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# Buying Time: Howards End and Commodified Nostalgia

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### **Buying Time: *Howards End* and Commodified Nostalgia**

Midway through E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, the newly married Margaret Schlegel Wilcox returns to the titular country house to find it the recipient of an unexpected makeover. Closed since the death of the first Mrs. Wilcox and for months used as a warehouse for the Schlegels' possessions, the house has been unpacked and reconstituted by the housekeeper, Miss Avery, who creates a new interior built from moments of Margaret's own history. As Margaret moves through the house in surprise, she takes a virtual tour of her past: her umbrella-stand greets her in the entrance way, the infamous sword of her father hangs on the wall, Tibby's books make up the library, her mother's cheffonier stands in the dining room, and everywhere, "many an old god peeped from a new niche" (194). The carefully placed goods even link events from the more distant past with recent ones: Tibby's old bassinet is, significantly, in the room where Helen stayed during her brief liaison with Paul Wilcox. A newly created space, *Howards End* is nevertheless temporally dense, showcasing not discrete moments, or even the passage of time from past to present, but suggesting rather a more free-flowing exchange among various times, uniting people, objects, and the house in a connective temporal web.

This seemingly minor scene collapses into one narrative moment Forster's intriguing and overlooked deployment of time in *Howards End*, a deployment in which temporal and personal history become written on the Schlegels' possessions, and by extension and by combination, upon *Howards End* itself. In presenting this revised interior, Forster creates a powerful model

for controlling time, one that brings different times and their places—as represented by objects and by architecture—into a new moment where they might be viewed or experienced simultaneously. This manipulation of time is essential to understanding an important moment in the transition to modernism: Stranded between an outmoded past and a rapidly modernizing future, Forster reconstitutes temporal relations not quite to fragment them, but to take time's fragments and weave them together to provide a continuous connection to a modified past, a connection that would potentially satisfy both modern imperatives and nostalgic desire. This time-play not only anticipates the modernist novel and the modern cinema—both poised in 1910 to alter time, to stretch out days and to collapse months—but also participates in an emerging way to traffic in nostalgic desire. Intriguingly, the makeover of *Howards End* deploys a similar strategy to the one that would be used by architects and merchants to market the past: inscribe temporality on material objects and interior space and turn time into a saleable item, a maneuver that reaches across disciplines and can be seen as the hallmark of a society in transition from the old to the new. The surprising homecoming of the second Mrs. Wilcox aligns Forster with a peculiarly modern gesture, the conflation of time and space that allows the past to live on, revitalized, in the present.

The examination of this striking interplay of time and space in *Howards End* leads us to a larger intervention into the debate about commodified nostalgia, a topic that excites much critical suspicion, in culture as in literature. The house, the novel, and the author have all been accused of participating in a questionable gesture, whether in advocating sentimental and ultimately hollow ideals or in finally eliding the commercial infrastructure supporting houses like *Howards End*. While valuable in part, this limited focus on exposure overlooks an extraordinary maneuver: the way new spaces such as Miss Avery's *Howard End* in fact work simultaneously to

acknowledge the perils of commodified nostalgia without losing the tantalizing possibilities of commodified time to establish a fluid relation between present needs and a vital past. Forster's redecorated country house ultimately establishes the contradictory impulses of modernism's strained and evolving relations to time and space, given vexed urgency by commercialization and a modern sense of inevitable loss.

### I. Buying Time: Reconsidering Commodified Nostalgia

To understand *Howards End*, we must also understand recent critical debates on nostalgia and on commerce, debates that have taken several turns and are all marked by anxiety about buying into the complicated nexus of the two in commodified nostalgia. The first turn hinges on Forster's nostalgic desire to preserve a space apart from the encroaching modernity of London, a space where time might unfold differently, away from the commercial "taint" of urban life. Such nostalgia has engendered understandable critical discomfort; Forster has been accused of celebrating a willfully naïve image of Britain summarized by Tambling as "agricultural, non-industrial, pre-motor car" (2) and of embracing an "archaism and nostalgia" (Delany 78) that denies the intensifying problems of modern life. In these readings, Forster's nostalgia becomes a blind for various troubling agendas, a deliberate evocation of a golden era strategically eliding social realities.<sup>1</sup>

Nostalgia, however, has recently received a critical boost, though not one directly related to Forster. Critics have long been alert to nostalgia's dangers of mystification, yet recent critics

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<sup>1</sup> Tambling links Forster's inability "to move out of nostalgia" to Forster's slighting of gender issues and to his failure "to become incisive about the enormity of British rule in India" (10). For Delany, Forster's pastoralism blinds him to encroaching problems of modernity; fed by Forster, literature might "waste away on its vegetarian diet" (78). Likewise, Lois Cucullu has explored how Forster's idealized Hellenism offers a fantasy of an all-male sexual and literary tradition, with women placed outside the exclusive circle. A few critics, however, do evaluate Forster's nostalgia enthusiastically; Judith Wiessman, for example, discovers in the mythic space of *Howards End*

have nevertheless been proposing that nostalgia might not—perhaps—be so bad after all. Specifically, nostalgia in modern British culture might deserve another look, as George Behlmer and Fred Leventhal have recently proposed, though with many reservations:

That the nostalgic bent can lapse into cloying sentimentality is obvious. No less evident is the potential for commercializing the fond backward gaze. Finally, it would be foolish to deny that, under some circumstances, nostalgia can serve to foreclose the future, to reject the possibility of productive change. Yet at the same time nostalgia can also be a strategy for coping with change, loss, or anomie. The nostalgic view, then, can provide an integrative service by reassuring individuals (and nations) that continuity—what one sociologist calls a ‘restitutive link’—exists between former and current conditions. (7)<sup>2</sup>

The many caveats required for even modest praise of nostalgia signal the dangers in this critical terrain. Yet given the complex interplay of time and space in Forster’s novel, it would be possible to reconsider *Howards End* in terms of a reclaimed nostalgia, to cast a kind eye on how the physical space of Howards End might offer a reassuring continuity, a “‘restitutive link’ [. . .] between former and current conditions.”

I plan to go yet deeper into this unstable terrain, however, by linking this reclaimed nostalgia to that perennial bad influence—commerce. Even Behlmer and Leventhal feel compelled to distance nostalgia from the commercialization that increasingly accompanied it in the modernist period. Most critics, including Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, and Richard

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“the beginning of a radical new economic order that can subvert the Wilcoxes and their empire” (444). As should become clear, I steer a course between condemning Forster’s nostalgia and embracing it.

<sup>2</sup> The link between nostalgia and modernism is receiving renewed critical attention, with critics urging more subtlety and less knee-jerk condemnation. See, for example, Felski’s excellent discussion of nostalgia in *The Gender of Modernity*, specifically Chapter 2: “On Nostalgia: The Prehistoric Woman,” as well as Jessica Feldman’s recent article in *Modernism/modernity*, “Modernism’s Victorian Bric-à-brac.” Behlmer and Leventhal’s introduction offers

Terdiman, reserve special wrath for commodified nostalgia, a confidence game by which governments and merchants seduce citizens and buyers.<sup>3</sup> Commodified nostalgia might include national projects of “commemoration,” the selling of souvenirs and keepsakes, or even the promotion of an idealized domestic interior. While the critics differ in their targets, what they repeatedly point out is how damaging and how dangerous commodified nostalgia is to history and to memory. The selling of nostalgia—or to nostalgia—implies selling what is sacred, making the authentic inauthentic, and producing a past that never was. Marketing nostalgia is a trick; it masks what is real (and for critics like Baudrillard, even erases the real). Perhaps most disturbing, it simplifies the past and erases its painful features. We have become adept at catching such deceptions. Wary of soft-focus Merchant-Ivory films, Disney’s Main Street America, or Martha Stewart’s recreation of “old interiors,” we train ourselves in suspicion, and with good reason. The impulse is always to stay above the fray, to reveal the ways nostalgic selling falsifies the past, and not, whatever happens, to be caught believing the hype.

Such exposure is essential. Both separately and together, nostalgia and commercialism can be tools supporting a wide range of disturbing reconstructions, tools designed to promote a nationalistic or hegemonic agenda. The nostalgic, country house ideal in *Howards End*, for example, finally excludes the implicit “taint” of the lower middle class Leonard Bast, erasing the character in disturbing ways. Nevertheless, exposure—however subtly done—is not the only

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a useful summary of the heritage critics from Martin Wiener’s highly negative view in *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, to later critical revisions.

<sup>3</sup> Many critics have offered insightful analyses of the dangers of commodified nostalgia. Hobsbawm and Ranger examine how government-sponsored revivals of national “traditions” were largely nationalist projects that invented traditions never practiced. Terdman finds that from the nineteenth century on, a commodified nostalgia endangered memory itself; as the mode of production for commodities became hidden, commodities began to challenge memory and to make it inauthentic. Baudrillard takes this to its pessimistic extreme, finding no authentic memory or real object, but only a world of simulacra, a “hyperreality” of self-referential signs. Raphael Samuel, while detailing some of the darker sides of commodified nostalgia, urges a more nuanced approach, suggesting that rather than envisioning a single-minded plot, we might “think of the invention of tradition as a process rather than an event” (17).

possible critical move, and the rush to condemn can prevent a detailed investigation into the ways nostalgia is sold and consumed. The various representations of *Howards End* provide an invaluable opportunity to explore the difficult critical terrain of commodified nostalgia, most specifically as an example of the ever-popular English country house ideal, which was beginning to be aggressively commodified and marketed when Forster was writing his novel. The changing manifestations of *Howards End* reflect a complex meeting of desires, embracing not only the urge to reject a commodified nostalgia, but also an acknowledgement of its appeal, of the wish to buy—or buy into—certain nostalgic visions. Under these varying and even contradictory readings, *Howards End* emerges as a rich critical model, one that not only allows a more nuanced reading of Forster's nostalgia, but one that also shifts the critical paradigm of commodified nostalgia from a thing to be unmasked and dismissed to a locus of competing imperatives.

This article explores the thorny terrain of commodified nostalgia in two overlapping discussions.<sup>4</sup> The first considers Forster's paradoxical desire both to erase and to acknowledge the role of commerce in supporting the titular home. Forster's desire to purify *Howards End* of commercial taint, to literally take it off the market, is well documented,<sup>5</sup> yet it is crucial to

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term "commerce" to delineate a range of values and activities associated with Forster's Mr. Wilcox. By commerce, I refer to the evolving economic order in the Edwardian age—spurred by the explosion of trade both in England and from imperial interests—as opposed to money made the old fashioned way, by aristocratic landholders. Forster links commerce to urban London, to the motor-car and the accompanying increase in the speed of life, and to overly cheap or opulent houses. Money from commerce, however, was becoming inextricably linked to the production of nostalgic space, as Forster knew, and as the vernacular architects (whose clients made their money in trade) were discovering.

I use the term "commodified nostalgia" in two ways in this article, and the blurring of these definitions is deliberate. First, the term refers to the packaging and selling of a nostalgic image—here the commodification of an idyllic country home referential of the past, where time itself seems to move differently. Second, the term refers to the way commercial ventures and monetary transactions—the very things that the idyllic image attempts to erase—produce and support these images.

<sup>5</sup> Stone points out that Margaret "in a sense [. . .] marries both Henry and Ruth," inheriting the legal title to *Howards End* from her husband, and the spiritual title from the first Mrs. Wilcox (258). See also Trilling's discussion (121-22) and Bradbury (131).

consider his contradictory move in making explicit the money required to support this nostalgic vision, money earned in the very commercial ventures that the ideal image may wish to exclude. Such a contradiction acknowledges the ironic symbiotic relationship between the desire for purity and the concomitant rise of commercial ventures that seek to sell this purity. The second, and related, vein in the discussion of commodified nostalgia concerns Forster's various constructions of time in the novel, and the way these constructions become commodified—or available for purchase—as well as the way they parallel emerging commercial ventures. I consider an architectural example of such ventures, the development of the popular vernacular movement in British home building, most notably in the homes designed by the successful Edwardian architect Edwin Lutyens. Forster's experiments with mapping time onto place paralleled Lutyens' own designs, which used a blend of architectural styles to create “fictitious histor[ies]” (Inskip 27) in his work. Forster and architects such as Lutyens saw the value (in all senses of that word) of showing the passage of time itself, of providing a visible sense of connection with past moments. As they knew, nostalgic desire usually seeks a passage back, a way to reach a wished-for past time, or a desired past space. To satisfy such a nostalgic desire would involve a kind of time travel, but even should such a move be possible, it would potentially involve a dangerous abandonment of the present. One effective way around this, as Forster and a wide range of marketers were discovering, is to find or construct objects that in themselves suggest the passage of time—such as a weathered piece of furniture or a building that, through a combination of different styles from different eras, offers a sense of time's flow. Such objects or dwellings bring the past into the present, making multiple pasts and the present available at one moment. This time compression in turn allows for the literal buying of time, for if time might be placed onto objects or dwellings, it can in turn be packaged and sold. Both



Howards End and the new vernacular architecture unsettled time, became constructed spaces of time's passage located in one present moment, nostalgic memorials, we might say, of things that never existed.

Any venerable building or antique chair, however, might suggest the passage of time. What makes the architectural spaces of Forster and Lutyens unique is their self-consciously constructed nature, though admittedly the two men are constructing in different arenas. The Howards End that Margaret finds on her visit is newly minted by Miss Avery, recently built with parts of Margaret's past; on a metatextual level, the ancestral home of Howards End itself is built by Forster in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> In a similar mode, Lutyens created "old" looking homes for his modern clients, infused with references to architectural styles from different eras. Yet for Forster and Lutyens, the resulting structures not only bore marks of continuity with the past, but crucially made an often frank avowal that the very idyllic, "authentic," and non-commercial aura of the houses was in fact sustained by modern commercial ventures. It is this paradoxical move—to recognize the value of continuity while foregrounding the constructed and commodified nature of this continuity—that turns these architectural sites into what I will call modern nostalgic spaces. These spaces not only offer new ways of mapping time, but in fact suggest a vital new way for contemporary critics to evaluate commodified nostalgia, one that moves beyond debunking to give equal weight to the possibilities and perils of buying time.

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<sup>6</sup> Forster's descriptions of Howards End were inspired by Rooksnest, Forster's boyhood home. See Forster's "Boyhood Recollection of Rooksnest."

## II. Killing Time: Failed Efforts in Time Management

Critics frequently observe that *Howards End* dwells, somewhat obsessively, on houses; as Daniel Born notes, “[r]eal estate permeates the novel” (142).<sup>7</sup> While it is true that houses and interiors are exhaustively described, Forster includes another dimension within these descriptions of spaces: a sense of changing private time. Within the various dwellings, Forster constructs a series of different temporal zones, letting both the interiors and the objects within them convey a varying sense of time’s passage, each with its own relation to commercial ventures. Forster presents a series of failed projects, places where time has been critically, and often disastrously, altered. A quick tour of these architectural landmarks in *Howards End* reveals a central and obvious tension between two kinds of real estate, each with a distinct relationship to time: the city home that is transitory and representative of an urban, commercial economy, and the authentic English country home, rooted in the past and, although tied to an agricultural economy, theoretically far removed from any monetary transaction.

In the first category, the cheap flat of the Basts and the sumptuous London home of the Wilcoxes represent two socioeconomic ends of the same suspect market, a market where time is static and discontinuous. The Basts’ flat is part of the larger “Block B” of flats, which in turn is part of a seemingly endless set of flats of “extreme cheapness” (36) rising over London, built to house, the narrator tells us, the new urban workers who pour into London from the countryside. These flats in turn will offer no lasting dwellings, likely to “be pulled down” (36) in a few years time. The apartment’s interior is no more distinctive, composed by a set of transitory objects,

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<sup>7</sup> The function of the house in *Howards End* has a long critical history. Trilling argues that the house is “The symbol for England” (118), and Stone agrees, and further considers *Howards End* as representing a disturbing “feminine sanctuary” (265). Born offers an insightful correction to the discussion of the houses in the novel, considering the real estate of *Howards End* in material rather than in symbolic terms.

newly made and newly purchased, and closely linked to their mass-produced origins. Forster condescendingly presents his description as a catalogue of lower-middle-class consumer taste:

The sitting-room contained, besides the armchair, two other chairs, a piano, a three-legged table, and a cosy corner. Of the walls, one was occupied by the window, the other by a draped mantelshelf bristling with Cupids. Opposite the window was the door, and beside the door a bookcase, while over the piano there extended one of the masterpieces of Maud Goodman. (37) <sup>8</sup>

The flat offers a sham respectability, a space filled with objects that Forster, with his sarcastic tone, suggests reflect a nostalgia gone wrong, a sentimental imitation deriving from a desire to attain middle-class respectability. Bast is not attempting to reconnect to his own past; as the narrator nostalgically and patronizingly observes, Leonard would be far better in the country: “Had he lived some centuries ago, in the brightly coloured civilizations of the past, he would have had a definite status, his rank and his income would have corresponded” (35). As it was, “One guessed him as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization had sucked into the town” (84). For Forster, the objects in the flat are too obvious in their idealizations, and like the room itself, lack any sense of continuity with Leonard’s history. Time here is shallow, and this shallowness links to ownership: Leonard rents the flat and almost all the objects within it. As the narrator observes, the flat “struck that [. . .] makeshift note that is so often heard in the modern dwelling-place. It had been too easily gained, and could be relinquished too easily” (37).

Mr. Wilcox’s London flat at Ducie Street achieves a similar, if more luxurious, shallowness, one that Margaret observes when touring it with Mr. Wilcox:

The dining-room was big, but over-furnished. [. . .] Margaret viewed with relief the sumptuous dado, the frieze, the gilded wall-paper, amid whose foliage parrots sang. It would never do with her own furniture, but those heavy chairs, that immense sideboard loaded with presentation plate, stood up against its pressure like men. [. . .] Even the Bible—the Dutch Bible that Charles had brought back from the Boer War—fell into position. Such room admitted loot. [. . .]

“Does all the furniture come from Howards End?”

“The Howards End furniture has all gone to Oniton.” (118-9)

While not as ephemeral as the Basts’ flat, the interior here is awash in an easy luxury unconnected to the history of the family or of England. The markers of empire are overt: the wallpaper comes not from an English scene, but a non-specific tropical one, with parrots in the foliage. The Bible from the Boer War falls right into position, not a religious text or a record of family lineage, but a marker of British imperialism. The room reflects a static time, a series of usable (and exploitable) moments that suggest not continuity, but a compendium of markers newly acquired in the present.

Mrs. Wilcox’s Howards End stands as Forster’s somewhat obvious antidote to the impermanence and commercial ties of these urban dwellings. Stephen Kern, in his work *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*, outlines a break between public and private time in the early twentieth century, a break that in Forster’s work splits instead between the hurried, unconnected, urban time of London and the slower, continuous, and indeed timeless time of the country. Early in the novel, while the first Mrs. Wilcox is alive, Howards End is bathed in a nostalgic glow, representative of an older England with authentic traditions. It is, as Helen

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<sup>8</sup> By 1910, pianos were advertised both as a middle-class status symbol and as the glowing center of family life. The popular artist Goodman painted sentimental domestic scenes, with women and children in idyllic country or

writes at the start, “old and little, and altogether delightful” (5), and “old” seems synonymous with “delightful” in these early pages. Critic Stephen Berstein equates *Howards End* with Jameson’s conception of romance, involving a place governed by “homogenous time” (41). Time here moves differently, mythically: it is slower, more in tune with the seasons, continuous. Even recent changes seem to have happened long ago.<sup>9</sup>

Forster is dismayed that the fast unconnected urban time is speeding into the country, represented both by the new motor car and by Mr. Wilcox, who is “a little Ten Minutes moving self-contained through its appointed years” (178). Mrs. Wilcox, however, is a protective foil to this speed, becoming almost an extension of the house itself; as the narrator tells us, “She seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it. One knew she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow had descended upon her- [ . . . ] assuredly she cared about her ancestors, and let them help her” (18). The house, as well as Mrs. Wilcox, become markers for vague and nostalgic notions of something quintessentially English. For all its value, however, and as much as Forster seems enamored with this golden vision, this nostalgic sense of time, set apart from the vulgar speed of both London and the other Wilcoxes, is finally declared inadequate. While it offers a sense of continuity missing from the London flats, time here remains fixed, unable to accommodate the modern age and urban time. Mrs. Wilcox, its purest representative, succumbs early, having stayed too long in London. There are continuous foreshadowings that country time will prove no match for urban time, that, like the dust left behind from the speeding automobile, it will disappear into the past.

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domestic settings.

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The death of Mrs. Wilcox produces in part a crisis of real estate. A central question for the characters: Who will inherit Howards End? reflects, as Trilling famously observed, the larger question, “Who shall inherit England?” (Trilling 118). Yet the crisis is also inextricably related to time. None of the dwellings discussed so far—the London flats or Mrs. Wilcox’s Howards End—can finally respond adequately to the crisis of time, to the critical need for Forster both to salvage what is worthwhile from the past and still find an adequate home for his distinctly modern characters.

A contemporary solution to such a crisis was a kind of commodified nostalgia, a packaging of time reflected in the fetishized selling of country houses and country life that emerged in full force at the turn of the century. At the time Forster was writing *Howards End*, “authentic” country dwellings were not only supported by commercial interests, but the very idea of an authentic country life was for sale in a way not previously seen in England. An idyllic picture of rural living was certainly nothing new, but the marketing of that vision became a powerful force at the start of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The desire to protect an idealized notion of English rural life from the contaminating forces of commerce and urban bustle in fact opened this vision to ever increasing commercialization. A kind of ironic feedback loop resulted, where efforts to keep the countryside “pure” granted more opportunities to market this purity. C. F. G. Masterman summarized the collective anxiety in 1909 in his popular book *The Condition of*

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<sup>9</sup> The spirit of modernity certainly resides at Howard End from the start of the novel, however. Mrs. Wilcox’s idyllic country image acts as a foil to the motor-car driving, commercially oriented members of her family.

<sup>10</sup> Books and articles on the tradition of the English country house are legion. For an overview, see Kelsall, *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature*. For information on the country house during the late Victorian and Edwardian age, see Stamp and Goulancourt’s well-known work *The English House 1860-1914: The Flowering of English Domestic Architecture*, and Hermann Muthesius’ *The English House*. While now dated, Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* remains a valuable guide to Britain’s historic representations of city and country life.

*England*: The English countryside was being drained of its original inhabitants, only to be purchased by the new urban elites (203). Advertisements such as the ones in Figures 1 and 2, from *The Times* of 1909, suggest that, with careful buying, a slower time—and a rural life—awaited London readers; buyers could maintain a house in the city, but still take advantage of the readily available “beautiful old country residences” or “picturesque old cottages.” Other ventures actively promoted the rural ideal; the popular magazine *Country Life* was launched in 1897, devoted to selling the idea of the country house for a ready public, with articles showcasing ways to decorate and maintain the traditional country home (Stamp 29). Likewise, the new domestic architecture movement, which built new houses designed to suggest age, quiet, and rural living at its best, was flourishing when Forster published his novel.

The scenes set at Oniton Grange offer Forster’s scathing commentary on these trends of commodified nostalgia, where country houses and the accompanying traditions are purchased by urban tourists. The old country estate Oniton, the narrator informs us, “had been a discovery of Mr. Wilcox’s” (149). It had been so remote “that he had concluded it must be something special. A ruined castle stood in the grounds” (149). He discovers, to his dismay, that despite the ruins and the country setting, there was little play to be found there—poor shooting, bad fishing, and not much scenery. He orchestrates his daughter’s wedding at Oniton (for Evie “had a fancy for something rural” [149]), but otherwise only thought “to get it off his hands” (149). The wedding party roars into the village, spreading dust and chaos, only to roar out again.

Margaret, however, is “determined to create new sanctities” (159) among the hills near Oniton and to treat the house as a permanent home. Thrilled with the surrounding countryside,




## COUNTRY HOUSES

TO the man in search of a house or estate in the country there has never been a greater variety and wider range of properties than he can now command for his selection. Agricultural depression has brought many beautiful old country residences into the market at prices which represent a sound investment of capital. These properties range from small manor houses, some with a hundred or so, some with fewer, acres of land, to big country houses with great parks and estates. In nearly every case such estates can be cut up to meet the wishes of the purchaser or tenant.

A very full list of manors and estates to suit the most exacting taste and, varying requirements—alike in the matter of locality, size, accommodation, and price—will be published in *THE TIMES* of April 24th.

Figure 1



## COUNTRY COTTAGES

IN one respect at least the present generation is wiser than its predecessors. Instead of confining its life to one big house in one place—whether town or country—the present generation tends to enjoy both urban and rural life by exchanging the one big house for a smaller house or flat in London and a little residence or cottage in the country. This alternation of residence and scene adds immeasurably to the freshness and enjoyment of life in both town and country. But many people do not yet know what charming and exquisite country cottages can now be bought or rented at prices which bring their possession well within the limits of quite moderate incomes and certainly less than the expense of even occasional week-ends at hotels. A very full and detailed list of modern and picturesque old cottages for purchase or lease or renting furnished and unfurnished will appear on April 24th in *The Times*.

Figure 2



Margaret imagines living an idealized country life:

Margaret was fascinated by Oniton. She had said that she loved it, but it was rather its romantic tension that held her. The rounded Druids of whom she had caught glimpses in her drive, the rivers hurrying down from them to England, the carelessly modelled masses of the lower hills, thrilled her with poetry. The house was insignificant, but the prospect from it would be an eternal joy, and she thought of all the friends she would have to stop in it, and of the conversion of Henry himself to a rural life. (156)

While Margaret appreciates the home and the setting more than the rest of the wedding party, Forster suggests that she too quickly seeks an atmosphere of tradition and stability: Her nostalgic thrill at the “rounded Druids,” her sense that the prospect would be “an eternal joy,” and her naïve expectation of converting Henry to a rural life, are premature. The narrator has already informed the reader that “Oniton was to prove one of her innumerable false starts” (150); Margaret assumes she might quickly make of Oniton another home, to enjoy the “prospect from it,” as if she might buy, ready-made, a nostalgic and romantic atmosphere. For Forster, Oniton reflects the ugly side of commodified nostalgia, which assumes a buyer might appropriate quickly and easily the benefits of a rural tradition.

Despite Forster’s rejection of commodified nostalgia within the real estate market, this kind of commodification—where the passage of time is desired, packaged, and sold by being mapped onto a domestic structure—suggests an important model of time that Forster modifies when constructing a modern version of *Howards End*, one that finally captures two competing impulses in Forster’s novel. He rejects commodified nostalgia as embodied by Oniton, but he also repeatedly acknowledges the vital role of money earned from commercial ventures; that

money not only supports the cultured life of the Schlegels but also revitalizes *Howards End* as a marker of authenticity incorporating different models of time.<sup>11</sup> Margaret insists, for example, on acknowledging the “islands of money” on which her comfortable life depends and declares, “I refuse to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it” (127)—to the point, of course, when she actually marries one of these guarantors. Likewise, she knows *Howards End* itself, and the way of life it represents, depends at least in part on Mr. Wilcox’s money. He has, as he informs Margaret, drained the fields, thinned out the brush, rebuilt the kitchen, and generally kept the house from falling down. When Margaret meets Miss Avery at *Howards End*, Miss Avery admits (though with caveats) that people like the Wilcoxes “keep a place going” (195). Forster makes clear that while these monetary contributions are not sufficient to maintain the house’s spirit, they are necessary prerequisites. Margaret may claim that “Discussion keeps a house alive. It cannot stand by bricks and mortar alone,” but as Mrs. Wilcox points out “It cannot stand without them” (58).

For *Howards End* to survive, then, it must be rebuilt. It must become a place of paradox: Separate from commercial urban spaces yet acknowledging the role of commerce in supporting such a “purified” vision, and embodying a modern sense of time that might address the anxiety of loss without creating a static temporality. Under this reading, Miss Avery’s newly constructed *Howards End* parallels commodified architectural nostalgia, appealing in part because of its ability to package time, to collapse past moments into present place. *Howards End*, of course, is not for sale on the open market, though Miss Avery, as any consummate shopowner might do,

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<sup>11</sup>Critics often cast this tension as a crisis in liberalism. Trilling observes the discomfort of the liberal intellectual who is “obscurely aware how dependent is his existence upon the business civilization he is likely to fear and despise” (125). Born notes a similar tension between culture and capital, but finds that the final failure to reconcile, or even acknowledge, these connections, does not reflect a failure of liberalism, but instead serves as a warning about liberalism itself, “that it cannot relax if it is to remain functional” (159). Delany sees the tension as intrinsic to those in the “rentier culture” who can live off investment income. This article restates this central tension as one

has arranged goods to make Howards End as appealing as possible to her primary target—Margaret. It is easy to cringe at this last image, introducing as it does the idea of a mercantile Miss Avery, recognizing that she stands to gain financially in these arrangements. This runs counter to most conceivable readings of Miss Avery's motives, but I have introduced the image to suggest that the scene lies in complicated critical territory, with Forster insisting on the central role played by money raised in commercial ventures in the construction of spaces seemingly purified of such alliances. Howards End becomes contested terrain, one that exposes both the desire to purify a space from commercial interests and Forster's own recognition that such "purified" spaces must necessarily be self-conscious constructions, ones that at least shadow the world of commodified nostalgia.

### III. Temporal Density: Building Time into Architecture

#### *a. Lutyens and the Domestic Architecture Movement*

Forster's move to condense different times onto a domestic structure paralleled developments in British architecture, developments that provide literal examples of Forster's vision of modern nostalgic space.<sup>12</sup> In 1904, Hermann Muthesius published his influential work *Das englische Haus*, which exhaustively outlined a new kind of domestic building trend in Britain, one starting in the 1860s. Called by various names including the Vernacular Movement, the Old House Movement, and the English Domestic Movement, this

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between nostalgia and commerce and suggests that the connection between the two reveals not a guilty secret but a frank acknowledgement of their symbiotic relationship.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Hegglund, in his insightful article "Defending the Realm: Domestic Space and Mass Cultural Contamination in *Howards End* and *An Englishman's Home*," is the first critic to link Forster's *Howards End* with the Arts and Crafts movement, and he includes Lutyens and the vernacular architecture movement under this heading. Rather than a touchstone of authenticity, Howards End is "constructed to appear older than it is" (405), an architectural example of houses such as Munstead Wood. While Forster distinguishes between the pure, timeless world of Howards End and the fast-paced and corrupt urban life, the house is "already infected by the mass culture it seeks to exclude" (400), an infection that "deconstructs the idea of the English house as a space opposed to urban mass culture" (401). Hegglund's insights are constructive and valuable, though I read the link between architecture and

new trend balanced a focus on craftsmanship, traditional design, and natural, local materials with an insistence on modern conveniences and accommodations to modern lifestyles. Architects such as Philip Webb, Norman Shaw, and in particular E.L. Lutyens designed domestic homes that appeared old but were not merely copies of earlier designs. As Muthesius notes, the new buildings represented “an up-to-date national art” (4) and yet were bathed in references to the past. In the new dwellings,

Everything breathes simplicity, homeliness and rural freshness, occasionally, indeed, verging on the vernacular. But a fresh breath of naturalness wafts through the house and a sound down-to-earth quality is combined with a sure feeling for suitability. What we principally find here is a practical, indigenous and preeminently friendly house; and instead of a sham modernity expressing itself extravagantly in whimsical artificiality we find purely functional, unaffected design that many may already regard as more modern than all the fantastic excesses of a so-called modern style. (4)

Both overlapping and paralleling the tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement, the new domestic architecture was not trying to return to any particular time or any particular style. What set the domestic movement apart is that it returned to a way of building (Muthesius 15; Stamp 25) that might encode time’s passage within architectural structure and design. The style did not try to evoke a period such as the Gothic or Regency (other than one generically pre-industrial), but a particular, nostalgic atmosphere that suggested a continuous link to the past.

With its emphasis on a nostalgic evocation of a rural past, the movement nevertheless turned on a contradiction similar to that in *Howards End*: It was supported largely by money

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commerce (rather than mass culture) not to indicate a contamination of the country house, but an engaged meditation on the difficult terrain of commodified nostalgia.

from new commercial interests. Gavin Stamp and André Goulancourt, in *The English House 1860-1914: The Flowering of English Domestic Architecture*, outline the ironies of this trend:

The new movement was fundamentally anti-urban, anti-industrial, anti-modern, yet it depended for its life and success upon the wealth and technology of Victorian Britain. [The architect Philip] Webb may have enjoyed occasional aristocratic patronage, but most of [the architect Norman] Shaw's clients were *nouveaux riches*: brewers, solicitors, industrialists—and the money came from *trade*. Furthermore, neither architects nor clients could really have indulged in the taste for rural life and the vernacular if it was not for the invention so hated by Ruskin and Morris: the railway. (27)

Edwin Lutyens, one of the most well-known vernacular architects, serves as an instructive guide to this blend of nostalgia and commerce. Lutyens built a wide range of houses and commercial structures both in England and in India, as well as numerous war memorials after 1918. A contemporary of Frank Lloyd Wright, Lutyens was born in 1869 and began studying architecture by examining the vernacular structures near his home in Surrey with Gertrude Jekyll, the famous British gardener who is credited with infusing new life into the informal English Country Garden. From his office in Bloomsbury Square, Lutyens planned houses for clients much like Mr. Wilcox: new industrialists or businessmen who wanted a house that looked established (Inskip 9, 11).

Lutyens inscribed the passage of time on both interior design and on architectural features. Furniture was often austere, built from old wood and stripped of polish. At Gertrude Jekyll's house Munstead Wood, he limed and sandblasted the oak he used in order to give the appearance of age, and at another house, Little Thakeham, he treated the stones to give them "the

appearance of three centuries of wear” (Inskip 27; Weaver xxx). More than simply using old material—or material that had been treated to look old—Lutyens created what Peter Inskip has called a “fictitious” or an “invented history” within his houses. Details from different styles and different periods were included in the same house to suggest that changes had been made over the centuries. In one design, for instance, he set an eighteenth-century-style chimney-piece amid an even older interior style to suggest an early attempt at modernization (Inskip 27). As Inskip suggests, the passage of time might work progressively, suggesting that the house had been improved slowly over time, as with the chimney-piece, or alternatively, might suggest disintegration. At Nashdom, for example, Lutyens built a door opening many feet off the ground to imply the previous existence of a staircase below (Inskip 28); such features offer a constructed nostalgia, hinting of a storied past that never existed. With these architectural features, Lutyens sold a temporal density to his clients, offering not simply a mix of styles, but the visual sense of time’s passage in a single contemporary space.

The new vernacular style was on tricky ground, of course. While the new buildings incorporated older models, the architects and owners were careful to distinguish their work from buildings they saw as fake or artificial re-creations of older forms. Consider, for example, Jekyll’s description of Munstead Wood, designed by Lutyens:

‘[It] does not stare with newness; it is not new in any way that is disquieting to the eye; it is neither raw nor callow. On the contrary it almost gives the impression of a comfortable maturity of something like a couple of hundred years. And yet there is nothing sham or old about it; it is not trumped up with any specious or fashionable devices of spurious antiquity; there is no pretending to be anything that it is not—no affectation whatever.’ (qtd. in Stamp 39)

For Jekyll, Munstead Wood was to occupy an innovative architectural position: at once new, and yet offering the impression of age; hiding its origins, yet not appearing as a “sham” or “spurious.” The new houses should, as much as possible, erase the signs of their recent production, but not in an obvious way, and look as natural—and as authentic—as if they indeed reflected a “comfortable maturity.”<sup>13</sup>

This attempt to hide the newness of the building in turn suggests an attempt to hide its commercial origins. Yet like Forster, Lutyens sought to walk a thin line: his artistic efforts were supported by new commercial money, and his clients wanted an old, established-looking house. As Lutyens noted in a telling phrase, “the visible result of time is a large factor in realised aesthetic value” (qtd. in Stamp 39).<sup>14</sup> Lutyens recognized the aesthetic and financial value of temporal density, of a building or object that reflected the passage of time, and that was in fact supported and produced by commercial ventures. Janus-faced, Lutyens sought both to acknowledge his ties to new industrial money at the same time that he sought to elide them in his work.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Lutyens himself was sometimes criticized, both by his contemporaries and later commentators, for producing sham-nostalgic effects. Sir Robert Lorimer, for example, disliked Munstead Wood for its “induced antiquity” (Inskip 27), and more recently, Peter Inskip has noted that some of Lutyens’s houses were “so dependent on fantasies of a make-believe world that they lack that spontaneity of the direct solution [. . .]” (29). Stamp, however, proclaims Lutyens “the master at the art of instant age” (39), and goes on to claim that while Lutyens was playing a sophisticated intellectual game, other architects “were trying to fake antiquity” (39). Authenticity is, of course, largely in the eye of the beholder.

<sup>14</sup> Stamp, Inskip, and others attribute this quotation to Lutyens, though Weaver quotes the original writer as Walter Pater, from *Notre Dame d’Amiens*. See Weaver xxx.

<sup>15</sup> Muthesius and the architects themselves believed that this English Domestic Revival was not only aesthetically more pleasing but also, as the descriptions reveal, morally superior as well. The new works were based on buildings that were “honest and nobler works of art” (Muthesius 15), built, as Jekyll notes, “in the thorough and honest spirit of the good work of old days” (qtd. in Stamp 95). We see here the kind of moral superiority assigned to certain dwellings that is present in Forster’s work. The nostalgic vision of a simpler, more natural time, embodied in a physical space, became the new building code at the turn of the century.

*b. Reconstructing Howards End*

Like Lutyens, Forster recognized the aesthetic—and monetary—power of manipulating time onto architectural space. With Miss Avery's construction of Howards End, Forster creates a literary version of Lutyen's literal buildings, a constructed space that offers the "visible result of time" at one moment—and in one place—in the present. The Howards End that Miss Avery has shaped by unpacking the Schlegels' possessions becomes the central solution to the crisis in the novel. Margaret has lured Helen to England from Germany, ostensibly to visit their gravely ill aunt. Worried that her sister's recent erratic behavior indicates a mental imbalance, Margaret meets Helen at Howards End, only to discover that the unmarried Helen is pregnant. This development brings to sudden intensity the spatial and temporal crisis present throughout the novel. Much of the story revolves around the question "Where to live?" (Born 142), with displaced families being the order of the day: Mrs. Wilcox is displaced in London, the Schlegels must move from Wilcox Place, Leonard Bast belongs (so the narrator tells us) in the country. Helen's pregnancy, however, adds new urgency to the issue. Helen recognizes that she is no longer simply displaced, but an exile; as she tells her sister, "I cannot live in England" (209) and more specifically, cannot stay at her sister's house. "Imagine a visit from me at Ducie Street! It's unthinkable!" Helen remarks, and "Margaret could not contradict her" (209). Unlike Margaret, however, Helen does not seem unduly troubled by this crisis of place; the temporal crisis, however, proves more difficult. Helen believes she must cut herself off from her past life, represented by her siblings and her old possessions. "'I am glad to have seen you and the things'" she tells Margaret, and "She looked at the bookcase lovingly, as if she was saying farewell to the past" (210).

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Such a spatial and temporal crisis suggests the larger cultural tensions outlined by Masterman, Forster, and others, a sense of mass displacement and disruption from existing homes and ways of life, simultaneously cutting people off from their dwellings and from their own history. Such tensions would in turn contribute to several staples of the modernist diet: alienation, displacement, and a sense of discontinuity with the past. As I discussed earlier, Forster's solution to this crisis has often been read as an almost embarrassing nostalgic gesture, a return to a naïve and simplistic vision of a slower, happier rural life. Yet Miss Avery's version of *Howards End* is not a nostalgic capitulation, but in fact modernism's evolving answer to the need both to retain the past and move into the present. Forster offers a new model of time, part of a larger cultural project to find a way, however uneasily, to respect the past without falling into stasis. This version of *Howards End* proves to be a potent model: Margaret and Helen resolve at least part of their crisis simply by walking through the new temporal space of *Howards End*. After they have decided to part ways, they take one last look at their furniture within the house, and end up taking an almost cinemagraphic tour of their own history, moving room to room to find not simply objects representative of their past, but the narratives that adhere to those objects as well. On one of the dining room chairs, for example, is a stain, and the sisters debate whether it was from the soup or the coffee that Tibby had spilled years ago. They finally place the stain in history, identifying it as soup since their father had been alive, but the debate triggers a memory of a trip to their aunt's and a short childhood rhyme that was the inadvertent cause of another spill. This remembrance of things past, generated by layers of objects and their temporal significance, offers the sisters a sustaining continuity. They have no wish to freeze the arrangement; they move furniture, debate other changes, and imagine future alterations. Unlike the "dead house" that Margaret sees at the start of the scene, the house, as Helen proclaims,

“seems more alive even than in the old days, when it held the Wilcoxes’ own things” (209). The Schlegels’ possessions seem almost animate; their chairs, for example, feeling the sun for the first time “in thirty years,” seem to have come to life; as Helen remarks, “Their dear little backs are quite warm” (211). It is a new arrangement of old things, and thus a new arrangement of the past made accessible to the present. These temporal connections reunite the two central characters. Far from a static hold on the past, the new *Howards End* offers the characters both a vital continuity and a chance to remake time’s passage to accommodate their current needs. It is, as the narrator tells us, “the past sanctifying the present; the present, with wild heart-throb, declaring that there would after all be a future [. . .]” (212).

It must be acknowledged, however, that this new temporal continuity, delivering that rare satisfaction of nostalgic desire, does suggest a denial of the earlier explicit links among commerce, culture, and a nostalgic longing for a country retreat. Margaret may previously have insisted on the connection between her cultured life and the businessmen who guarantee it, and Helen may have attempted to give her money to Leonard Bast as some kind of reparation, but this meeting at *Howards End* finally excludes both Henry Wilcox and Leonard Bast. The moment of dramatic reconnection for the sisters is also the moment that the nostalgic vision of the country house starts to become “purified” from ties either to commerce or to the disturbing repercussions of that commerce. Once the new *Howards End*—with its tempting offer of temporal continuity—is available, and construction is more or less complete, the underlying connections between *Howards End* and commerce seem to slide out of sight.

The final scene of the novel offers the logical and deflating conclusion to this move to separate *Howards End* from market forces. Critics have, in fact, long savaged the ending as a nostalgic capitulation, though there is disagreement over whether this failure belongs to Forster

or the two sisters.<sup>16</sup> The novel's finale offers Mr. Wilcox almost on his deathbed, revealing the final distribution of his estate to his children and daughter-in-law: Howards End will pass to Margaret and her nephew; his money will be carefully channeled away from Howards End, going directly to his children. It is Margaret's inheritance that will presumably maintain the house, though much of this (which itself comes from investments in trade) is also being given away. Likewise, the disturbing results of commercial interests, represented in the novel by the terrible plight of Leonard and his wife, have been ruthlessly and effectively purged. Leonard is dead (Margaret instructs Helen to forget him) and his wife Jackie is never mentioned, seemingly so far beneath notice (or so potentially threatening) as to be written out of the text.

This final ambivalent gesture toward purification in fact suggests the central tension inherent to relations between nostalgia and commerce: On the one hand, we see both Forster's and Lutyen's desire to reveal the connections, to uncover the ties between commerce and an architecturally based nostalgia, to be explicit—and in most ways unapologetic—about the complications of creating monuments of temporal density. On the other hand, there is always present the wish that this unmasking might itself result in a purified space, that the final results of these connections would be a space apart from the problems of urban modernity and the terrible repercussions of a commercial age, a place where past moments might be united with the present, rather than alienated from it. The final moments of Forster's novel suggest capitulation, but they also suggest an imaginary space for nostalgic desire itself, not a place of actual idyllic beauty, or a space that is actually separate from the commercial, but a place where the desire that these things might be realized can be maintained and protected. These places sanctifying nostalgic desire are an enormously tempting vision for Forster, for Lutyens, and for most of their

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Delany faults Forster, finding he clings in the end "to archaism and nostalgia while failing to engage the contemporary passions of the ordinary citizen" (78). Born, however, finds that the fault lies with Margaret and

Edwardian counterparts. We misread Forster, however, if we isolate this nostalgic vision from the rest of the novel and simply condemn it, declaring that however much Forster may have protested, he capitulates to nostalgic mistiness in the end. Easy critical condemnation of Forster's nostalgia should, in fact, be resisted as strongly as this simplified country myth. While the final nostalgic vision is, to borrow a commercial term, a sell-out, this vision must be read as part of a larger meditation on the perils and appeals of commodified nostalgia. Forster offers, in a sense, the whole advertisement. He explores the financial and human costs for producing this country vision, its careful construction, its illusion of purification, and finally the overwhelming desire to obtain this illusion, a desire Forster undeniably shares. A single-minded critical focus on condemning the blindness of Forster's nostalgia not only misses the contradictory treatment of nostalgic space in *Howards End*, but in fact partakes of the very blindness such a focus seeks to correct.

#### IV. A Locus of Modern Nostalgic Desire

The critical importance of modern nostalgic spaces such as Howards End and Munstead Wood lies both in their power to manipulate time and in their self-conscious acknowledgement of this manipulation. These newly constructed spaces offer the viewer—or reader—an opportunity to become a time traveler, to experience spatially a temporal continuity that—nostalgically—helped erase modern industrialization and mechanization. Yet such spaces, as Forster and Lutyens both acknowledge, were made possible by a grant from industrialization. Rather than unmasking the paradoxical treatment of these spaces, we should likewise see this tension as instructive of the very contradictions and possibilities present in selling time. Creating nostalgic spaces in the present requires that they be both constructed and, to various degrees, commodified. These spaces are both literally for sale, in that it is possible to buy a Lutyens'

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her sister, and that the ending is Forster's warning to a complacent liberalism (159).

house or a copy of *Howards End*—both popular, incidentally in part because of the nostalgic atmosphere they evoke—and also more figuratively for sale, in one present space for our viewing pleasure.<sup>17</sup> The spaces become shimmering new commodities, the ideal of a modern nostalgic who wishes not quite to go back to the past, but to bring the passage of time to the present, to inscribe onto both space and objects a sense of temporal continuity, to continue time by disrupting it. That this move produces both benefits, and very troubling failures and exclusions, suggests that our analysis of commodified nostalgia must be equally nuanced.

Forster and Lutyens, then, not only offer vital models of modern nostalgic spaces, but create spaces whose ambivalence and self-consciousness suggest a potent critical approach to commodified nostalgia itself. We might put pressure on the final word in this term—spaces—and suggest that this openness demands an equally dexterous critical response. While maintaining our suspicion of trafficking in nostalgic desire, we might also avoid being overly content simply to unmask it and proclaim it a sham, for Forster and Lutyens remind us that this is not the end of the story. Rather than approaching sites such as the new *Howards End* as single places to be condemned or appreciated, we might view examples of commodified nostalgia as reflecting a nexus of contradictory impulses, one that requires us to acknowledge both desire and failure, both a powerful new ability to manipulate and to sell time, and a clear sense of the limits and costs of this manipulation.

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<sup>17</sup> Forster himself has become a powerful site of commercialized nostalgia, an almost deified figure of the Edwardian age. Most notable, of course, are the highly popular (and lucrative) Merchant-Ivory movie adaptations of his novels, surely a quintessential instance of using nostalgia as a profitable sales technique. Even before these films, however, Forster had himself been endowed by observers with a romantic aura, an Edwardian relic still living in his rooms at Cambridge until his death in 1971. Visitors to Forster in his later years return again and again to the sense of place, repeatedly imagining the nostalgia evoked by Forster as emanating from the rooms and the objects within them. See Stape for a summary of these visitors.

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