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# **Empires of Objects: Accumulation and Entropy in E. M. Forster's *Howards End***

HENRY S. TURNER

[T]here seems something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called "value," something which 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 . . .

—E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* 19

One of the evils of money is that it tempts us to look at it rather than at the things that it buys.

—E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* 6–7

Speaking to a BBC audience in 1946 on the topic of the "Challenge of Our Time," Forster addressed with candor and typical irony a dilemma that he felt keenly and unapologetically: his attempt to reconcile the ubiquity of the "New Economy" with the "Old Morality" that he felt was disappearing and which was to remain so indispensable to him in later years:

But though the education [I received] was humane it was imperfect, inasmuch as we none of us realized our economic position. In came the nice fat dividends, up rose the lofty thoughts, and we did not realize that all the time we were exploiting the poor of our own country and the backward races abroad, and getting bigger profits from our investments than we should. We refused to face this unpalatable truth. . . .

All that has changed in the present century. The dividends have shrunk to decent proportions and have in some cases disappeared.

The poor have kicked. The backward races are kicking—and more power to their boots. Which means that life has become less comfortable for the Victorian liberal, and that our outlook, which seems to me admirable, has lost the basis of golden sovereigns upon which it originally rose, and now hangs over the abyss. . . .

[Y]ou are brought back again to that inescapable arbiter, your own temperament. When there is a collision of principles would you favour the individual at the expense of the community as I would? Or would you prefer economic justice for all at the expense of personal freedom? In a time of upheaval like the present, this collision of principles, this split in one's loyalties, is always occurring. (*Two Cheers* 56–58)

Faced with the growing disenfranchisement of England's working class and the ugly legacy of Victorian imperialism, the clarity and force with which Forster perceived the demands of ethical responsibility proved difficult to reconcile with his equally profound allegiance to private feeling and individual memory. This very ambivalence was to play a more subdued but nonetheless central role in Forster's later biography of his great-aunt, *Marianne Thornton*, where it runs throughout his nostalgic account of the Clapham Sect and its distinct blend of philanthropy, sentimentality, and moral conservatism.<sup>1</sup> As a family portrait the work is perfectly balanced, at once generous and deeply sympathetic—even proud—but always shrewd, sharply observed, and conscious of anachronism. Here was the very source of emotions that Forster recognized as most intimately and resolutely his own—the deep attachment to a family home not least among them—and yet the picture jarred with the contemporary world he observed around him, where a friend's farm could be commandeered by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning and appropriated for subdivisions and public housing.<sup>2</sup> His awareness of his own contradictory position could only be made more acute by his fond exercise in family biography: as a young boy Forster had inherited from his great-aunt Marianne the seed capital for a lifetime of investment, dividends, and freedom from conventional wage labor. Although the bequest was to cause him occasional dismay throughout his life, he recognized that it left him free to pursue a career as a professional writer.<sup>3</sup>

Written more than three decades before *Marianne Thornton*, *Howards End* (1910) marks the conversion of a writer's personal ambivalence into a specific formal problem: the work may be read as an extended meditation on the difficulty of representing capital accumulation, in all its elusive and terrifying abstraction, as a total process.<sup>4</sup> Here Forster's negotiation between money and morality takes place through the narrative's persistent attention to the physical objects of everyday life. As concrete objects cluster around

the novel's characters to form the fabric of their lives and environments, their accumulation becomes both the narrative's preeminent thematic concern and its primary structuring principle. Forster indicates his discomfort with the modes of capital accumulation made possible in his age by delineating a world in which personal objects and places act as repositories for a sentimental "value" that exceeds the vicissitudes of commerce and commodification. The novel articulates an ambivalent fascination with material substances of all types, as Margaret nostalgically embraces objects for their promise of cultural permanence and stability even as the narrative voice regards them with detached irony, mistrust, or even disgust. In these latter moments Forster is forced to confront the question of how entropy and surplus—the disorder provoked by a *super*-abundance of objects, people, property, and spaces—fit into the logic of nationalism and imperialism, and how this peculiar, contradictory logic might be accommodated within the formal techniques of the modern novel.

Schlegels and Wilcoxes, family and home, genealogy and real estate: these oppositions form the basic thematic and theoretical structure around which the narrative's total trajectory has been plotted. Nearly every scene charts, in its minute way, the inexorable division of the "house" into these separate conceptual components, and the air of uneasy anticipation that hovers throughout the novel can be traced to the discomfort that Margaret feels as she becomes aware of this growing bifurcation and of the forces that threaten her family's once-solid foundation at Wickham Place. As the Schlegels and Wilcoxes become increasingly intertwined, the separation of family from home can only become more acute, largely because each family's perception of the "house" differs so radically. Each conforms to a distinct, and opposing, model of accumulation: on the one hand, Forster offers the chiffoniers, books, and embedded genealogical memories of the Schlegel household, and on the other the luggage and real estate of the Wilcoxes, with their insistence on the infinite fungibility and latent liquidity of belongings.<sup>5</sup>

Forster's initial description of Schlegel *père*, for instance, sketches the faint sense of anachronism ("a type that was more prominent in Germany fifty years ago than now" [26]) updated in his daughters, with its essential characteristics clearly preserved:

He was not the aggressive German, so dear to the English Journalist, nor the domestic German, so dear to the English wit. If one classed him at all, it would be as the countryman of Hegel and Kant, as the idealist, inclined to be dreamy, whose Imperialism was the Imperialism of the air. (26)

The reluctant imperialist inveighs against the “clouds of materialism obscuring the Fatherland” (26) and those men who only

“care about the things that you can use, and therefore arrange them in the following order: Money, supremely useful; intellect, rather useful; imagination, of no use at all. No”—for the other had protested —“your Pan-Germanism is no more imaginative than is our Imperialism over here. It is the vice of a vulgar mind to be thrilled by bigness, to think that a thousand square miles are a thousand times more wonderful than one square mile, and that a million square miles are almost the same as heaven. . . . They collect facts, and facts, and empires of facts. But which of them will rekindle the light within?” (27)

The Schlegel sisters, however, do not appear as resolute as their father in their condemnation either of imperialism or of the narrow materialism and methodical accumulation on which it rests. Margaret, remarks Forster, will “at times dismiss the whole British Empire with a puzzled, if reverent, sigh” (25), and she retains a vision of the imperialist as hard worker and civilizer (not to mention paragon of productive and knowing masculinity) until the final pages of the novel. As she enjoins Tibby:

you must work, or else you must pretend to work, which is what I do. Work, work, work if you'd save your soul and your body. It is honestly a necessity my dear boy. Look at the Wilcoxes. . . . With all their defects of temper and understanding, such men give me more pleasure than many who are better equipped, and I think it is because they have worked regularly and honestly. (109)

Margaret at first playfully adopts a position vis-à-vis work that might describe Forster himself, and she certainly shares his awareness that “lofty thoughts” depend on “nice fat dividends” (Forster, *Two Cheers* 56–57).<sup>6</sup> But later in the novel, as Margaret continues an earnest defense of the great civilizer—and in the name of “us literary people” (171), no less—Forster’s gentle irony allows him a polite, but no less firm, distance from the comfortable liberal credo she articulates:

If the Wilcoxes hadn't worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn't sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery. No—perhaps not even that. Without their spirit, life might never have moved out of protoplasm. (171–72)

For Forster, it is not only Margaret who “pretends to work” but also the Wilcoxes themselves, as they expend relentless energy doing nothing in par-

ticular; aside from Paul (at best a half character, dimly visible over the colonial horizon, clumsy from the saddle, and burnt by the sun) the “work” of the Wilcoxes is distilled into Henry’s dictation of a letter (no doubt with great purpose) and his worry over property management.

While the Schlegels gather in a world of cozy “feminine” interiors (“‘I suppose that ours is a female house,’ said Margaret. . . . ‘it must be feminine, and all we can do is to see that it isn’t effeminate’” [41]), the Wilcoxes recline in the leather interiors of accumulated imperial spoil:

The dining room was big, but overfurnished. . . . those heavy chairs, that immense sideboard loaded with presentation plate, stood up against [the room’s] pressure like men. The room suggested men, and Margaret, keen to derive the modern capitalist from the warriors and hunters of the past, saw it as an ancient guest-hall, where the lord sat at meat among his thanes. Even the Bible—the Dutch Bible that Charles had brought back from the Boer War—fell into position. Such a room admitted loot. (159–160)

Forster’s use of free indirect discourse here again allows him to introduce a critical irony toward the Wilcoxes that cannot be attributed entirely to Margaret herself. Despite her avowed impatience with imperialism—“An Empire bores me, so far, but I can appreciate the heroism that builds it up” (110)—Margaret’s complicity lies less in her equivocations than in her willingness to invest psychologically in the materials that empire makes available: she animates these objects with her own visions of masculine grandeur and epic process, just as later, after Henry’s proposal, she will exclaim romantically over shares in a currant farm (141). But her swelling concern for the past, both personal and national, and its accumulation in the things of everyday life, is also precisely what separates her and her sister Helen from the Wilcoxes, who care only for the accumulation of profits and the commerce of the future.<sup>7</sup> “You see,” says Helen to her cousin,

the Wilcoxes collect houses as your Victor collects tadpoles. They have, one, Ducie Street; two, Howards End, where my great rumpus was; three, a country seat in Shropshire; four, Charles has a house in Hilton; and five, another near Epsom; and six, Evie will have a house when she marries, and probably a pied-à-terre in the country—which makes seven. Oh yes, and Paul a hut in Africa makes eight. (167)

The list undergoes perpetual revision as the novel continues: by chapter 31 Henry has both acquired and finally succeeded in jettisoning Oniton (after much implied time and effort), and two pages later we catch a glimpse of Henry and Margaret’s plans for the construction of their new home.

It would appear that to represent capital accumulation as an ongoing, abstract process, Forster has adopted a narrative strategy similar to that discerned by Elaine Scarry in the novels of Thomas Hardy, in which “the structure of all narrative action entail[s] (and often even depend[s] on) the physical continuity of man and his materials” (“Participial Acts” 60).<sup>8</sup> But Hardy’s problem, according to Scarry, and that of the nineteenth-century realist novel more generally, was to represent the process of *work*. What are we to make of *Howards End*, in which work-as-process is no longer a question of productive human action—no longer Scarry’s humanist vision of the *body-at-work*—but rather of Margaret’s generalized principle of social and personal betterment on the one hand, and an inexorable, silent mechanism on the other, the work not of bodies but of investment, distanced calculation, and profit-making? How much more difficult a problem for representation, when work as the production-of-things—Scarry’s vision of work as the personal, intimate transformation of the material environment—has become work-as-accumulation, work as the production not of *substance* but of possibility, of opportunity, of the further production of abstract representation itself?

Scarry’s reading of Hardy suggests two formal possibilities that Forster might adopt for representing the process of accumulation. He might, for instance, “subdivide the activity of work not into temporal units but into task units . . .” (65–66). But work-as-human-production—work as task—however attractive to the late-nineteenth-century narrative imagination, seems quaintly out of place in the world of early twentieth-century modernism. The division of the “task unit,” after all, was crucial to assembly-line mass production and would soon make possible the capital accumulation strategies of Fordism.<sup>9</sup> Representing the process of accumulation—a self-perpetuating process—by dividing it up into “task units” is simply not an option in a novel such as *Howards End*, especially when the body that performs those tasks has been eliminated. “Work” of this type, the “work” of imperialism and the Wilcoxes, busies itself precisely with the effacement of the material body, whether through displacement and repression (the “invisible” colonial margin and its labor), or through the abstract conversion of labor into commodities and profit.

Bodies in *Howards End*—such as they are in a novel whose witty chat, felt confessions, and class-marked characterizations insist repeatedly on the importance of the intellect, the spirit, and the emotions—suffer the onslaught of cheap possessions and obdurate things, innumerable objects that resist Scarry’s (and Father Schlegel’s) vision of a reciprocal, Hegelian relation with their neighboring human subject. It would be worth pausing, for a moment, to consider the Basts, certainly the most “embodied” characters

of the novel: here embodiment is distinctly pathetic, sick, fragile, and bloody (in the case of Leonard), if not monstrous (in the case of Jacky). Do we dare to read their squalid dinner scene, after Scarry, as “part of the resculpting or remaking of the body . . . entailed in work”? (“Participial Acts” 56). The grotesque communion here between the laboring body and its needs—congealed tongue, fat, and dissolving gelatin—could not be further from the ennobling dialectic of self-fulfillment that the nineteenth-century novel would seem to promise.

Nor could the Schlegels be said to participate in this process: they seek spiritual things, an “unseen” that transcends, rather than clinging mercifully, to the human experience. Helen’s sudden (and transgressive) embodiment is the only legacy of a man who does not, after all, “labor” in any familiar sense of the word. Leonard Bast, insurance clerk, produces nothing: he is a condition of possibility for the management of possibility itself, the anticipation of accident and loss, disruption and chaos. He is, moreover, a dispensable condition, as likely a figure for surplus as the throw-away furnishings of his rented flat. These possessions wound: Leonard cuts himself on Jacky’s picture, the blood “spilling over onto the exposed photograph” (46), just as Margaret will do 12 pages later, in Mrs. Wilcox’s bedroom, although here, as she has just finished uttering to Tibby and Helen, “money pads the edges of things” (58). When Tibby rouses himself to bestow upon the Basts Helen’s desperate and utterly inappropriate gift of *capital*, they have vanished into the pool of surplus populations and underclass space, leaving behind them only a “scurf of books and china ornaments” (253) to mark their disappearance.

This moment, like other discussions of investment and income that appear during the course of the novel—Margaret’s personal moral code (“all our thoughts are the thoughts of six-hundred-pounders” (59), or the playful discussions of philanthropy at the women’s group, for which Bast is no more than a “conversational hare” (to borrow an expression from Margaret’s dinner party)—manifests most clearly the tension between Forster’s recognition of capital’s indispensability and his profound desire to be rid of it. Like Helen, who “confuses wealth with the technique of wealth” (177), Forster seems fascinated by the power of money to change things and people but at the same time distrustful of its superficiality, of the structures that produce it and that are required to manage it, and of the world of impermanence it ushers in.

Surprisingly few objects circulate in the novel as commodities in the strict sense; in fact, apart from the ubiquitous concern for real estate and investment, other commercial operations make scant appearance. It is as if Forster can bring himself to represent only the most anonymous processes

of accumulation and refuses to sully moments of interpersonal, human contact with the stuff of commerce. Only two scenes stand out in which financial exchanges actually occur between two people. At Simpsons, Henry insists on tipping the carver: this is a technique picked up on his Eastern colonial travels (“especially in the East, if you tip, they remember you from year’s end to year’s end” [149]), a ruse of domestication and humanization (“perhaps it does make life more human,” responds Margaret [149]) that passes privilege off as considerate action and civilized manners. A gesture of supreme insignificance enacting the fantasy of *largesse*, the tip reduces huge processes of economic dependency and structural inequalities to the slip of a coin in the palm and grateful obsequiousness. It is Henry’s single attempt to “connect.” At an earlier moment in the novel, Margaret accompanies Mrs. Wilcox on her Christmas shopping; here, of course, the scene only emphasizes the *impossibility* of paying a debt of gratitude with material tokens, since Mrs. Wilcox conspicuously buys nothing for Margaret.

Nor would it be possible to identify in the novel, at least not without some modification, realism’s alternative solution to the problem of representing an extended process: “to take the massive fact of work precisely at the moment when there is a tear or lapse in the activity that must be repaired, replaced, or rescued” (“Participial Acts” 66). The interruption of accumulation, unlike work, is not any simple cessation; it is not a periodic moment of leisure, a holiday, a flushed sense of achievement and pride. Accumulation is mute and unnoticed—and its “failure” is nearly inconceivable. And yet if the process of accumulation as a *whole* appears seamless and self-generating, does it not in some way depend on interruption and rupture after all? It would be worth recalling that rupture and displacement are the very foundations of the accumulation of capital, above all in the production of the commodity and its transformation into a fetish: for an object to become a commodity, *it must circulate in physical, spatial terms*; it must participate in a foundational break from the site of its production to the site of its exchange and eventual consumption. Forster, I argue, registers one of the crucial conditions of the system of capital accumulation in which he and his characters find themselves and transforms this condition (displacement or rupture from an originary place) into a modernist narrative principle. It would be more accurate here to speak not of commodity fetishism but of what we might call “narratological fetishism,” a process whereby objects become charged with symbolic or narratological significance and assume an independent motive force that drives the action of the plot.<sup>10</sup> They are the sites of elaboration for Forster’s national and moral philosophical themes and the vehicles for his nostalgic investment; they are the material hinges on which the narrative turns.

The plot of *Howard's End* advances primarily through a ceaseless *translatio* of things, a straying of objects across the topography of the novel that draws characters into worlds either desired or feared. Hence Forster devotes long sequences to chance meetings, wanderings from milieu to milieu, and journeys from city to country and back again, all of which finally drive Margaret to insist on a "permanent" place to live ("Don't you believe in having a permanent home, Henry?" [256]). A similar feeling prompts Mrs. Wilcox's lament at the news that Wickham Place will be destroyed (81). Forster's restless, almost cinematic treatment of setting lends to the novel a dislocated sense of time and space: for all the considerable detail with which Forster renders each room, house, or avenue, these remain a series of *places*, heterogeneous particularities that resist coalescing into a coherent narrative geography or mappable "space."

The narrative reaches what we might call a point of saturation, as, gradually, things (and their owners) begin to spill over into places where they do not belong. Accumulation thus makes its first appearance through its effects, its small disturbances and disruptions in the intersecting personal orders of the novel, which must stretch to accommodate the new intrusion of material. Consider, for example, Leonard Bast's umbrella. Initially the umbrella serves as the perfect conduit for the chance encounters that are the very substance of *Howards End*, making possible the initial visit between the Schlegels and Leonard Bast. We may perceive, in the rupture of two personal spheres and the subsequent wanderings of objects and people that this rupture provokes, all the latent violence of later events. Nor does the umbrella move only laterally, describing the various social spaces of the narrative, but it is immediately elevated, as a transposed symbol, to the level of ironic social commentary articulated by the narrative voice:

But in his day the angel of Democracy had arisen, enshadowing the classes with leathern wings, and proclaiming: "All men are equal—all men, that is to say, who possess umbrellas," and so he was obliged to assert gentility, lest he slip into the abyss where nothing counts and the statements of Democracy are inaudible. (43)

Later Margaret takes recourse to the example of the umbrella to illustrate her feelings toward dividends, inequality, and the poverty of others:

I stand each year upon six hundred pounds, and Helen upon the same, and Tibby will stand upon eight, and as fast as our pounds crumble away into the sea they are renewed—from the sea, yes, from the sea. And all our thoughts are the thoughts of six-hundred-pounders, and all our speeches; and because we don't want to steal umbrellas ourselves, we forget that below the sea people do want to

steal them, and do steal them sometimes, and that what's a joke up here is down there reality— . . . (59)

Over the following pages, the umbrella submits to a series of equations or substitutions: its place is taken by the Schlegel's card, which becomes the misplaced, itinerant object: "Months passed, and the card, now as a joke, now as a grievance, was handed about, getting dirtier and dirtier. It followed them when they moved from Camelia Road to Tulse Hill. It was submitted to third parties. A few inches of pasteboard, it became the battlefield on which the souls of Leonard and his wife contended" (120–21). This card, in turn, leads Jacky back to Wickham place, searching, in the words of Helen, "for a husband as if he was an umbrella. She mislaid him Saturday afternoon—and for a long time suffered no inconvenience" (111). When Leonard comes to the Schlegels to explain his wife's visit, he discovers that he has not only been "mislaid" by his wife but also that his original meeting with the Schlegels, the entire event itself, has been forgotten.

The "umbrella," moreover, is increasingly associated not only with the loss of memory but also with theft. First Margaret fears that Leonard suspects her of stealing the umbrella and working a confidence trick; then, after the umbrella has been found and returned, the Schlegel's half-serious discussion turns to the safety of their own property, the "apostle spoons" (39) and the "majolica plate . . . that is so firmly set into the wall" (42). Margaret's attempt to contain loss by appealing to her father's notion of "rent," "to the ideal, to his own faith in human nature" (39), can only take on an uncomfortable irony in light of Leonard and Jacky's threatened eviction and the bailiff who Leonard watches "fingering my Ruskins and Stevensons" (235), calculating their money value.

The interesting aspect of these scenes is the way in which the appearance of the umbrella always implies a certain fragility and darker chaotic underside; it balances at the threshold of two radically incommensurate realities, bridging them even as it holds them apart. For Margaret the encounter with Leonard and his umbrella is more than uncomfortable: it is a murmur from the abyss and the ill portent of a great, impending dislocation: "Her thoughts turned sadly to house-hunting. Wickham Place had been so safe. She feared, fantastically, that her own little flock might be moving into turmoil and squalor, into nearer contact with such episodes as these" (112). The narrative significance of the umbrella hinges precisely on this simultaneous, dual value: at the concert, for Helen, the umbrella is absolutely insignificant; she takes no notice of it whatsoever, has no recollection of any accidental contact, and fails to recognize it when she finds it in the hallway. For Leonard, however, the umbrella's value is nearly immeasurable: it ex-

ceeds the ordinary uses of an umbrella (protection against the elements) and serves as a crucial mark of social distinction; it is a bulwark against certain despair, if not, within the terms of the novel, nonexistence.

How different is Leonard's umbrella from that other object overlooked at the concert, cousin Frieda's reticule. Its compact utility belies the carelessness of its owner: the address book, a catalogue of personal social order, inscribed social relations, and brilliant itineraries; the map, tool for the tourist and temporarily rootless, an illusion of stable and enduring space that Leonard would hardly recognize; the dictionary, here no doubt an innocent phrase book but bearing within it the tyranny of imperial tongues; and money—agent of all change, the final *passe-par-tout*. Unlike Leonard's tattered umbrella, the reticule *belongs* at the concert; it participates seamlessly in its world of leisure and perfectly elaborates the person of Frieda. Around these belongings, from the smallest accessory to larger places of dwelling and protection, gather intricate cultural narratives of gender, class and national differentiation, wildly divergent value systems, insouciance, and devastating loss.

In choosing to represent accumulation through objects and their circulation, Forster has demonstrated not the failure of accumulation or its temporary rupture but only its persistence, its resourcefulness, even its necessity. And he has, at the same time, made a larger decision not typical of nineteenth-century realism, which is to represent accumulation-as-process by choosing to represent its *cost*. Immediately (and unwittingly), however, Forster runs up against a quintessentially "modern" problem: how can the full cost of accumulation ever be adequately represented? Jacques Derrida has suggested the difficulties in representing the obverse of accumulation as dissemination, as a radical loss or absence, when the very act of representation is itself firmly inscribed within a metaphysics of recuperation, gain, or preservation—to quote Helen, "Death destroys a man; the idea of Death saves him" (236).<sup>11</sup> In grappling with a process that, however destructive, never disappears or ceases, and, in the face of this relentlessness, turning instead to the cost of the process—somehow trying to see *through* the process, as if to expose it—Forster forces himself into the position not of representing waste, loss, or absence *itself* but rather of selecting certain things to be figures *for* loss and surplus, setting them up to bear the full brunt of the process and thus, as its victims, to reveal its destructive power.

It is here, I think, that we can most clearly register the subtle ambivalence within Forster's social and national vision. In a first movement, his narrative separates the process of accumulation and loss into two seemingly isolated and morally opposed spheres: investment capitalism on the one hand, and on the other, a vision of a sacred national legacy that is both

personal and communal and fueled by an ongoing accumulation of sentiment and memory. Forster can thus condemn the work of the Wilcoxes unambiguously (“But the imperialist is not what he thinks or seems. He is a destroyer” [320]), and then immediately *humanize* the loss by inventing certain characters who stand as figures for surplus and the human cost of capitalism—the Basts—but who are rendered as mere symbols, “flat” characters, placeholders on which to hang, in passing, a certain amount of remorse over the system and its expense. Here Leonard (never a very risky figure) represents the cost, while altogether more probable (not to mention politically charged and historically accurate) representatives for the human cost of capitalism are consigned either to the “abyss” (the underclass who is never represented) or beyond the margins of the novel itself (the colonial subject).<sup>12</sup> Note also that if Forster condemns the imperialist as a destroyer, he does so not on account of the lands he has colonized but rather for the threat he poses to the cultural specificity of *England* (“he prepares the way for cosmopolitanism” [320]).<sup>13</sup>

Finally, in what I find the most enduring point of interest in the novel, Forster chooses to represent loss as nothing less than a further form of accumulation: an inventive and peculiarly “modern” representation of loss as the accumulation of entropy, the accumulation that results from the decay, rust, and rubble, or “grey” typical of suburbia and London:

It was the kind of scene that may be observed all over London, whatever the locality—bricks and mortar rising and falling with the restlessness of the water in a fountain. . . . (44)

The mask fell off the city, and she saw it for what it really is—a caricature of infinity. The familiar barriers, the streets along which she moved, the houses between which she had made her little journeys for so many years, became negligible suddenly. Helen seemed one with the grimy trees and the traffic and the slowly flowing slabs of mud. . . . (277)

“All the same, London’s creeping.”

She pointed over the meadow—over eight or nine meadows, but at the end of them was a red rust. (337)

Forster realizes this form of loss most magnificently in the forces that impel the disintegration of the “house”: the ubiquitous ebbs and flows, the flux of destruction and reconstruction, the forced vacancies and hemorrhages of superfluous personal belongings:

The Age of Property holds bitter moments even for a proprietor. When a move is imminent, furniture becomes ridiculous, and Mar-

garet now lay awake at nights wondering where, where on earth they and all their belongings would be deposited in September next. Chairs, tables, pictures, books, that had rumbled down to them through the generations, must rumble forward again like a slide of rubbish to which she longed to give the final push and send toppling into the sea. But there were all their father's books—they never read them, but they were their father's and they must be kept. There was the marble-topped chiffonier—their mother had set store by it, they could not remember why. Round every knob and cushion in the house sentiment gathered, a sentiment that was at times personal, but more often a faint piety to the dead, a prolongation of rites that might have ended at the grave.

. . . The feudal ownership of land did bring dignity, whereas the modern ownership of movables is reducing us again to a nomadic horde. We are reverting to the civilization of luggage, and historians of the future will note how the middle classes accrete possessions without taking root in the earth, and may find in this the secret of their imaginative poverty. (146)

Death and chaos lie revealed at the heart of the arranging life. This is not a vision of surplus as profit but of surplus as waste: it marks the vertiginous recognition of the dissolution that new modes of accumulation (both capital and emotional) make possible, and the recasting of this realization in the reassuring metaphors of organicism and dynamic natural forces. Radical loss, itself a structural requirement of capital investment and profit, is here deflected through the strategies of narrative representation into a meditation on emotions, pasts, and families. Even as they threaten to disappear as surplus (the effects of capitalism), the Schlegels' possessions resonate with a personal sentiment that emerges all the more powerfully because of this loss, sentiment later recuperated and poured into the receptacle of Howards End and the national landscape. Likewise, Leonard's umbrella is precious precisely because of its place within a precarious personal order, and its value appears most clearly not in its use but in its absence, when it threatens to carry with it everything else.

In the language of Marx, action has become substance, but action of an entirely different sort from human productive action, human praxis or work; it is rather the restless action of capital accumulation and the waste it produces. Forster grasps that every system has a cost, requires an expenditure, a leftover, an outside. Perhaps in this final recognition Forster momentarily presents, if only to recoil from it, a glimpse of "accumulation" utterly antithetical to the conventional understanding of the term: not a building up, a growth, a saving, a reserve to be tapped and used (whether in terms of capital profit, personal memory, or national past) but simply a ceaseless

movement, a restless overturning and change, the acceleration of time and space to the point where, from the motorcar, the scenery before Margaret's eyes "heaved and merged, like porridge," and then "congealed" (195).

The singular importance of *Howards End*, the house, lies here: as the place "outside" the time and space of modern cosmopolitanism, beyond the bonds of property and finance; the place where Margaret will, in an uncanny moment of alienation and recovery, encounter the Schlegel possessions furnishing the rooms as if they had always belonged there; a place where she will renounce her invested wealth in favor of a house that is both embedded in the national landscape and acts as the metonym of that landscape; a place reappropriated as both the repository of national past and the nursery for the national future.<sup>14</sup>

Forster reaches the profound and unsettling realization that in the modern world (and the world of modernism) accumulation never ceases, can never be interrupted, as work can be: objects multiply and continue to multiply, they slip and jostle against each other, they resist the subject, they kill. Radical, unrecoverable loss, if it can "appear" at all, appears here, adumbrated around the more familiar figures of capital and property: in "scurf" and clutter, or in the mud of the national landscape (pointed out unerringly by the German nationalist cousin: "And the mud of your Poole down there—does it not smell, or may I say stink, ha, ha" [133]). It resonates in Forster's coolly ironic description of West Africa and Henry's office at the Rubber Company ("just the ordinary surface scum of ledgers and polished counters and brass bars that began and stopped for no possible reason" [155]); we glimpse it in the recurring imagery of blurred edges and dim outlines (61, 62) and in Forster's fascination with "the grotesque impact of the unseen upon the seen" (65, 83). It hides behind his casual dismissal of the "unthinkable" poor (43) and by his tendency to contemplate the laboring body—particularly the belabored body of Jacky—as an assemblage of monstrous clichés; it appears in the very disorder of entropy and accident, in shards of glass, the sprinkling of blood on a picture, and a crashing cascade of books.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reader for this journal who suggested that I consider *Marianne Thornton* for the light it sheds on Forster's attitudes toward money and property and on my reading of *Howards End*.

<sup>2</sup> *Marianne Thornton* is particularly remarkable for its memorializing of Battersea Rise, the Thornton family estate, and for the way it records the Thornton's distinct imaginative and sentimental investment in houses. It was a sensibility that Forster shared, and I am struck by how clearly *Howards End* pre-

figures his later exploration of this aspect of his family and of his own earliest memories; he explicitly acknowledges the role that his childhood home in Hertfordshire played in his creation of *Howards End*, the house (301).

<sup>3</sup> Forster received £8,000 when he was eight years old. I am indebted to Delany for the information on Forster's inheritance and what he suggests to be Forster's "lifelong preoccupation with the morality of living on unearned income" (285). Forster himself provides a brief comment on the topic at the conclusion of his biography of his great-aunt (*Marianne Thornton* 324; see also Furbank, esp. 1: 24 and 2: 317). Forster's dilemma, Delany argues, "is how to uphold the civic and cultural virtues intrinsic to the rentier way of life, yet avoid complicity with commerce or technology" (291). While Delany is chiefly interested in tracing Forster's own attitudes and moral views as they are articulated through the novel's characters, I will be concerned with the way in which these attitudes produced a set of specific formal representational problems, which Forster sought to solve through his treatment of objects and property.

<sup>4</sup> My thesis here owes a considerable debt to the work of Scarry, in particular "Participial Acts" but also *The Body in Pain*. I will take up Scarry's argument, and my differences with it, in more detail later. Born makes claims that are similar to Delany's and my own, noting the centrality of real estate to Forster's social and aesthetic vision (142) and claiming that Forster's "preoccupation with surfaces, houses, and the substance of material living . . . becomes a strategy of moral penetration" (142-43). Critical responses to the novel are usefully surveyed in Page; for the purposes of this paper, see in particular ch. 4, "Can a Marxist like Margaret," 37-44. I draw also on Jameson's discussion of the determining power of imperialism on the formal innovations of modernism and on *Howards End*, and on Said 62-80.

<sup>5</sup> Bradbury (128-43) observes a similar series of distinctions; Stone also argues that oppositions between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes are played out primarily in terms of houses (237-38).

<sup>6</sup> The virtues and contradictions of the novel's liberalism have been well rehearsed over the years; following Trilling's influential 1943 study, representative examples include virtually every essay in the anthology edited by Bradbury. For more recent reconsiderations of liberalism see Armstrong, who highlights the importance of architecture and horizontal spatial movement in the novel (esp. 187-88), and Levenson. Two articles explore similarities between *Howards End* and the pragmatic philosophy of Richard Rorty: Born, who offers a helpful reevaluation of the central critical claims for the novel's liberalism, and May, who reads Margaret as the premier example of the Rortian "liberal ironist."

<sup>7</sup> Born overlooks the real *qualitative* differences in the investments Margaret and the Wilcoxes make in places and things when he argues that "for all their differences, in this respect [the concern for property and social mobility] Margaret and the Wilcoxes are identical" (154).

<sup>8</sup> See also 64-65:

Although, then, work is extensively represented in the novel . . . it is at the same time . . . a deeply difficult subject to represent. The major source of this difficulty is that work is action rather than a discrete action: it has no identifiable beginning or end; if it were an exceptional action, or even "an action," it could—like acts in epic, heroic, or military lit-

erature—be easily accommodated in narrative. It is the essential nature of work to be perpetual, repetitive, habitual. There is no formal convention in any genre of literature that would make it either possible or desirable to portray it in all its constancy and repetitiveness. . . .

<sup>9</sup> See Harvey's discussion (125) of early-twentieth-century economic planners such as F. W. Taylor, whose *The Principles of Scientific Management* was published in 1911, only a year after *Howards End*.

<sup>10</sup> The term "narratological fetishism" is indebted, of course, to the classic account of commodity fetishism in Marx and to the wide range of anthropological, historical, and theoretical work that has sought to elaborate the wider cultural meanings embedded in objects and to examine the many social practices they illuminate. In anthropology, see in particular the ground-breaking study by Douglas and Isherwood and the more recent work by Appadurai and the other essays in his collection. See also Mukerji: "here the point is that objects are carriers of ideas and, as such, often act as the social forces that analysts have identified with ideology-as-words" (15). Classic theoretical statements on the semiotics of objects are provided by Barthes and by Baudrillard; after Foucault, Butler has gone furthest in theorizing the *body* as object.

<sup>11</sup> See Derrida's rereading of Georges Bataille's "anti"-Hegelianism and his notion of a "general economy":

The notion of *Aufhebung* (the speculative concept par excellence, says Hegel . . .) is laughable in that it signifies the *busying* of a discourse losing its breath as it reappropriates all negativity for itself, as it works the "putting at stake" into an *investment*, as it *amortizes* absolute expenditure, and as it gives meaning to death. (257)

<sup>12</sup> Born (147–50) provides an excellent discussion of possible sources for Bast and the representations of the "abyss" in contemporary social writings such as C. F. G. Masterman's *The Heart of the Empire: Discussions of Problems of Modern City Life in England, with an Essay on Imperialism* (1901) and *From the Abyss: Of Its Inhabitants by One of Them* (1902); and Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903). He argues against the critical censure of Forster on "realist" grounds, and claims that Forster's ironic distance in his treatment of Bast, while cruel, nonetheless suggests his awareness of the impossibility of truly objective realism.

<sup>13</sup> As Jameson's comments on the novel suggest, the primary loss endemic to the structure of imperialism is the inability to accurately perceive or articulate loss itself:

[W]hat the new situation of imperialism looks like from the standpoint of cultural or aesthetic production now needs to be characterized, and it seems best to do so by distinguishing its problems from those of an internal industrialization and commodification in the modernizing metropolis. This last seems most often (paradoxically) to have been lived in terms of a generalized loss of meaning, as though its subject measured the increase in human power negatively, by way of the waning of tradition and religious absolutes. . . . What is determined by the colonial system is now a rather different kind of meaning loss than this one: for colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic

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system as a whole is now located elsewhere, beyond the metropolis, outside of daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies over the water whose own life experience and life world—very different from that of the imperial power—remain unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power, whatever social class they may belong to. Such spatial disjunction has as its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole. (50–51)

Cf. Said, esp. 63–66.

<sup>14</sup> Born notes that the novel's country-house close was "the typical Edwardian gesture to the urban crises of the time: the pastoral escape hatch has exact parallels, for instance, in Gissing and Masterman" (156). Social reality was, of course, quite different. Delany, citing C. K. Hobson's *The Export of Capital* (1914), points out that the development of the railways (the very Home Rails invested in by Mrs. Munt, the Schlegels, and Forster himself) was one of the primary forces behind the decline of agriculture and rural depopulation, which in turn made possible the middle-class gentrification of farms such as Howards End (290).

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