

More Than a House: Encountering Beauty as a Site of Disclosure in *Howards End*

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Abstract

This essay argues for greater engagement with the country house in *Howards End* as a work of art. Rather than approaching the country house merely as property or decoration, this essay demonstrates how the house can function as a site where truth is disclosed through aesthetic encounter. Drawing on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-George Gadamer alongside Elaine Scarry's account of beauty as unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving, this essay contends that *Howards End* calls its characters into transformative experiences where life might be quickened, realtionships reconfigured, and self-understanding deepened. Through the examination of the Schlegel sisters alongside the Wilcox family, this essay argues that those who yield to the house with patience and openness experience its capacity to disclose a richer vision of being, while those governed by calculation and property remain closed to its transformative possibilities. Through this lens, Forster's country house emerges as an aesthetic event that invites readers to connect, yield, and participate in the transformative power of art.

Keywords: *Howards End*, E. M. Forster, Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics, aesthetics, beauty, truth

Art is for increasing life. That, I believe, after all the other purposes receive their due, is really what it's for—why we revere it, why we give our hearts to it.
—William Deresiewicz¹

Introduction

In the opening lines of E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End*, Helen writes to her sister:

It isn't going to be what we expected. It is old and little, and altogether delightful—red brick . . . Then there's a very big wych-elm . . . leaning a little over the house, and standing on the boundary between garden and meadow. I quite love that tree already . . . Oh, the beautiful vine leaves! The house is covered with a vine.²

Rather than simply appearing architecturally, Helen describes the country house as something that exceeds her expectations and interrupts prior understanding. "It isn't the least what we expected," she insists.³ From the novel's opening pages, readers enter a conversation about encountering beauty and its call for a new way of seeing. As such, *Howards End* does not merely sit as an object in a landscape; it addresses Helen and, in her attentiveness, she responds.

Such a scene resonates with Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that understanding is not a method we apply to objects but an event that happens to us. In encountering a work of art, there exists the possibility of genuine, deep experience that "is never merely a confirmation of expectations but a surprise of them."⁴ The experience of beauty disrupts our expectations and discloses something about ourselves as interpretive beings. If, as philosopher Dennis Schmidt suggests, aesthetic experience reaches "the deepest center of being human," namely, our hermeneutical core, then Helen's astonishment before *Howards End* signals more than delight in a charming country house.⁵ Instead, it marks a moment of interpretive enlargement and truthful illumination of her world.

¹ William Deresiewicz, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Art," *Salmagundi*, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://salmagundi.skidmore.edu/articles/477-thirteen-ways-of-looking-at-art>

² E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, Dover Thrift Editions: Classic Novels (Dover Publications, 2002), 1–2.

³ Forster, *Howards End*, 2.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image," *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, edited by Richard E. Palmer, (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 200.

⁵ Dennis Schmidt, *Between Word and Image: Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis*, (Indiana University Press, 2013), 10.

Since *Howards End*'s publication in 1910, some critics have read Forster's portrayal of the Schlegels as reflecting elitist sympathies, particularly in contrast to the wealthy Wilcoxes and the lower-class Basts.⁶ At first glance, *Howards End* may read as a romanticization of art, literature, and the longing for an uncomplicated countryside. As Anna Grmelová notes, critics have further argued that such nostalgic pastoralism renders the ending of *Howards End* ahistorical as the country house becomes a refuge "from the impending expansion of London."⁷ However, nothing stops at first glance. Rather than carrying on such lines of criticism and distancing ourselves from aesthetics, this essay argues for greater engagement with the country house as a work of art.⁸ If we approach *Howards End* not merely as property or decoration but as a site of aesthetic disclosure, as I argue the women of the novel do, we begin to see how it functions as an event of truth within the novel. As a work of art, *Howards End* calls its characters into a transformative encounter where life might be quickened, relationships reconfigured, and self-understanding deepened if we know how to look.⁹

Between the Work of Art and the Beautiful

Works of art carry the beautiful with them. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry outlines three key features of beauty as unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving.¹⁰ Although philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Schiller likewise describe aesthetic experience as disclosive and transformative, Scarry's account provides a particularly helpful vocabulary for identifying the work beauty performs in *Howards End*.¹¹ What makes a work of art beautiful is not its perceived prettiness or painterly skill but its unique ability to intensify or deepen one's sense of life in a way akin to sacred experience. In preparing to encounter a work of art, Scarry writes it this way,

⁶ David Deutsch, "Reconnecting Must to *Howards End*: Forster's Aesthetics of Inclusion," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 21, (2010): 163, DOI: 10.1080/10436928.2010.500586

⁷ Anna Grmelová, "'We Murder to Dissect': Enjoyment of Beauty versus Theoretical Rigour in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*," *Brno Studies in English* 38, no. 1 (2012): 82, <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2012-1-5>.

⁸ My reading seems to gesture toward, in a broad stroke, why Zadie Smith wrote *On Beauty*, which is a tribute to Forster and *Howards End* in particular.

⁹ In Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, which is a homage to *Howards End*, it is not a country house but a painting that preoccupies the novel.

¹⁰ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 22–24, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400847358>.

¹¹ Of particular note would be Hans-Georg Gadamer's essay "The Relevance of the Beautiful: Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival" as play, symbol, and festival could be another great lens through which to view *Howards End*.

“You are about to be in the presence of something life-giving, lifesaving, something that deserves from you a posture of reverence or petition . . . through your careless approach, you become cut off from it, you will feel its removal as a retraction of life.”¹² On Scarry’s account, to be careless before beauty is to fail to give oneself over to its transformational potential. In a careless approach, one might remain quite closed off: confident about what the piece means historically or to what ends we might employ it. In this, the beautiful is merely one more consumable, interchangeable object rather than something particular that, in its presence, invites one’s presence. In one’s inattentiveness, the “retraction of life” Scarry describes is a contraction within the self or a shrinking of one’s capacity for attention and responsiveness. To be experienced as a life-quickenning event, beauty asks a certain comportment of us—one that is patient, open, and willing respond. In this way, Scarry’s account of caring for beauty aligns closely with a hermeneutic understanding of encounter and Gadamer’s concern for dwelling with a work of art. “We must learn” he writes, “how to dwell upon the work in a specific way . . . [for] the essence of our temporal experience of art is in learning how to tarry in this way. And perhaps it is the only way that is granted to us finite beings to relate to what we call eternity.”¹³ Beauty addresses us—even offers us the chance at eternity—but only those willing to give themselves to its call have the chance to experience its unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving force.

In *Howards End*, the country house takes on each of these features as demonstrated in various conversations throughout the novel. For example, Margaret remarks, “Howards End must be a very different house to ours. We are fond of ours, but there is nothing distinctive about it. As you saw, it is an ordinary London house. We shall easily find another.”¹⁴ Margaret recognizes there is something different and distinct between these two houses when it comes to their interchangeability. Whereas the “ordinary” Schlegel house can be easily exchanged for another, Howards End is “distinctive” and therefore resists such a swapping transaction. The emphasis on distinctiveness also marks Margaret’s growing understanding that this house carries meaning that exceeds basic function. Her awareness of its unprecedentedness becomes clearer when the Schlegels must move from Wickham Place and Margaret finds herself confused and unable to settle. “London only stimulates, it cannot sustain,” the narrator observes.¹⁵ Even more, Margaret hurries “over its surface for a house without knowing

¹² Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 27.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45.

¹⁴ Forster, *Howards End*, 74.

¹⁵ Forster, *Howards End*, 135.

what sort of a house she wanted.”¹⁶ The language of surface and stimulation highlight the replaceability of city houses as they may excite but do not endure. As a work of art, *Howards End* is unprecedented not because of its architectural originality but its ability to press upon Margaret’s imagination as remarkable and sustaining. Those who approach it with attentiveness find themselves drawn into relation with it, while those who seek only shelter or ownership remain untouched.

Taking the idea of the unprecedented one step further, *Howards End* is also seen by Mrs. Wilcox (and eventually Margaret) as sacred. For example, Margaret initially declines Mrs. Wilcox’s invitation to come visit *Howards End* only to realize that her answer of “another day” will “do for brick and mortar, but not for the Holy of Holies into which *Howards End* has been transfigured.”¹⁷ Such transfiguration suggests a change from drab, common house to holy, sacred dwelling place. Margaret notices how *Howards End* is set apart from average, unremarkable buildings and made to be something more unique and sublime. Additionally, given the passive language of “has been transfigured,” one might see Mrs. Wilcox as the being whose participation was required for such transformation. In this example, the act of becoming sacred is an interpretive act of cooperation and co-creation. As Mrs. Wilcox tarries with *Howards End* it discloses to her a mode of belonging that resists the speed of contemporary life. What might appear to others as merely rural property shows itself to her, in her sustained attention, as a site of wisdom and ancestry.¹⁸ Rooted in place and history, the house, in response, nourishes Mrs. Wilcox’s own sense of self and gathers her life into a larger web of significance. Through this ongoing exchange, the house is lifted from the sphere of utility and into the realm of the sacred. Thus, the transfiguration of *Howards End* into the sacred is an interpretive event that occurs between being and beauty. Luce Irigaray puts it this way, “The celestial lies not only above our head but also between us.”¹⁹ Her claim reminds us holiness is not just something of the heavens, but what can be disclosed in the interpretive moments shared between beings and beauty in conversation. When an encounter with the beautiful is held with reverence, the sacred emerges in the interpretive space between Mrs. Wilcox and *Howards End*. In this, the transformative power lies not only in the act of witnessing and attending but also in the ongoing relationship between Mrs.

¹⁶ Forster, *Howards End*, 135.

¹⁷ Forster, *Howards End*, 76.

¹⁸ Forster, *Howards End*, 18.

¹⁹ Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, trans. Heidi Bostic et al., Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (Continuum, 2002), 147.

Wilcox and the country house, where each contributes to the evolution and enrichment of the other.

Finally, *Howards End* is crucial to life as Mrs. Wilcox notes, “*Howards End* was nearly pulled down once. It would have killed me.”²⁰ If the beautiful work of art quickens life, then the absence of quickening drains life. Although Mrs. Wilcox eventually dies from poor health, she suggests her life would not be worth living without the country house. Rather than a threat of physical death, “it would have killed me” registers as a kind of existential diminishment.²¹ The house sustains a mode of being that finds little affirmation within her family’s ethos. Where the Wilcox men devote themselves to business, expansion, and property management, Mrs. Wilcox “had only one passion in life—her house . . .”²² This stark difference becomes unmistakable after death, when her written wish to leave *Howards End* to Margaret is dismissed and destroyed by the Wilcoxes. To the family it seemed “natural and fitting that after due debate they should tear the note up and throw it on to their dining-room fire . . . For one hard fact remains. They did neglect a personal appeal. The woman who had died did say to them ‘Do this,’ and they answered, ‘We will not.’”²³ The burning of the note enacts symbolically what the demolition of the house would have accomplished materially, namely the erasure of Mrs. Wilcox and her desires. Thus, as a work of art, *Howards End* is a lifesaving force not because it prolongs Mrs. Wilcox’s life, but because it deepens the meaningfulness and coherence of her life against forces that would render it forgettable. Further, Niklas Cyril Fischer notes that the relationship between Mrs. Wilcox and *Howards End* is more than that of owner and object.²⁴ For she also maintains “an alliance with the mythical” and ancestral past which “sublimates her character into the house’s spatial and temporal order.”²⁵ When Forster first introduces Mrs. Wilcox during Aunt July’s frantic visit to the country house, he writes, “[Mrs. Wilcox] seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it.”²⁶ Such relationship of belonging suggests an interconnected vitality between *Howards End* and Mrs. Wilcox. Although Mrs. Wilcox cannot help but exist in the modern world, Forster offers *Howards End* as the sustaining force which quickens her life. Thus, in each of these

²⁰ Forster, *Howards End*, 74.

²¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 74.

²² Forster, *Howards End*, 75.

²³ Forster, *Howards End*, 88.

²⁴ Niklas Cyril Fischer, “E.M. Forster, Realism, and the Style of Progressive Nostalgia,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 45, no. 2 (2022): 73, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.45.2.05>.

²⁵ Fischer, “E.M. Forster, Realism, and the Style of Progressive Nostalgia,” 73.

²⁶ Forster, *Howards End*, 18.

instances, *Howards End* is rendered not as an everyday object of use but rather as a work of unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving art.

Howards End and the Disclosure of Truth

Insofar as we follow Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer on the understanding of beauty, we can now add the disclosure of truth and the bringing forth of being to Scarry's key features. Treating *Howards End* as a work of art not only means it is beautiful (in the sense discussed above), but that the experience of the country house reveals meaningful truth about being human and brings forth the possibility of our humanness. Rather than serving as a synonym for fact, truth in art is better understood as disclosure. Art discloses truth not as methodological inquiry or search for certainty and correctness. Instead, art's truth is that human beings are the site of understanding and meaning making, and this alters the way we interpret our world.

In his poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Rainer Maria Rilke writes of this altering experience of art in the closing line: "You must change your life."²⁷ Like Heidegger and Gadamer, Rilke notes that part of the truth disclosed in the experience of a work of art is the possibility of transformation. In this way, the hope of art and beauty is that we might uncover the truth of life as such: that we are interpretive beings who, as the site of understanding, have the possibility to change the way we relate to others. Gadamer writes it this way, "Works of art possess an elevated rank in being, and this is seen in the fact that in encountering a work of art we have the experience of something emerging—and this one can call truth!"²⁸ In other words, in our experience of the work of art—that moment when we are struck by or invited into beauty—we are not simply viewing a static object apart from us. What we experience in this encounter is the experience of disclosure, understanding, and possibility, which is the truthfulness of life. The work of art brings forth being in that it gives us the chance to be "drawn out of our everyday selves and drawn into a conversation" where we might understand ourselves and better our relations with others.²⁹

²⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed March 7, 2026, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/1679348/archaic-torso-of-apollo>.

²⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image," in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of The Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 207.

²⁹ Ramsey Eric Ramsey, "Before the Work of Art," *Phainomena* (SI) 28, nos. 110–111 (2019): 93, <https://doi.org/10.32022/PHI28.2019.110-111.14>.

In *Howards End*, Forster's phrase "only connect" acts as a reminder to readers and characters to draw out of themselves such that we build better relations through understanding. The country house opens up a clearing where the call to "only connect" prioritizes both internal connections of ideas and consequences and external connections between one another.³⁰ Margaret thinks to herself, "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height."³¹ As a work of art, *Howards End* makes much of Margaret's plea in its bringing forth and intensification of life. Reflecting on English farms on her way to *Howards End*, Margaret experiences both love and sadness as she contemplates life and death, and such thoughts give her a "feeling of completeness."³² Speaking hermeneutically, we understand completeness not as an absolute, definitive conclusion at which she has arrived. Instead, it might be said that Margaret's feeling of completeness is one of great depth, fulfillment, and meaningfulness. In remembering her experience of *Howards End*, Margaret seems to understand a new complexity to the richness of life. In this scene Margaret thinks, "In these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole, group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth, connect—connect without bitterness until all men are brothers."³³ This vision holds together the tension of what had initially been understood as contradictory: life and death, transition and eternity, and joy and sorrow. Yet now, Margaret reveals a richer understanding of life.

This is further demonstrated as Margaret is better prepared to hold both the sweet and the bitter, which give dimensionality to her understanding. For example, when Helen returns disgraced after Leonard Bast's death, Margaret refuses the Wilcoxes' impulse toward condemnation. Instead, she recognizes the tragedy of the situation while still defending her sister demonstrating a capacity to hold both moral complexity and familial love. In attempt to callout Henry Wilcox's inability to connect his own affair with Helen's pregnancy, Margaret cries, "In what way different? You have betrayed Mrs. Wilcox, Helen only herself. You remain in society, Helen can't. You have had only pleasure, she may die. You have the insolence to talk to me of differences, Henry?"³⁴ Where Henry divides and judges, Margaret attempts to hold together such complexities. Thus, part of the work of *Howards End* as a work of art

³⁰ Forster, *Howards End*, 168.

³¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 168.

³² Forster, *Howards End*, 242.

³³ Forster, *Howards End*, 242.

³⁴ Forster, *Howards End*, 279.

is to reveal, intensify, and connect our experience of life so that its contradictions may be met with a deepened sense of wholeness.

Yielding to the Country House

For *Howards End* as a work of art to have its say, there must be someone to listen. To tarry with a work of art means to spend time, reside, and linger such that we remain sensitive to art's address. Without one who encounters the work of art, the quickening, transformative potential of *Howards End*'s is not received, even if it may be subtly felt. Throughout the novel, many characters know about and engage with *Howards End*. However, not all experience or encounter it. The notion of "yielding" to the work of art, following philosopher Ramsey Eric Ramsey, suggests a comportment of readiness, surrender, and freedom. Characters like Ruth Wilcox, Margaret, and Helen yield to *Howards End* because they experience it not as mere utility or something to be controlled for profit. Rather, their broader sense of living well (outside of control, utility, and profit) frees up a meaningful space for possibility and futurity to arise within their encounter. On the other hand, Mr. Wilcox and Charles are almost completely unable to remain sensitive to *Howards End* as a work of art because they remain steadfast in the world of objects, control, and utility. These men have learned that living well means owning but not experiencing, collecting but not connecting. Because of their desire for control, they have learned to "think [themselves] subjects standing over against objects there for [their] manipulation and use."³⁵ Thus, even when they feel fond of *Howards End*, the Wilcox men are primarily concerned with its utility and potential to maximize their own material ends.

Given the reign of technology and calculation in both our contemporary moment and in London in 1910, it is unsurprising how one is thrust into the realm of utility without much say. Take for example, the pace of progress and practicality as the narrator remarks of Margaret, "In the streets of the city she noted for the first time the architecture of hurry, and heard the language of hurry on the mouths of its inhabitants . . ."³⁶ This sense of hurriedness and urgency speaks to the sprawling urbanization of London, which includes railways, apartment flats, and motor-cars. The Wilcoxes, as wealthy, multi-property-owning, imperialist-venturing capitalists seem to be situated in the heart of such progress.

³⁵ Ramsey, "Before the Work of Art," 95.

³⁶ Forster, *Howards End*, 97.

As the men of the Wilcox family are engrossed in the realm of development and calculation, they are only ever accustomed to seeing items as objects to be controlled or accumulated and then measuring its usefulness. The novel reflects this in its portrayal of the Wilcoxes often as shallow, thoughtless characters. For example, when Helen notices Paul's shame and embarrassment after their kiss, she "felt for a moment that the whole Wilcox family was a fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness."³⁷ This lack of substance but accumulation of things is also reflected in the progress of London, which is contrasted with Howards End. "London only stimulates, it cannot sustain" writes the narrator.³⁸ And later, "The mask fell off the city, and [Margaret] saw it for what it really is—a caricature of infinity."³⁹ In these examples, both London and the Wilcox men are financially successful, but vitally hollow. Both promise much but offer little sustenance. The Wilcox men talk of life but obscure it through the clamoring collection of objects. This connection between London and the Wilcoxes is made clear when Margaret says, "If 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."⁴⁰ Thus, the novel seems to suggest that London and the Wilcoxes have shaped and informed one another.

As successful London men, Henry and Charles are particularly fluent in the language of property and finance. They do not make any decisions without first considering an endeavor's viability toward some material success. This is keenly showcased in many conversations they have about Howards End. Expressing his frustration at Margaret and Helen's stay at the country house, Mr. Wilcox argues, "The house is mine—and, Charles, it will be yours—and when I say that no one is to live there, I mean that no one is to live there. I won't have it. . . . To my mind this question is connected with something far greater, the rights of property itself."⁴¹ In this conversation between Mr. Wilcox and Charles, Mr. Wilcox harps on his need for ownership and control of the house above all else. His strict commitment to traditional notions of property rights obscures his relationship to his wife and sister-in-law. Thus, rather than attempting to connect the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels in this scene, Mr.

³⁷ Forster, *Howards End*, 22.

³⁸ Forster, *Howards End*, 135.

³⁹ Forster, *Howards End*, 252.

⁴⁰ Forster, *Howards End*, 157.

⁴¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 297.

Wilcox's obsession with control causes him to forbid connection by placing more value in the tangible possession of Howards End than on relationships.

Mr. Wilcox is ill-equipped to encounter Howards End as a work of art. He cannot yield to Howards End because his being is distorted by impulses of control and obscured by the use of property. Thus, as Hattice Yurttas writes, "... the Wilcoxes represent vulgar capitalist-imperialist greed and blindness which goes along with their abstaining from literature and art."⁴² Caught up in the historical moment of modern technology and utility, the Wilcox men are unable to listen or make way for Howards End in conversation. For example, Margaret points at Mr. Wilcox's lack of compassion for Helen's request to stay at Howards End as she mockingly asks, "Will Helen's condition depreciate the property?" and later, "Tonight [Helen] asks to sleep in your empty house—a house which you do not care about, and which you have not occupied for over a year."⁴³ Mr. Wilcox cannot imagine anything outside of Howards End's usefulness as this is what the domination of calculation and practicality have taught. Under the reign of calculation, objects become separate from us and appear not as meaningful items in our world in relation with us, but as objects to be made useful. Without a perceived usefulness, such items appear to us as broken objects, good for nothing.

Perhaps this is precisely why Ruth Wilcox did not initially leave the house to her family as she knew they could not connect without trying to own. For example, when the Wilcox family discusses Ruth's note stating that Margaret should inherit the house, they feel betrayed and confused: "To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to her [Ruth] it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir."⁴⁴ Although Howards End holds family memories, the Wilcoxes are unable to understand how its beauty was so much more than decoration or pretty object for Ruth. Because Ruth experienced the house as sacred, she sought someone who could encounter it for all its life-saving, life-altering potential. The family's confusion in this scene stems from the tight reign of utility and technology, or what Heidegger calls calculative thinking that "races from one prospect to the next ... [it] never stops, never collects itself ... These forces ... everywhere and every minute claim, enchain, drag along, press and impose upon [us]."⁴⁵ The encompassing grasp of this dominating way of thinking hides and distorts the Wilcox family's ability to contemplate and reflect. It

⁴² Hattice Yurttas, "Class and Art in E. M. Forster's *Howards End*," *Language and Literature Studies* 18 (2018): 231.

⁴³ Forster, *Howards End*, 277–78.

⁴⁴ Forster, *Howards End*, 87.

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 46.

makes them believe the only way of relating to others, items, and the world is through objectification rather than meaningful connection.

The inability to step outside the realm of utility is further demonstrated when Charles says, "If Miss Schlegel had been poor, if she had wanted a house, I could understand it a little. But she has a house of her own. Why should she want another? She wouldn't have any use of *Howards End*."⁴⁶ Here, Charles (and the rest of the family in agreement) cannot begin to imagine *Howards End* outside of a house for someone who needs one. When Margaret does not fit this description, the family is utterly perplexed as to why Ruth would suggest such a thing. And in the midst of their mother's death, here lies another tragedy: The family's inability to understand *Howards End* outside of utility makes them incapable of understanding Ruth. In this same scene discussing their mother's note Forster writes, "it was contrary to the dead woman's intentions in the past, contrary to her very nature, so far as that nature was understood by them."⁴⁷ Although the family claims Ruth's leaving *Howards End* to Margaret is against her nature, Forster suggests this is not so. The phrase "so far as that nature was understood by them" suggests that if they had truly known their mother, they would have understood her decision. Thus, the family's confusion is less about Ruth acting out of character and more about the family's inability to connect with their mother, *Howards End*, and the relationship between the two. If the family truly wished to understand their mother and her decision, controlling *Howards End* and ignoring Ruth's wishes do not bring them closer to an understanding. Instead, they would do well to practice yielding to *Howards End* not as an object, but as a work of art as Ruth did. In this way, as Leslie White notes, "Art's immediate elusiveness and 'unintelligibility' paradoxically establish its abiding relevance, even (perhaps especially) to those who do not care about art at all."⁴⁸ In this, White demonstrates the Wilcoxes' inability to yield to *Howards End* as a work of art makes it even more painfully relevant both to their lives and to the plot. Had they been sensitive to the country house outside of its utility, perhaps they would have understood both their mother and her request a bit differently.

It seems that Ruth, Margaret, and Helen would agree with Gadamer that "the beautiful is something about which it is never appropriate to ask what it is 'for.'"⁴⁹ If one asks what *Howards End* is for, they have already extracted art from the realm of beauty and forced it into the realm of objects to be used and manipulated. For the

⁴⁶ Forster, *Howards End*, 88.

⁴⁷ Forster, *Howards End*, 87.

⁴⁸ Leslie White, "Vital Disconnection," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 51, no. 1 (2005): 49.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image," 203.

Wilcox men, *Howards End* is merely a country house. And after Ruth's passing, they do not know what to do with it besides treat it as profit-making rental property. For them, *Howards End* becomes simply a way to increase family wealth instead of a site where beauty ushers in the possibility of a more sensitive, connected life. And it is only Ruth and the Schlegel sisters, as Kaoru Urano notes, that maintain an "aesthetic sensibility" that attends to the "conceptual depth" and value of *Howards End*.⁵⁰ Their departure from the transactional, utilitarian approach of the Wilcox men allows them to embrace the contemplative, transformative pull of *Howards End*.

Words Toward the End

In asking what we might find in viewing *Howards End* as a work of art, we are better prepared to understand its magnetizing, intensifying pull on those who extend their hand. Rather than a country house property of bricks and mortar, when we view *Howards End* as a work of art, we see its unprecedented, sacred, and lifesaving qualities. For Ruth Wilcox, *Howards End* was holy and unlike anything she had known in its ability to give meaning to her life. By the end of the novel, for the Schlegel sisters *Howards End* has come to mean a future of possibility. In the final chapter Helen remarks, "I feel that our house is the future as well as the past."⁵¹ As a work of art, *Howards End* makes it possible to notice the movement of life. Because of this, the Schlegel sisters come to sense the past as well as the future while they are presently moving within the house. In other words, Margaret and Helen have the gift of reckoning with their life and making something of it. Viewing *Howards End* as a work of art invites us to reconsider our relationships with the beautiful and with others, encouraging a move beyond profit and utility. Through this lens, we find a profound call to connect, yield, and immerse ourselves in the transformative power of art.

⁵⁰ Kaoru Urano, "From the Country House to the Painting: An 'Aesthetic' Adaptation of *Howards End* in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*," *Textes et Contextes* 7, no. 1 (2012), <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=359>.

⁵¹ Forster, *Howards End*, 309.