remember, when we are tempted to criticise others, that we are standing on these islands, and that most of the others are down below the surface of the sea." (58)

The contradiction between what the motto of *Howard End* implies and promises—a reconciliation of opposites, as expressed by Margaret's project—and what the narrative actually shows has been considered the weakest point of the novel in terms of inner coherence and textual consistency, but it is, instead, its strongest point at a discursive level, as it testifies to its dialogic dimension (Marroni 9-10).

The novel's polyphony is evident in the plurality of voices within each of the two opposite fronts. The Schlegel sisters, for example, are probably to be taken as the author's "two voices," confronting each other; Margaret and Helen have very different personalities—the former is self-controlled, the latter is passionate—and often express dissimilar views as the exponents of opposite intellectual stances: pragmatism *vs* idealism, rationality *vs*

mysticism. In the debate they have at their informal discussion club about the means of achieving a fairer distribution of money and culture, Margaret maintains that the best way to help people like the Basts, till Socialism comes, is to give them cash (instead of commodities), for "it is the warp of civilization, whatever the woof may be" (120). She thinks that "Henry would save the Basts as he had saved Howards End, while Helen and her friends were discussing the ethics of salvation" (215). Margaret is realistic, and refuses abstract, ideological positions; as Helen says, she "mean[s] to keep proportion, and that's heroic, it's Greek" (181). In spite of her belief in personal relationships, Margaret finds positive aspects also in nation-builders, in those who perform their duty, like Henry, and is in favour of such typical bourgeois values as activity and work. She comes to feel "an admiration, emotional rather than rational, for the Wilcox energy and ability to get things done" (Page 79), and explains to Helen that if people like the Wilcoxes "hadn't worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn't sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. […] More and more do I refuse to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it" (164).

Helen holds a wholly different opinion from Margaret; as she explains to Leonard, she despises the Wilcoxes because they have never learnt to say "I am I" (222): "We are all in a mist—I know, but I can help you this far—men like the Wilcoxes are deeper in the mist than any. Sane, sound Englishmen! Building up empires, levelling all the world into what they call common sense" (222). But there is one issue on which the Schlegel sisters agree: they both want to take care of Leonard. The young man is so class-conscious that, when they ask him questions concerning his job at the bank, he resents it; he chooses to keep the world of "romance" (which means, for him, Art, Culture, the privileged classes and, therefore, the Schlegels) separated from his grey everyday life and work, lest the former be tainted by the latter: "He did not want Romance to collide with the Porphyrion, still less with Jacky, and people with fuller, happier lives are slow to understand this. To the Schlegels […] he was an interesting creature, of whom they wanted to see more. But they to him were

denizens of Romance, who must keep to the corner he had assigned them, pictures that must not walk out of their frames" (116).[10] When he tells them of his night walk into the woods, he cannot help mentioning Ruskin, Stevenson, Jefferies and other writers in order to communicate his fruition of Nature *via* Culture. This scene, which should confirm Margaret and Helens's perception of him as a naïve neophyte, throws light, instead, on their own snobbishness. They want Leonard to be "natural," and welcome his disappointment at the spectacle of the dawn, and his flat statement "it was only grey, it was nothing to mention" (113), as his only genuine moment. Cherishing the image of him as a "real" man who cares for adventure and beauty, they wish him to get rid of what they consider his cumbersome, artificial learning, but, in so doing, they prove to be insensitive to his inner needs. In wanting Leonard "to wash out his brain and go to the real thing" (137), they patronize him.

The Schlegel sisters' condescending approach to Leonard is also the narrator's implicit critique of their behaviour. On the other hand, the same narrator does not conceal his uneasiness with the young clerk, which emerges, for instance, in the treatment of his voice and in the representation of his language that betray Forster's own "genteel class prejudice" (Bradshaw 158). As Frank Kermode has acutely remarked, "Gissing would probably not have had as much trouble with the character of Leonard Bast […] as Forster himself did; he knew all he needed to know about 'board-school prigs' and the real or supposed tendency of the lower classes to steal the umbrellas of their better" (94). Leonard's sudden and violent death (after Charles Wilcox strikes him with the wrong side of the ancestral sword, and a bookshelf falls over him, he dies of a heart-attack) seems the only possible end for this character.

To conclude, no reader can deny that *Howards End* is structured, since its opening chapter, around the opposition between the "good" Schlegels and the "bad" Wilcoxes. And yet, "the thornier question of where the author's deepest sympathies lie,

[10] In this, Leonard reminds one of Wemmick, Jagger's secretary, in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, who makes a point of keeping his private life outside his office.

with his heavy-handed idealists or his sports-mad philistines, may well remain unsettled," as David Bradshaw writes (151), agreeing with Peter Widdowson's comment: "Whatever the flaws, weaknesses and contradictions we may perceive in Forster's own ideological position, *Howards End*, by containing them, gains rather than loses" (12).

The final scene, which shows Helen rushing into the house from the garden, "holding Tom [the farm boy] by one hand and carrying her baby in the other" (319), has a symbolic function as well as a prophetic meaning—at least in the author's intentions. If we take this sort of *tableau vivant* at face value, the answer to the initial question "who will inherit England?" seems to be: a hybrid breed, made of both an 'illegitimate' child (the progeny of intellectual bourgeoisie and lower-middle class) and a descendant of the old yeomanry. As suggested by Lionel Trilling (122), does this ending envisage a classless society in England's future?

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