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E. M. Forster's Tea-Table

One may as well begin with an entry from Katherine Mansfield's *Journal*: "E. M. Forster never gets any further than warming the teapot. He's a rare fine hand at that. Feel this teapot. Is it not beautifully warm? Yes, but there ain't going to be no tea."¹ What we could take from Mansfield's frustration with E. M. Forster's thwarted climaxes is the image of the table laid for tea: the teapot warmed up, but tea never poured out, perhaps not even made. That she blended this particular image into her comment should not surprise one for, indeed, *Howards End* abounds with the scenes constructed around the tea-table, in which, though, the actual repast matters little since food hardly gets mentioned and might even be completely forgotten. It is not on this account that the tea-table in Forster tantalises the reader and it is not in the apparent withholding of victuals that its inadequacy inheres for when food, whether in its ugliness or exquisiteness, monopolises the table, as it does on several occasions, its centrality comes to no good. Clearly,

¹ *Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 82. In May 1917 Mansfield wrote: "Putting my weakest books to the wall last night I came across a copy of *Howards End* and had a look into it. But it's not good enough. E. M. Forster never gets any further than warming the teapot. He's a rare fine hand at that. Feel this teapot. Is it not beautifully warm? Yes, but there ain't going to be no tea. And I can never be perfectly certain whether Helen was got with child by Leonard Bast or by his fatal forgotten umbrella. All things considered, I think it must have been the umbrella."

Forster does not conceive the tea-table as a gastronomic affair and if the tea-table poses all sorts of difficulties and complications, whereby it often precariously tilts, this is because it is primarily a social situation, a locus and representation of domestic and public relations, a demonstration of how people are with one another.

So in *Howards End* the tea-table constitutes a focal point: around it the characters assemble in their communications, through its ceremonies and practices their personalities and social awarenesses reveal themselves and become defined. Bloomsbury and E. M. Forster's concern at the time was about gaps between people – between classes, between nations (England and India or Germany), between the sexes – which revealed so many failures of connection, so many losses of the “good.” In thinking of the good, of course, though (like Arnold) reluctant to speak of it or to define it, E. M. Forster was deeply influenced by the Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore who in his *Principia Ethica* stated “That they are truths – that personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments include *all* the greatest, and by *far* the greatest, goods we can imagine [...]”.² These truths, E. M. Forster, agreed were the principle and basis of social relations which could connect us and it is at the tea-table that E. M. Forster scrutinises the state of English social relations in 1910. The tea-table examines the notion of closeness, of social intimacy and exchange. It reveals the principia of everyday, practical, social morals: here values are discussed and disclosed. To reveal the principles and values by which and for which the tea-table should be laid Forster guides his reader through a succession of tea-tables that go wrong in that they lean too much towards one end, which could be just food, just talk or just business. The understanding of what the substance of the tea-table, and therefore human relations, consists in is garnered piecemeal, it seems, by an apprehension first of what the tea-table must *not* be about. In this paper we shall seek to consider several scenes in which the tea-table gets misunderstood or/and mishandled, and examine the different forms of disharmony and disconnectedness which inform it.

In the few episodes in which we actually see food on the table, the emphasis is laid less on the alimentary function of the meal and more on its aesthetic, and so potential moral, aspect. G. E. Moore insists upon the moral and the aesthetic as connecting counterparts. And although in the following scene tea does not happen for Leonard Bast, who impulsively asked by Margaret Schlegel to tea as impulsively flees Wickham Place, it certainly seems to happen for Tibby:

² G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 238.

Their brother, finding the incident commonplace, had stolen upstairs to see whether there were scones for tea. He warmed the teapot – almost too deftly – rejected the Orange Pekoe that the parlour-maid had provided, poured in five spoonfuls of a superior blend, filled up with really boiling water, and now called the ladies to be quick or they would lose the aroma.³

Here, it seems, real tea is made indeed, and its making cannot but put one in mind of a ceremony – so carefully observed and emphatically performed an operation it is. None of the items of the tea-making protocol gets neglected, and the peculiar deliberation with which Tibby applies himself to the apparently domestic task makes it a serious matter. To Tibby, making tea is a concern superior to Leonard Bast's future. Although taken over from the maid, by no means is it a menial occupation for besides deliberation he demonstrates expertise, by far exceeding a mere servant's skill, thus elevating the job into an art. All is done then with a masterly authority which rectifies the parlour-maid's erroneous or indifferent choice of a blend; the "superior blend", on which Tibby so unhesitatingly decides, bears out the superior aesthetic judgement. It is not just a matter of the gourmet knowledge which governs his choice, for, however flavourful or aromatic, this tea is unmistakably artistic. And so it is less to be drunk or even savoured; rather it is proposed as an appropriate expression and extension of a particular mood inspired by Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Providing a coda to the cultural experience, the just ended concert, the tea itself becomes a purely aesthetic brew. Ostensibly social and meant to be jointly appreciated, ultimately it is quite a selfish affair in that it professes Tibby's refined taste and caters for specifically his appreciation. This meticulous, even finicky, approach to the tea does not surprise in one who listens to the symphony holding "the full score open on his knee"⁴ and draws the company's attention to the "the transitional passage on the drum,"⁵ with "the drum steadily beating on the low C."⁶ Thus Leonard Bast, his umbrella, and his embarrassed flight can hold no interest for him who favours the aesthetic, and so get shrugged off as a commonplace incident. People, objects and events are worth noticing and caring for, provided they are aesthetically engaging or gratifying.

Artistically mature, Tibby is socially puerile to the point of insensitivity to all that lies without the scope of the beautiful. His aestheticism is exclusive, since it lets in those who already belong and so know all about Beethoven or Orange Pekoe; and if an invitation to share an experience, be it music or tea, presup-

³ E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

poses affection, here affection does not entail any effort since it comprehends only those it has always included anyway. Tibby's appreciation of the beautiful fails, because in his caring for beautiful objects, he nurses, first and foremost, the beauty of his own emotions, forgetting those of the others unless they happen to coincide with his own. In Japan, the tea-making ceremony was performed on the eve of battle by the warrior. It was a means by which the mind was emptied, the ego or self abandoned and the struggle with negation accepted. With Tibby tea-making becomes superficial in its serious self-satisfaction. The aesthetic is kept apart from the commonplace, kept apart from such as Leonard, and so is forced away from the moral with which – according to G. E. Moore – it ought to be mingled. In such separateness, failure of connection, Tibby's aestheticism at least is a moral failure.

In this respect Tibby's tea, over-aestheticised but uncaring or self-regarding, bears a natural affinity to Ruskin's Venice, to which Leonard Bast transports himself on his return from the concert, or the flight from the Schlegels, pathetically striving thus to prolong his visit to Culture. But a volume of Ruskin, as he only reluctantly intuits, fails to work in the dark and fusty basement flat. Neither does it convert him to culture, nor does it even sustain the refining effect possibly provided by the classical concert. If an exquisite blend of tea serves to complement Beethoven's Fifth and naturally evinces Tibby's artistic sophistication, it is also tea that marks, in turn, Leonard's dramatic disconnection from the culture of Queen's Hall. The little tea he drinks is "black and silent," nor does he have scones, but "some dusty crumbs of a cake,"⁷ no sentence from Ruskin, however melodious and heavy with beauty, can convey him to gentility.

Leonard's irremediable distance from Venice, the concert hall or Wickham Place is further augmented by the ugliness of the meal he sits down to with Jacky:

They began with a soup square, which Leonard had just dissolved in some hot water. It was followed by the tongue – a freckled cylinder of meat, with a little jelly at the top, and a great deal of yellow fat at the bottom – ending with another square dissolved in water (jelly: pineapple), which Leonard had prepared earlier in the day.⁸

Their meal embodies the ugliness of the poor, as well as modern repast. For all its pretensions to substantiality and slowness – after all, it is a three-course affair – it exudes not just obvious skimpiness, but also speed, which assisted its preparation. Quickness constitutes the vital ingredient of the dishes, the convenience food of sundry squares dissolved in water commu-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

nicates the modern civilisation of hurry as forcibly as its more manifest agent, the motor-car. Here quickness does not act as an ally of simplicity, but in its non-naturalness, its disregard for or dissolution of the essential, it provides a flavour awkward, synthetic and unsavoury. Leonard and Jacky's food combines in a curious way solidity and substancelessness: the solidity is implied by the insistently geometrical forms out of which dishes are fabricated, or in which they are served, but no formal solidity can make up for their lack of substance and failure to nourish.

But the ambience of unbearable ugliness in which their tea is steeped has other causes than the overwhelming unattractiveness of the flat in which the meal is taken, or the meagre coarseness of the food itself. Here the ugliness of the food concurs with that of the conversation attached to the meal: disjointed, shabby and as bland as if it too were made of some squares dissolved in water. Yet the concurrence of the ugliness of food and talk does not mean the concurrence of the meal and the conversation: they happen separately. Itself disjointed, the conversation is also disjointed from the repast. At the centre of the table is food, and the silent engrossment in consumption may be here an instinctive manner of managing or, rather, averting anxiety. Although reduced to food, the meal provides poor nourishment, and not only because of its measly comestibles, but also because of its emotional discomfort. The substance which their tea-table lacks most is the substance of affection, affection being ousted by Jacky's anxiety about the absence of affection, and so by her preoccupation with her own fears and insecurities. That insecurity forever worries one also away from the appreciation of beauty is what Leonard realises when an insistent thought of the stolen umbrella corrodes his encounter with Culture in the concert hall. Thus distressed self-consciousness eats away at personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments; part of the painful grotesqueness of the meal is the way in which both Jacky and Leonard are eaten away even as they eat.

Tibby's absorbed separateness makes an ugliness of the studied beauty of his tea. But similarly, Leonard maintains his separatenesses too: he keeps his Ruskin apart from Jacky lest it be sullied by her distrust and ignorance; his "dusty crumbs," dreary clerical work and Jacky herself he would keep distant from Helen Schlegel's "little deadlies"⁹ and his longed-for superior table-talk of "another beautiful book."¹⁰ The aesthetic is for Leonard a bolt-hole from squalor; he studies it to make it serve as part of a fantastic escape and as such, like Tibby, he denies it a more vital connection, a more radical moral connection, with the commonplaces of his life. It will become for

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Leonard no more than a straw to clutch at... and yet such a straw – a wisp of hay we see with Ruth Wilcox – remains a connection waiting to be made rather than denied. Though such a straw will cost Leonard his life, it will also be a lifeline to possibilities which his unknown child must more properly grasp.

The failure to provide one not so much with tea as with any real meeting or connection disturbs or even upsets other tea-tables too. While there may be laid different intentions and emphases – be they aesthetic, intellectual or practical – at the centre of Forster's tea-tables, ultimately all of them seem to serve separateness. Thus Margaret's luncheon party is given over to highbrow discussion and thus, putting minds on a knife-sharp alert, it presents no possibility of restfulness nor, for that matter, communication. Its key principles, as Ruth Wilcox perceives, are noise and hurry: for the young people gathered round the table the meal occasions an intellectual race as they frantically run after ideas and issues trying to overtake other speakers and compete for the lead. No security is offered. In the course of the conversation one must, at least, keep up with the others so as to satisfy and, more importantly, assert one's higher faculties, and so at the centre of Margaret's tea-table there lurks a fear of exposure and exclusion. Silence or failure to catch on to a thought quickly enough betray one's intellectual and, by the same token, social deficiency. Conversationally passive, Ruth Wilcox appears to bring up the rear and so can, inevitably, be dismissed as "uninteresting,"¹¹ by those who identify the tea-table with solely intellectual pursuit. Yet while she falls behind the rapacious talkers in the conversational contest, she is ahead of them in realising that they do not blend with each other any more than she does with them. They collide rather than connect. She sees their conversation as "the social counterpart of a motorcar," not only because clever talk is fast and noisy, but because it is essentially fitful, accidental, "all jerks."¹² Jerkiness denotes disconnectedness: the conversation is a series of abrupt and self-contained speeches as, in an act of solitary mental exercise, each of the talkers takes his or her mind for a run. Like a motorcar, clever talk entails a movement through space the principle of which is isolation. While isolation results from speed, speed entails the elimination of the personal, particular, private. The concerned remark "I hope that your sister is safe in Germany by now"¹³ has to be dealt with in a slowness and consideration which is not required in the handling of a more intellectual – and more superficial – notion like "Stettininity."¹⁴ "Stettininity"

¹¹ Ibid., p. 88.

¹² Ibid., p. 84

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

is safer and easier in that it addresses the disconnected and the generalised and eschews pressure on the particular or the personal self; all it invites is the “expressive.”

In the midst of such cerebral steeplechasing Margaret Schlegel discerns Mrs Wilcox's transcendent personality and greatness which have little to do with mental agility, but rest on more delicate, yet more solid, foundations. In sensing her superior nature Margaret also knows her tea-table fails not so much as a particular social event which does not come off, but rather as a manner of fostering and attending to social intimacies. The apprehended discomfort of her guest makes her momentarily abhor London life which fashions the tea-table into a site of showy intellectual contest. “We lead the lives of gibbering monkeys,” she admits and adds, somewhat defensively, “[but] – really – we have something quiet and stable at the bottom” (88). Quietness and stability Margaret identifies with Mrs Wilcox and while she grasps their significance, she does not realise the more profound source from which they emanate, that of “the personal affections.” This is the principle which, in their hurried and insecure chatter, the talkers by-pass and are therefore unable to appreciate each other, let alone Ruth Wilcox whose reticence they scorn and dismiss as “uninteresting.” Once again, Mrs Wilcox can be said to be ahead and to have grasped in her quietness the principle and practice of affection which allows one to be generous in one's relations to others. In her turn she, too, seems dismissive of the company and of their restless talk which she, apparently innocently and yet how accurately, calls “chatter.”¹⁵ Her judgement and generosity enable Forster to present her as the adult at a tea-party of bickering or over-excitabile children.

Quietness and stability are how Mr Wilcox remembers his late wife at the funeral breakfast at Howards End; more than her goodness he values her evenness, in the end equating one with the other: “she had been a good woman – she had been steady.” She had been submissive too: “they [had] brought up their three children without dispute. They had never disputed.”¹⁶ Yet at her death she instigates an alarming surprise in the form of a personal plea which, as they draw up to the breakfast table to “have a talk,”¹⁷ the Wilcoxes turn first into a dispute and then into a war with Ruth. In this she is to be destroyed, killed-off, and buried for good so they think, (dismantled and replaced like the stables) – to the point at which mud on the car's axle will soon assume more urgent emotional attention than her death and Ruth's name will rarely be uttered again. The Wilcoxes' table is

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

differently and more savagely wrong than Margaret's. It lacks the latter's noise and haste, but the willed levelness which governs it is as antipathetic to affection as clever talk. It conveys efficiency and confidence that belong to the world of business – and for the Wilcoxes the businesslike, matter-of-fact approach is the best way of dealing with human affairs: "item by item."¹⁸ So in order to manage the dining-room they have to turn it into a committee-room. It cannot therefore be a site of gentle domesticity or restfulness, for the principle of efficiency requires they lay their table with an agenda and steadily dispose of its particular items, determined to make sure that things go forward and decisions are settled. But this makes the tea-table a hostilely unaccommodating place for, as at Margaret's intellectual gathering, it serves the purpose of camouflaging while permitting competition for power, confirming or reinstating – as in this instance – Mr Wilcox's practical leadership. Thus the Wilcoxes' tea-table manages human relations as power relations whereby the others' acts of practical kindness arouse suspicions as to their possible political implications: "Charles had been kind in undertaking the funeral arrangements and in telling him to eat his breakfast," Mr Wilcox concedes, "but [he] [...] was a little dictatorial, and assumed the post of chairman too readily."¹⁹

But where the practical tea-table resembles the intellectual one most is in its dismissal of Ruth Wilcox and its stubborn blindness to G. E. Moore's "personal affections." While the Wilcoxes choose the manner of the committee-room as a way of negotiating their own and each other's emotion, they sever the personal ties between themselves and Ruth, and so deny any seeing of the personal and affectionate as the foundation of her character and human relations. They recognise the personal appeal of her note, in which she wishes Margaret Schlegel to have *Howards End*, but they see in her entreaty a disloyal, unWilcoxlike whimsicality that they can disregard. To them the note has no business sense; one does not give away houses in the way one may give away a silver vinaigrette as a memento. They perceive the personal as sentimental and trivial, but never momentous, for them the momentous can be only business, possession, property. The possession of things is a means to political supremacy – to give up the house, as Charles Wilcox knows, would be to cede power. Power and competition remain at the centre of the practical tea-table, but they are also central to the intellectual one; while the former represents the capitalism of property, the latter the capitalism of talk. Enmeshed in a scramble for leadership, neither property nor clever talk can secure stability within human relations, they are

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

values too shallow to form a solid principle on which society could be based. Not so the personal affections, which Ruth Wilcox points to as *the* fundamental principle.

The meal at the Schlegels', to which Leonard Bast comes²⁰ is contrived by the sisters as a practical tea-table rather than intellectual fare for which he hopes. It turns out to be an event at cross-purposes because of a conflict of intentions, and also because its participants find themselves at odds over what they understand the tea-table to mean or signify between them. The Schlegels withhold from Leonard, their customary intellectual sophistication, the taste of which matters more to him than that of cakes or tea served in expensive cups "with delicate borders of wild strawberries."²¹ Although apparently invited to share a meal and conversation, and cloyed with informal attention, Leonard does not experience democratic order – he remains an employee asked to sit at high table. He might have penetrated to the superior room, but only as a political issue. He receives what J. B. Priestley called "benevolence on principle."²² Even though Margaret and Helen make an attempt at doing practical good, they approach Leonard as a theory, "another class,"²³ through him paying their "rent to the ideal" (55). He gets tea but no sympathy, since they cannot see him as a person and in their dealing with him they reveal a troubling affinity with the Wilcoxes who, too, debated Ruth as an issue, talked her over point by point, refusing to see her in her wholeness. In both cases then the tea-table evinces the capitalist manner in that it prefers managing people to paying heed to them. The Schlegels' tea professes solicitude, but shows all-too shallow respect for the helped, who is little more than an object for charity. It is not disinterested nor, in the end, practical, benevolence for in passing on to Leonard the information that the Porphyryon Company is "no go" and he should "clear out of it,"²⁴ the sisters exercise what is *their idea* of doing good. Instead of looking after him they look after themselves. Their help promotes their own

²⁰ Interestingly enough, the theme of the practical tea-table is taken up ... in Katherine Mansfield's story "A Cup Of Tea" (1923). A wealthy lady takes a beggar-woman home for tea à la Schlegel, has plans to change her life but then realises that her husband finds the woman beautiful and so, out of fear of being replaced, gets rid of the woman with a few pounds. See Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

²² "Affection flourishes in a region somewhere between love and benevolence on principle. It is warmer than goodwill and more aware of its object [...]. There is always memory playing a part in affection." J. B. Priestley, *The English* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

egos more than it does Leonard Bast's security. He deserves their attention chiefly, it transpires, because *they* see him as interesting and worth "pulling through."²⁵ But in so thinking they dismiss him, turn him into their lapdog protege; he might not be a sort or type, as in Henry Wilcox's reductive view, but as "a special case"²⁶ he is made just as abstract and unreal.

But, unlike Ruth Wilcox, Leonard Bast minds being dismissed, and he is crudely so when the interest shifts from him to the prancing puppies. Just as crudely he lets his resentment be known whereby he upsets the etiquette of the tea-table and brings it to the brink of shouting-match vulgarity: "I don't want your patronage, I don't want your tea"²⁷ – voices are raised and doors are slammed. Disastrous as this tea-table may be, the conspicuity of its failure helps to avail Margaret of some understanding of what might be the principle on which the ideal tea-table could rest. The principle is not named at this point, it is merely hinted at in Margaret's explaining to Leonard "We wanted to help you, we also supposed you might help us"²⁸ and her personal address to him in which she begins to appreciate him in his wholeness, as a person. Then affection can happen and sustain the tea-table which, it will be gradually discovered, is not about food, getting things done or talked over, but about reciprocity, a proper exchange, and intimacy. The tea-table concerns thus the manner in which one relates and connects, and so, in a symbolic sense, it is a state of one's consciousness, one's consciousness of other people. To this consciousness the personal affections are central.

For all his preoccupation with faulty tea-tables, E. M. Forster does not exemplify the proper one – such is the nature of any ideal that it can be only implied. We must glimpse then rather than see it, very much in the manner in which we glimpse Ruth Wilcox whom we intuit to have grasped and unobtrusively practised that ideal, even though the novel hardly shows her at table. She exhibits that state of consciousness which G. E. Moore described as "the most valuable thing" which combines "the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects."²⁹ When our attention becomes directed to her, it connects her to the outside, to the garden as the space to which she belongs and which becomes her. Her sensibility is garden-oriented in that her affections and moral wisdom have their root in the garden, submit to it and are sustained by it. One has to turn to the garden, E. M. Forster suggests, to evolve one's contemplative self which one brings then to the tea-table, and it is this egoless self that is required to make a

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

²⁹ G. E. Moore, *Principia*, p. 237.

tea-table – social space – work. Thus one has to *connect* the garden and the tea-table, submit to the authority of the contemplative which unites the practical and the intellectual, the personal and the social. To acknowledge the hidden or invisible principia of the tea-table is to permit the visible components of the tea-table their proper places.

E. M. Forster's tea-table acknowledges the problem of knowing the good and of doing good, but it also suggests the principle on which both might rest. It is a principle to be discerned rather than to be defined, and when Katherine Mansfield says, "You ain't going to get no tea" it may be that she wants the tea to be too crudely set before her. It was partly to E. M. Forster's amusement, partly to his *belief* to set the tea-table so elusively before one, but the tea *is* there... and it was then to his dismay (and fears for the future and its increasing literalism) that so many, including the artistic-intellectual Katherine Mansfield, missed it.