NOSTALGIA (Sept 2022)

If sentimentality is about self-indulgence and wallowing in syrupy emotion for its own sake, where does that leave us with softly rose-tinted nostalgia? Good for art, or bad?

Nostalgia is hard to escape – as we advance in age it's tempting to think that what was our past, and our forebears' pasts, was rosier, less complicated, freer, in short, happier. Forgetting, of course, the appalling wipe-outs of the First and Second World Wars, the rigours of the Industrial Revolution, the dreadful quality of medical care in the past, plus all the harmful absurdities of education and religion…

Right now I'm wading through Marcel Proust in French – and, although he is searching for how to view family, friends and lovers from times gone by, there is little sentimentality as he subjects the past he has known and the social scene of the Belle Epoque, around the time of the Dreyfus Case and leading up to the First World War, to his forensic scrutiny. As I become steadily older, I wish to review some of my earlier readings dealing with nostalgic visions of the past, to see how I now view them.

This summer in Houdetot, watching our four little grandsons running, hiding and playing in the sun-drenched gardens that Vicki has so cleverly created over the last thirty years, I was reminded of the importance of nostalgic locations relating to childhood, particularly focusing on landscapes and gardens, with their Edenic connotations of innocence and experience. Gardens offer protection, but they also contain the wildness of nature, with plenty of hints of hidden savagery (cf Reggie Kray, our lovable cat). You can make dens, you are free to rampage or you can just conceal yourself and lurk unnoticed; you can team up or be solitary – and just be away from adults, for a while.

Let's start with "Burnt Norton" by TS Eliot. First published in 1936 and linked in some ways to "Murder In The Cathedral" which he was writing at the same time, it is bathed partly in memories of his summers at a house in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Would you like a very quick tour of that house first? Come on in, it's worth the visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYoAR7bkjoU ?

the 'Downs'
(East Gloucester, Massachusetts USA)

where Eliot spent his summers as a boy

These memories were triggered by Burnt Norton, a house in the Cotswolds that Tom (let's bring him down to size by calling him 'Tom', as our tutor, Hugh Sykes Davies, who knew him quite well, did with us undergraduates) discovered with Emily Hale. Recently opened letters have revealed just how intense their relationship became after he first revealed his love for her, so she said, way back in 1922. From 1935-39 they began spending summers together in Chipping Campden, in the Cotwolds (Gloucestershire UK) and it was after visiting the gardens there that Eliot began writing Burnt Norton, the first of his Four Quartets. In retrospect, his haunting memories of an American childhood are sharpened not a little by his love for Emily, while he was having to deal with Vivienne in a marriage which had so quickly soured.

Here is the evocative sounding Burnt Norton. And here is Tom reading the first section. You will I'm sure, if you're hearing him for the first time, be surprised at his clipped British-sounding utterance, far moved from what must surely have once been the drawl of the deep southern states, or possibly, at least, a twang of New England... When did he switch? Why?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XibDngCWfgQ

Burnt Norton

I

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose

Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.
Other echoes
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.
There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Here are my jotted notes as I listen to and reread this first of four movements, which, as part of a quartet, one should be (is?) aware of as some sort of musical 'orchestration'.

The first 5 lines are very unpoetic – more like some irrefutable philosophical proposition. The build-up of Latinate nouns ("contained", "unredeemable") make the tone heavy. Why do we have to accept this autocratic, pseudo-logical formulation? I find my hackles rising…

Then the tone lightens with "Footfalls echo in the memory…" Yet since we are told, paradoxically, that none of this really happened ("the passage we didn't take"…), a sense of mystery begins to build with this piling up of negatives. How can memory be involved in something which never happened?

Also, who is the persona addressing with "you" and "we"? Us readers? The scene, however, seems to be resolving into a romantic encounter (don't forget the symbolism of roses) – but what are we to make of the "unseen eyebeam crossed"? A childish, furtive romance?

The mysterious setting then becomes more negative ("empty alley", "drained", "dry") – but there is a build-up of suspense when "they (who are "they"?) were behind us, reflected in the pool".

If "they" refers to hidden children, then the "laughter" may be totally innocent, or it may be hurtful and mocking – as if "we" have been discovered together and the secret is out!

It is all left very ambiguous. The last 3 lines return us to the register of 'objective' philosophical statement – telling us *incontrovertibly* that the past and the future are contained in the present. At least, that is what the poem seems to be saying, but "point to one end" is surely rather paradoxical, because logically the present is not an "end" as such. Is it? Unlike the past and the future that are set in "time" ("time past and time future") the present is a more mysterious continuum that we cannot put our finger on. One cannot, in fact, "point to" or pin down the present – which is happening around me as I set down these words…!

So, what is it with the bird? These lines are often quoted but I doubt whether anyone can sensibly decide what this is really all about. Is the obscure reference to the "deception of the thrush" some hint about the rape of Philomela by Tereus? A warning about the dangers of sexual passion? The poem refuses to yield its mystery, to allow us in. The childhood images here – of secret discoveries in a garden hint at both innocence and danger – shared happiness and shared fear. But I'm irritated by this voice loftily *telling* us stuff but with no *real* disclosures.

This is, then, just the first movement. The whole poem in 4 movements becomes quite dense and philosophically abstract and oblique. Can love, time past and time future and the present ever be reconciled (*spoiler… they can't, or not easily using simple words!).* Here, however, is the beautiful (but still opaque) ending of Section IV and the end of the poem.

…..

The detail of the pattern is movement,
As in the figure of the ten stairs.
Desire itself is movement
Not in itself desirable;
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement,
Timeless, and undesiring
Except in the aspect of time
Caught in the form of limitation
Between un-being and being.
Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always -
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.

One of the science teachers at my school, 'Doc' Britten, an aloof, magisterial sort, once gave some of us senior English Lit students a talk in 1968 on how as a student in London during the War, he like many others queued up during the Blitz to get their copies of the Four Quartets as they first came out. The verses evidently resonated even amongst *scientists*! "Burnt Norton", however, unlike the other three, is clearly less influenced by wartime events because it came out before the war. I, like many others, find the Christian background of the Quartets far less interesting than the glorious instability Eliot's "The Wasteland", or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". There, Eliot's fragmented vision of fragmented European culture marched side by side with his own fragmented personal life with Vivienne, haunted a little, perhaps, by Emily Hale. For 'fragmented' read 'thoroughly fucked up', though scholarly discourse frowns on such bluntly Saxon terms.

There is, I think, a lot of nostalgia in "Burnt Norton", but for me it is heavily disguised under the veneer of this somewhat patronising, scholarly aloofness. Just listen to those vowel sounds again. *De haut en bas!* We are being talked *down* to, and the impetus for the poet's nostalgia is hidden deep in the undergrowth (along with Emily Hale?). The nostalgia is, in the end, tortuously private, lurking behind those lofty abstractions. Fascinating, but unshared…! And think, too, of 1936, the Berlin Olympics, Hitler's menace, the Abdication of Edward VIII – poetry doesn't have to deal with these important events, but if you are going to explore your psychic territory of gardens and childhood in a poem whose title is pushing us towards some sort of revelatory events – well, at least come clean about it. Stop beating about the bush, Tom!

* * * * * *

Sticking with the USA (is there more nostalgia with American writers, I wonder, than in buttoned-up British writing?), I want to switch to the beautiful prose of *The Great Gatsby* with its haunting theme of a lost past. "But of course you can repeat the past!" cries Gatsby, hoping to regain unreliable Daisy with his wealth and new prestige. Films, naturally, concentrate mainly on charismatic Jay Gatsby. "There was something gorgeous about Gatsby," says Nick, the narrator, and we, in turn are also partly seduced by the sheer magnitude of Gatsby's dream - his personality, his wealth and power, but also his uncertainty and his inner fragility.

The novel, however, is about much more than just Gatsby's dizzying, breath-taking rise (and fall) to stardom. For me it's about two Americas – 'old' money and 'new' money, the Midwest and the East, Chicago versus New York. There is a wonderful, but puzzling, list of names at one point – the names of people who came to Gatsby's famed parties. The list is divided into 'new money' - the West Eggers, where Gatsby's Normandy château ("Pretentious? Moi?! cf *Fawlty Towers*) can be found, and the 'old money' families of East Egg, which is where Nick finds Tom and Daisy Buchanan. A wide bay on Long Island separates these fictional localities of East Egg – the posher end which one assumes to be further from New York – and cheaper West Egg where Nick is residing near the Normandy château.

> *From East Egg, then, came the Chester Beckers and the Leeches and a man named Bunsen whom I knew at Yale and Doctor Webster Civet who was drowned last summer up in Maine. And the Hornbeams and the Willie Voltaires and a whole clan named Blackbuck who always gathered in a corner and flipped up their noses like goats at whosoever came near. And the Ismays and the*

Chrysties (or rather Hubert Auerbach and Mr. Chrystie's wife) and Edgar Beaver, whose hair they say turned cotton-white one winter afternoon for no good reason at all.

Clarence Endive was from East Egg, as I remember. He came only once, in white knickerbockers, and had a fight with a bum named Etty in the garden. From farther out on the Island came the Cheadles and the O. R. P. Schraeders and the Stonewall Jackson Abrams of Georgia and the Fishguards and the Ripley Snells. Snell was there three days before he went to the penitentiary, so drunk out on the gravel drive that Mrs. Ulysses Swett's automobile ran over his right hand. The Dancies came too and S. B. Whitebait, who was well over sixty, and Maurice A. Flink and the Hammerheads and Beluga the tobacco importer and Beluga's girls.

From West Egg came the Poles and the Mulreadys and Cecil Roebuck and Cecil Schoen and Gulick the state senator and Newton Orchid who controlled Films Par Excellence and Eckhaust and Clyde Cohen and Don S. Schwartze (the son) and Arthur McCarty, all connected with the movies in one way or another. And the Catlips and the Bembergs and G. Earl Muldoon, brother to that Muldoon who afterward strangled his wife. Da Fontano the promoter came there, and Ed Legros and James B. ("Rot-Gut") Ferret and the De Jongs and Ernest Lilly—they came to gamble and when Ferret wandered into the garden it meant he was cleaned out and Associated Traction would have to fluctuate profitably next day.

A man named Klipspringer was there so often and so long that he became known as "the boarder"—I doubt if he had any other home. Of theatrical people there were Gus Waize and Horace O'Donavan and Lester Meyer and George Duckweed and Francis Bull. Also from New York were the Chromes and the Backhyssons and the Dennickers and Russel Betty and the Corrigans and the Kellehers and the Dewars and the Scullys and S. W. Belcher and the Smirkes and the young Quinns, divorced now, and Henry L. Palmetto who killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square.

Benny McClenahan arrived always with four girls. They were never quite the same ones in physical person but they were so identical one with another that it inevitably seemed they had been there before. I have forgotten their names—Jaqueline, I think, or else Consuela or Gloria or Judy or June, and their last names were either the melodious names of flowers and months or the sterner ones of the great American capitalists whose cousins, if pressed, they would confess themselves to be.

In addition to all these I can remember that Faustina O'Brien came there at least once and the Baedeker girls and young Brewer who had his nose shot off in the war and Mr. Albrucksburger and Miss Haag, his fiancée, and Ardita Fitz-Peters, and Mr. P. Jewett, once head of the American Legion, and Miss Claudia Hip with a man reputed to be her chauffeur, and a prince of something whom we called Duke and whose name, if I ever knew it, I have forgotten.

All these people came to Gatsby's house in the summer.

This list is an astonishing intrusion into the smooth-running of the plot, and teaching Gatsby one is tempted to brush over it as it seems so pointless. But what I take from it is, first, the richly funny and dizzying numbers. And behind that, there is perhaps a subtle game being played out about American snobberies, for although West Egg is presented as socially different from East Egg, all the names, some of which are recognisably Jewish, are comically interchangeable, and perhaps this is the point. They *all* come to pay homage at the parties to Gatsby's wealth, whether the names represent old money or new. It's the smell of serious money that draws them all together!

Nick Carraway's family (old money apparently) are from the Midwest, as are the Buchanans. And interestingly, Gatsby himself - or Gatz, his real name (with a subtly Jewish ring to it?) - is not from the 'old' moneyed, established families of the Midwest. He can only make it socially and economically (just as Nick ironically is currently trying to do) by heading east and trying to make the easy 'new' money in "bonds" (as well as, in Gatsby's case, by bootlegging and "fixing the World Series" – in other words, out and out criminality).

F. Scott Fitzgerald's own family came from St Paul originally in the Midwest, and, following the money, his father moved the family eastward, but he eventually failed as a businessman and they all had to move back west. The precariousness of his own family's fortunes matches Gatsby's to some extent, and, when the Fitzgerald father's dream failed, his son's formative school years took place in the Midwest. So, here, for me, is one of the most interesting, and deeply nostalgic, passages in the novel in Ch.9:

> *One of my most vivid memories is of coming back west from prep school and later from college at Christmas time. Those who went farther than Chicago would gather in the old dim Union Station at six o'clock of a December evening with a few Chicago friends already caught up into their own holiday gaieties to bid them a hasty goodbye. I remember the fur coats of the girls returning from Miss This or That's and the chatter of frozen breath and the hands waving overhead as we caught sight of old acquaintances and the matchings of invitations: "Are you going to the Ordways'? the Herseys'? the Schultzes'?" and the long green tickets clasped tight in our gloved hands. And last the murky yellow cars of the Chicago Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad looking cheerful as Christmas itself on the tracks beside the gate.*
>
> *When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour before we melted indistinguishably into it again.*
>
> *That's my middle west—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns but the thrilling, returning trains of my youth and the streetlamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and*

> *Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.*
>
> *Even when the East excited me most, even when I was most keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old—even then it had always for me a quality of distortion. West Egg especially still figures in my more fantastic dreams. I see it as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house—the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares.*
>
> *After Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me like that, distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home.*

This is hauntingly evocative – Fitzgerald (as Carraway) at his best. But don't allow yourself to get too swept away by it. If you remember, one of the most disturbing images in the novel is an enormous billboard advertising Dr T.J. Eckleburg's spectacles; it dominates the scenery around the so-called "Valley of Ashes", part of the soulless suburbia outside New York. Nick Carraway, the novel suggests, may himself have a need for those "yellow glasses" because what he sees is not quite what he 'gets'. It is left for us readers, ourselves, to apply that "power of correction". Nick is, as nearly everyone else is, taken in by this "gorgeous" (his word) *fake*. Because in the end Gatsby *is* a fake and must be called out as such. His belief, "Why, you can't repeat the past? Of course you can." is as dangerously false as Trump's MAGA claims in our own age. The novel remains ambiguous, which is part of its power and its charm, but if you follow the logic of the enormous EYES, it unmistakably directs us towards recognising Gatsby for what he is. Myrtle Wilson was *run over* by Gatsby's car and he is central to the sordid cover-up. He, like the Buchanans, cannot be trusted.

So, how should we read the fabulously poetic and dewy-eyed ending – nostalgia at its height?

> *Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.*
>
> *And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close*

> *that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.*
>
> *Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning—*
>
> *So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

First, we have to remind ourselves that this is Nick Carraway speaking, our less than reliable narrator and someone who has entirely fallen for the spell of Gatsby, that archetypal weaver of dreams. The green light that shone above the moorings at East Egg represents the fantasy for Gatsby of attaining the past – a past in which he had once almost had the power to attain his romantic dream - of winning the beautiful but feckless Daisy. He couldn't manage it back then because Daisy lived and breathed in the end *only* for money – Gatsby even remarks, "Her voice is full of money". Romantics amongst us (like Nick in the novel) will want to believe that Gatsby's dream was ultimately worthwhile and forgivable, because it was a dream founded on and inspired by pure, disinterested *love*.

The novel, however, drives us to judge, *with our eyes*, a little more clearly. He tempted her with dirty money.

The deeply nostalgic line at the end: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." ***cannot*** therefore be taken at face value. It may well be that we also are haunted by our own pasts, but the novel itself is ***clear-eyed*** that we should not let ourselves be bamboozled in the process.

* * * * * * *

A British novel that is similarly interested in dissecting society and scrutinizing its power and its dreams in the rapidly shifting early years of the 20th century is *Howards End*.

Written in 1909, well before the First World War and well before Brexit, which it extra-ordinarily prefigures, it pits 3 discernible levels of society against each other. First up are the Schlegels (who in our day would doubtless be 'Remainers in Europe'). They are middle-class, socialist-leaning, bookish, cultured and Europhiles (of German descent) - liking German music, travelling abroad, open to new ideas about gender, women's involvement in the world generally, and on the side of imagination and sensitivity towards others.

They become involved with the Wilcoxes, who would now be our arch Brexiteers – business orientated, Empire enthusiasts, anglocentric, racist, class-conscious and utterly conservative in their ideas about society and the place of women. Finally, and in a more marginalised way, (they also live more on the margins economically) are the lower middle-class Basts. Leonard Bast may be a lower-class dreamer, attracted to the Schlegels, but the novel allows him and Jacky, his unmarried partner, whom he has rescued as a 'fallen woman'(and who has been tangled in a brief affair with Henry Wilcox) no place in this world.

For the novel poses the question: "Who will inherit England?" - and if you think about it, for its time, just before an utterly cataclysmic European war, there is a terrible weight, in

retrospect, when we think of this question (which still applies today!). Would it be capitalistic big business, the rigid class system, outmoded gender ideas, jingoism and the British Empire, or would more pan-European ideas prevail, based on greater distribution of wealth, greater equality, art, imagination and sympathy?

Howards End, the house, represents symbolically a vision of England. It just happens to be based on Forster's own house, where he grew up with his mother and this is where the nostalgia creeps in. Howards End 'belongs to' Mrs Wilcox, an ethereal, feminine presence (in this masculine Wilcox world), who dies early on, but whose spirit seems to control the fate of the house.

> *They were all silent. It was Mrs. Wilcox.*
>
> *She approached just as Helen's letter had described her, trailing noiselessly over the lawn, and there was actually a wisp of hay in her hands. 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 that she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow had descended upon her--that wisdom to which we give the clumsy name of aristocracy. High born she might not be. But assuredly she cared about her ancestors, and let them help her.*

First of all - its position. The novel sets Howards End presciently at a time before motoring has really taken off, but already we can see, with the Wilcoxes' fondness for cars, that the era of automobiles is coming, bringing with it huge alterations to the previously unconnected villages that make up rural Britain. Here is a rather simple Schlegel aunt travelling by train to HE.

> *The train sped northward, under innumerable tunnels. It was only an hour's journey, but Mrs. Munt had to raise and lower the window again and again. She passed through the South Welwyn Tunnel, saw light for a moment, and entered the North Welwyn Tunnel, of tragic fame. She traversed the immense viaduct, whose arches span untroubled meadows and the dreamy flow of Tewin Water. She skirted the parks of politicians. At times the Great North Road accompanied her, more suggestive of infinity than any railway, awakening, after a nap of a hundred years, to such life as is conferred by the stench of motor-cars, and to such culture as is implied by the advertisements of antibilious pills. To history, to tragedy, to the past, to the future, Mrs. Munt remained equally indifferent; hers but to concentrate on the end of her journey, and to rescue poor Helen from this dreadful mess.*
>
> *The station for Howards End was at Hilton, one of the large villages that are strung so frequently along the North Road, and that owe their size to the traffic of coaching and pre-coaching days. Being near London, it had not shared in the rural decay, and its long High Street had budded out right and left into residential estates. For about a mile a series of tiled and slated houses passed before Mrs. Munt's inattentive eyes, a series broken at one point by six Danish tumuli that stood shoulder to shoulder along the highroad, tombs of soldiers. Beyond these tumuli, habitations thickened, and the train came to a standstill in a tangle that was almost a town.*
>
> *The station, like the scenery, like Helen's letters, struck an indeterminate note. Into which country will it lead, England or Suburbia? It was*

> *new, it had island platforms and a subway, and the superficial comfort exacted by business men. But it held hints of local life, personal intercourse, as even Mrs. Munt was to discover.*

The house itself is not outstandingly beautiful nor an English stately home. In the novel, it's more of a glorified cottage based on Rooksnest, where Forster and his mother lived near Stevenage.

Rooksnest

Here is Helen Schlegel's description of Howards End in her letter that opens the novel:

> *It is old and little, and altogether delightful--red brick. We can scarcely pack in as it is, and the dear knows what will happen when Paul (younger son) arrives tomorrow. From hall you go right or left into dining-room or drawing-room. Hall itself is practically a room. You open another door in it, and there are the stairs going up in a sort of tunnel to the first-floor. Three bedrooms in a row there, and three attics in a row above. That isn't all the house really, but it's all that one notices--nine windows as you look up from the front garden.*
>
> *Then there's a very big wych-elm--to the left as you look up--leaning a little over the house, and standing on the boundary between the garden and meadow. I quite love that tree already. Also ordinary elms, oaks--no nastier than ordinary oaks--pear-trees, apple-trees, and a vine. No silver birches, though. However, I must get on to my host and hostess. I only wanted to show that it isn't the least what we expected. Why did we settle that their house would be all gables and wiggles, and their garden all gamboge-coloured paths? I believe simply because we associate them with expensive hotels--Mrs. Wilcox trailing in beautiful dresses down long corridors, Mr. Wilcox bullying porters, etc. We females are that unjust.*

Howards End is poised between the city and a still, in 1909, relatively untouched countryside. It used to be a farm and has a meadow and large garden. Henry Wilcox, the father, doesn't care for it at all, and cannot understand why his dead wife should have left a penciled message asking for it to be given to Margaret Schlegel, the elder sister, who had befriended her and who has, rather extraordinarily, now accepted to become Henry's new wife. This all

sounds complicated but is less so when reading the book. The question I'm more interested in right here, is how the nostalgia associated with this symbolically rich house is handled and to what ends. Here is Margaret's first visit to HE as she prepares to marry Henry. It is unpropitiously raining hard:

> *She hesitated. Ought she to wait for Henry? He felt strongly about property, and might prefer to show her over himself. On the other hand, he had told her to keep in the dry, and the porch was beginning to drip. So she went in, and the drought from inside slammed the door behind.*
>
> *Desolation greeted her. Dirty finger-prints were on the hall-windows, flue and rubbish on its unwashed boards. The civilization of luggage had been here for a month, and then decamped. Dining-room and drawing room--right and left--were guessed only by their wall-papers. They were just rooms where one could shelter from the rain. Across the ceiling of each ran a great beam. The dining-room and hall revealed theirs openly, but the drawing-room's was match-boarded--because the facts of life must be concealed from ladies? Drawing-room, dining-room, and hall--how petty the names sounded! Here were simply three rooms where children could play and friends shelter from the rain. Yes, and they were beautiful.*
>
> *Then she opened one of the doors opposite--there were two--and exchanged wall-papers for whitewash. It was the servants' part, though she scarcely realized that: just rooms again, where friends might shelter. The garden at the back was full of flowering cherries and plums. Farther on were hints of the meadow and a black cliff of pines. Yes, the meadow was beautiful.*

This is a very Schlegel perspective. Beauty, openness, shelter, welcoming friends – this is what is important in life.

To cut a long story short, the novel ends at HE with Margaret and her sister Helen, who now has an illegitimate baby. The child was fathered by poor Leonard Bast before he was killed by Charles Wilcox who ironically brought tons of books down on his head – the culture he had sought so earnestly fatally smothers him in the end! Margaret, along with the Schlegel vision of life – imaginative sympathy, (the novel's epigraph is "Only connect…"), liberal, egalitarian ideas – becomes the inheritor finally of Howards End (for which read, optimistically, England!). She achieves this through her marriage and her eventual hold over Henry, who was once so masculinely powerful and rich, but now entirely under her control. Her values, her sensitivity and also her gritty determination succeed over the masculine bluster and blather of the Wilcox world – think of Boris Johnson and his backward-looking, selfish, corrupted cronies and you are in Wilcox territory.

The Remainers have won! Hooray! We can all stay part of an enlightened, liberal and forward-looking Europe! Here are the very last pages:

> *There was a general silence. Dolly looked nervously round, fearing that she had been inappropriate. Paul continued to scratch his arm.*
>
> *"Then I leave Howards End to my wife absolutely," said Henry. "And let every one understand that; and after I am dead let there be no jealousy and no surprise."*
>
> *Margaret did not answer. There was something uncanny in her triumph. She, who had never expected to conquer anyone, had charged*

straight through these Wilcoxes and broken up their lives.

"In consequence, I leave my wife no money," said Henry. "That is her own wish. All that she would have had will be divided among you. I am also giving you a great deal in my lifetime, so that you may be independent of me. That is her wish, too. She also is giving away a great deal of money. She intends to diminish her income by half during the next ten years; she intends when she dies to leave the house to her--to her nephew, down in the field. Is all that clear? Does every one understand?"

Paul rose to his feet. He was accustomed to natives, and a very little shook him out of the Englishman. Feeling manly and cynical, he said: "Down in the field? Oh, come! I think we might have had the whole establishment, piccaninnies included."

Mrs. Cahill whispered: "Don't, Paul. You promised you'd take care." Feeling a woman of the world, she rose and prepared to take her leave.

Her father kissed her. "Good-bye, old girl," he said; "don't you worry about me. "

"Good-bye, Dad."

Then it was Dolly's turn. Anxious to contribute, she laughed nervously, and said: "Good-bye, Mr. Wilcox. It does seem curious that Mrs. Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she gets it, after all."

From Evie came a sharply-drawn breath. "Good-bye," she said to Margaret, and kissed her.

And again and again fell the word, like the ebb of a dying sea.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Dolly."

"So long, Father."

"Good-bye, my boy; always take care of yourself."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Wilcox."

"Good-bye.

Margaret saw their visitors to the gate. Then she returned to her husband and laid her head in his hands. He was pitiably tired. But Dolly's remark had interested her. At last she said: "Could you tell me, Henry, what was that about Mrs. Wilcox having left me Howards End?"

Tranquilly he replied: "Yes, she did. But that is a very old story. When she was ill and you were so kind to her she wanted to make you some return, and, not being herself at the time, scribbled 'Howards End' on a piece of paper. I went into it thoroughly, and, as it was clearly fanciful, I set it aside, little knowing what my Margaret would be to me in the future."

Margaret was silent. Something shook her life in its inmost recesses, and she shivered.

"I didn't do wrong, did I?" he asked, bending down.

"You didn't, darling. Nothing has been done wrong."

From the garden came laughter. "Here they are at last!" exclaimed Henry, disengaging himself with a smile. Helen rushed into the gloom, holding Tom by one hand and carrying her baby on the other. There were shouts of infectious joy.

"The field's cut!" Helen cried excitedly--"the big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!"

Well, of course, hay has to be read symbolically too (Mrs Wilcox trailed around with wisps of hay attached to her but all of the other Wilcoxes are allergic to hay) – it symbolizes perhaps Britain's rural past. It may seem like nostalgic romanticism, a harping back to glamourised visions of rural Britain, but for its time it is 'environmentally friendly', as we might put it nowadays. Overall, Howards End as a setting, though idealized perhaps, becomes the focus for a very pertinent examination (missing out the working classes, of course, but Forster didn't want to write about what he didn't know) of where England stood in social and global terms just before the First World War, which was to reshape so much in the world (including, of course, Gatsby's America). And the Schlegel/Wilcox war goes on today. Liz Truss would like nothing better than to see the BBC handed over to private interests. 'Levelling up' (Johnson's baby who was always going to be throttled somewhere down the line), is going out of the window now with soaring inflation, high interest rates, a cost of living crisis enhanced by Brexit, and low taxes around the corner which will help the better off but not the poorest who do not pay taxes – little help for them! And an NHS that is totally submerged… This is what you get after 10 years of Wilcox management of the country!

* * * * *

I can't finish this little foray into nostalgic locations without looking at that arch-nostalgia poem of Thomas Hood's that we were given to read (unthinkingly) at school - "I Remember, I Remember". *("It's poetry – so it's probably good for you to read and learn – test on Tuesday…")*

I Remember, I Remember

by Thomas Hood

I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn;
He never came a wink too soon,
Nor brought too long a day,
But now, I often wish the night
Had borne my breath away!

I remember, I remember,
The roses, red and white,
The vi'lets, and the lily-cups,
Those flowers made of light!
The lilacs where the robin built,
And where my brother set
The laburnum on his birthday,—
The tree is living yet!

I remember, I remember,
Where I was used to swing,
And thought the air must rush as fresh
To swallows on the wing;
My spirit flew in feathers then,
That is so heavy now,
And summer pools could hardly cool
The fever on my brow!

I remember, I remember,
The fir trees dark and high;
I used to think their slender tops
Were close against the sky:
It was a childish ignorance,
But now 'tis little joy
To know I'm farther off from heav'n
Than when I was a boy.

I would like to say something positive about it – because I don't think Hood wrote it maliciously – this must have been how he felt about it all, but it all ends up as such a gloopy, self-indulgent mess! What had he done that was so *bad* as an adult (*that* might be interesting!) – and are we really to believe he was such a little saint as a kid? Come on now!

So, as a nostalgia corrective, here is Philip Larkin in typically *anti*-nostalgia mood:

I Remember, I Remember

by Philip Larkin

Coming up England by a different line
For once, early in the cold new year,
We stopped, and, watching men with number plates
Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,
'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign
That this was still the town that had been 'mine'
So long, but found I wasn't even clear
Which side was which. From where those cycle—crates
Were standing, had we annually departed

For all those family hols? . . . A whistle went:
Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.
‘Was that,’ my friend smiled, 'where you “have your roots”?'
No, only where my childhood was unspent,
I wanted to retort, just where I started:

By now I’ve got the whole place clearly charted.
Our garden, first: where I did not invent
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
And wasn’t spoken to by an old hat.
And here we have that splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,
The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,
Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be
'Really myself’. I’ll show you, come to that,
The bracken where I never trembling sat,

Determined to go through with it; where she
Lay back, and 'all became a burning mist’.
And, in those offices, my doggerel
Was not set up in blunt ten—point, nor read
By a distinguished cousin of the mayor,

Who didn’t call and tell my father There
Before us, had we the gift to see ahead —
‘You look as though you wished the place in Hell,’
My friend said, ‘judging from your face.’ 'Oh well,
I suppose it’s not the place’s fault,' I said.

‘Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.’

I love that last line – and in terms of virtually unnoticed control in what seems like a very colloquial and informal register, do check out the clever use of rhymes that pick each other up like notes of carefully arranged music. The number plates is a puzzler. Coventry made cars – are these commuters carrying their car number plates with them? Help, please…?

So, what are we left with, after this somewhat idiosyncratic trawl through nostalgic locations and settings? I think *control* comes through as important. Nostalgia can open up floodgates of emotion. Eliot, for me, is too buttoned-up. A control freak, perhaps. He’s clever, undoubtedly, and there’s a lot there, but you feel he’s not going to let you walk around his garden without **him** showing you what he wants you to see – a*nd not see*. Fitzgerald and Forster run tight ships and the nostalgia is there for a purpose. Both want us to use nostalgia as a stepping-stone, or as a focus, to enlarge our understanding of the wider world. Both use symbols to show us things and let us *see* for ourselves.

Here, as an epilogue is DH Lawrence, who in his novels and particularly his short stories recreates his Nottinghamshire childhood world in such clearly observed scenes. In his prose he can be nostalgic about the past, in locations around Eastwood that are ambiguously poised between the mines and furnaces of the industrial world and the beautiful, natural countryside that is threatened by such activity. But Lawrence stays coolly critical, observing from the outside, even when, as in *Sons and Lovers* he is writing almost autobiographically. Read "Fanny and Annie" or "Odour of Chrysanthemums" for very sharply observed social situations, described sensitively and perceptively. The struggle is often between sensitive women and clumsy men tainted by industrialization. Yet here is clearsighted Lawrence, for once overcome with nostalgia big-time:

Piano

By D.H. Lawrence

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

This isn't mawkish in the way Hood's poem was. Lawrence is only too aware of the "insidious mastery" of music - the poem is very musically and rhythmically written in what is largely dactylic metre (based on a stressed followed by two unstressed syllables), which itself powerfully drives his gathering emotion in an unstoppable way. But he is somewhat uncharacteristically overcome by this sudden wave of nostalgia linked to his mother, who was really the driving force in the family as far as art and culture were concerned, though thwarted at nearly every step by his coalmining father as well as by their straitened economic and social circumstances.

The poem points out the *danger* of nostalgia – its potentially "insidious" force - for the poet is weakened by it, while it also suggests how hard life must have been if that memory, of such "cosy" Sunday evenings in the parlour, has such power over him still.

Here, below, are our inspiring grandsons…

…what will be high on their nostalgia scale later on and how will it impact their thoughts and attitudes?