

“The battle against sameness”: Hospitality as Romantic Transcendence in *Howards End*

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Abstract: The present article presents a thematic analysis of hospitality in E. M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* (1910). The article begins by suggesting the centrality of personal relations in Forster’s philosophy and in his reputation as a writer, and then proceeds to consider episodes of hospitality in *Howards End* in a variety of aspects. First, the argument addresses the ideological work performed by non-transformative situations of hospitality in the novel (what the author terms “conservative hospitality”), and details the spiritual discontent that they engender in the novel’s protagonists. Second, the article highlights the connection between hospitality and the romantic mode, chiefly as a result of the Schlegels’ interactions with Leonard Bast. This personal connection, however, ultimately fails to coalesce into a truly transformative hospitality due to Bast’s material circumstances and experiences, preventing him from overcoming the class difference that separates him from the Schlegels; this suggests the inherent difficulties that face those who attempt to engage in hospitality across lines of class. Third, there follows a consideration of the association between hospitality and transcendence in the novel, which appears in connection to the figure of Ruth Wilcox and presents forms of spiritual desire for transcendence that take place in a secular, agnostic context. The article approaches Ruth Wilcox’s bequest of *Howards End* to Margaret Schlegel as a gesture of supreme or divine hospitality, which produces a spiritual inheritance that makes the guest into a permanent hostess of the *Howards*’ house. Finally, the article considers the status of *Howards End* as a house that inherits and refashions the literary tradition of country house hospitality at the symbolic level, while embracing privacy and isolation at the thematic level.



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Received: 2024-09-30; reviewed 2024-11-01; accepted 2024-12-12

Keywords: E. M. Forster, hospitality, romance, country house literature, modernist religion

Perhaps more than any other of E. M. Forster's fictional works, *Howards End* (1910) has been instrumental in cementing its author's reputation as a liberal intellectual who values culture, intelligence, emotional sensitivity, and personal intercourse among like-minded individuals as the essential tenets of a fulfilling intellectual and emotional life. The creed expounded by Helen Schlegel, stating that, together with culture, "personal relations are the real life, for ever and ever" (Forster 2000, 23) has been considered largely representative of the Forsterian ethos. In relation to *Howards End*, a large number of critics have focused on the limitations of the liberal-humanist political framework to which Forster subscribes and which, by the early 20th century, was undergoing a process of ideological revision that sought to reconcile classic libertarian principles with greater attention to the social aspects of identity, thus envisioning society as an organic whole (Medalie 2002, 4-5). The desire to achieve unity and harmony, both on a personal and a political level, points to a significant ethical preoccupation across Forster's oeuvre, to the degree that one critic has termed Forster as "quite possibly Levinas's most astute literary precursor" (Goodlad 2006, 325).

In light of the central role played by ethics in Forsterian fiction, an analysis of the literary trope of hospitality – a highly codified social practice that implies recognition, mutual obligation, and reciprocity – appears as a privileged site for questioning the possibility of integration that Forster's novels envision at the thematic level. This paper seeks to contribute to existing analyses of hospitality and ethics in *Howards End*, such as Catherine Lanone's (2019) or Benjamin Bateman's (2011), by considering previously neglected aspects that are called into question by the encounter between hosts and guests in the novel. In particular, I intend to argue for the thematic importance of hospitality in connection to the shifts in literary mode in the novel. I focus on episodes of hospitality as a catalyst for the text's transitions from a realist to a romantic mode, and I contend that this modal shift provides a momentary resolution to the spiritual discontent engendered by instances of inconsequential, non-transformative hospitality. I further suggest that the romantic mode is inextricably associated with the novel's articulation of transcendence, which attempts to recapture the intensity of religious feeling in the secular age of Edwardian modernity – where the social power

of the likes of the Wilcoxes, based on materialist accumulation and imperial expansion, is perceived by Forster to overshadow the life of the spirit. Finally, I suggest that the novel presents *Howards End* as a sanctuary of hospitality, in continuity with the literary tradition of the pastoral mode, and ultimately offers the country house in rural England as a location that plays out a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion on both the thematic and the symbolic level.

The opening chapters of *Howards End* set the tone for the novel as a typical comedy of manners, in which hospitality operates as the privileged means of social connection between middle-class families. In this case, Helen's stay at the country seat of the Wilcox family has the explicit purpose of further weaving the social fabric entertained by the Schlegel sisters, who participate in intellectual circles with a cosmopolitan flair. Helen's letters from *Howards End* detail an intense fascination for the Wilcoxes' way of life, which suggests to the young woman images of community, closeness to nature, efficiency, and intimacy; this is accompanied, however, by an implied dissatisfaction with Helen's own existence in cultivated society. Soon enough, Helen's romantic view of the hospitality received at *Howards End* becomes manifest in the form of the romance she entertains with the youngest son of the family, Paul Wilcox. Helen, then, experiences the utter novelty of the Wilcoxes' life in the country as a shock that is translated into sexual attraction for Paul. The narrator later remarks that “the impulse to sneer” at such moments of intense attraction, unsupported by the intimacy of sustained personal relations, “is at root a good one [...] We do not admit that by collisions of this trivial sort the doors of heaven may be shaken open” (Forster 2000, 21). Nevertheless, even if it does not lead to a spiritual transcendence of almost religious intensity, the imaginative impression produced by the romance of hospitality endures in Helen's psyche.

Shortly after, Helen recoils at the manifest philistinism and emotional repression of the male Wilcoxes – the “horror latent” (22) in their life devoted to stocks, material accumulation, and imperial expansion. Still, this eventful stay at *Howards End* forces the two sisters to confront the infamous ethical problem of how to account for, and relate to, different conceptions of “reality,” which is chiefly expressed as a difference in values: does reality reside in culture, intellectual activity, and pleasant society, or in the materialistic world of economic pursuit and modern business? Throughout the novel, the Schlegels display a perceived sense of inadequacy in their own way of life, which leads them to seek intellectual and emotional fulfilment through

transformative interpersonal relations. This is a pursuit of reality that envisions a relation to others that is ethical and integrative, and which requires a refashioning of one's social circles (even across lines of social class, as with Leonard Bast). Margaret Schlegel is particularly susceptible to the discontents of a frivolous social life that forecloses authentic, intimate connection and imaginative exercise: in London, she feels overwhelmed by the stimuli of polite society, comprised of "concerts which it would be a sin to miss, and invitations which it would never do to refuse" (128). The novel is replete with frustrating social occasions that attempt to create a sense of connection but lead only to the awareness of the artificiality of the attempt and consequent failure. In *Howards End*, this chiefly translates into the failure to address the impact of "the unseen" on daily life, with the unseen being comprised of a network of associations between personal emotion, alertness to the possibility of spiritual transcendence, and the intimacy that attends to meaningful personal encounters in the novel. The preoccupation with the unseen finds expression in Margaret's complaint to Mrs Wilcox that she and her intellectual friends "lead the lives of gibbering monkeys" (67); as I will discuss below, Ruth Wilcox represents for Margaret the possibility for a more intimate and transformative connection, one that radically alters her worldview and that suggests personal relations as an affirmative ethical force that informs Margaret's desire to "battle against sameness" (288).

These non-transformative encounters, which have virtually no effect on the emotional, spiritual, or intellectual life of participants, are instances of what I term conservative hospitality. Catherine Lanone defines the hospitality of events such as Evie's wedding as "normative" (2019, 410); I suggest the term "conservative" in order to further highlight the ideological import behind these social operations and their effect on the development of narrative. As I envision it, conservative hospitality is not merely a negative and exclusionary effort, but it is actively engaged in the strengthening of human ties within a carefully circumscribed social group. Above all, conservative hospitality functions as an ideology, insofar as it seeks to reproduce existing conditions, social customs and hierarchies, stable relationships of property and economic dependency. Readers of Edwardian fiction will recognise this as a veritable trope of early 20th-century literature, one which was codified in literary criticism by Samuel Hynes's analysis of the garden party as the main iconic image associated with Edwardianism (1968, 3-14). The significance of such episodes of conservative hospitality for Forster in particular is that they allow the novelist to create

a background of spiritual discontent for his characters, so that the text may dramatically unveil epiphanic moments in which “the possibility of connection is suddenly intensified” (Lanone 2019, 405).

The opposition between these epiphanies and what Margaret Schlegel terms “life’s daily gray” (Forster 2000, 124) also recalls the difference between the “life in time” and the “life by values” that Forster identifies in *Aspects of the Novel*. Forster suggests that the life in time corresponds to chronological time, and it can be measured accordingly; the life by values, on the other hand, “is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles” (1927, 48). *Howards End*, as I will elucidate below, repeatedly associates episodes of transformative hospitality with the intense emotion that attends to the life by values. Instances of conservative hospitality, on the other hand, largely abide by the explicit or unspoken rules of ritualistic sociability, and they fail to rise to the status of significance reserved for transformative, ethical interpersonal relations. In both his compositional method and in his ethical conception, Forster therefore privileges the discovery of great moments that are often connected thematically to hospitality and modally to the romantic imagination.¹ Episodes of conservative hospitality, on the other hand, resonate with Lanone’s description of the Wilcoxes’ hospitality as “a temporary, selective practice” (2019, 409); in what follows, I seek to integrate this argument by suggesting the extent to which such conservative hospitality functions as a way of maintaining the existing social order.

The most evident instance of conservative hospitality in *Howards End* is Evie Wilcox’s wedding at Oniton Grange, which serves the newly engaged Margaret as an opportunity to meet Henry’s friends and relations. Most significantly, the wedding also operates as a trial for Margaret: on this occasion she is expected to act as social hostess and to abide by the codes of hospitality expected of a late-Victorian married woman, in accordance with domestic ideology. Leonore Davidoff writes that, in the highly formalised society of the 19th century, “upper- and middle-class women were used to maintain the fabric of Society, as semi-official leaders but also as arbiters of social acceptance or rejection,” thus acting as counterpart to men’s activity in the public domain of business (1973,

1 A similar thematic pattern recurs in other fictional works by Forster, most notably in *A Passage to India* (1924). In that novel, the moments of intimate personal connection across the colonial border – such as the encounter between Aziz and Mrs Moore in the mosque – contrast with more formal occasions of conservative hospitality, such as the Bridge Party hosted by the Collector Mr Turton.

16). This role, then, invests the domestic woman with the responsibility to demarcate and police social boundaries: the ideal social hostess determines the conditions that underlie the family's hospitality. At Oniton, Margaret attempts to abide by the polite hospitality called for by the occasion, but her social skills as hostess are most notably tested on the day of the wedding, as Helen makes an unexpected appearance with Leonard and Jacky Bast. Claiming responsibility over the Basts' fate, Helen lashes out against "the wretchedness that lies under this luxury" (Forster 2000, 191) and the spiritual inertness of the Wilcoxes' world. Margaret, eager to avoid a scandal, declines personal responsibility and invites the Basts to be her guests not at Oniton Grange but at the nearby hotel; however, she speaks "rather conventionally" (193), and her offer of hospitality sounds a note of hollowness and insincerity. The contradictory requirements of conservative hospitality and ethical commitment thus clash dramatically in this scene.

As always in Forster, however, none of the terms in his binary oppositions are naively idealised or held as obvious solutions to the spiritual problems he considers. To the abstract quality of Helen's pronouncements on justice and duty, the text opposes the pragmatism of Margaret, whose offer to help Leonard find employment attempts a mediation between the material needs of the Basts and the requirements of society. This attempted compromise between conservative hospitality and an ethics of hospitality suggests the ethical quandaries underlying Forster's political liberalism. It is only a prophetic character such as Ruth Wilcox who is able to transcend this ethical impasse: when faced with the complications of fraught hospitality in chapter 3, she does not "pretend that nothing had happened, as a competent society hostess would have done" (19), but instead employs tact and instinctive affection (qualities that Forster famously identified as constitutive of the "aristocracy of the sensitive" [Forster 1972, 70]) to restore harmonious personal intercourse. Thus, Mrs Wilcox embodies an alternative figure of the hostess, who provides access to the transformative hospitality sought by Margaret Schlegel as a result of her existential discontent. Before considering the spiritual salvation offered by Mrs Wilcox's transcendent hospitality, however, I now turn to the intersection of hospitality and romance represented by the interaction between the Schlegel sisters and Leonard Bast.

Bast enters the Schlegels' life by coincidence, as a result of a misplaced umbrella, and his unexpected interaction with the sisters already plays out the dramatic possibilities inherent in a situation of hospitality. The Queen's Hall, the setting of the concert that both Bast and the Schlegels attend, brings together the

sisters with the modest clerk who exists on the edges of the infamous “abyss” represented by urban poverty in Edwardian culture. The awkwardness and uneasiness of the trans-class encounter are shown to be influenced by each person’s material circumstances, for Bast’s poverty lies behind his instinctive mistrust of the sisters (“[t]his young man had been ‘had’ in the past [...] and now most of his energies went in defending himself against the unknown” [Forster 2000, 31]). Ultimately, Margaret and Helen admit Bast into their house at Wickham Place and thus manage to uphold their deceased father’s ideal of unconditional hospitality, according to which “it’s better to be fooled than suspicious [...] the confidence trick is the work of man, but the want-of-confidence trick is the work of the devil” (Forster 2000, 26). This intimation of openness and trust, however, is simultaneously shadowed by Mrs Munt’s comment that “[w]e know nothing about the young man, Margaret, and your drawing-room is full of very tempting little things” (Forster 2000, 26). This scene, therefore, already suggests the potential treachery and dispossession that inhere in the hospitable encounter across lines of class demarcation. The pitfalls of want-of-confidence or usurpation acquire political relevance because, as noted by Stone, “Leonard is a fictional test of Arnold’s belief that Culture, if it is to be realized at all, has its best chance among the Philistines” (1966, 248).

The romantic ideal of an organic, harmonious society is thus played out in the repeated interactions between the Schlegels and Bast. Significantly, these interactions depend on instances of hospitality that are invested with a halo of romance. This momentarily overcomes the realistic framework of the text, as the admittance of Bast into the domestic life of the Schlegels briefly realises the ideal of social ascent granted to those who believe in culture and personal relations. Obviously enough, the Schlegels are for Bast “denizens of Romance” (Forster 2000, 104) who are able to relieve the greyness of his daily life. However, he also exerts a powerful fascination on the sisters, as he allows them to experience the romance of hospitality in its full force. His function in the novel thus achieves the modal blend that David Medalie terms “romantic realism” (2002, 64), a typically Edwardian fictional hybrid that combats the representational narrowness of the naturalist tradition with romantic “escape hatches” that make possible the transcendence of one’s own circumstances. This is consonant with the shift that occurs in 19th-century literary engagements with romance: according to Gillian Beer, “[f]rom the Romantic period onwards [...] romance has become a literary quality rather than a form and it is frequently set against ‘reality’ in literary

argument" (1970, 66). It is this transition from form to quality that allows Edwardian novelists to accommodate the romantic mode within the framework of a largely realist novel such as *Howards End*.

The most extensive engagement with the romantic mode appears with Leonard's call at Wickham Place, the day after Jacky Bast's unfortunate appearance at the house. The novelty of a rather dishevelled clerk initially perturbs Margaret, as she instinctively recoils before the "odours from the abyss" (Forster 2000, 100) that emanate from him. However, the sense of connection intensifies as Bast recounts his attempt to escape the unwelcoming urban landscape of London and to put into action a vague idea of "return to the land" inspired by his readings. Even the bathetic conclusion to Bast's adventure, that is, his failure to witness a wonderful dawn, does not diminish in the Schlegels' eyes the romantic intimation that drove him into the countryside in the first place. Beer writes that the romance "absorbs the reader into experience which is otherwise unattainable" (1970, 3), and that it crucially depends on "a certain set distance in the relationship between its audience and its subject-matter" (5). The recollection of Bast's modest adventure, more notable for its noble intent than for its result, thus engages the Schlegels' romantic imagination and suggests a physical remove from the city. The romantic sensibility displayed by Bast indicates his belonging to the "aristocracy of the sensitive" with which the Schlegels identify: Margaret envisions a community of intent and emotion as she exclaims, "haven't we all to struggle against life's daily greyness, against pettiness, against mechanical cheerfulness, against suspicion?" (Forster 2000, 122). The admittance of Bast into the Schlegels' home thus presents hospitality as a form of romantic, imaginative liberation, which allows the sisters to break away from the spiritual dullness of domesticity and frivolous society. At the same time, Margaret's recognition that "[m]oney pads the edges of things" (51) suggests that their indulgence into the domain of romance rests upon economic privilege – which reinforces once again the notion of romance as distance, to be experienced vicariously at a safe remove, rather than in the first person.

As the realities of class difference ultimately prevent Bast from accessing the world of leisure and culture – for, unlike the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, he does not "stand upon money as upon islands" (Forster 2000, 51) – the momentary romance made possible by the Schlegels' hospitality proves to be exceptionally fragile, and finally untenable. If the practices of polite hospitality among social peers entail a degree of reciprocity, Bast is manifestly unable to offer hospitality

to the Schlegels due to the squalor of his domestic arrangement. Furthermore, the misguided goodwill of the Schlegel sisters results in a detached and generally condescending attitude, as in the comic dinner party in Chapter 15. The ethical problem of how exactly to help society's poor without adopting a patronising stance towards the beneficiary proves to be impossible for the Schlegels to solve tactfully, and this engenders in Bast a sense of mistrust and alienation from the world of the cultivated middle class. Bast's failed visit to Wickham Place in Chapter 16 has disastrous consequences, which lead to his eventual downfall into the abyss of urban poverty. The imaginative impression made by Leonard on the Schlegels remains strong, just like Helen's ethical commitment to the Basts' fate, but social class appears in *Howards End* as an undefeatable, even deterministic force shaped by the historical developments of industrial and urban modernity. Finally, Margaret has to look elsewhere if she is to realise her maxim that “either some very dear person or some very dear place [is] necessary to relieve life's daily gray, and to show that it is gray” (124).

The alternative route to salvation, which allows connection to both people and place, is provided by the prophetic character of Ruth Wilcox, a figure who presides over the imagery of the novel even as she occupies a marginal position in much of the plot – with the exception of one crucial gesture of hospitality. Unlike Bast, Mrs Wilcox offers a less fraught vision of hospitality, unmarred by the complications of class difference, even as she appears alien to the world of cosmopolitan, intellectual society frequented by the Schlegels. At the luncheon party hosted by Margaret at Wickham Place – yet another instance of conservative hospitality, in its blend of polite interaction and inconsequential chatter – Mrs Wilcox hardly speaks, as Margaret anxiously dominates the conversation as if possessed by “the demon of vociferation” (63). As Margaret realises the inadequacy of her hospitality towards the guest of honour, Mrs Wilcox's silence functions as an intimation of “a life that may be of greater importance” (65) existing beyond the domains of conservative hospitality and spiritual and imaginative inertness. The romantic impulse to transcend the familiar boundaries of daily life through meaningful personal intercourse is consistent with what Jonathan Rose terms the Edwardian “cult of human relations, which, like so many other movements in Edwardian culture, served as a substitute for a lost religion” (1986, 40). Rose sees it as a particular manifestation of the more general Edwardian tendency to “[infuse] spirituality into worldly things” (3), as a result of the decline in popularity of dogmatic, organised religion – at least in intellectual

circles. Recently, the survival of the longing for transcendence has been at the heart of a burgeoning critical interest in modernist forms of religious desire. For example, Alexandra Peat contests the “secularisation hypothesis” in studies of modernity and argues that modernist literature “understands the experience of the sacred as one of being connected to something larger than the self and consequently constructs spirituality as an ethical mode of understanding the place of the individual in the universe” (2011, 2). The connection between ethics and the spiritual suggests that a consideration of hospitality as a literary theme may serve as a way of understanding the desire to transcend the social and material circumstances of the self. This also resonates with the romantic role played by the meaningful interpersonal encounter, as romance becomes inextricably tied to hospitality, transcendence, and imagination.

In *Howards End*, the friendship between Margaret and Mrs Wilcox begins via an attempted contact that disregards the complex etiquette of calling and visiting in Edwardian times (“in England the newcomer ought not to call before she is called upon” [Forster 2000, 55]). After an initial misunderstanding, however, Margaret herself calls upon the bed-ridden Ruth Wilcox, and a “curious note” (61) of intimacy is struck as the conversation signals the shift “from mundane, comedic social interaction, to the invisible ethics of hospitality” (Lanone 2019, 405). Mrs Wilcox’s act of reaching out to Margaret serves as a test of the young woman’s imaginative responsiveness, and her emotion quickens as her hostess muses upon the general significance of connection to place and to Howards End in particular. In this situation of hospitality, it is Margaret Schlegel who needs to be introduced to the life of the spirit, much in the same way as Leonard Bast longs to be introduced to the life of culture. The refinement of her ethical and imaginative sensibility is then intensified in the subsequent scene, in which Margaret and Mrs Wilcox go Christmas shopping together in the city. The overriding materialism and consumerism of metropolitan life make Margaret aware of “the grotesque impact of the unseen upon the seen” (Forster 2000, 69), and her spiritual discontent finds expression in a desire for transcendence that she articulates in secular, agnostic terms: “[s]he was not a Christian in the accepted sense [...] [b]ut in public who shall express the unseen adequately? It is private life that holds out the mirror to infinity; personal intercourse [...] that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision” (69). Significantly, *Howards End*’s critique of the spiritual torpor that affects modern individuals is tied to the extensive critique of modernity articulated by the novel’s narrator. The text famously

presents modernity as an age of alienation, disconnection, and spiritual rootlessness, with humanity featuring as a “nomadic horde” (128) that inhabits “the civilization of luggage” (128). The manifest impossibility of returning to an idealised community rooted in an agrarian economy – which the novel only realises in its idyllic, pastoral ending – clashes against the capitalist and imperialist socioeconomic order of the metropolis. The volatility of capital finds its counterpart in the male Wilcoxes’ inability to establish a meaningful relation to the houses and lands they inhabit: as Helen comments, they “collect houses like [...] tadpoles” (145), and when they move from one house to another they only leave “a little dust and a little money behind” (213). Against this logic of endless accumulation, Ruth Wilcox represents for Margaret a transcendent detachment from materialism that is rooted in the primacy of ethics, giving, and hospitality.

The association of friendship and intimacy with a secular form of transcendence culminates with the informal testament by which Mrs Wilcox bequeaths *Howards End* to Margaret, following the older woman’s death by illness. The unconventionality of this bequest, as Bateman writes, “bypasses tradition, neglects heterosexual modes of inheritance and problematizes her maternal persona” (2011, 187), thus acting as a form of invitation down “a queer path, an alternate subject position visible to ‘he who strives to look deeper’” (188). Obviously, the slip of paper left by Mrs Wilcox has no legal value, and the ethical complexity of the decision faced by the male Wilcoxes is mediated by a lengthy narratorial intervention. The narrator finally concludes that, despite the sensible decision of the Wilcoxes to ignore the note and to retain ownership of *Howards End*, “one hard fact remains. They did neglect a personal appeal” (Forster 2000, 85). The ethical problem generated by this informal will points to the clash of conflicting codes of conduct – one dictated by jurisprudence, the other by ethical consideration of the other’s will, however unreasonable it may appear.

Most significantly for my discussion, however, Mrs Wilcox’s bequest of *Howards End* to Margaret Schlegel constitutes the central act of hospitality of the novel, a gesture of supreme or divine hospitality, by virtue of its association with transcendence. Since, throughout the narrative, Ruth Wilcox always figures as inextricably connected to her family farm and acts as a tutelary spirit of the house, the giving away of *Howards End* constitutes a veritable giving away of the self: it is a gesture that invites Margaret to transition from guest to hostess of the house herself, and thus to become Ruth Wilcox’s own uncanny double (as testified by Miss Avery’s misrecognition when Margaret first enters

the house [231]). Mrs Wilcox's act of supreme hospitality and uncanny transcendence of death stirs Margaret's romantic imagination, figuring later in the novel as a recurrent suggestion of spectrality as a sanctifying presence at Howards End. The virtual homelessness experienced by Margaret Schlegel since the end of the lease at Wickham Place, which places her in a precarious position until a new, permanent accommodation is found, leads her to Howards End as the final stage of her quest for a home. Only as a recipient of Mrs Wilcox's supreme hospitality will Margaret be able to experience the joys of domesticity in a way that Topolovská likens to the Heideggerian notion of dwelling (2018, 90). The concealing of Ruth Wilcox's will also puts Margaret before yet another trial, the coming into possession of Howards End through her own means and resourcefulness while honouring the former Mrs Wilcox's ethos of hospitality and welcome. By the end of the novel, this effort is described in heroic terms: "[t] here was something uncanny in her triumph. She [...] had charged through these Wilcoxes and broken up their lives" (Forster 2000, 291). However, the militaristic undertones of this statement are undercut by the transformation undergone by Howards End itself, from a mere countryside farm to an enduring, integrative literary symbol of community and harmony. Before closing my argument, I now turn to a discussion of Howards End as a house and as a symbol made for, and shaped by, hospitality.

Howards End provides a suitable synthesis for the tradition of hospitality embodied by both the Schlegel and Howard families. The creed of faith in others voiced by Schlegel senior, which I mentioned above, finds an exact correspondence in Miss Avery's recollection of hospitality in her youth at Howards End: "[o]ld Mrs Howard never spoke against anybody, nor let anyone be turned away without food. Then it was never 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' in their land, but would people please not come in? Mrs Howard was never created to run a farm" (234). The demise of the Howard family and the state of disrepair of their house before Mr Wilcox's intervention locates their ethos of openness in a distant golden age of hospitality, an attitude which is currently unsustainable due to the lack of business sense that it entails (Margaret's dwelling at Howards End is ultimately liberated from the requirements of efficiency and productivity, as it is supported by Henry Wilcox's imperial trade). Margaret's spiritual inheritance of Howards End begins as she enters the house alone after the previous tenant, Mr Bryce, has died abroad. Inside, Margaret is astonished to find that the housekeeper, herself a symbolic emissary of the prophetic influence exerted

by Ruth Wilcox, has arranged the Schlegels' own furniture in the empty house. The house comes to life once more, as the personal history of the Schlegels is inscribed into the architecture and natural landscape of *Howards End*, thus creating a strong affective bond between individual and place. As Rankin Russell notes, “Forster suggests that beloved things, cultural or natural, such as books and trees, along with places, forge and maintain links to our common humanity and to our departed family members” (2016, 204). This imbrication of place and personal history is the first step towards the condition of homeliness that constitutes the prerequisite for any situation of hospitality, and that will allow Margaret to rise to the position of hostess later in the novel.

If *Howards End* is to represent a house shaped by an ethics of hospitality, its location in the English countryside must be considered as an essential feature of the welcome that the house offers to prospective visitors. As I have suggested above, *Howards End* famously provides a respite from the “civilization of luggage” (Forster 2000, 128) and the corresponding sense of flux and rootlessness that afflicts Margaret. The reason for this is to be found in its physical remove from the metropolis, and in the generic and thematic lineage that connects it to the tradition of country house hospitality. The tradition of country house literature in English as a genre is generally held to begin with a small corpus of 17th-century “country house poems,” the most famous one being Ben Jonson’s “*To Penshurst*” (1616). These texts generally confer honour and praise upon the master of the house, who also acts as literary patron and host to the poet. A central element of their celebratory function is represented by the appreciation for the master’s generous hospitality, expressed in the image of the lavish feast to which all who contribute to the economy of the estate are admitted. Crucially, the lord’s hospitality provides a key image of harmonious and hierarchical class relations: McClung identifies a “moral economy” operative in such social occasions, for “the functioning of the estate depends upon the observing of the proper relationships between the classes of society or between the offices of the estate” (1977, 105). Thus, traditional country house hospitality may be termed an instance of conservative hospitality, consonant with the ideological function performed by country house poems (Spurr 2012, 20). At *Howards End*, however, such a tradition of country house hospitality is refashioned in a more democratic vein: even as the narrator at one point acknowledges that “the feudal ownership of the land did bring dignity” (Forster 2000, 128), the house is not presided by a patronising medieval lord, but by the female tutelary spirit of Mrs Wilcox; its

style is overall modest and proportionate, as detailed by Helen in her opening letter (3), rather than “built to envious show” (Jonson 1995, 66). Margaret’s famous pronouncement about the countryside of Hertfordshire goes, “the appearance of the land was neither aristocratic nor suburban [...] left to itself [...] this country would vote Liberal” (Forster 2000, 228). Wiener (2004, 13) details how, beginning in the Victorian age, the newly acquired middle-class taste for rural living was part of a larger process of absorption of aristocratic values by the bourgeoisie; among these, in this case, we may count the notion of country house hospitality.

At Howards End, Margaret recognises her duty of hospitality as mistress and hostess of the house. Thus, she rebels against the patriarchal order represented by Henry and Charles Wilcox, and she does not take part in their plan to ensnare the pregnant Helen in the country house by deceptive means. In this way, Margaret honours Ruth Wilcox’s notion of Christian hospitality to sinners, which is reinforced by the narrator’s claim that “[i]t is those who cannot connect who hasten to cast the first stone” (Forster 2000, 266). As I have discussed, in *Howards End* transcendence of the material world can only be achieved through a romantic, imaginative interaction with place. As Margaret and Helen are reunited at Howards End, there comes the former’s recognition of Ruth Wilcox as the possessor of a supra-human, prophetic awareness and sanctifying presence that transcends death and human realities (268). This is what accompanies “the peace of the country” and “of the present” (269) that blesses the sisters as they spend the night at the farm. Commenting on Margaret’s position at Howards End, Bateman suggests that “[she] enriches the queerness of a bequeathing intended not to protect and privatize property, but to deterritorialize it and expand its ownership – an ownership defined less by law and custom than by emotional investment” (2011, 192). Following Derrida, he also writes that the house “belongs neither to Ruth nor to Margaret but to the invitation that binds them” (193). Thus, in the romantic mode, this idealisation of hospitality at Howards End makes the house into a secular sanctuary for ethical values, which in Margaret’s view centre around the respect for and the coexistence with difference: “[i]t is part of the battle against sameness. Differences – eternal differences [...] so that there may always be colour; sorrow perhaps, but colour in the daily gray” (Forster 2000, 288).

The romantic mode that dominates the novel’s final chapters, however, is also problematised by several aspects that question the future existence of Howards End as a haven for liberal, ethical values. Leonard Bast is notably excluded from the final idyll of the book, though his child survives and opens up the possibility

for a reformed vision of the nuclear family. Meanwhile, the future of *Howards End* is threatened by the expansion of the “red rust” (289) of suburbia, which threatens the country house with the prospect of deadening undifferentiation and homogeneity. At the same time, however, *Howards End* retains a disturbing dependence on the capital acquired by Henry Wilcox through his imperial and commercial enterprise. The farm itself had been rescued from mismanagement and economic decay by Henry’s intervention, which provided the material conditions for Margaret’s imaginative and romantic dwelling at *Howards End*; in the novel’s final pages, the islands of money upon which Margaret and the Wilcoxes rest ensure their financial security and the continued prosperity of the household. These factors, in addition to the threatening image of looming suburbia, complicate the conception of *Howards End* as a household devoted to hospitality and reveal its position of besieged insularity. The democratic impulse to openness and equality is problematised by the rejection of the very suburbia that Leonard Bast inhabits, a reaction which Hegglund identifies as emblematic of a tendency of Edwardian intellectuals to distance themselves from perceived agents of mass cultural contamination – for example, the humble clerk (1997, 399-401). In *Of Hospitality*, Jacques Derrida focuses on the “irreducible pervertibility” (2000, 25) of the law of hospitality, insofar as an absolute, ethical, and unconditional hospitality must also be extended to an other who may exert violence, dispossession, or usurpation onto the host. *Howards End* ultimately remains unable to overcome the aporetic state created by its simultaneous embrace of an ethics of hospitality and by the “closing of the gates” (Forster 2000, 223) of Margaret’s mind and of the house alike.

In addition to the thematic level, *Howards End* also serves as a symbolically hospitable house. Michael Levenson argues that the novel functions synecdochically: “[i]t withdraws from a broad canvas; it reduces its scale; its battles are all waged among individuals. But in retreating to the partial view, it asks those parts to stand for the whole” (1991, 91). Levenson focuses on the political import of the synecdochical operation for Forster’s liberalism; for the purposes of my discussion, however, it is sufficient to note that in *Howards End* the country house acts not only as a private retreat but as an aggregating and integrative cultural symbol. As Tereza Topolovská writes, in the 20th century the country house acquired “abstract meaning as the embodiment of history” and operated “in the formation of national identity” (2018, 9-10) – a symbolic role that resonates with *Howards End*’s preoccupation with the historical, social, and cultural

condition of Edwardian England. If the country house is to figure as an integrative force in society and culture, then its status as literary symbol implies an ethical openness on the symbolic level. As a literary symbol of harmony and aggregation, one that is persuasive enough to construe a community of meaning built around its ideal of ethical and rural hospitality, *Howards End* must remain open and available to interpretation, ultimately liberated from the contingencies of the realist mode: only thus can the barriers of the self be transcended through a romantic and imaginative gesture of hospitality. Nevertheless, at the thematic level *Howards End* remains private, insular, and thus figuratively inhospitable, and the text does not suggest any logical indication that the house may provide a viable way forward for English national life in modernity.

In *Howards End* the mediation between the private (the dimension to which Margaret Schlegel retreats as she goes “from words to things” [Forster 2000, 223]) and the public (to which the novel’s symbolic architecture aspires through its use of synecdoche) points to a complicated, even contradictory ethical commitment to hospitality. The hospitable encounter is envisioned throughout the text as a potential “escape hatch” that determines the novel’s insistent association between hospitality and the romantic mode, as testified by the sisters’ interactions with Leonard Bast. Finally, transcendence of the boundaries of the self and access to the metaphysical reality of place is afforded by Ruth Wilcox’s gesture of supreme hospitality towards Margaret, which ends her condition of spiritual homelessness and allows her to rise to the degree of hostess to the reformed, democratic country house. As a result of this spiritual inheritance, *Howards End* undergoes a symbolic transformation into a home that presents a powerful, if unstable, symbol of hospitality and harmony.

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