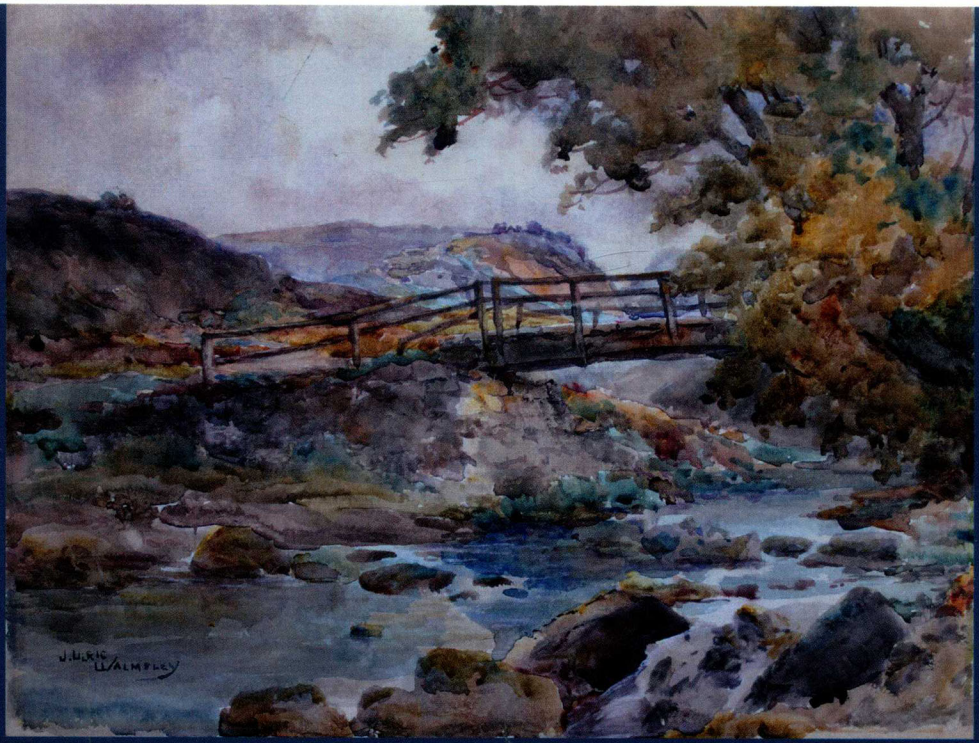
Modernity and the English Rural Novel

Dominic Head



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MODERNITY AND THE ENGLISH RURAL NOVEL

This book examines the persistence of the rural tradition in the English novel into the twentieth century. In the shadow of metropolitan literary culture, rural writing can seem to strive for a fantasy version of England with no compelling social or historical relevance. Dominic Head argues that the apparent disconnection is, in itself, a *response* to modernity rather than a refusal to engage with it, and that the important writers in this tradition have had a significant bearing on the trajectory of English cultural life through the twentieth century. At the heart of the discussion is the English rural regional novel of the 1920s and 1930s, which reveals significant points of overlap with mainstream literary culture and the legacies of modernism. Rural writers refashioned the conventions of the tradition, and the effects of literary nostalgia, to produce the swansong of a fading genre, with resonances that are still relevant today.

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To Tricia, Felicity and Oliver

Preface

I can date the genesis of this study to the summer of 1981, when I was between school and university, at the end of a holiday travelling with friends in California. Killing time at Los Angeles airport, on a twelve-hour wait for 'standby' seats for the flight home, I spent the day sitting on my suitcase, trying not to hear the tape-loop from the drop-off point ('*the white zone is for the immediate loading and unloading of passengers only*'), and reading a second-hand copy of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, bought at a bookstore in La Jolla. I still have this sixties-style paperback, with its lurid green cover, a schematic lino-cut of three trees. In memory it is an incongruous scene: a callow Brit immersed in a quintessentially English novel, championing traditional rural values, in a definitively modern space; but it was probably the spark of the intellectual friction that underpins this study.

Howards End, which anticipates many of the concerns and effects of the later twentieth-century rural novel in England, is one of two books that punctuate this survey. The other is Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*, the seminal study of the topic, which I felt needed to be considered in its different aspects, as a reference point. Thus, Chapter 1 makes reference to Williams's chapter on the rural-regional novel, which he presents as (in effect) a misrepresentation of social history; Chapter 2 moves beyond Williams's discussion of the labourer to give context to the discussion of the 'outsider'; and Chapter 4 takes Williams's paradoxical invocation of nostalgia as one of its triangulation points.

To ameliorate the problem of pigeonholing, which has tended to contribute to estimations of the rural tradition as a limited form of genre fiction (with sub-genres), authors are not always confined to particular chapters. H. E. Bates, for example, bridges some of the different themes treated here; and, because his career spans much of the twentieth century, he is particularly useful in demonstrating how shifting developments in the rural tradition relate to the evolving historical context. Another strand

is the question of dwelling, or belonging, or being rooted, which is raised in the Introduction, then reconfigured in the problem of the outsider in later chapters, and then revisited in the Afterword.

The importance of rural ideas is now becoming widely acknowledged in studies of twentieth-century literature, and especially in modernist studies;[1] but this is not my focus. Although this book sometimes uses writers from the literary 'mainstream' as points of comparison – notably Forster and George Orwell – the chief interest is in the neglected rural tradition, populated by writers perceived as 'minor' or middlebrow. In arguing for the overlooked significance of writers such as H. E. Bates, Adrian Bell, A. G. Street, Leo Walmsley, Winifred Holtby and Sheila Kaye-Smith, there is a tangential connection with the new modernist studies in the sense that the 'turn to England' now recognized in late modernism was in some ways anticipated in the rural novel, which continued to develop alongside (sometimes overlapping with) that late modernist strand. But the emphasis here remains on the rural tradition as a discrete phenomenon, worthy of greater attention than it has had hitherto, not least because of its major role in sustaining an enduring cultural fascination with the rural.

I am grateful to Ray Ryan for his willingness to commission this book when it was a glint in the eye, and for his customary editorial skill in seeing it through to production. My thanks are due to: David James, who has given valuable advice at different points in the writing; and Neal Alexander, Jim Moran, Andrew Thacker, Richard Kerridge, Lawrence Buell, Dean Baldwin and Howard Booth, who have offered insightful commentary or support at various stages. For the cover I have to thank my sister Alison, who, with the artist's discriminating eye (and instinct), tracked down the original watercolour by J. Ulric Walmsley. (The quest to locate the spot that might have inspired the painting continues!) Like most academic books written nowadays, this one was written chiefly in my spare time (evenings, holidays, weekends), so I have no particular sponsor to thank. As ever, my greatest debt is to my family, Tricia, Felicity and Oliver.

[1] For example, while I was completing this study, Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy published *Green Modernisms: Nature and the English Novel, 1900–1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), with a focus on Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, Ford Madox Ford and Mary Butts.

Contents

Introduction

The title of this book announces a puzzle: how to situate the stubborn persistence of the rural tradition in the English novel into the twentieth century, and beyond, in relation to the recognized artistic responses to modernity. More usually, the relationship is refused or downplayed: the rural tradition is seen as an anachronism, fancifully disconnected from actual social change in a period of intensified industrialization and urbanization. The emphasis of this book is on seeing the apparent disconnection as, in itself, a *response* to modernity rather than a refusal to engage with it. A nuanced form of critique can be ascribed to the rural tradition approached in this way, a critique that has resonances for our understanding of the place of the rural in contemporary consciousness.

In one sense, this is obvious enough: the ubiquity of the experience and consequences of modernity make it impossible to expunge from the canvas or page. Marshall Berman's classic account of the 'vital experience' of modernity, which is, in his conception, an ongoing (and so contemporary) mode of being, places emphasis on modernity as a global phenomenon, which 'cut[s] across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology'. But this shared experience – 'modernity can be said to unite all mankind' – is really a predicament, 'a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity' that 'pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air."'[1]

Berman's book was first published in 1982, and, because he takes a 'long view' of modernity, as a continuing phenomenon, his focus is different from that of other scholars working in the same intellectual era, when literary theory took root, who attempt to locate modernity historically – or

[1] Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 15.

at least to consider the grounds for doing so. One such is David Harvey, whose enduring and persuasive statement, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, defines modernity broadly, as a period from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, a time when artists grappled with the problems inherent in making sense of a period of rapid industrialization, massive social upheaval and vertiginous change. It is easy to perceive the rural novel in the twentieth century (in the obvious but appropriate pun) to be ploughing its own furrow, cultivating an imaginary realm quite distinct from the actual pressures of modernity and the disorienting changes compellingly identified by Marshall Berman and David Harvey. This book conceives of the continuing rural tradition in the English novel as a telling response to modernity (as well as an implicit challenge to the notion of postmodernity), all the more powerful because of its obliquity. It is a paradoxical connection, but one justified by the tensions inherent in the tradition itself, a characteristic that immediately suggests a (tenuous) bridge with modernist literature. As the separate chapters will show, 'modernity' is variously defined and constructed in the work of the rural novelists considered in this survey, treating of different manifestations of mechanization, urbanization and social change. Here I attempt merely to draw out some of the key elements in the conception of modernity, to set the scene for the specific discussions that follow.

At the outset of his attempt to account for the relationship between modernity and modernism, and in response to the 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal' identified by Berman at the heart of the experience of modernity, Harvey emphasizes the contradictory impulses of modernist art, pulled in two directions. There is, he writes, a 'conjoining of the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and the immutable'. This replicates the experience of those we might identify as *moderns*, because 'the history of modernism as an aesthetic movement has wavered from one side to the other of this dual formulation, often making it appear as if it can . . . swing round in meaning until it is facing in the opposite direction'.[2] This process – of embracing and harnessing the forces of modernity and transforming them into artistic expression – produces a paradoxical aesthetic (the fusion of the fleeting and the eternal), which is refashioned into a series of artistic dilemmas encapsulated in the idea of 'the image of creative destruction'. For Harvey, this image is central to our understanding of modernity because it 'derived from the practical dilemma that faced the implementation of the modernist project. How could a new world

[2] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1980; Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 10.

be created, after all, without destroying much that had gone before? You simply cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.'[3] James Joyce and T. S. Eliot are key examples in Harvey's account, writers who very obviously combine formal inventiveness with allusions to traditional structures, especially drawn from the classical tradition. Superficially, the better writers in the rural tradition utilize a corresponding (although much lower-key) method of interrogating and resuscitating tradition.

Yet – to begin the account of its specific properties – rural fiction constitutes a mode of writing with a cultivated and distinctive vein of literalism, a literary world where breaking eggs might be an unlikely choice of metaphor: the egg-breaking scene in Leo Walmsley's *Foreigners* (1935) encapsulates a keenly felt situation of bullying, disaffection and communal outrage. It is a scene that may cause a reader to wince at the smashing of eggshells.[4] This is not to choose a deliberately obtuse example that suggests the cultivation of a transparent realism in the rural novel, nor to suggest that it is devoid of artistry or literary self-consciousness; but rather to say that it is usually underpinned by a different form of imagination, and a more circumscribed understanding of the Real. The question, 'How could a new world be created?' does not make any sense to the rural sensibility.

The similarities and differences between the rural tradition and mainstream modernism provide an intriguing literary-historical backdrop to any understanding of why rural writing persists. One way of approaching this is to question the straightforward (and largely true) notion that modernist writing is essentially metropolitan while rural writing is at heart provincial. This apparent dichotomy between the literary treatment (and separation) of town and country can mask how the relationship between the two can become a point of focus in the modernist, as well as the rural novel. However, the points of intersection with modernism can be overstated. The chief point of the connection, rather than to explore extensive formal correspondences, is to insist that the persistence of rural fiction in the twentieth century is a considered response to modernity (and often also a critique of it), rather than an attempt to disengage from it.

This book is centrally concerned with literary ideas about the English countryside and rural life, and the *literary effects* that result, taking the interwar years as a defining period in establishing modern attitudes that have extended into the twenty-first century. An emphasis on *ideas* and *effects* is clearly appropriate in a study devoted to literary responses. This does

[3] Ibid., p. 16.

[4] Leo Walmsley, *Foreigners* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), pp. 259–60. This is not the only scene in which the narrator's immaturity is articulated through the destruction of food produce.

not mean that material aspects of rural life are ignored: there is a chapter devoted to farming and the novel. And one of my central assumptions is that rural writers tend to see their work as being underpinned by a material reality – more urgently so than is the case in other forms of fiction – an understanding of reality in which the essential notion of human subsistence on the land is, at the very least, an obvious subtext. Even so – to sound another note in the motif of rural paradox that is central to this study – it is equally important to be attuned to the ways in which rural writers, for all their apparent conventionalism, find ways of making us rethink the rural, and the relationship between the country and the city.

In this connection, I am drawn to the argument of Jeremy Burchardt, and his resistance of the tendency for academics, writing 'histories of the countryside since the industrial revolution', to 'place agriculture at the centre of their accounts'.[5] Burchardt encourages us to think of 'another countryside besides that dedicated to farming', the 'countryside of nature, of leisure, of artistic contemplation – the countryside that is enjoyed "for itself", rather than used as a means to a separate end'. This 'second version of rural England' conceives 'the countryside as an object of consumption rather than a means of production', and it is this understanding of rural life 'that has more significantly affected English society'.[6] That distinction, between the countryside understood as a means of production and alternatively as an object of consumption, becomes more complicated and more difficult to negotiate in the work of writers who are also concerned with matters of subsistence, or who are also farmers. But it helps to establish a necessary dual focus, a way to understand the ideological role that literature has played in the construction of the 'rural idyll' – or, rather, 'idylls', since views about the English countryside have been, inevitably, extremely varied. There is, however, a general perception that the regional and rural novel, from Hardy through to the Second World War, presented the English countryside as under threat from the combined effects of modernity: urbanization, mechanization, economic and social change. There is truth in this generalization, although it masks the extent to which the better rural writers understood the tensions in their treatments of these topics, given that modernity brought benefits, too, and was in any case unstoppable.

Here we have to reckon with a potential rift between the logic of industrialization and the literary sensibility. In his investigation of British industrial decline, Martin J. Wiener detected just such a rift, stemming

[5] Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change Since 1800* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), p. 1.

[6] Ibid., p. 2.

from the Victorian era, when 'a cultural *cordon sanitaire*' emerged, 'encircling the forces of economic development – technology, industry, commerce'. This 'mental quarantine' issued in a 'softly rustic and nostalgic cast to middle- and upper-class culture' which had a material bearing on 'the modern fading of national economic dynamism'.[7] To the extent that the twentieth-century rural tradition extends this displaced rusticity, it might be said to have played its part in the enervation of the British industrial spirit. We need to be careful, however, about how we impute causal effects to literary production. Wiener's analysis is based on the (I think, correct) assumption that 'cultural values and attitudes often reveal themselves in imaginative literature'. But he draws a crucial distinction between 'the public reception and public images of writers and their work', on the one hand, 'and the subtleties of their art, which are lost on many of their readers', on the other. In short, he is concerned with 'those aspects of their work that literary critics tend to pay least attention to – what they most share with the widest audience'.[8] This study is centrally concerned with these 'subtleties' and literary effects that Wiener thinks get lost in the process of translation to public reception; but it also seeks to problematize the dichotomy between public reception and close reading. Indeed, the paradox that rural writing is at odds with the dynamic of industrial progress is often at the heart of the self-conscious effects of the rural tradition. This means that rural writing itself stages an *investigation* of the decline of the industrial spirit, rather than being merely *constitutive* of it.

The possible culpability of the rural writer needs to be kept in view, however. Perhaps the most consistent underlying response to modernity in the literature of the early twentieth century was a concern, as Burchardt has it, 'with the alienation of modern humanity from nature' as 'potentially a tragic vision', although, from a historical perspective, the return to the land as 'a solution to the alienation of man from nature' became increasingly implausible.[9] A fundamental topic to consider is the role rural writers played in *concealing* this fact. For Burchardt, 'the minor writers of rural life (particularly Mary Webb and Sheila Kaye-Smith)' perpetuated a 'deeply reassuring' message in equating 'England with a timeless countryside'. These 'minor rural writers', he claims, 'helped to foster the growth of preservationist sentiment in interwar England' by 'popularizing among the middle class the idea of the English countryside as a refuge from

[7] Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. ix.
[8] Ibid., p. x. [9] Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, pp. 72, 76.

modernity'.[10] Historically, there may be some truth in this; and, to the extent that it is true, it is worth bearing in mind the role such 'minor' writers played in the (still persisting) belief in the countryside as a refuge, which can also be a reality for some people. However, the actual literary effects of the texts in question are often far more equivocal than this implies: there is greater nuance in many of the rural novels of these 'minor' writers than can be accounted for in a straightforward assertion about their ideological influence. There is also greater affinity between 'minor' and 'major' literary figures than has been properly recognized in literary history, which means that the rural novel is more closely engaged (albeit on its own terms) with the complex literary response to modernity than it is sometimes perceived to be.

Recent criticism, under the aegis of the 'new modernist studies', has, in fact, begun to detect an interest in rural England that challenges the easy equation of modernism and the metropolitan. Central to this topic, which I take up again in Chapter 3 in a longer discussion of primitivism, is Jed Esty's pioneering survey of late modernism, which challenges the orthodox idea that the end of Empire brings with it a straightforward decline in English literature. In selected late works by Eliot, Woolf and Forster, he detects 'indirect and mediated representations of imperial contraction in the form of an "anthropological turn"'.[11] Following Perry Anderson, Esty finds an absence in imperial modernism, when 'the anthropological visibility and wholeness of tribal societies in the colonial periphery drew attention away from comprehensive sociological knowledge of England itself'. He argues that 'if the metaphor of lost totality is one of the central deep structures of imperialism and modernism, it follows that the end of empire might be taken to augur a basic repair or reintegration of English culture itself', a process distinguished by 'Anglocentric representations of meaningful time and bounded space'.[12] This is an argument that suggests the resurgent twentieth-century rural tradition anticipates, and then unfolds alongside, one significant strand of late modernism. But the association does not exonerate rural fiction from the charge of cultivating potentially retrograde preservationist sentiment; and this applies to modernist writing, too. Indeed, the Anglocentric emphasis of late modernism might be said to reinforce the preservationist mentality. One of the signs of this anthropological turn, for Esty, is an interest in traditional forms, or

[10] Ibid., p. 76.

[11] Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 2.

[12] Ibid., p. 7.

'Anglocentric rituals', such as the pageant-play, as part of a broader exploration of 'English cultural identity at the end of empire'. This formal shift involves a movement 'away from the myths, symbols and epiphanies of a universally significant but privately rendered mind' and towards 'the public performance of civic rituals'.[13] This moment of transition in the history of English modernism reveals a duality that is in some measure resolved as the turn towards England gathers pace in the late modernism of the 1930s and 1940s. The duality is keenly felt, however, in E. M. Forster's earlier short story/fable 'The Other Side of the Hedge' (1904), in which a green and timeless place inside 'the hedge' is encircled by a road which is the emblem of modernity and progress. For Esty, 'the hedge literalizes the divide between an insular pastoral nation – increasingly a figment of the literary imagination – and the vast metropolitan routes that connect the core culture to every corner of the globe through British political, economic, and technological power'.[14] This is illustrative of a tension at the heart of all of Forster's work:

> In the case of Forster, nostalgia for an insular and pastoral state competes with the compensatory . . . privileges of dwelling at the centre of expansive industrial and imperial power. After all, Forster finds the green spaces and long traditions of his native culture nourishing, but also unfulfilling and overfamiliar. His narratives, like the protagonists within them, require the symbolic crunch and frisson of cultural difference provided by metropolitan perception as well as the lingering allure of insular landscapes. They require, in other words, the coexistence of British hegemony and Anglocentric idealism.[15]

The entanglement of the pastoral and the imperial (brought together in the privileged context of literary production) identifies another reason for the duality of twentieth-century rural fiction, as much as it does for late modernism. It also identifies the central problem of *Howards End* (1910), a book that is sometimes seen as a progenitor of the more conservative ruralism of the 1930s.[16] The identification of an ambivalent pastoral strain in Forster resuscitates his place in the history of modernism, which is also reconceived in the process. Forster is generally held to have an ambivalent relationship with modernism – as a 'reluctant' modernist, in David Medalie's phrase – partly drawn to traditional forms, partly inspired by modernist innovation.[17] If we can see a significant strain of

[13] Ibid., p. 17. [14] Ibid., p. 24. [15] Ibid., p. 25.

[16] On Forster's significance to the development of ruralism in the 1930s, see Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 230.

[17] David Medalie, *E. M. Forster's Modernism* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 1.

modernism as embracing aspects of more traditional literary expression, as well as non-urban experience, this helps to bring into focus the (perhaps unexpected) relationship between the rural novel and literary modernity.

Howards End is the key text for investigating Forster's conflicted response to the town–country nexus. The place Howards End, the rural retreat of the Wilcoxes, symbolizes a simpler rural life, and is made to seem the spiritual centre of the book. However, its status as a holy place is undermined by Forster's treatment of wealth and ownership, and the contrasting world views of the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels. This is where the book's epigraph, 'Only connect...', becomes complicated, since the novel's oppositional strand is unresolved. In the rural retreat at Howards End, the book seems to hold up an idealized pastoral place as a form of redemption or succour – in a spiritual sense, or at least as the setting for personal fulfilment. This aspect of Forster's novel seems to establish an inevitable opposition between the urban and the rural, between the fixed and idealized pastoral place and the unsettling movement of urban (and especially metropolitan) life. In this way, the idea of being rooted in place is the ideal to be preserved against the trends of modernity – suburbanization and cosmopolitanism. Yet if the book's central idea is contained in that epigraph, 'Only connect...', we must wonder if there is a place for such oppositional thinking. The idea of connection is to unite the passion and the prose, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, so why not also the ideas of fixity and flux, the rural and the urban?

In the final, much-discussed chapter, the 'red rust' of suburbia is seen to be encroaching on the rural idyll of Howards End, and Margaret Schlegel wonders if it can be held at bay, fancifully imagining the 'craze for motion' as a temporary phenomenon that 'may be followed by a civilization that won't be a movement, because it will rest on the earth'.[18] Yet, as many readers will inevitably observe, the Wilcoxes have made their money in Africa, and specifically by investing in rubber; which means that the house is financed by one of the industries that makes possible the expansion of car ownership, and (although it is yet to eclipse the railway in this regard) the inevitable consequent spread of suburbia, a development Forster seems to be anticipating. And, as David Bradshaw points out, 'African rubber was also a deeply tainted commodity' because of the 'barbarity' that accompanied its exploitation.[19] The paradox of *Howards End* is that it is

[18] E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910; London: Edward Arnold, 1973), p. 337. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[19] David Bradshaw, '*Howards End*', in *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster*, ed., David Bradshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2007), pp. 151–72 (p. 164).

premised on the ideal of the beneficent rural retreat, through the impetus of its mood, plot and sympathetic/antipathetic characterization; and yet it systematically undermines the ideal thematically. To some extent, this is now an orthodox reading of *Howards End*. What is significant here is how Forster's paradox is illustrative of several related paradoxes at the heart of the rural tradition.

The idea of a spiritual home is a recurring feature in the rural tradition, although it is not always treated in a straightforward manner. This is also one of the great conundrums of modernity, epitomized in the reaction to Martin Heidegger's later theory of dwelling. For Heidegger, being and dwelling are interdependent concepts: 'Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken.'[20] Dwelling involves putting down roots, thereby giving personal meaning to space, forging a link between a native home and a sustaining identity. This idea comes under close scrutiny in later twentieth-century reconceptualizations of space and place, and this is significant here because this rethinking of dwelling is also very often part of the process of uncovering problems at the heart of modernity.

In Neal Alexander's lucid summary of this new thinking, the assumptions behind Heideggerian dwelling are called into question: 'such notions of community, rootedness, and organic belonging are substantially undermined by recent geographical understandings of space and place, where "space" is both a product of, and a productive nexus for, social relations, and "place" is an unfolding spatio-temporal event'.[21] The emphasis on the social construction of space retains this dialectical understanding: 'space, then, is socially produced; but equally, society and social relations are also shaped by their constitution in space'.[22] This historical and political dimension to space is especially easy to descry in the context of urbanization; but it is equally relevant to the construction and experience of the rural, although harder to see.

The focus here is on how 'questions of space and geography' helped 'condition the experience of modernity', as well as 'the imagination of modernism'.[23] Forster's *Howards End* remains the touchstone in this discussion, since the illuminating ambivalence I was tracing earlier can be

[20] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (London: Perennial, 2001), p. 155.

[21] Neal Alexander, *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 13.

[22] Ibid., p. 29. [23] Ibid., p. 31.