Spring 2005

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Recommended Citation

White, Leslie. "Vital Disconnection in Howards End." *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 51.1 (2005): 43-63.

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Twentieth-
Century
Literature

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Author(s): Leslie White

Source: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring, 2005), pp. 43-63

Published by: [Hofstra University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20058751>

Accessed: 02/05/2011 16:08

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Vital Disconnection in *Howards End*

Leslie White

In the final scenes of *Howards End*, Schlegels are ascendant and Wilcoxes shamed and acquiescent. For many readers, however, the novel's competing impulses are resolved not in marriage, as was traditional in the novel of manners, but in the child of Leonard Bast and Helen Schlegel, presumably the inheritor of Ruth Howard Wilcox's house and land. These commentators generally regard the ending as exhibiting harmonious formal and thematic resolution, and see the promise of the famous epigraph "Only connect . . ." as having been realized. Others, of course, have found the conclusion forced and implausible, and the novel's achievement undermined by plot contrivances, inadequate character development, and most notably by Forster's alleged cultural elitism.¹ Forster's privileging of Schlegelian values, now regarded as axiomatic, has been especially objectionable to some. "Forster doesn't really want connection at all," Wilfred Stone asserted nearly 40 years ago (266), epitomizing a chorus of challenges (before and since) to the novel's putative thematic vision. For Stone, Margaret and Helen Schlegel are domineering, destructive elitists who, having established at Howards End an idyllic sanctuary of "personal relations" and "the inner life," permit the devastated, uncomprehending Henry Wilcox to reside there. Stone's withering critique raised stimulating (and still germane) questions about the novel's formal and thematic integrity: *Did* Forster believe in the possibility of connection? What sorts of association (if any) does the novel actually advocate, and by what means might they be achieved? If Schlegels are "superior," what is such "superiority" actually worth in both personal and cultural terms? Can interaction between the antithetical dispositions ameliorate the extremes

of both without effacing what is valuable in them? Most important for this essay, if Forster did not really want connection, is *Howards End* the “ethically evasive” novel that Stone believed it to be (258), and is its author elitist?²

Undoubtedly, Schlegels are more favorably presented than Wilcoxes, but their depiction is not always flattering, perhaps to mitigate the bias of which Forster must have been aware. In the final chapters, to cite but one example, Margaret appears to have transmuted into an imperialistic *materfamilias*, a female Henry in effect, who autocratically “straightens tangles” (288), adjusts “lopsidedness” (282), is “unable to forgive” (283), and “who had charged straight through these Wilcoxes and broken up their lives” (290). Initially, in privileging Schlegelian values (and thus his own) Forster seems merely to have inverted the novel’s (and the culture’s) prevailing hierarchy, though he certainly would have understood that the potential decadence of Schlegel “ivory-towerism” is hardly the appropriate antidote to the brutality of Wilcox hegemony, as Margaret herself often acknowledges. Clearly, then, the kind of synthesis the novel appears to advance and certainly the means for achieving it are highly problematic. Margaret’s idealistic desire for a union of “the prose and the passion” and her persistent efforts to impose it are well-intentioned and may be preferable to Helen’s arrogant and precipitous disengagement, but they result in an incredible resolution that emphasizes the book’s thematic “failure” and reveals Forster’s ambivalence concerning such a marriage.

The vexed interactions between Schlegels and Wilcoxes reflect larger (and ongoing) cultural tensions, in particular between the aesthetic and the practical. It is thus illuminating to examine the relationship between Forster’s ambivalence and the novel’s “failures” in the context of his ideas about art and the artist’s function that were evolving as he wrote *Howards End*, ideas that he would only fully articulate in a series of related critical writings published more than two decades after the novel, in the thirties and forties.³ The next section of this essay explores the character of Forster’s aesthetic values as expressed in those writings, and the following sections look back to the novel and argue that it, like the critical writings, favors not a marriage but a salutary disconnection of disparate sensibilities. That is, the Schlegelian ethos—reflective, compassionate, visionary, progressive—must remain apart from the concentrated grasp of Wilcox pragmatism if art and culture are to be “passed on” (as Forster would later figure it in “Does Culture Matter?” [*Two Cheers* 104]) and have the

transformative effect envisioned for them. Such a position, a cornerstone of Forster's aesthetics as expressed in his major critical phase, is nascent in *Howards End* and subverts the reconciliation that the novel ostensibly seeks.

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In his study of Forster's criticism, Rukun Advani contends that Forster emphatically "refuses to be an elitist in any way" (112), that he did not regard the artist as "inherently superior to the ordinary person" and that he is "at pains to avoid giving artists the nearly superhuman status which aestheticism confers upon them" (99).⁴ Forster was certainly careful to distance himself from the affectations of extreme aestheticism, yet if we turn to the critical writings we find that the positions Advani assigns to Forster are hardly unambiguous. These writings, challenging with increasing insistence any conservative or compulsory connection of the aesthetic and the practical, emphasize the sort of constructive tension between antithetical impulses that *Howards End* appears to advocate. In "The Ivory Tower" (1938), for example, Forster contends that a certain remove from society encourages self-development through introspection and contemplation.⁵ A symbol of personal retreat, the ivory tower provides sanctuary to cultivate the temperament and sensibility essential for living imaginatively. Such a retreat into self-exploration is neither solipsistic nor socially irresponsible, and available not only to artists or to exceptional people in whatever discipline. Those emerging from the ivory tower are better prepared, Forster believes, to engage the complexity of life and art; while celebrating appreciators who become in their "minor way an artist," as he would describe them later (*Two Cheers* 106), he expresses regret (though not surprise) that too few aspire to such status. Falling early in his major critical phase, "The Ivory Tower" indicates Forster's ambivalence regarding connection, in that the aesthetic egalitarianism ostensibly posited here is undercut by a not altogether convincing resignation that the ivory tower will likely hold little appeal for those most in need of its benefits.

"What I Believe" (1939) sets out an observation that one could imagine being articulated by the narrator of *Howards End*. Addressing the marginalized status of his "aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky," Forster somewhat fatalistically concedes, three decades after *Howards End* and on the eve of war, that "no device has been found

by which these private decencies can be transmitted to public affairs" (*Two Cheers* 74). In fact, something like this sentiment does appear in the novel, but framed in a slightly more optimistic way: the Schlegels "desired that public life should mirror whatever is good in the life within" (41). Like Matthew Arnold's "saving remnant," Forster's "aristocrats" "are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages" (*Two Cheers* 75), and in noting the persistence of this aristocracy, Forster remains convinced that "the experiment of earthly life cannot be dismissed as a failure" (74). He does deem it tragic, however, since the quest to establish these decencies (to "connect") is too often thwarted. In the public sphere, Forster rather cynically speculates, these qualities and what they might yield will almost certainly be altered or otherwise co-opted, absorbed into the roar of the center, translated into a common language, losing through widespread accessibility their singular power to enlighten and transform. Intractably opposing this threat are Forster's "aristocrats," "those who want to create something or discover something." However indefatigable, these "little lights" of Forster's aristocracy must inhabit a peripheral space lest they be "[ground] down and made all alike" (76).

This comparatively subtle severance of the aesthetic/spiritual from the ethical/material spheres becomes more pronounced in "The Duty of Society to the Artist" (1942) and "Does Culture Matter?" (1940). In the former, Forster imagines an interview between the Philistine, the state official Mr. Bumble, and an artist, "a painter of genius" who would like the job of painting a mural in the new police station. Mr. Bumble wants a mural that will edify, inspire, or entertain; the artist wants license to experiment and thereby "extend human sensitiveness through paint" (*Two Cheers* 98). In the immediate moment, the painting may instruct, inspire, amuse, or do none or all of these. The artist doesn't yet know. With an eye to later connection, perhaps to future approbation, he wants "to paint something which will be understood when this society of ours is forgotten and the police station a ruin" (98). Mr. Bumble, of course, denies him the commission and bluntly informs him that he doesn't "fit in," a reaction the artist appears to have anticipated:

I know I don't fit in. And it's part of my duty not to fit in. It's part of my duty to humanity. I feel things, I express things that haven't yet been felt and expressed, and that is my justification. And I ask the state to employ me on trust and pay me without understanding what I am up to. (98)

The artist's gift to society is an originality that most will not immediately comprehend or appreciate. Implicit in Forster's argument is the view that art's "usefulness" resides in an inaccessibility that (at least initially) may threaten, agitate, and bewilder. Driven by a desire to move "human sensitiveness in directions away from the average citizen" (94), the artist asks that "the state" resist censorship and other hindrances; he appeals to "the ordinary" to trust that what may at first appear unintelligible and thus inconsequential will in time "pay." Citing Plato on the madness of poets and poetry, Forster ironizes art as a manifestation of "insanity." Sanity, the normal, determines what will "fit in," and what sort of order best suits its perpetuation. But since it is an order imposed from without, whatever "harmony" results is transitory or fraudulent. Such imposition inhibits acts of self-determination, which in the "unoriginal" citizen must emerge as the forbearance and tolerance necessary for art to flourish. The gulf between the artist and the "average man," between creative reach and conventional apprehension, appears to have widened since *Howards End* and is even more pronounced than in Forster's earlier critical writings.⁶ The only recourse, Forster concedes, is to attempt to convince the sane man "in soothing words that there is something in this queer art business which he cannot understand and must try not to resent" (100).

Forster laments that suspicion, indifference, or sneering disdain have displaced past generations' good-humored, supportive, mildly reverential views of the artist. Because amelioration through whatever sort of "instruction" Forster can imagine will be terrifically complex, as *Howards End* had suggested, he concludes that some form of fervently passionate appreciation is required, involving what he calls a desire to "pass on" the creations of culture, a zeal to bequeath that might transform and vivify the necessary, often pleasant but ultimately modest concerns of the practical sphere. In "Does Culture Matter?" he writes as an evangelist for the "cultural gospel," not as a creative artist who, he observes, "might take another line and . . . have more urgent duties" (*Two Cheers* 106). The artist, then, will not serve as art's advocate. That he will leave to the "appreciator of an esthetic achievement . . . who cannot rest without communicating what has been communicated to him" (106). But what form will this "passing on" impulse take? How will these "minor artists" testify from their intermediate position between artist and potential appreciator? Will they attempt to educate, recruit, cajole, shame? Only under the direst of conditions will one of these strategies be called upon; by far the

preferred approach, Forster indicates, is to remain removed, not aloof or condescending, but ebullient and confident. In such an enterprise,

Dogmatism is of course a mistake, and even tolerance and tact have too much of the missionary spirit to work satisfactorily. What is needed in the cultural gospel is to let one's light so shine that men's curiosity is aroused and they ask why Sophocles, Velasquez, Henry James should cause such disproportionate pleasure. (106)

Forster acknowledges that the acquisition of culture is hard work, and while there must be figures and texts of inspiration for the uninitiated, there ought not be the intimate earnestness of the tutorial. The "glow derived from the central fire" (106) manifests itself in the "minor artist" as the inclination to bequeath, and he testifies from the margins, hopeful that others will catch the "glow."

In "Does Culture Matter?" and "What I Believe," Forster addresses the vexing problem of "maintaining and extending aristocracy in the midst of democracy" (Advani 63). In "The Challenge of Our Time" (1946) and later "Art for Art's Sake" (1949) he attempts to define and defend that other "line" that the artist might take and those "more urgent duties" in which he is engaged. Such concerns are part of Forster's rehabilitation of certain aspects of aestheticism that he believes have "eternal importance" (*Two Cheers* 88). In "Challenge," Forster anticipates the central arguments of "Art for Art's Sake" by figuring the artist as an autonomous outsider bound to create in a climate of indifference or hostility.⁷ In the later essay, Forster takes up his defense of the outmoded notion of "art for art's sake," a "profound phrase that has been foolishly used and often raises a giggle" (59). But art's ability to create "little worlds of its own, possessing internal harmony," is urgently needed, is in fact "needed before it is appreciated and independent of appreciation" (60). For Forster, echoing Wilde and to some extent Whistler, art anticipates its "utility," is indifferent to public approval or censure, moves faster than life's capacity or inclination to apprehend it, and, recalling Wordsworth, creates the taste by which it is to be enjoyed. Once again distancing himself from the reductive and "dangerous heresy" that "only art matters," Forster significantly remains in close sympathy with the "Bohemian figure" whose manner and role he has questioned; such a conception of the artist, formulaic though it may be, is preferable to that which views the artist as a spokesperson for

the age, a utilitarian oracle of the moment meant to edify and guide. Necessarily, in fact, the “artist will be an outsider in the society to which he has been born” (92). Only if he resists what Forster calls “mateyness,” an enervating, distracting, inhibiting intimacy with his “fellow citizens,” will the artist be able to produce work possessing the “internal order and harmony” that will benefit this “permanently disarranged planet” (93). To further his point, Forster invokes Shelley’s proclamation that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” to emphasize art’s “uselessness,” its resistance to the common requirements of the “average man.” “The legislation of the artist is never formulated at the time, though it is sometimes discerned by future generations” (94). Forster’s romantic conception of the marginalized artist writing for a sympathetic, imaginative coterie of “minor artists” emphasizes art’s “pertinacity” and its belated cultural value.⁸ As David Latane notes, writing of the role Shelley envisioned for the poet, “the unacknowledged legislator eventually contributes to the amelioration of mankind’s condition—the gospel slowly filters from poet to reader-disciple [Forster’s ‘minor artist’] to the people” (22). This filtering down corresponds to Forster’s “passing on” impulse introduced in “Does Culture Matter?” and implicitly urged in other essays of this period. Art’s immediate elusiveness and “unintelligibility” paradoxically establish its abiding relevance, even (perhaps especially) to those “who do not care about art at all” (94).

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The romantic bearing of Forster’s aesthetic values briefly examined above is immediately evident in the famous epigraph of *Howards End*, removed from its position within the narrative presumably to declare thematic intention. As Alistair Duckworth, Alan Wilde, and others have noted, however, the epigraph exhibits a provisional element that threatens the novel’s ostensible thematic aspiration and implies that its formal resolution may be a contrivance. Duckworth observes of the epigraph’s punctuation that already “the ellipsis points imply an incompleteness,” which betrays, he believes, Forster’s “chagrined realization of his limited ability to correct society’s problems or improve human life” (*Forster’s House* 8). In romantic theory, connection and its cognates (completion, closure, etc.) are inimical to the primary qualities of persistent striving, anticipation, and majestic imperfection. Does the epigraph, then, deconstruct the text itself, as

Duckworth appears to suggest, and did Forster intend this? Does it, with its ellipsis, signify a conscious admission of defeat? Or rather does it acknowledge that what follows is an attempt to dramatize the belief that the daunting quest for connection *must* be undertaken, whatever the conditions or consequences, if society's problems are to be corrected and human life improved? *Howards End* reaches and "fails" in model romantic fashion, but in this failing it offers a vision of connection for which language, or perhaps the fictional mode, was for Forster at that time unsuitable, inadequate, or elusive. Seeking common ground for German idealism and English pragmatism, the cultured intelligentsia and the commercial philistine, the unseen and the seen, the aesthetic and the ethical, *Howards End* eschews conventional connection in its enacting of the noble but inevitably "failed" quest for accommodation of antithetical dispositions.

Such juxtapositions as these betray the tendency of Forster's fictive imagination to range dialectically over broad metaphysical and sociopolitical concerns. This inclination not only makes plausible but perhaps even calls forth an allegorical approach to the principal conflict of *Howards End*, which Forster renders in an abstract language exemplified in repeated references to the "unseen" and its synonyms (infinity, the inner life, etc.). Resistant to precise definition, this language is cultish, private, and potentially disorienting to the uninitiated. To become conversant in it requires creative, individualized engagement from Forster's characters and readers alike. J. H. Miller has observed that the characters of *Howards End* are measured by "their openness or lack of openness to the unseen" (471). The open and responsive, attuned to reality's spiritual extensions, are intellectually and morally committed to transcending (but also transforming) the pressures of prevailing conventions and imperatives—completion, "bigness," material progress, action rather than contemplation, and so on. Or like Ruth Wilcox and Miss Avery, they instinctively act to preserve the sacred rituals, creations, and rhythms of life inherited from the past. Forster's commitment to the sanctity of personal relations and his belief in the "irreducible centrality of the individual" (Wilde, *Critical Essays* 7) are embodied in the three characters who respond soulfully (though inconsistently or sometimes recklessly) to the promptings of the "unseen." In various senses drawn to Wilcox "grit," energy, and power, ultimately Ruth Wilcox and Margaret and Helen Schlegel are all constitutionally resistant to them. Their responses to the "unseen"—from a conventional perspective threatening, transgressive, or merely eccentric—oppose the reductive intransigence of imperialist patriarchy.

In their singular ways, Ruth, Margaret, and Helen are Forster's "minor artists," members of his "aristocracy" between whom "there is a secret understanding . . . when they meet" (*Two Cheers* 73). Though Ruth Wilcox is often unassertive and seemingly reduced to subaltern status, she nevertheless exerts a subtle authority over her family, even over the obtuse Henry and the brutal Charles. She "gives the idea of greatness," observes Margaret, who, aware of the pretensions of her own set, "was conscious of a personality that transcended their own and dwarfed their activities" (80). Significantly, the family somehow knows it is not to "take advantage of her" (23), as Helen notes in her second letter to Margaret. When early in the novel Ruth comes upon the contretemps between Charles and Paul over Helen, she instantly cuts through the expedient absolutism favored by Wilcoxes, and all fall silent before "the instinctive wisdom" (36) that Ruth derives from her ancestors. In such matters, Ruth intuitively, "one doesn't ask plain questions. There aren't such things" (36). Her elegant mediation of the misunderstanding stuns Helen; heretofore in thrall to Wilcox power and efficiency, Helen immediately connects with Ruth and begins to discern the "panic and emptiness" that would set her against Wilcoxes, Henry and Charles in particular.

That the ancestral Howard home remains in the family at all is testament to Ruth's serene tenacity. The other Wilcoxes, of course, when they think of the house at all, see it as burdensome, out of date, an impediment to suburban progress; their interest in *Howards End* amounts to the vulgar desire to modernize. Through no conscious effort, Ruth somehow manages to communicate to her husband and children that the house, her feelings for it, the values it possesses offer qualities wanting in themselves that they must try to cultivate, or at least not destroy. Indeed, perhaps Ruth succeeds only to the extent that the family doesn't sell or raze the house after her death. Yet despite their insensitivity to things of the spirit, the Wilcoxes, Henry and Charles even, are to some extent transformed in Ruth's presence. Henry, after all, is drawn to women like Ruth and Margaret; perhaps his attraction to them betrays a remote desire to counterbalance his commercial bent, and a vague intimation of the advantages of the "unseen." That Henry ends up at *Howards End* might be a crude irony, but that he wills the house to Margaret surely has as much to do with honoring Ruth's wish that the house belong to its rightful "soul" heir as it does with marital succession. And even Charles, after Leonard's death and in an uneasy exchange with his father, "had a vague regret—a

wish that something had been different somewhere—a wish (though he did not express it thus) that he had been taught to say ‘I’ in his youth” (280). Before Charles withdraws to familiarity behind the rigid Wilcox carapace, his mother’s (and perhaps Margaret’s) influence allows him a fleeting, inarticulate glimpse of the “diviner wheels” (281).

Obviously, Ruth is neither “dogmatic nor possessed of the missionary spirit.” Privy to the “unseen” without having pursued the apparatus of high culture that Margaret and Helen have mastered—concerts, literature, discussion meetings, museums—Ruth often seems less a character than a finite spirit, a physical embodiment of the “unseen.” This is of course most dramatically evident in her attempt to bequeath *Howards End* to Margaret, an intuitive act indifferent to law, custom, and familial allegiance. The “higher pleasures” that the house afforded Ruth “rather resemble [those provided] by religion, and it is impossible to enjoy them without trying to hand them on” (*Two Cheers* 106). Mystified by Ruth’s gesture, the Wilcoxes, in their narrow, bloodless efficiency, built as it is on legal grids and balance sheets, can only define the act as “treachery” (*Howards End* 99). For them a material object, a commodity, *Howards End* is for Ruth—though she would not use such language—a part of the cultural heritage of England, a work of art in its embodiment of spiritual truth that must be preserved and passed on. Ruth’s spiritual presence arouses curiosity, and in a sense a certain uneasiness, in those who are convinced they can do very well without art and culture. Again, for all their indifference to the house and their efforts to alter it, the Wilcoxes are unable to dispense with *Howards End* or to prevent it from passing to Margaret. If in life Ruth cannot fully convey to her husband and children the values inherent in the house and grounds she so reveres, perhaps unconsciously she has arranged their “filtering down” through her bequest to Margaret, who will carry forth Ruth’s work and spirit.

Forster’s preoccupation in his critical writings with “the dilemma of the intellectual in the modern world” (Duckworth, *Complete, Authoritative Text* 300) is prefigured in his characterization of Margaret and Helen Schlegel, eccentrics in a civilization of flux and material progress, outsiders who don’t entirely “fit in.” Their own estrangement from those social, political, aesthetic, and even economic values championed by Wilcoxes perhaps suggests the incomprehensibility of “cultural stuff” to those “who do not care about art at all” (*Two Cheers* 94). In chapter 4, Forster frames the terms of this conflict by describing Margaret and Helen’s sensibilities

in the context of their Anglo-German ancestry. Margaret's grand failure to bring about "connection" and Helen's consistently subversive action signify different aspects of the aesthetic temperament that Forster would address in his criticism; both are romantic in character but descend from separate traditions that reflect their competing ancestral lines. Margaret may be viewed as Coleridgean/Hegelian in her desire for reconciliation, a creative synthesis of antithetical types, and perhaps Shelleyan as well in her seeking of a transcendent union of the prosaic and the poetical. Helen, in marked contrast, is an unpredictable, disruptive force in *Howards End*; her character provocatively enacts the philosophical positions suggested by her surname. J. H. Miller points out that the choice of Schlegel is not accidental, citing an early manuscript version of the novel in which appears the phrase: "Their father, a distant relation of the critic . . ." (474). Miller believes it impossible "to tell whether Forster had in mind Friedrich Schlegel or A. W. Schlegel."⁹ However, considering Helen's impulsive nature and the deleterious effects of her reckless behavior, I suggest the possibility that Forster was thinking of Friedrich Schlegel, whose denial of absolute order and repudiation of synthesis or resolution were the cornerstone of his philosophical irony. Helen's actions—impulsively falling in love with Paul, bringing the Basts to Oniton, having sex with Leonard, to name but three—complicate Margaret's quest for connection, and in a Schlegelian sense, promote an unharmonized dialectic of evolutionary becoming that complements the fruitful disconnection between Schlegels and Wilcoxes that the novel implicitly advances.

The dialectical interplay that disallows conventional synthesis (and which in Schlegel's schema produces a spiritual evolution ["becoming"] driven by perpetually conflicted elements) hardened into a rigid dualism in postromantic English cultural criticism. *Howards End*, I think, descends from both of these lines, as the following overview should illustrate. Thomas Carlyle was perhaps the first to anatomize the note of division that in part defines the cultural crisis inherited by *Howards End*. In "Signs of the Times" (1829) and "Characteristics" (1831), two early essays influenced by aspects of the German idealism that Forster would also engage in his novel, Carlyle opposes the dynamical to the mechanical, asserting that the latter produces a disabling self-consciousness that stifles individualism. When he declares in "Characteristics" that "Manufacture is intelligible but trivial; creation is great and cannot be understood" (5), he disengages the material from the aesthetic, the knowable that occasionally

enhances but more often merely sustains existence from the unintelligible, “useless” products of the creative mind that enliven and challenge. One encourages passivity and dependence, Carlyle insists, the other unrest and growth. In equating the “intelligible” with the “trivial” and the “unintelligible” with “creation,” he intensifies the incipient debate over art’s proper role, positioning the creative mind above the status quo. Similarly, in the section of the *Autobiography* (1873) in which he writes of his mental breakdown, John Stuart Mill identifies the inadequacies of a strict rationalist orientation and invidiously opposes his emergent intuitive being and aesthetic needs to the pragmatic limitations of unenlightened utilitarian imperatives. Further, the chapter on individualism in *On Liberty* (1859) promotes “eccentricity” as antidote to the ordinary, sets “the person of genius” against the “unoriginal minds” of the “collective mediocrity,” and opposes “originality” to the complacency of the masses (267–69). Stone observes that *Howards End* is “the most explicit test of Arnold’s notion of culture in our literature” (239). The thematic polarities that drive the novel clearly recall such characteristic Arnoldian antitheses as culture and anarchy, Hellenism and Hebraism, “saving remnant” and philistine, “concentration” and “expansion.” Arnold was the Victorian writer Forster most admired, and many of Arnold’s concerns in his poetry and criticism (division, provincialism, self-satisfaction, jingoism) are clearly Forster’s also. Though *Howards End* and a number of Forster’s essays respond to this critical tradition in their concern for the increasingly marginalized status of art and the exceptional person and in deploring the self-satisfaction and indifference to culture of the commercial middle classes, Forster veers slightly yet appreciably away from his forebears in his approach to resolution or “connection.” Whereas the critical positions of Carlyle, Mill, and even Arnold remain largely dualist, *Howards End* calls for a sustained, dynamic tension that produces what Julia Prewett Brown calls a “paradoxical interrelatedness of opposites” (xv).¹⁰ Brown’s phrase evokes a more immediate and, I suggest, formative presence behind Forster’s developing aesthetic positions. Brown uses it to characterize Wilde’s alternative to conventional reconciliation, one that could overcome “the strict Victorian opposition between the ethical and the aesthetic” (51).¹¹ Like Wilde, Forster would argue in much of his criticism for the crucial role of art in the practical sphere, maintaining that the aesthetic must transform rather than transcend the ethical. However, this aestheticizing of the ethical, a central argument in “The Critic as Artist” (but also strongly advocated in

"The Soul of Man under Socialism" and "The Decay of Lying") "calls upon art to distance itself from modern life and society . . . to uplift and stimulate them with new forms." Paradoxically, "by keeping aloof from the practical sphere . . . art more completely realizes for us that which we desire" (Brown 109). Brown's elegant summation of this central tenet of Wilde's aesthetic philosophy defines as well the salutary disconnection that *Howards End* tacitly urges.

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For most of the novel, Margaret's actions instantiate the conflicted idealism discernible in Forster's evolving aesthetic values. Margaret rejects elitist remove and the valorizing of Schlegelian values even as she elevates those responsive to the unseen above those who aren't: "Don't brood too much on the superiority of the unseen to the seen," she admonishes Helen. "It's true, but to brood on it is medieval. Our business is not to contrast the two, but to reconcile them" (102). Margaret knows that the Wilcoxes are not "her sort," that they "were often suspicious and stupid" and possessed virtues of the "second rank" (101–02), yet she is often stimulated by contact with them. Unlike Helen, who very nearly comes to think of Wilcoxes as evil, Margaret, in this sense Arnoldian, sees the amelioration of Wilcox deficiencies as essential for the survival and advancement of aesthetic and spiritual values. But what role is the artist or the person of culture ("minor artist," "appreciator") to take in an effort to accommodate these disparate orientations? In "The Duty of Society to the Artist," "Does Culture Matter?" and "Art for Art's Sake," the artist is a provocateur producing his work at a comfortable remove and an agitator as well, whose duty it is "not to fit in" (*Two Cheers* 98). He is neither elitist nor deliberately radical, but one who "does not consider too anxiously what his relations with society may be, for he is aware of something more important than that—namely, the invitation to invent, to create order, and he believes he will be better placed for doing this if he attempts detachment" (93). For both creator and "minor artist," Forster favors detachment over "idiosyncrasy and waywardness" not only because it facilitates invention but, as significantly, it is a way to avoid the "mateyness" that is potentially threatening to the "creative impulse." Broadly in the Schlegel-Wilcox association and particularly in the Margaret-Henry relationship, Forster anticipates the potentially risky intimacy between art-

ist and “average citizen” that he warns of in “Art for Art’s Sake.” Margaret is the curious seeker who “hopes to risk things all her life” (67), bent on engaging the world’s variety while working to heal its divisions. But her well-intentioned quest for connection is perverse, and ultimately injurious. Finally, she is driven too much by the “missionary spirit,” and her efforts to that end effectively amount to pandering, or “mateyness.”

When Margaret announces to Helen that she will marry Henry, justifying her decision in a language of flat rationality, Helen is shocked nearly into silence; at this point in the narrative, the central consciousness shifts briefly from Margaret to Helen, who implores her sister not to go forward with her plans and is able only to murmur “Don’t” and “One would lose something” (159). She views Margaret’s “well considered, well thought out” (158) decision as deeply compromising, a betrayal of the values the sisters have inherited from their father and cultivated all their lives. As Alan Wilde remarks of Margaret,

in her final phase . . . love of stability turns into love of comfort; concern for order becomes concern for neatness; desire for significance leads to desire for busyness. An anti-intellectual Margaret is a poor substitute for Miss Schlegel of Wickham Place. . . .
(*Art and Order* 118).¹²

Helen’s suspicions are corroborated throughout in Henry’s numerous failures of imagination—most significantly in his earlier refusal to tell Margaret of Ruth’s bequest and later to grant the pregnant Helen leave to spend a night at Howards End before her self-exile to Germany. As the novel closes and Henry is forced by Dolly’s faux pas to acknowledge his dismissal of Ruth’s appeal, “Margaret was silent. Something shook her in its inmost recesses, and she shivered” (291). When she attempts to assure Henry that “[n]othing has been done wrong,” she may intend magnanimity, forgiveness, or pity, but the perfunctory, passive-voice expression only further illuminates the extent to which she has betrayed her values. After Margaret’s devastating epiphany, the shouts of laughter and the “infectious joy” are hardly convincing. The fabulous conclusion emphasizes the high cost to both Schlegels and Wilcoxes; the values of the former have been severely compromised, those of the latter entirely “broken up.”

Believing that the “private decencies” of the “inner life” must somehow be assimilated into the “great outer life . . . in which telegrams and anger count,” Forster wanted a society more accepting of those who

desired to make “the public life . . . mirror whatever is good in the life within” (*Howards End* 41). This “outer life” that the Schlegels “have never touched” (40) Margaret rightly sees as balancing the “sloppiness” she suspects is inherent in the sphere of personal relations—naïve idealism, insularity, the ineffectual aestheticism exemplified in Tibby, the dogmatic self-righteousness of which Margaret and Helen are both culpable. But if the novel finally works against conventional resolution, fails to render it convincingly, what was Forster trying to achieve with *Howards End*? Surely we must assume that when he conceived and wrote the novel he *did* believe that the divergent sensibilities represented by Schlegels and Wilcoxes could be brought into mutually beneficial alliance. And we must make such an assumption for this reason: if Forster’s intentions were merely to show that connection of this or any kind is undesirable or impossible to achieve, the book would be little more than an “ethically evasive,” even mean-spirited trick. Stone’s contention that Forster “didn’t want connection at all” is, I think, reductive, for it attributes the novel’s failures primarily to the author’s alleged elitism and fails to recognize that other ways of connecting might be in play, whether Forster himself was conscious of them or not. I believe that Forster *does* want connection, but the utopian vision of *Howards End* is destabilized by his ambivalence (as well as his inchoate aesthetic positions) regarding the utility of the exceptional person in a culture threatening or unsympathetic to the dynamical, imaginative life. The vital disconnection that Forster could finally articulate in his critical writings is prefigured in the various “failures,” in the compromised lives and strained, implausible connections of *Howards End*.

Notes

1. On one side of this well-known debate David Shusterman tentatively concludes that the novel finishes with a “synthesis, though perhaps uneasily achieved, but a synthesis nevertheless” (157). Alan Friedman contends that the ending “provides a sense of resolution and continuity of Margaret’s moral triumph” (107). And Andrew Wright rather rapturously proclaims that

Forster’s revelation is that intelligence is strong enough, that personal relations can endure, that culture can survive the collision with the anarchy of ‘panic and emptiness,’ that love can succeed. The close of *Howards End* is idyllic, a joyous tableau. (72–73)

In contrast, Alan Wilde finds the ending “at best, unsteady, at worst facile” (*Art and Order* 123). Douglass Thompson concurs: “the concluding joy that reigns at *Howards End* is fragile and qualified” (131). And C. B. Cox asserts that the “final scene in the hay is pure fantasy, a sentimental hope for the future for which the action of the plot has given no support” (93).

2. Peter Widdowson detects an “unconscious elitism” in Forster’s liberal humanist position, which “assumes its own values and its own form of ‘civilization’ are absolute and for all time and that culture is static, having achieved its apotheosis in the liberal-humanist image” (368–69). Frederick Crews also explores liberal humanism’s failure to confront adequately the challenges of democratization and modernity. Alistair Duckworth points out that

unlike Crews, [Widdowson] identifies this failure as political rather than metaphysical, a fictional realization of the economic and class basis of liberalism’s values and their consequent inadequacy to the twentieth-century world. (*Complete, Authoritative Text* 306–07).

3. Grouping texts written 30 years apart and reading the earlier through the prism of the later might prompt such questions as: What kinds of criticism was Forster writing before, during, and after the composition of *Howards End*? Does Forster’s other fiction of the period, and particularly that written between 1910 and the essays on aesthetics examined here, similarly address the cultural tensions that Forster dramatizes in *Howards End*? Did Forster’s aesthetic values discussed in this essay remain constant throughout this period? Forster’s essays on aesthetics were written between 1911 (“Inspiration”) and 1947 (“The Raison d’Être of Criticism in the Arts”). The most significant, other than the ones discussed here, are “Anonymity” (1925) and “The Raison d’Être.” Neither of these is relevant to my argument. Similarly, the fiction written between *Howards End* and the criticism I engage, including the posthumously published *Maurice*, the stories in *The Life to Come*, and *A Passage to India*, does not bear on the issues addressed in this essay. It is perhaps worth mentioning that Forster’s fictive imagination often inclined toward broad cultural polarities to explore English encroachment into unfamiliar worlds (*A Passage to India* [1924] is an obvious late example). And in *A Room with a View* (1908), we do see Forster anticipating some of the concerns that he would address in *Howards End*. Just as he pairs Schlegelian idealism and Wilcox pragmatism, Forster sets what he sees as the natural, intuitive, and spontaneous qualities of the Italian sensibility against English self-satisfaction, artificiality, and priggishness. Particularly Mr. Emerson, but also his son George, prefigure Ruth Wilcox and the Schlegel sisters in their constitutional opposition to “muddle” and their instinctive responsiveness to the “unseen.” Lastly, I make no

claims for the consistency of Forster's aesthetics over the period in question. I only point out that Forster was initially ambivalent and always skeptical about conventional reconciliation between the incompatible orientations in English culture and that those attitudes, discernible in the "failures" of the novel, do get clarified in the critical writings I address here.

4. In "Art for Art's Sake," Forster lampoons the affectations of aestheticism—velvet suits and green carnations—while discussing a "more dangerous heresy, namely that only art matters, an idea that has somehow got mixed up with the idea of art for art's sake, and has helped to discredit it. Many things, besides art, matter" (*Two Cheers* 89).

5. Even as Advani absolves Forster from the errors of extreme aestheticism, he situates Forster's conception of the artist and his views on the function of art in the romantic tradition. Correctly linking Forster with romanticism's democratic inclinations, he neglects the competing tendency (evident especially in Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and even Keats) to elevate the artist's status while challenging readers through stylistic and thematic experimentation, positions Forster also takes in his criticism. Several critics have written of Forster's romantic ancestry. John Beer places Forster in the romantic tradition of Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Beethoven, and Wagner. His identification of the romantic split between "vision and realism, between an artist's sense of reality and his sense of an inward vision which obstinately refuses to close" (25) is consonant with the primary disconnect under discussion here, that between the "unseen" and the "seen." As well, Forster's essentially romantic conception of the artist, evident in the essays discussed here, is also apparent in his depiction of Schlegelian idealism. Stone also places Forster in the romantic line, calling him "an implicit Coleridgean" (5) and thus, in the Milleian dialectic, an anti-Benthamite: "It is no exaggeration to say that nearly all the characters in Forster's novels are either Benthamites or Coleridgeans—opposing the mind to the heart, the letter to the spirit, efficiency to love" (5). In a broad aesthetic sense, Forster is Coleridgean in that art "is the creation of wholes, the harmonizing of contraries" (18). In the fictional world of *Howards End*, however, the envisioned synthesis seems attractive only in theory. As Stone remarks, "to be fair-minded about Red-bloods [Wilcoxes] is one thing—living with them quite another" (243).

6. In "Art for Art's Sake," Forster warns that "mateyness" "may stop the artist from doing the one thing which he and he alone can do" (*Two Cheers* 93). He then cites "those memorable words" from Kenneth Clark's "The Eclipse of the Highbrow" for corroboration of his own elevation of the artist and to rebut the "pernicious doctrine" that art should "toe the line" society draws for it:

"The poet and the artist," wrote Clark, "are important precisely because they are not average men; because in sensibility, intelligence and power of invention they far exceed the average."

7. Of course, we no longer think of the self or subject as unified or autonomous or of texts as singular products of an integrated consciousness. Forster's essentializing language defining the artist ("outsider," "Bohemian," "minor artist," etc.) and those not artists ("the average man," "the ordinary citizen," "the sane man," etc.), antedating postmodernist notions of human identity as essentially constructed, is very much of its time, linked intimately with the universalizing "metanarrative" of liberal humanism ("autonomy," "transcendence," "certainty," "unity"). It should be mentioned that Forster envisions as the audience for these essays both "Schlegels" and "Wilcoxes," and consequently, befitting his self-conscious role as propagandist for the cultural gospel, casts his aesthetic values in terms more absolute than he otherwise might.

8. In "The Raison d'Être of Criticism in the Arts" (1947), Forster continued to write of art's futurity: "The work of art assumes the existence of the perfect spectator and is indifferent to the fact that no such person exists. It does not allow for our ignorance and it does not cater to our knowledge" (*Two Cheers* 118). See Latane's introduction for a concise history of the romantics' appropriation of Milton's "fit audience though few," an attitude that Forster appears to be moving toward in this phase of his criticism.

9. Miller further points out that A. W. Schlegel "may have had greater importance in Forster's day, whereas today, Friedrich is more admired" (474). Peter Firchow believes that Forster was thinking of August Wilhelm and not Friedrich, though he acknowledges that both critics had "considerable influence on English romantic critical theory, especially that of Coleridge . . ." (58). Firchow finds the background of Margaret and Helen's father incredible, but he does assert that the sisters are the "biological and spiritual descendents of romantic idealist Germany, a Germany which, at the time the novel takes place, no longer exists."

10. I am indebted to Brown's discussion of Wilde's "debt to the Victorians," in which she explores this "theoretic deadlock that would characterize the discourse of the major prose writers of the century" (36). In Victorian criticism, Brown contends, "we see how disabling [its] opposition between ethics and aesthetics has become to art" (48). She goes on to argue that through a "reassociation of sensibility," Wilde was able to overcome that dualism by demonstrating an "interrelatedness" between the aesthetic and the ethical "while preserving a distinction between them" (51). Taken together, *Howards End* and

the critical writings confront this opposition, proposing its overcoming by means similar to Wilde's.

11. If Forster was familiar with Wilde's critical writings before the composition of *Howards End*, biography has not uncovered it. Nor are there any references to Wilde in Forster's letters or his Commonplace Book. It is difficult to imagine that Forster would not have had some familiarity with the writings of the most accomplished and notorious British homosexual writer of his adolescence and early adult life. Almost certainly he would have known his tutor and mentor Goldworthy Lowes Dickinson's notable review of *De Profundis*, which appeared in *The Independent Review*, a journal to which Forster also contributed, in 1905. In that review Dickinson writes bravely of Wilde not only as an opponent of British philistinism but also as a serious artist and thinker, countering the popular view of him as a degenerate poseur and flamboyant aesthete.

Oddly, criticism has largely neglected Wilde's impact on Forster. Claude Summers, however, in his discussion of *Maurice*, finds Wilde's influence pervasive and claims that *Howards End* is informed by *De Profundis* at every turn. And in *Queer Forster* Eric Haralson suggests that Forster was very early aware of Wilde through his "plight at law in 1895": "Wilde's fate 'devastated hope and destroyed affiliation' for homosexual men generally, and 'permanently affected' Forster both as a private person and as an evolving writer" (60). In her discussion of Forster's interest in Wagner, also in *Queer Forster*, Judith Scherer Herz takes Forster's knowledge of Wilde for granted: "Forster would have known, at the very least through his interest in Wilde [specifically *Dorian Gray*], of the homosexual cult of Wagner" (141).

It should also be noted that Forster would treat Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" in his Clark Lectures of 1931, and in 1938 reviewed Frank Harris's biography of Wilde for *The Spectator*, so perhaps his criticism of that period reflects his reading of Wilde. The titles of the essays alone, Wildean in character and intent, strongly suggest it. Whether or not Forster was directly influenced by Wilde, either before or after the composition of *Howards End*, is perhaps less significant than their strikingly comparable approaches to the "theoretic deadlock" concerning the aesthetic and the ethical. Wilde's insistence on a separation of the two spheres (as a means of aestheticizing the ethical) is, I believe, of central importance in understanding Forster's novel.

12. It is worth noting that Helen too compromises herself. As Alan Wilde points out,

there is something vacuous about her life, too, as it stretches into the future. From Helen, even more than from Margaret, one expects tremendous vitality and joy in living, but it is apparently to be her fate

to share in the quiescent country life of her sister and brother-in-law. Helen's extremism has been too thoroughly curtailed, leaving her, like her sister, less than, as well as different from, what she was.
(*Art and Order* 119).

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