

Days of Peculiar Splendour: *Howards End* and *The Sea, The Sea* in the Context of the Poetics of Summer House Fiction

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which E.M. Forster's 1910 novel, *Howards End*, and Iris Murdoch's 1978 novel, *The Sea, The Sea*, elaborate the constitutive elements of the poetics of summer house fiction. While reflecting major ecological, cultural, social and political concerns of their individual periods, these novels reverberate with timeless issues, including unfulfilled desire for the pastoral and the fruitless search for eternal summer with its promise of spiritual and physical regeneration if not rebirth. The thematic connection between the two works is intensified by their focus on the quest for authenticity, including compromises stemming from the inevitable failure of any idealised or definitive solution to the fundamental existential struggle. This endeavour is reflected in the circular character permeating all aspects of the novels, from imagery and motifs to the overall arrangement of the plot and its philosophical interpretation.

Keywords: summer house fiction, E.M. Forster, Iris Murdoch, country house, poetics of space, circularity

1. The Evolution of Country House Fiction

Now, Penshurst, they that will proportion thee // With other edifices, when they see // Those proud, ambitious heaps, and nothing else, // May say their lords have built, but thy lord dwells. (Ben Jonson, 'To Penshurst')

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the urge of urban dwellers to abandon life in the city for a few weeks in an unspoilt natural setting has been threatened by a commercialisation which has transformed all the truly beneficial outcomes of the change of scenery into a wide range of clichés and stereotypes. This temporary change of address has acquired the dimension of a socio-cultural phenomenon, deeply rooted within the defining characteristics of the middle class, and has given birth to a considerable amount of literary production rendering all the different forms of such a kind of dwelling.

The bucolic pastoral of the seventeenth-century country house poem, whose well known examples are Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" and Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House", vaguely associated with a temporary form of living arrangement, was renewed and transformed beyond recognition, but it also contributed to the development of what David Spurr describes in his *Architecture and Modern Literature* as "country house ideology", where the pastoral poems represented the houses which were already "representations of a mythic past" (Spurr, 2012, p. 23). In accordance with Louis Althusser's conception of ideology, David Spurr draws attention to the fact that a typical country house poem "is the representation of the imaginary relation between individuals and their real conditions of existence" (Spurr, 2012, p. 19). However, later he observes the resemblance between Althusser's concept of ideology and Walter Benjamin's conception of mythology. Thus the English country house poem nurtures and also represents country house ideology since it portrays an imaginary structure of relations between the estate, the patron, the tenants, the landscape, the poet and the social and political spheres. These relations obviously already existed but were transformed in order to fit into the artistic shape and the issuing ideology, which stipulated an orderly, hierarchical, centralised vision of the world. Consequently, today's perception of country houses is not only vaguely reminiscent of such an understanding, but also often either subverts or reverberates with a nostalgia-infused romantic longing for an orderly hierarchical division of the past. In his *A Country House Companion*, an anthology dedicated to the presentation of various aspects of life in country houses across the centuries, Mark Girouard claims that country-house life

has never been even remotely reminiscent of its idealised representation:

For although, in some moods and under some circumstances, they are magical places, country-house life was far from pure gold all the way through. There is a mythology of the English country house which runs something as follows. The English upper-classes, unlike their continental counterparts, have always been firmly rooted in their estates. They know the land, and enjoy its ways and sports. They look after their tenantry and their servants, and have an easy and natural relationship with working-class people. At the same time they have a sense of duty, which leads them to devote much of their lives to public service, with no thought of personal gain. (Girouard, 1987, p. 8)

This idealised perception may elucidate the enormous popularity of stately homes both as sights and as subjects of various artistic renditions, ranging from literary depictions to TV series and documentaries. The orderly notion of the country house has thus survived all perils (such as the treacherous attack Charles Dickens made in *Bleak House*) and managed to continue to represent settled relationships and mutual responsibility, as John Lucas observes in his study *The Sunlight on the Garden*, in which he explores the exclusive and elusive nature of pastoral England from the social and literary perspective of the period of Modernism. Beginning with the twentieth century, the country house has become, both as motif and setting, a rich object of continuous scrutiny, of questioning and rethinking and consequently it has been reinvigorated.

The twentieth and twenty-first century depiction of the country house in fiction embraces the results of the necessary reassessment of its function. Great country houses of the past had been tied to the aristocracy, which, especially from the period after the end of the Second World War till the 1970s, lost most of its political and economic power and therefore a great deal of public hostility. No longer the subject of possible public criticism and suspicion, the aristocracy began to systematically exploit its possessions—many houses and artworks were either sold, transformed, or opened to the public. Thus the aristocracy's estates acquired a new role in society and became emblems of a new social and economic order, no longer serving only as idealised representations of their owners and their social class. Accordingly, their fictional forms are bought and sold, often to foreigners whose buying power exceeds aristocratic exclusivity or expunges the crimes of the past, such as the case of Darlington Hall in Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 novel, *The Remains of the Day*, or transformed into schools, hotels, museums and monuments as in the case of Ishiguro's 2005 dystopia, *Never Let Me Go*, Alan Hollinghurst's 2011 novel, *The Stranger's Child* or Ian McEwan's 2001 novel, *Atonement*. Some of the stately homes have become desolate, hollow shells kept for the sake of appearance as in the case of the Narborough estate described so memorably in Will Self's 2002 novel *Dorian, an Imitation*. Sometimes, readers may catch a glimpse of life in the past as seen through the prism of historical novels or novels which offer a playful twist on the depiction of a particular period, very often the period before or after the Great War as in the case of the earlier mentioned *The Stranger's Child* or Sadie Jones's dreamlike 2012 novel, *The Uninvited Guests*. This development may be understood as a result of the supposed "degeneration" of the country house novel described by Raymond Williams in his seminal work *The Country and the City*. There he describes "these incidentally surviving and converted houses" (Williams, 1993, p. 249) and also the outcome of the process which sought new employment for spaces which, stripped of their original significance and function, became suddenly unsustainable and thus could only survive through a transformation into public spectacle: "Growing numbers of owners declared 'open house' and sought to profit from a gentle resurgence of popular interest in history of all kinds" (Mandler, 1997, p. 5).

Raymond Williams described the middle-class detective story as the only possible and plausible future for the country house novel as these places gather together a heterogeneous group of people whose relationships lie at the core of a detective story. The twentieth-century country house became a place entangled within a set of complicated relations, which led to a reduction of its importance and vitality and, according to Williams, it has been transformed, both in reality and in fiction, into an indifferent setting for a public school, museum, hotel, or secret police headquarters: "It is not a sad end; it is a fitting end. The essential features were always there, and much of the history that changed them came out of them, in their original and continuing domination and alienation" (Williams, 1993, p. 250). This persuasion is echoed by Stevens, the embodiment of a perfect butler and the unreliable narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 novel, *The Remains of the Day*: "[...] although we did not see a great deal of the country in the sense of touring the countryside and visiting picturesque sites, we did actually 'see' more of England than most, placed as we were in houses where the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land gathered" (*The Remains of the Day*, p. 4). There were attempts to restore the former dignity and grandeur of the English country house, for example in the novels of Evelyn Waugh, and in his nostalgic novel *Brideshead Revisited* in particular, which frequently revive the period before "the arrival of barbarians" (Stone, 1996, p. 183) but which also depict the desolation of the transformation of these former seats of power, elegance

and balance into lunatic asylums and military camps, as well as their inevitable absorption by the insatiable suburbs.

Both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries produced country house fiction whose setting is not restricted to stately homes. The former social exclusivity was gradually dissolved with the absorption of ancient farmhouses, cottages and villas into the tradition. As John Lucas states in connection with E.M. Forster's 1910 novel, *Howards End*:

Howards End is not a great country house. It is scaled down to a far more modest size than those houses that had been celebrated by Jonson, Carew, Marvell, Pope and others; but its naturalness echoes theirs, the implication that it was built with no man's ruin, no man's groan. (Lucas, 1996, p. 69)

Besides the relatively rich variety of transformations of stately homes, which more or less radically subvert the remnants of the seventeenth-century "country house ideology", their diminutive versions, such as converted old farmhouses, cottages or inland and seaside villas, develop traits of the eighteenth-century "villa ideology". In this, as David Spurr observes, the emphasis is put on "creating an architectural counterpart to enlightenment human understanding" (Spurr, 2012, p. 24), so the houses in question reflect neoclassical principles of reason, clarity, and symmetry, rather than mirroring the position of their masters within the social hierarchy. However, the pivotal point of this ideology is the suburban setting of these villas, since it positions them in a neutral zone which is far from the town and court as well as detached from the rural idyll of the countryside. Consequently, the eighteenth-century villas transformed the conception of suburbia into a liminal region full of social, political and artistic potential on the one hand, yet providing its inhabitants with relative independence from the ancient dichotomy of the country versus the city on the other hand.

2. Unique Temporality

Despite the considerable diversification the model country house underwent from the beginning of the twentieth century, which may be seen partly as a result of the growing democratic aspirations of the period, there is one aspect that did not suffer any radical transformation and that is the temporal arrangement in which these houses exist. Both real and fictional country houses have always been marked with some form of specific temporality, be it temporariness or a firm rootedness in the past that connects the resulting literary portrayal with pastoral aspirations firmly linked with timelessness. As David Spurr claims with regards to Ben Jonson's ode "To Penshurst": "the ideology of the country house is shown to consist of a double-layered representation: the poem represents the house, which is already a representation of a mythic past" (Spurr, 2012, p. 23).

Linear, chronological time is thus either dissected by the temporariness of the residence (especially in the case of rented houses or houses with a restricted period of habitability) or invaded by the more or less subtle pull of the past. The extent of the timelessness depends on the level of absorption of the country house-associated ideology. A temporal linearity is also threatened when ecological worries indicate its possible interruption. It was E.M. Forster who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, voiced the concerns of both his predecessors and contemporaries, such as D.H. Lawrence, and highlighted the threat of potential ecological catastrophe ensuing from the complete appropriation of the land by the "red rust" of technological civilisation.

2.1 *Summer in the Country House*

The books on the low shelves were mostly summer reading you find in rented houses, books suited to the role, with faded jacket illustrations of other houses in other summers, or almanacs, or atlases, a sun stripe edging the tops of the taller books. (*The Body Artist*, p. 46)

'And summer's lease hath all too short a date.' (Shakespeare, *Sonnet 18*)

Another aspect of country house fiction restricts its action to the period of summer, with the majority of country house fiction taking place during the lustrous days of that season, during "days of peculiar splendour" (*Brideshead Revisited*, p. 23), which often reflects the actual situation of people residing temporarily in the countryside. The resulting poetics tends to define what may be identified as "summer-house fiction", a sub-genre which is thematically relatively uniform, but whose popularity is fuelled by the possibility of readers identifying with the situation of a restricted period of time spent in a place quite remote from their everyday reality. Summer, with its languid days and morality, all its promises of retreat, renewal and respite on the one hand, and splendour, rapture and intensity on the other, has inspired many novels and novellas crafted around the element of the country house. This specific form of residence is not reserved for literature only and authors in nations with a coastline frequently choose to buy or rent summer houses by the sea and thus replenish their inspiration (Note 1).

Thus, the poetics which Albert Camus ascribes to "the House above the World" from his novel *A Happy Death*,

which he wrote in the 1930s but which was published posthumously in 1971, adumbrates the major elements of subsequent works by him and others. The house is situated in Algiers, on the top of a hill overlooking the sea, drowned in flowers, bathed in sun, intoxicating its inhabitants with air and light

[...] the House above the World trained its huge bay windows on a carnival of colours and lights, day and night. But in the distance, a line of high purple mountains joined the bay and its extreme slope and contained this intoxication within its far contour. Here no one complained of the steep path or of exhaustion. Everyone had his joy to conquer, every day. Living above the world, each discovering his own weight, seeing his face brighten and darken with the day, the night, each of the four inhabitants of the house was aware of a presence that was at once a judge and a justification among them. The world, here, became a personage [...]. (*A Happy Death*, pp. 33-34)

However, the purity of the air and the sheer openness of the space and scorching sunlight are achieved at the expense of human sacrifice. Patrice Mersault, the main protagonist, kills a dying rich man because he believes he is entitled to happiness. As a result, the idyllic seaside villa is stricken because of his absence of guilt and conspicuous lack of remorse. The beauty of the idyllic setting is poisoned by the price at which it was achieved and the sharp contrast between Patrice's vitality and ravenous grasp of opportunity and the putrid effect of his fatal illness (Patrice contracts tuberculosis and dies) emphasise the existential struggle at the heart of the story.

Many novels continue in a similar pattern and are far from being pastoral idylls as the summer retreats they depict reinterpret the idyll, or defy it, and the intensity of their rejections varies from parody and mock pastoral to the Gothic. Seen from this perspective, Iris Murdoch's twentieth novel, *The Sea, The Sea*, her only novel to win the Booker Prize, adds unexpected twists to its otherwise traditional narrative of retreat, with its related themes.

The country house in its summer form, both as theme and setting, has been revisited by a number of contemporary novels in English. The American novelist Don DeLillo performs a dissection of an abnormal process of grieving in his 2001 novel *The Body Artist*, set in a rented house on the New England Coast. The year 2014 witnessed the emergence of numerous novels reviving interest in the complexity of a seemingly pastoral setting, such as the thriller *Summer House with Swimming Pool* by Herman Koch, *The Lemon Grove* by Helen Walsh, in which the beauties of nature unleash elemental desires, Emma Straub's *The Vacationers*, featuring a Mediterranean retreat in Mallorca, and *The Arsonist* by Sue Miller, set in New Hampshire. One aspect all these literary works share is a certain form of exclusivity arising from the economic superiority of the middle-class protagonists. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, summer houses, country houses, as well as the countryside itself have decisively become expressions of a yearning for the pastoral which is closely associated with, if not reserved to, the middle class (Note 2).

3. Defining Dichotomies

To speak against London is no longer fashionable. The earth as an artistic cult has had its day, and the literature of the near future will probably ignore the country and seek inspiration from the town. One can understand the reaction. Of Pan and the elemental forces the public has heard a little too much—they seem Victorian, while London is Georgian—and those who care for the earth with sincerity may wait long ere the pendulum swings back to her again. Certainly London fascinates. One visualizes it as a tract of quivering gray; intelligent without purpose, and excitable without love; as a heart that certainly beats, but with no pulsation of humanity. It lies beyond everything: Nature, with all its cruelty, comes nearer to us than do these crowds of men. (*Howards End*, p. 93)

'[...] there is nothing to get up for in London.' (*Howards End*, p. 59)

Charles Arrowby, the main character of Iris Murdoch's novel *The Sea, the Sea*, nearly fails to complete his mission of learning to be good, which he wants to achieve through his reclusive existence in a seaside villa in the North of England. Ever distracted by inquisitive visitors: "The house was curiously weirdly silent. I realized that for a long time now I had not been alone in it. What a lot of visitors I had had" (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 443), his effort is perpetually endangered by his twisted longings e.g. his lusting after his childhood sweetheart Hartley, or by disruptions imposed by the ghostly house, Shruff End, itself.

It is not that I find Shruff End in any way 'creepy'. It is just that, as it now suddenly occurs to me, this is the first time in my life that I have been really alone at night. My childhood home, theatrical digs in the provinces, London flats, hotels, rented apartments in capital cities: I have always lived in hives, surrounded by human presence behind walls. [...] This is the first house which I have owned and the first genuine solitude which I have inhabited. Is this not what I wanted? (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 20)

The sought-after solitude proves to be less desirable than he had imagined and the series of distractions thus fittingly fills the vexing void: it is not until he is tucked away safely in James's London flat that Charles finally approximates his original intention. The country proves to be "the least peaceful and private place to live. The most peaceful and secluded place in the world is a flat in Kensington" (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 111). It is paradoxically the anonymity of the city which enables "the scattering anonymous feeling of returning into oneself" (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 168).

E.M. Forster's creation was shaped by an alternation of opposing motifs (Note 3) and the country versus city dichotomy may be regarded as one of the principal elements. Especially in the case of *Howards End*, the motifs of connection versus detachment, the masculinity versus the femininity of the Schlegel sisters, only anticipate another duality present in the novel and that is the country as opposed to the city. Forster's position in this duality is self-evident; he had already established himself as an author of organic imagery and his earlier stories and novels are yearnings for an unobstructed view, with *Howards End* representing a decisive nod in this direction. Motorcars and hurrying men with their luggage bring flux and an inevitable impoverishment of the spiritual, aesthetic and ethical dimensions of human life. Cities are perceived as centres of the secular and the materialistic, as Wilfred Stone points out, echoing Lewis Mumford, "the city is a form of death" (Stone, 1966, p. 260). The countryside, on the other hand, is idealised to the point of hagiography.

The process of glamorising and fictionalising the dichotomy between the country and the city, and London in particular, has inspired a number of studies and has become one of the leading concerns of contemporary literary criticism and studies. Petr Chalupský, for example, examines literary portrayals of London and elaborates the diversity and versatility of the urban milieu. According to his numerous articles on the topic, contemporary British authors such as Penelope Lively and Peter Ackroyd depict London as a city defying definitiveness in all respects, since it exists in mutations of reality and various degrees of fictionality and, moreover, it utterly suspends chronological time: "The various forms of time coexist here—the city becomes a phenomenon beyond the chronological understanding of time where the past, present and future perpetually collide and mingle" (Chalupský, 2009, p. 15). Ackroyd's vision of London in particular becomes a highly specific form of Bakhtin's chronotope, a meticulously crafted whole in which, with time transforming into the fourth dimension of space, space and time merge into an inherently inseparable form.

Thus in London, according to Ackroyd, "events and actions reduplicate, echo and reinforce one another in recurrent cyclical or spiral patterns, their occurrence to a large extent controlled by the energies of the places where they happen rather than merely by chronological successiveness. (Chalupský, 2013, p. 19)

Forster's and Murdoch's visions of the countryside and the particular spaces they depict—Howards End and Shruff End, bear traces of a similar spatiotemporal arrangement, although in less exaggerated form. *The Sea, The Sea* does not provide the readers with any substantial information concerning the history of Shruff End, apart from references to the poltergeist and its haunted character, and the cyclical temporal arrangement revolves mainly around Charles's adherence to daily routines and the employment of prevalently circular imagery. In the case of *Howards End*, which also features appearances of a ghost, the source of the cyclical temporal patterning is, apart from the overall composition of the plot and the structural arrangement of repeating motifs, due to the close resemblance between Ruth Wilcox and Margaret Wilcox, née Schlegel:

It is the starved imagination, not the well-nourished, that is afraid. Margaret flung open the door to the stairs. A noise as of drums seemed to deafen her. A woman, an old woman, was descending with figure erect, with face impassive, with lips that parted and said dryly:

'Oh! Well, I took you for Ruth Wilcox.'

Margaret stammered: 'I – Mrs Wilcox – I?'

'In fancy, of course—in fancy. You fancy. You had her way of walking. Good day.' (*Howards End*, p. 172)

Consequently, the defining dichotomy between the country and the city is employed in both cases, but both cases manifest its unforeseen aspects. *Howards End* emphasises the fragility of the undisturbed countryside while hinting at the possible ecological threat to it while *The Sea, The Sea* challenges the myth of spiritual awakening in nature.

All the houses in question display an array of various contradictory dualities, they scare and soothe, they inspire and exhaust, they shelter and expose, they attract and deter, they welcome and reject, they tie and provide various forms of release: "The house, the sea-planet outside it, and how the word alone referred to her and to the

house and how the word sea reinforced the idea of solitude but suggested a vigorous release as well, a means of escape from the book-walled limit of the self" (*The Body Artist*, p. 49).

4. Exaggerated Circularity

I repeat images of full roundness help us to collect ourselves, permit us to confer an initial constitution on ourselves, and to confirm our being intimately, inside. For when it is experienced from the inside, devoid of all exterior features, being cannot be otherwise than round. (Bachelard, 1994, p. 234)

The temporal character of summer house poetics further increases their idiosyncratic character. In the case of rented summer houses the time elapsed is delimited by the lease or period. Time and its specific treatment may be regarded as the chief constituents of the poetics of summer houses. Generally speaking, time seems to pass differently in these places, following its own patterns, e.g. a mourning wife stepping into a different atmosphere induced by the spirit of the dead husband: "She was happy in a way, in many ways, folded in hope, having the house to come back to after long mornings rambling in stands of jack pine and spruce [...] knowing she would mount the stairs, touching the top of the newel at the landing, and walk down the hall into his time" (*The Body Artist*, p. 121) or Margaret Schlegel recapturing the sense of space within the walls of Howards End: "She must have interviewed Charles in another world –where one did have interviews" (*Howards End*, p. 171), but the common denominator is its exaggerated circularity. *Howards End*, which acquires the character of permanent residence only at the end of the novel, opens and closes with a parallel image of Ruth Wilcox and later the Schlegel sisters revelling in the sight of cut grass "The big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!" (*Howards End*, p. 293), relishing its smell, with the rest of the Wilcox clan taking shelter inside the house to shield their hay-fever-prone selves from the effects of the grass. The degree of fatality involved in the novel, where "[...] it does seem curious that Mrs Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she get it, after all" (*Howards End*, p. 292), only enhances the circular character of the work where time seems to follow a cyclical trajectory, connecting the present, the past and the future in a spherical continuum verging on the temporal arrangement of a myth: "All signs are against it now, but I can't help hoping, and very early in the morning in the garden I feel that our house is the future as well as the past" (*Howards End*, p. 290).

From the perspective of an idiosyncratic passing of time, Shruff End in *The Sea, The Sea* embraces a similar pattern to that presented in *Howards End*: "It was not exactly a sinister or menacing effect, but as if the house were a sensitized plate which intermittently registered things which had happened in the past—or it now occurred to me for the first time, were going to happen in the future" (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 227). Besides the temporal arrangement, circularity permeates numerous other aspects of the novels in question. Thematically, Margaret Schlegel's motto "Only connect!" invokes circularity as well.

Similarly, the striking density of circular motifs and the circular nature of the majority of the leitmotifs concerning the house and the sea in Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea* reinforce the final impression of firm interconnectedness. Thus the movements of the sea, Charles Arrowby's preference for daily routines, be it swimming, eating or shopping, and the close attention the narration pays to minute descriptions of meals he prepares, all repeatedly refer to the cyclical effect of such actions and thus refer to the geometrical nature of a circle which, while completely separating the inside from the outside, is first and foremost a closed curve. Its unique properties, apart from having triggered a great deal of technological progress, inspired its adoption as an emblem of perfection and, consequently, of divinity. The ensó, mandala and halo are therefore expressions of various religions sharing a belief in the circle as the symbol of ultimate perfection and unity.

The Sea, The Sea brings the notion of circularity to an overwhelming new level of complexity. Besides the Buddhist agenda incarnated by James, Charles's cousin, and the depiction of the failed attempts of Charles Arrowby to access wisdom and spiritual connection in any form, the novel also offers an intricate, yet highly overt intertextual commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Both Prospero and Charles Arrowby are men of the world, trapped and alienated in and by the natural world, and may be called magicians, directors of dramas which they stage through the sheer force of their manipulation. Reflecting the form of the island where Prospero performs his version of pandemonium, circularity penetrates all aspects, layers and interpretations of *The Sea The Sea* and thus may be regarded as the key element of the overall poetics of the novel.

When it comes to Shruff End, its circular properties do not apply to its peculiar atmosphere only but also extend to its physical properties. The arrangement of the house features a striking number of windowless spaces, be it various oblong spaces on the landings of the stairs or two windowless inner rooms:

The chief peculiarity of the house, and one for which I can produce no rational explanation, is that on the ground floor and on the first floor there is an inner room. By this I mean that there is, between the front room and the back room, a room which has no external window, but is lit by an internal window giving onto the adjacent seaward room (the drawing room upstairs, the kitchen downstairs). These two funny inner rooms are extremely dark, and entirely empty, except for a large sagging sofa in the downstairs one, and a small table in the upstairs one, where there is also a remarkable decorative cast-iron lamp bracket, the only one in the house. (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 16)

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard ascribes primal importance to the study of intimate places, scrutinising the spatial properties of houses and the nooks and corners within. He views all these as being reminiscent of nests and shells, which are understood “as primal images; images that bring out the primitiveness in us” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 91). These peculiar places may be perceived as the focal points of all the emotional involvement of humans in spatial practices. Seen from this perspective, Charles Arrowby’s attempts to colonise Shruff End, as well as his peculiar fondness for the two inner rooms, may be understood as demonstrations of his willingness to compose himself, to retreat, to withdraw into himself, protected against the world: “[...] every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 136).

Besides these inner, nuclear rooms positioned in the centre of the house, there, amongst the scarce furnishings of Shruff End, a collection of puzzling objects is to be found, such as lamp brackets, vases, mirrors, stones of different sizes, all of them possessing a certain degree of circularity, being oval, round, elliptical or spherical, all of them further enhancing the haunting air of the house:

I am very conscious of the house existing quietly round about me. Parts of it I have colonised, other parts remain obstinately alien and dim. The entrance hall is dark and pointless, except for the presence of the large oval mirror aforementioned. (This handsome object seems to glow with its own light). (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 19)

The elliptical is not restricted to the inside only, but spills into the arrangement of Charles’s ‘rockery’ with its various pools: “I also picked up a number of pretty stones and carried them to my other lawn. They are smooth, elliptical, lovely to handle” (*The Sea, The Sea*, pp. 7-8). Circularity extends from collecting, observing and marvelling at round objects of various sizes to the presence of the rocky hole which, viewed from the bridge, affords the curious pleasure of observing waves: “as they rushed into that deep and mysteriously smooth round hole, destroy themselves in a boiling fury of opposing waters and frenzied creaming foam” (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 261) and culminates in the inclusion of a tower in the repertoire: “Yes, I am now the owner not only of a house and a lot of rocks, but of a ruined ‘martello’ tower!” (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 6).

The accumulation of circular imagery is reinforced by the gradual intensification of the circularity of the various activities Charles performs. The growing urgency with which he clings to routines, defying both self-inflicted and visitor-induced disturbances, reaches its climax with his final gyration into the destructive spiral of obsession:

The next day I was like a madman. I rambled, almost ran, round the house, round the lawn, over the rocks, over the causeway, up to the tower. I ran about like a frenzied animal in a cage which batters itself painfully against the bars, executing the same pitiful leaps and turns again and again. (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 215)

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard highlighted the role of images of roundness, both marking their simplicity, verging on the primitive, and revelling in their completeness. The round or circular character of images is marked and valued as the source of hypnotic powers:

These images blot out the world, and they have no past. They do not stem from any earlier experience. We can be quite sure that they are metapsychological. They give us a lesson in solitude. For a brief instant we must take them for ourselves alone. If we take them in their suddenness, we realize that we think of nothing else, that we are entirely in the being of this expression. If we submit to the hypnotic power of such expressions, suddenly we find ourselves entirely in the roundness of this being, we live in the roundness of life [...]. (Bachelard, 1994, p. 233)

Seen from this perspective the actions and images accumulated in the depiction of Charles’s endeavour to learn how to be good may be regarded as utterly beneficial, if not from Charles’s perspective, then from the reader’s.

5. “The World Must Be Peopled” (*Much Ado about Nothing*, Act 2, Scene 3)

We don't know what we are like. We can't know what other people are like. How, then, can we put any trust in personal relationships, or cling to them in the gathering political storm? In theory we cannot. But in practice we can and do. Though A is not unchangeably A or B unchangeably B, there can still be love and loyalty between the two. For the purpose of living one has to assume that the personality is solid, and the 'self' is an entity, and to ignore all contrary evidence. And since to ignore evidence is one of the characteristics of faith, I certainly can proclaim that I believe in personal relationships. (*Two Cheers*, 1965, p. 76)

E. M. Forster fills his works with characters striving for connection as well as with pastoral images and he repeatedly refers to threats and violations of nature imposed by man's far-reaching involvement. An example of this is the 'red rust' of civilisation invading the beauty of the meadows surrounding Howards End. His pleas and warnings against the perils of industrialisation is the "voicing of a personal fear and grief—the heartbreak and outrage of one who sees his private estate invaded by the barbarians—and only incidentally a moral argument for the health and welfare of the planet" (Stone, 1996, p. 183). Although throughout his work Forster expresses an inclination towards the natural world, his enthusiastic embrace, which highlights its liberating properties, is gradually replaced by a scepticism concerning its future and also by a far more selective choice as far as the stability of the objects of his admiration is concerned. In the majority of his fiction (Note 4), longer or shorter, he enthusiastically endows 'the outside' with liberating properties reminiscent of pagan identification with the land or with Romantic preoccupations with solitude. But this land gets progressively deprived of its liberating potential, as he remarked on the subject in 1951:

We cannot escape any more to the sands or the waves and pretend they are our destiny. We have annihilated time and space, we have furrowed the desert and spanned the sea, only to find at the end of every vista our own unattractive features. What remains for us, whither shall we return? (*Two Cheers*, 1965, p. 273)

Consequently, he embraces the approach already introduced in the short story 'The Machine Stops': "For a moment they saw the nations of the dead, and, before they joined them, scraps of untainted sky" (*Collected Short Stories*, p. 146) and that is an inclination towards unattainable, uninhabited skies, stars and planets: "For some of us who are non-Christian there still remains the comfort of the non-human, the relief, when we look up at the stars, of realizing that they are uninhabitable. But not there for any of us lies our work or our home" (*Two Cheers*, 1965, p. 274). It is nevertheless the craving for the unspoiled, the unmarked, the 'inviolable' which is "at the heart of Forster's religion, [...] even at the expense of social justice, in a world being overrun" (Stone, 1996, p. 179). However, Forster subverts his antisocial cravings for 'unpeopled' spaces and an unobstructed view through his faith in what is good in people and that is "their insistence on creation, their belief in friendship and loyalty for their own sakes" (*Two Cheers*, 1965, p. 80), despite describing violence as the major factor in people's muddled relations.

The Schlegel sisters desperately and disparately strive for connection on the one hand and a view on the other hand in *Howards End*. Since they try to unite such opposing tendencies, they tend to crush those who stand in their way with what they honestly believe to be good intentions. The ruined lives of both Leonard Bast and Henry Wilcox are shining examples of the Schlegels' 'successful' attempts at connection and universal goodness. Similarly, Charles Arrowby's hermit trial seems to be replete with good intentions and challenges that in the end turn out to be unattainable. Still, the conclusion proves to be highly instructive. In her monograph entitled *Human Relationships in the Novels of Iris Murdoch*, Milada Franková claims that the novel explores the rivalry and love between two figures incarnating two philosophical and aesthetic principles—the artist and the saint. The role of the artist is obviously assumed by the retired Shakespearean director Charles Arrowby, the narrator of the story, who besides attempting to become a selfless person also tries to produce a piece of writing in an unspecific form - he cannot decide between journal/philosophical diary and novel. "Charles's wanting to be good after his London life of power and ego may have been inspired by James, his cousin and the saint-figure in the novel." (Franková, 1995, p. 37) Unlike Charles, James is capable of finally renouncing his life and stopping his heart from beating, by doing which he fulfils the Buddhist maxim that requires the ultimate destruction of ego, which corresponds with 'achieving fulfilment in death'. Charles is unfit for such a leap of faith but what he attains is by no means less valuable. He finally acknowledges the impossibility of attaining any finality in life, any conclusions or ultimate solutions. Life, unlike art, is where it is impossible to achieve shape and unity:

[...] life has an irritating way of bumping and limping on, undoing conversions, casting doubt on solutions, and generally illustrating the impossibility of living happily or virtuously ever after.

[...]Then I felt too that I might take this opportunity to tie up a few loose ends, only of course loose ends can never be properly tied, one is always producing new ones. Time, like the sea, unties all knots. (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 512).

The impossibility of reaching definite conclusions could also be seen as the summary of numerous novels written by Iris Murdoch: “[...] there is no finality to Murdoch’s endings, they dissolve into a vagueness suggestive of the ever recurring cycle of life, of human relationships being so similar and yet so different, of everything repeating itself but never quite in the same way” (Franková, 1995, p. 78). Charles Arrowby and his story both incarnate and voice the eternal question concerning the possibility of changing oneself. Once again, his conclusion may be seen both as hypocritical self-delusion or honest revelation. A person cannot change and, if this is so, gone are the theatrical aspirations to a fundamental spiritual rebirth. The only attainable route is one where a person lives quietly, harming no one and ‘doing little good things,’ however, even those good things are not likely to occur frequently: “I cannot think of any good thing to do at the moment, but perhaps I shall think of one tomorrow” (*The Sea, The Sea*, p. 537).

Similarly to the continuous rotation of one round motif around another, the circular orbits of the two novels, *The Sea, The Sea* and *Howards End*, meet, echo and at times intersect. They both treat the theme of attempting to attain an ideal, the outcome of which seems to be doomed to failure. A successful quest for authenticity appears to be conditioned by the activity of searching and coveting. Both E.M. Forster’s work and Iris Murdoch’s novels also elaborate on certain elements of summer house fiction as explored in the works of authors ranging from Evelyn Waugh and Albert Camus to Elizabeth Jane Howard, Don DeLillo, Sadie Jones, Alan Hollinghurst, Herman Koch, Emma Straub and Sue Miller, particularly temporality, cyclicity, enrapture and bedazzlement. All these elements are triggered by places whose exceptional properties set them apart from real sites as their access is both literally and metaphorically restricted, which emphasises their exclusivity, and they are able to transform the linear passing of time into a circular loop. This circular temporality is projected into the structure of the novels as well as their overall imagery, which accumulates a surprising number of individual motifs endowed with round disposition in both literal and metaphorical sense. Not only does the fleeting character of the season depicted in summer house fiction, whose definition both *Howards End* and *The Sea, The Sea* at least partly fulfil, accentuate the urgency of contemporary ecological and ethical issues, but it also mirrors the elusive nature of attaining of any sort of idealised state.

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Notes

Note 1. E.g. Keri Hulme, one of the most prominent New Zealand contemporary writers and author of *the bone people* writes in the main room of her sea coast house, overlooking the shore, and she has underlined the role of the coast in her writing and in a number of interviews. The same applies to Eleanor Catton, a fellow New Zealand author, whose novel *Luminaries*, which won the 2013 Man Booker Prize, reaffirms the importance of the New Zealand West Coast as both a source of inspiration and as remarkable literary setting.

Note 2. The association of the middle classes with the countryside, its cultivation, its preservation and the issuing environmental policy is partly inspired by the rhetoric of the advertising campaign for Metroland. Besides this essential step taken by the Metropolitan Railway towards the development of the London suburbs between 1915 and 1932, there are powerful literary portrayals of the exclusive country aspirations of the middle classes: where John Galsworthy layers pastoral images describing the extraordinary house and its surroundings in idyllic Robinhill in the first volume of *The Forsyte Saga* (1906–1921), E.M. Forster offers a house with a view achieved at the expense of sacrifices of different types in his 1910 *Howards End*, Iris Murdoch mocks a failed attempt at leading a nature-infused existence in her 1978 *The Sea, The Sea* and Fay Weldon draws a realistic picture of an 'idyllic' weekend spent in the cottage in the countryside in her brilliant 1978 short story, "Weekend".

Note 3. E.M. Forster insisted on a specific way of reading his novels; they greatly resemble musical scores in which leitmotifs associated with certain characters and situations are of special importance. The alternation of these utterances creates a distinctive rhythm: "The book's rhythms are carried mainly by key phrases, and words within these phrases, which are stated and repeated in ever-widening circles of meaning." (Stone, 1966, p. 268)

Note 4. Ranging from earlier short stories such as 'Other Kingdom': "She danced away from our society and our life, back, back through the centuries till houses and fences fell and the earth lay wild to the sun" ('Other Kingdom' in *Collected Short Stories*, p. 82) or 'The Story of a Panic': "'Not in my room,' he pleaded. 'It is so small'" (*Collected Short Stories*, p. 30) to novels such as *Maurice*: "He was not afraid or ashamed any more.

After all, the forests and the night were on his side, not theirs; they, not he, were inside a ring fence” (*Maurice*, p. 190) E.M. Forster endows natural images with liberating properties and spiritual power.

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