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New Age Collaborative Essay

Mapping Motorphobia: Motorcars, Culture, and *Howards End*

The *New Age* archive opens up new avenues for research which can recontextualize canonical texts such as *Howards End*. As Sean Latham suggests in his article “*New Age* Scholarship: The Work of Criticism in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” the site lends itself to a kind of “frenetic” or “surface-reading.” Taking Latham’s keyword search on “imperialism” as our model, we began our process with two interests in mind: 1) to investigate some general terms in relation to the historical context of the novel (e.g. Liberalism, Socialism, urbanism), and 2) to contextualize the discussion club’s hypothetical solutions to the problem presented by Leonard Bast.

We began our search of the *New Age* archives by investigating broad areas of interest, and discovered overlapping terms among seemingly disparate articles. For example, we accessed M.D. Eder’s article “On Culture” through the search term “culture” and then again through the term “suburbs.” After reading “On Culture,” we followed up its socialist/democratic interest by searching for the term “socialism,” which, strangely enough, brought us to O.W. Dyce’s article “Motorphobia,” which in turn returned us to the suburbs with its interest in commuting. At this point, we decided that motorcars might provide us with an interesting point of entry and reentry into both *Howards End* and *The New Age* archives. Clearly the motorcar acts as a nodal point for various topics of contention concurrent with the social and political discourses of *Howards End*. As Latham posits, a search of digital archives maps unpredictable “connections.” These research methods yield compelling new readings of a novel intimately concerned with “connecting.”

Using the *New Age* articles as a lens for rereading *Howards End*, we were able to recontextualize the novel's central concern with "in-betweenness." By reexamining the novel's interest in place through the ideas of the suburbs and commuting, we found that this particular avenue of inquiry revealed tensions between the novel and some of the popular ideas expressed in the *New Age*. Throughout the novel, Margaret exhibits anxiety about moving from her girlhood home, a worry that is taken up by the narrator as symptomatic of modern living. The narrator suggests, "we are reverting to a civilization of luggage, and historians of the future will note how the middle classes accreted possessions without taking root in the earth, and may find in this the secret of their imaginative poverty" (137). Here the narrator blames the grayness and drooping moustache of men like Leonard Bast on the transience of London living. The dissatisfaction of "rootless" living seems to be a particularly urban complaint, especially when contrasted with the fecundity of country living, most clearly evident in the image of Mrs. Wilcox holding fresh hay in her hands. M. D. Eder, in his essay "On Culture," likewise emphasizes the importance of rooted living, but he locates it within the suburbs:

Yet I find that men and women in my suburb have no joy in the hours spent in factory and workshop—but they hasten back to the cultivation of their part of the mud where they labour assiduously and longingly as if their lives depended upon the sticks of Burbank's Crimson Winter or New Crimson Queen Rhubarbs they are forcing. (224)

Here the double meaning of rootedness espoused in *Howards End* becomes clear. Eder suggests that the working people of the suburbs draw sustenance from both the permanence of their homes *and* the very soil on which their homes rest.

While the *New Age* articles we explored share with *Howards End* a condemnation of unhealthy and spiritually empty urban living, they also acknowledge something that the novel does not. What the narrator and Margaret seem to be missing is that while those members of the middle class such as Mr. Wilcox, or Margaret herself, may have the luxury of deciding to "either

be in London or out of it,” the working members of the middle class, like Leonard Bast, don’t have the option of completely severing ties with the city (124). By placing O. W. Dyce’s “Motorphobia” article in conversation with Eder’s celebration of suburban living, we begin to see the possibility for the suburbs as an in-between space:

Granted that it will take some years to bring the price of even a ‘two-seater’ car to a democratic level, there is still good reason to believe that clerks, small shopkeepers, and workmen in the better-paid trades will be able, in course of time, to live in the country and motor to business daily. (Dyce 385)

The motorcar, in Dyce’s formulation, becomes a great democratizing force; it allows urban workers to live in a rooted way. Contextualizing *Howards End* through the *New Age* articles allows us to see solutions to the problems of modern living left unspoken by the novel in its inability to imagine the spaces between.

The motorcar offers one way to navigate these spaces. *Howards End*, however, considers multiple competing forms of travel. The anxieties about travel expressed in “On Culture” and “Motorphobia” offer new ways of addressing tensions among driving, walking, and train travel, and the extent to which each is or isn’t amenable to social “connection.” The motorcar in *Howards End* acts as an anxious mediator “in between” the train, which is almost overwhelmingly social, and walking, which is solitary, but which anticipates social “interchange.” Leonard Bast’s off-road walk, a detour that could not be made in a motor-car, ties him to a “love of the earth” that the middle-class characters find quaint and neo-Romantic. Eder argues that walking, particularly in the suburbs, allows for a “pleased anticipation of interchange with new minds” (224). For the worker, the walk is not valuable for itself but for the opportunities of cultural exchange; for the middle class, who can afford Romantic sentiments, the walk is far more interesting than the books describing such wanderings. The narrator figures those books as an unnavigable “swamp,” an off-road space available only to the walker. The

narrator warns that within this swamp of “great names,” it is easy to “mistake the sign-post for the destination” (110), a mistake only pertinent in the motorcar: not on foot, and not on train (where the traveler has no control over the destination anyway). Thus Leonard's success in “reaching the destination” privileges walking as a sign of working-class physical mobility, while underscoring anxieties about the motorcar as a sign of modernity—a new technology that unsettles time and space, “robb[ing]” the “journey of half its magic” (192).

Train travel, however, combines the pace and industry of the car with the romantic “interchange with new minds” of the walk. Forster juxtaposes this scene describing Leonard's walk with a scene describing his train trip to Cambridge, a trip characterized by “the keenest happiness he had ever known” (112). As a rented public space that puts Leonard into contact with “new minds,” the train momentarily eases his social anxiety. Trains, therefore, serve a function similar to walking by socializing the worker and putting him into impermanent contact with new groups of people. The homoerotic echoes of this scene predict Forster's description of the Great Western express as a “forcing-house for sex,” in which nobody is referred to by name but in which everyone collectively is referred to as “they” (191). While Dyce favors the motorcar as a substitute for older, more dangerous forms of “animal propulsion” (385), in *Howards End* the train itself becomes a form of “animal propulsion,” whose “purr” provides a “background for conversation” (191). The train acts as a space for the human “animal” to interact both socially and erotically during the journey from city to suburb to country. When Margaret consciously does not correct fellow passengers who misidentify Oxford colleges, the “signpost” metaphor resonates once again, insofar as the conversational atmosphere and social setting of the train eclipse specific cultural details. While in the motorcar trip the emphasis is on the vehicle's ability to collapse space and time, with the train the emphasis is on what occurs *inside*: the speed of the

train is mollified by the leisurely interaction occurring within. The travel to Shrewsbury by train is parallel to Leonard's trip on foot insofar as the journey itself is more important than either “signpost” or “destination.” When that destination is reached, it results in yet another trip by motorcar—one in which Albert “flatten[s] out a cat” (195). Motorcar travel kills off meaningful cultural and personal interaction—the car becomes a menace to the cultural leisure that Eder ascribes to suburban travel. In Forster’s formulation, as opposed to that of the *New Age* articles, the motorcar is a profoundly disjunctive force.

When the narrator proclaims, “only connect” in Chapter 22 of *Howards End*, it is not entirely clear how one ought to follow this advice. Forster not only champions connection, he also stages the problematics of what it means to “only connect.” Forster seems unable to—or perhaps purposefully fails to—effectively connect the “prose” of Leonard Bast’s life with the “passion” of his upper-class betters. He more directly suggests the potential impossibility of connection when, at the end of Chapter 12, the narrator comments, “Actual life is full of false clues and sign-posts that lead nowhere” (97). A reading of the novel requires active decoding on our part; in order to make sense of it, we have to sift through the various false starts and misleading signposts until a semblance of meaning begins to develop. With a book that suggests the impossibility of interpretation this process becomes an even more vexed problem.

When we turn to the “Motorphobia” article from *The New Age*, as we have seen, new connections take shape, and our understanding of the novel enlarges and expands. Such contextualization is especially helpful with a novel like *Howards End*, in which Forster clearly attempts to engage with pressing social and political issues (e.g. the rise of Socialism, class divisions, the end of aristocracy). Likewise, the book is not short on interesting moments involving the motorcar. The moments in which Margaret loses her sense of time and space are of

particular interest in relation to the “only connect” problem. When riding between Hilton and London, she experiences a sort of Einsteinian crisis: “Once more she lost the sense of space; once more trees, houses, people, animals, hills, merged and heaved into one dirtiness, and she was at Wickham Place” (186). It is only when she returns home that her perceptual disruption comes to an end:

She forgot the luggage and the motorcars, and the hurrying men who know so much and connect so little. She recaptured the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and starting from Howards End, she attempted to realize England. She failed – visions do not come when we try, though they may come through trying. (186)

By perverting the human sensory relation to the natural order, the motorcar renders difficult the connection that is needed to form the basis of an aesthetic sensibility and national identity.

Although Margaret fails here, Forster does not close off the potential for a connection of space and beauty. As with his more thorough testing of the “only connect” idea in *A Passage to India*—which ends with failure, but also includes a forward-looking move (“Not yet” etc.)—here Forster indicates an inability to connect, while reserving the possibility of its realization in the future (“they may come through trying”).

Although *The New Age* materials did not in this case reveal ground-breaking new discoveries, they did breathe new life into old questions. Our contextualization allows us to forge meaningful links between what seem to be “false clues” and signposts. In some ways, *The New Age* archive is useful in its ability to help the reader/researcher prove a negative. In its presentation of multiple crisscrossing discourses, *The New Age* suggests ways of understanding both the content of *Howards End* and the roads *not* taken by Forster. By revealing the multiplicity of ideas available to Forster at the time he was writing *Howards End*, *The New Age* archives raise questions of intent—why did Forster select the paths he did in constructing his novel? “Motorphobia” and “On Culture” focus the social problems of class, culture, and

industrialization into the symbolic site of travel, problematizing the spatial and temporal tropes laid out in *Howards End* with the politics that Forster wanted to engage. By distinguishing the public space of the train with the private space of the car, Forster underscores the lack of connection among members of separate classes, while evoking the “connecting” possibilities of liminal spaces.

Works Cited

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