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Passage to E.M. Forster: Race, Homosexuality, and the 'Unmanageable Streams' of Empire

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Abstract
They lay entwined, Nordic warrior and subtle supple boy ... There they Jay caught, and did not know it, while the ship carried them inexorably towards Bombay. E.M. Forster, 'The Other Boat' In one of his many essays on the East that date from the early 1920s, E.M. Forster turns his attention to a geographical location that, for decades to come, would exert extraordinary emotional and political pressures upon him. Writing at a time when Egyptian resentment against the British occupation was starting to die down, Forster focuses on the large brooding figure whose imperialist shadow loomed over Port Said. 'Salute to the Orient!' he exclaims, in tones that quickly deepen in their mockery.

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E.M. Forster, ‘The Other Boat’

I

In one of his many essays on the East that date from the early 1920s, E.M. Forster turns his attention to a geographical location that, for decades to come, would exert extraordinary emotional and political pressures upon him. Writing at a time when Egyptian resentment against the British occupation was starting to die down, Forster focuses on the large brooding figure whose imperialist shadow loomed over Port Said. ‘Salute to the Orient!’ he exclaims, in tones that quickly deepen in their mockery. ‘Given at Port Said presumably, where the status of M. de Lesseps points to the Suez Canal with one hand and waves in the other a heavy bunch of stone sausages’.

As if this derisory description were not absurd enough (with the ‘sausages’ representing a dredging-rope), Forster proceeds to render even more ridiculous the self-aggrandizing attitude struck by a figure who for him ostensibly enshrined the worst aspects of empire. Continuing in this satirical vein, Forster imagines Ferdinand de Lesseps, the chief engineer of the passage between East and West, declaring ‘Me voici’ in an expansive gesture grandly sweeping out towards his handiwork, only to add ‘Le voilà’ as an ‘afterthought’. ‘It leads rather too far, that trough’, remarks Forster, ‘to the mouths of the Indus and the Ganges’ — rivers which, as his sentence unravels, he disparagingly calls ‘unmanageable streams’.

But as the arch wording of this paragraph draws to its close, Forster’s final clauses suggest that the ‘unmanageable’ condition of India reveals much more about his own anxieties than any ‘afterthought’ de Lesseps may have had. ‘Nearer Port Said’, he observes, ‘lie trouble and interest enough, skies that are not quite tropic, religions that are just comprehensible, people who grade into the unknown steeply, yet who sometimes recall European
friends'. The inferences to be drawn from these comments are plain to see. In the distant land of 'unmanageable streams', there is a much more intense mixture of 'interest' and 'trouble' – the true 'tropic' heat, incomprehensible religious beliefs, and men and women who in their 'unknown' reaches perhaps prefer not to recall their 'European friends'.

I have dwelt on this paragraph at length because it accentuates the main tensions that can be readily detected in Forster's diverse writings on Egypt and on India. This is an extensive corpus of work. It begins with his 'Indian Journal' of 1912-13, and gathers pace with the large number of letters he wrote from Alexandria while stationed there during the First World War. His knowledge of Egypt came to public attention in 1922 with Alexandria: A History and a Guide, and with several of the essays contained in Pharos and Pharillon, published the following year. His reflections on Egyptian and on Indian politics – especially the rising forms of nationalist agitation – appeared in a series of notable unsigned contributions to the broad Liberal periodical, the Nation and Athenaeum, during 1922 and 1923. His engagement with the shortcomings of British imperialism in the period after the Armistice in 1918 culminates, of course, in what most critics would agree is his greatest – if most contentious – work of fiction, A Passage to India (1924). Much later, Forster brought together some of the correspondence he had mailed to England while working in 1921-22 as the Secretary to the Maharajah of the native Indian state of Dewas Senior; furnished with an editorial commentary that connects the episodes detailed in these letters, The Hill of Devi was issued in 1953.

These writings often disclose Forster's distaste for the racial bigotry and arrogant behaviour of the British imperialists, whether he is alluding to the supremacist attitudes of the Milner Mission to Egypt in 1919-20 or to the enduring narrowmindedness of the Anglo-Indian community, who were understandably appalled by his representation of them in his novel of 1924. Time and again, Forster publicly scorns the triumphs of empire. 'May I never resemble M. de Lesseps', he insists in 'Salute to the Orient!'; 'may no achievement upon no imposing scale be mine, no statistics, philanthropy, coordination or uplift'. Yet even here the force of his denunciation is not quite as complete as one might think. Rather than disown any such claims to posterity – all of them emanating from Victorian ideals of progress – Forster adds how he would like to bequeath his own, albeit modest, legacy. His preference is to be remembered, not for any kind of moral 'uplift', but for 'scattered deeds', ones that would last for a 'few years only' before being promptly consigned to a 'wayside tomb'. Such sentiments suggest that Forster is not exactly resisting the imperial prowess represented by the statue of de Lesseps. For all his vigorous mockery, he in many respects shares the angle of the engineer's gaze.
In repudiating the injuries of empire, Forster paradoxically reinscribes them, if in a less clearly discernible form.

This clash of interests becomes most prominent, I believe, in those writings that mediate Forster's sexual experiences with Egyptian and with Indian men. The present essay seeks to show how the contours of his inter-racial homoeroticism bring almost to breaking-point the persistent antagonism one often finds in Forster's anti-imperial efforts to imagine 'friendship' between colonial rulers and subaltern peoples; the desire for connection between both parties is for him indissociable from fantasies of dominative violence. Although rarely concentrating on the homoerotic dimension to this conflict, countless recent discussions of A Passage to India have drawn attention to Forster's ambivalent attitude towards empire. If, in that novel, his narratorial jibes at the members of the Club at Chandrapore find perhaps greatest amusement in recalling the Anglo-Indians' performance of Cousin Kate, then the native Indian population is hardly spared the narrator's scorn. 'Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumour' - this is perhaps the most infamous moment of narrative condescension. But rather than recapitulate the observations made by those critics - such as Benita Parry and Edward W. Said - who have most clearly identified the imperial mentality that shapes much of Forster's purportedly liberal thought (a liberalism, one needs to recall, that preoccupied an earlier generation of critics), I wish to turn instead to the larger political contexts that framed Forster's erotic encounters with racially subordinated men during his periods of residence in Egypt and in India between 1912 and 1922. His private memoirs, journal entries, and correspondence with close friends bring into focus the sources of a conflict between his political and sexual preferences that lurks beneath the surface of his highly acclaimed novel. These works make for compelling reading, since they reveal how he was uncomprehendingly drawn to the location where he felt obliged to deride the grandiosity of de Lesseps' salute to the Orient.

II

Let me, then, begin with Forster's first voyage East in 1912, since it holds certain clues to the painful tension between homoerotic experience and imperial domination that aggravates many areas of his later work. Travelling with his Cambridge mentor, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Forster came into contact with Captain Kenneth Searight, a dashing young officer who kept a detailed record of his 'minorite' liaisons. The comprehensive account of Searight's sexual adventuring, which amounted by his own calculations to the seduction of 129 boys between 1897 and 1917, was still being compiled when parts of it were shown to Dickinson and Forster during their voyage East. Ronald
Hyam claims that the manuscript Searight completed in 1917—which takes the form of a long autobiographical poem entitled ‘The Furnace’—counts as one of only two surviving sexual ‘confessions’ by Indian army officers from this period.⁶ In the extant manuscript, Searight devised some thirty-three different symbols to identify the specific sexual acts he had conducted with each boy, along with information about their names, age, height, and the date and place where the different forms of intercourse occurred. It scarcely needs stating that Searight’s tireless attention to taxonomic devices such as these reveals both a military and a missionary desire to produce a certifiable knowledge of the native ‘other’ that is very much of its time. Such systems of classification had a precedent in Richard Burton’s writings on the ‘Sotadic Zone’: a wide-ranging area tending towards the equator that, on his view, joined together cultures where pederasty was endemic. (His notorious essay was written in 1885, the year in which the Labouchere Amendment put a legal ban on acts of ‘gross indecency’ between males, even in private.) Although it would appear that Forster’s sexual encounters in Egypt and in India did not match Searight’s either in frequency or in their capacity for experimentation, it is reasonable to infer that this meeting at Port Said opened Forster’s eyes to sexual possibilities in the East.

By March 1917, while working as Head Searcher for the British Red Cross in Alexandria (a post that involved doing the rounds of hospitals, and questioning wounded soldiers for news of their missing comrades), Forster had grown intimate with Mohammed el Adl, an Egyptian tram conductor. This relationship was to remain, for the rest of his days, one of the two main loves of his life. The memory of el Adl would haunt Forster for decades after this lover had died of consumption in 1922. In 1963, for example, when writing to William Plomer, Forster makes what is a quite typical comment on the ways in which various threads of his creative imagination are curiously intertwined. Having been asked to respond to an enquiry about whether Oniton Grange in Howards End (1910) is based on a real house or not, he declares that this imaginary home is associated for him with the Clun Forest celebrated in A. E. Housman’s covertly homophile collection of poems, A Shropshire Lad (1896). The movement from Oniton Grange to Housman’s ‘Clun’ is significant, not least because it shifts perspective from a residence built on the profits of an imperialist stockholder (the money-grabbing Henry Wilcox) to a man whose lyrics bore a strong resemblance to the writings of the ‘Uranian’ poets whose paean to boy-love at times courted controversy in the late-nineteenth century.⁷ No sooner has this transition been made from the imperial stronghold of Oniton Grange to Housman’s homophile pastoral than Forster is prompted to write that this ‘little matter has set me to thinking of the past which is sometimes evoked by its smallness’. And he adds: ‘A big matter – Mohammed el
Adl—has occurred to me’. He reveals how he has been consigning to a box various ‘scrap’s and ‘memories’ of his lover. ‘With one exception’, writes Forster, ‘he has been the greatest thing in my life’. What, then, was it about el Adl that forty years later spoke so powerfully to Forster’s desires?

Forster’s fond thoughts about el Adl are most explicitly detailed in two sets of documents: the series of letters he wrote to Florence Barger, who knew as much as any of Forster’s intimates about his sexual needs and wants throughout his middle age; and the still unpublished memoir of his lover that he started writing in 1922, and drew to a close in 1929. By 13 September 1917, he responds to Barger’s question about what he and el Adl ‘do’. ‘Talk mostly’, he replies. Stating that he and el Adl can enjoy only two hours a week together, Forster notes the difficulties he has in bringing his lover back to his apartment. Not the least of his worries is being put under suspicion by the authorities. It needs to be remembered that it was not just that homosexual relations were legally prohibited (Egypt at this time was a British Protectorate, with courts that could lay down sentences against acts of gross indecency), but also that the country—given its strategic military position—was under strict military surveillance: throughout 1914-18 severe forms of censorship were imposed on communications of all kinds. ‘We have laid down certain rules’, he remarks. ‘We meet and part at certain places—both in civilian costume—and never travel together on trams’. If his lover is dressed in what Forster describes as ‘a long and rather unpleasing nightgown over which you button a frock coat’, the two may walk together only in the ‘neighbourhood’ of el Adl’s room. But if these impediments were not enough, there is for him a much more pressing problem that activates the pronounced antagonism in the ways that Forster negotiates both his sexual affiliation with an Egyptian man, and his racial difference from his lover:

His is unfortunately rather black—not as black as a child’s face or ink, but blacker than [the doctor and poet, Ernest] Altounyan or [the man whom Forster had long adored after first tutoring him in Latin, in 1906, Syed Ross] Masood—so that our juxtaposition is noticeable. It was thoughtless of him to have been born that colour, and only the will of God Allah prevented his mother from tattooing little blue birds at the corners of his eyes. Blobs on his wrist have sufficed her.

Even though, at first glance, these sentences suggest that the fact of blackness is in itself a complete misfortune (a point compounded by the erasure of the adverb ‘rather’), the other hesitancy in the script is revealing. For it indicates that this all too evident chromatism is attached to an acknowledgement of the inappropriate language Forster finds himself imposing on el Adl’s body. Not by the ‘will of God’ but
by the 'will of Allah' – this momentary correction might encourage us to look again at the fear of the contrastive 'juxtaposition' where an emphatic difference of colour threatens to jeopardize their love-affair because it is doubly illegitimate – inter-racial and homosexual – under imperial rule. That said, the subtext is clear: Forster’s romance would surely be easier if only el Adl was white. But, there again, given the attention paid to the tattoos on el Adl’s wrists, one cannot help but think that the chromatic ‘juxtaposition’ between them is a source of erotic fascination. If endangering them both, at least for him their differing complexions draw attention to the possibility of their intimacy. On this view, racial difference has the capacity to make publicly perceptible their sexual ‘juxtaposition’.

But this ‘juxtaposition’, as Forster knew, was in many respects more than a little one-sided. Sexually, he felt the relationship gave greater pleasure to him than his partner. On several occasions, the unpublished memoir of el Adl shows that Forster’s desires – most pressingly, his wish to be penetrated – were not reciprocated. There appears to have been some confusion about the nature of their erotic encounters. ‘Perhaps for this reason’, Forster regretfully wrote, ‘my carnal ecstacies [sic] with you have never been supreme’.10 Several pages later, he notes: ‘It appears to me, looking back, that you were not deeply attached to me, excited and flattered at first, grateful afterwards – that’s all’.11 Whether such emotions were ever recognized at the time of their love-making can only remain a matter of speculation.

Politically, too, the course of their relationship did not run smooth, but if for rather different reasons. Forster’s decision to influence the path of el Adl’s career makes one wonder about the extent to which he wished to improve or to corrupt the object of his affections. In the same month as his previous letter, he asked Barger: ‘Do you really think it beastly to have made him a spy?’12 Given that he ranked high in the Red Cross, Forster had exploited his connections to find el Adl employment as an intelligence-gatherer in the Canal Zone. Such work was altogether more ‘lucrative’, he informed Barger, than working on a tram. Since Forster claims to have lost his ‘high moral values’ on this score, the loss, he claims, can be compensated for in el Adl’s newfound earnings. Rarely might one encounter a more paradigmatic instance of imperial philanthropy covering its bad conscience.

By finding el Adl this kind of work, Forster knew he had pressed his lover into the service of an empire that was anxious about the commercial and political security of an occupied territory whose value in the war against Germany and Turkey could not be underestimated. In the pamphlet on the government of Egypt that Forster produced for the Research Department of the Labour Party in 1920, he shows how appalled he was by the imperial exploitation of the Egyptian animals, food, and fodder that occurred during the war; he pointed out that the
inadequate and tardy payment for such resources contributed greatly to the rise of anti-British feeling by the time of the Armistice. As he himself observes, one million Egyptians (a thirteenth of the whole population) had been commandeered into a Labour Corps serving the needs of the British rulers. 'Up to 1919', before the rioting against the British had well and truly begun, 'the Egyptians were allowed such plebeian virtues as industry and good temper, but they were regarded as an inferior race, incapable of taking the initiative or of suffering for an ideal'\textsuperscript{13} - such as empire itself. No wonder Forster's decision to find el Adl 'lucrative' work grieved him. 'I am ashamed, ashamed', he admitted in February 1918, 'to have to ask him to behave as I do'. This sense of shame, however, is accompanied by the assertion that his love for el Adl is 'the most wonderful thing' that has 'ever happened' to him.\textsuperscript{14} The greatest sexual rewards, it would seem, have their basis in not a little guilt.

Forster's love thrived in a country where, as subsequent writings show, he felt forced to question how much his erotic desires were influenced by an imperial mentality, one that was highly conscious of the background that gave rise to the Egyptians' militant demands for freedom. Whatever the sexual setbacks, it was in this vexed political context that his relationship with el Adl continued to flourish during 1918 until early the following year. By that time, it was clear to Forster that he would have to leave his position at the Red Cross, now that the Great War had ended. But he was keen not to depart, particularly as el Adl had shown early signs of consumption. During this acutely difficult period, Forster began writing his rather unconventional 'guide' to the city in which he had first met el Adl.

It is worth pausing for a moment on this quite comprehensive work - one that is rarely discussed in studies of Forster's canon - because it helps to open up ever further his conflicted perspective on the country in which 'the most wonderful thing ever happened' to him. Discussing Forster's critique of 'tourist discourse' - notably in the Edwardian novels - James Buzard claims that in Alexandria: A History and a Guide 'Forster again lays stress on the distant past's indicting connection with an early twentieth-century present'. This observation makes greatest sense when one realizes that '[o]f nearly all the city's chief "attractions", not a trace remains: Lighthouse, Ptolemaic Palaces, Library, Temple of Serapis'. Such is the nature of Forster's 'anti-guide', which refuses the ""synthesis" or ""harmony" sought by tourists and imperialists".\textsuperscript{15} Buzard's account, however, should not necessarily urge anyone to believe that Forster's idiosyncratic 'history' and 'guide' is wholly subversive in intent. It does, after all, represent the city as eerily dead and unpeopled, as if it had no contemporary cultural life of its own. Covered in ruins, bearing the impressions of many historical epochs, and having witnessed the encounter between East and West
through both commerce and warfare, 'Alexandria', announces Forster, 'though so cosmopolitan, lies on the verge of civilization'.16 Once one leaves the city, there is nothing but desert, leading further and further away from this last outpost of culture. Travel away from it leads only to 'unmanageable streams'. Not surprisingly, then, when Forster followed the 'trough' eastward from this location, the more troubled and dissatisfied he became, both politically and sexually – to the point of wanting to inflict pain upon the body of a native Indian.

III

In the private memoir entitled 'Kanaya', probably drafted in 1922, Forster records his sexual experiences with a servant of the court of the Maharajah at Dewas Senior, where he worked as Secretary between March and September that year. Having reached the land of 'unmanageable streams', Forster discovered that he had even greater access than in Egypt to willing sexual partners, even though their apparent compliance with his wishes made him despise them. The 'unmanageable' nature of India, wrote Forster, lay in the heat. 'The climate', he remarks, 'soon impaired my will'. 'I did not suffer from the heat in other ways', he adds, 'but it provoked me sexually'. Once he had discovered that masturbation brought no relief to his passions, he made advances towards a Hindu coolie, a boyish figure who he felt was altogether preferable to the 'Mohammedans in those parts', given their 'general air of dirt and degradation'.17 But when he grew anxious about being discovered by the Maharajah, he confessed his activities, only to find that his employer was convinced that Forster's desire for boys must have been a bad habit picked up from Egypt. Keen to protest otherwise, Forster was never the less relieved to know that he would not lose his job. And what was more, a suitable boy would be supplied for him. But when Kanaya arrived, Forster was hardly excited: 'in too yellow a coat and too blue a turban, he rather suggested the part and his body was thin and effeminate and smell of cheap scent'.18 Faced with this young man, he found that for some time their sexual encounters 'went well'. But he still could not 'get from Kanaya the emotional response of an Egyptian, because he had the body and soul of a slave'.19 That is presumably why he eventually received pleasure from boxing Kanaya about the ears. 'He hadn't even the initiative to cut my throat'.20

By the time Forster wrote these words, Egypt had been granted a limited amount of independence, if on terms that ensured – as a result of the Milner Mission – that Britain could keep using the country as a military base. London believed that the nationalist discontent led by Sa'd Zaghlul had once and for all been contained. But India, of course, had over a quarter of a century to wait for independence, and then on
entirely different terms. 1922-23 is generally recognized by historians as marking the second of the main phases of Indian nationalist agitation, in which Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement largely helped to set the political agenda. But Forster's liberalism hardly stretched to the support of such insurrection. 'If the menace of British India subsides', he remarks in an essay published in 1922, the Princes of the native states - such as Dewas Senior - 'will return to their old ways'. And these 'old ways', as he sees them, involve far too many different traditions, systems of belief, and political tendencies. Even though Forster admires those native states that are shifting power from autocracy to democratic constitutionality, he finds himself unable to write a 'eulogy' to the 'new spirit that has entered India'. So in spite of Forster's attack on the 'menace' of empire (his derisory account of the Prince of Wales's ill-timed visit to Indian in 1922 is tart to say the least), his essays from this period adopt a comic-ironic tone towards Indian life and customs that is assuredly co-extensive with the Raj discourse that he abominated. Take, for example, how he regards the ceremony of serving pan in the broader context of Indian culture. 'The serving of Pan is in itself a little art - and the arts of littleness are tragically lacking in India; there is scarcely anything in that tormented land which fills up the gulf between the illimitable and the inane, and society suffers in consequence'. Confronted by this chasm between the sublime and the ridiculous, he claims that only the humble chewing of pan can restore our sense of 'humanity'. No one, he argues, should be led to believe that chewing pan is in any respect connected with the 'Mystery of the East'. 'The East is mysterious enough', he insists, 'mysterious to boring point'. Such words may well leave one querying what 'humanity' is left in a writer who feels he can flatly condemn - regardless of his mordant tone - a subordinated culture in which he feels distinctly uncomfortable.

Forster's growing fascination, developing perplexity, and final revulsion with the 'Mystery of the East' comes into even sharper focus when one traces his remarks on India and the Orient in his voluminous correspondence with Syed Ross Masood. In many ways, Masood was Forster's first contact with Indian life; he was also Forster's first great passion. Although Masood could not requite the love that Forster declared for him in 1910, the two men maintained a long and lasting friendship, mostly through their frequent and intimate letters. In 1912, Forster enthusiastically announced: 'You have made me half an Oriental, and my soul is in the East long before my body reaches it'. But typically this comment is matched with incomprehension: 'I don't understand the East or expect to understand it, but I've learned to love it for several years now'. Later, in September 1917, one suspects that Forster sees himself in danger of disclosing that his Egyptian experience may have made him into 'half an Oriental' in ways that Masood never
could:

One is as far from the East here as in London. All is so colourless and banal. But I oughtn’t to grumble too much, for I have good friends here, and have lately got to know an Egyptian whom I greatly like and who sometimes reminds me of you. (On the whole I dislike the Egyptians.)

His divided attitude is intriguing. At first, it appears that Egypt—being equidistant from England and India—cannot match either place, since it is ‘colourless and banal’. Yet Forster has none the less managed, in this seemingly depressing environment, to get ‘to know an Egyptian’ who would appear to substitute for the erotic intimacy that he desired, but was denied, with Ross himself. Hereafter, if Forster is going to become ‘half an Oriental’, it will occur on Egyptian, not Indian, soil.

Five years afterwards, when Forster was in the midst of drafting *A Passage to India*, he made the disillusionment with India that one finds in his essays of this period perfectly clear to Masood: ‘[W]hen I began the book, I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between East and West: but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable’. And just to drive the point home, he adds: ‘I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits and I’m not interested whether they sympathize with one another or not’. This could well be taken as the most decisive declaration to support the prevailing critical view that by the early 1920s Forster had lost faith in his liberal idealism that he had worked through his earlier fictions, up to and including *Howards End*, where the imperative ‘only connect’ serves as an epigraph. Even though the essays of 1922, the letters to Masood, and the memoir of Kanaya have a different standing as variously public and private documents (they necessarily have a range of addressees, and their tone and texture alter accordingly), one can none the less see how each illuminates one of the major sources of friction in *A Passage to India*: the enduring contradiction between the thematics of ‘friendship’ in the novel and the sexual violence that we find at its centre, a form of violence that does everything it can to sever East from West.

Only one sustained critical intervention has so far been made into this vexed topic and its impact on Forster’s *magnum opus*. Sara Suleri’s powerful—but far from unproblematic—post-colonial analysis of the novel has already been critiqued by myself elsewhere, and there is no need to recount my concerns about her reading at any greater length here. For my present purposes, I would simply say that Suleri’s thought-provoking observations about the conflicted ‘imperial erotic’ that arises in the novel shows how easy it is to lay the blame for Forster’s recoil from India upon a misapprehension of male homosexuality. The shortcomings of Suleri’s reading are instructive, since they prove how difficult it remains for feminist, for post-colonial,
and for queer critics to articulate the novel’s persistent ambivalence towards patterns of imperial and sexual violence without duplicating the kinds of damage that Forster’s narrative complexly subverts and supports. Recognizing that *A Passage to India* stands as ‘one of English India’s most troubling engagements in the fiction of cultural self-examination’, she points out how the narrative adjusts the traditional masculinist gaze of empire upon the feminized native territory by revising the well-worn and discredited trope of ‘friendship’ that features largely in many earlier fictions of English India.

To Suleri, it is those passages in the novel that linger on the sexual fascination of the Indian male body — such as ‘the man who pulled the punkah in the courtroom scene’ — that reveal ‘a hidden tradition of imperial looking in which the disempowerment of the homoerotic gaze is as damaging to the colonizing psyche as to that of the colonized’, thereby questioning ‘the cultural dichotomies through which both are realized’. But once Suleri has made this remark, she turns her attention to a number of sentences in the memoir of el Adl that Forster started in 1922, the year in which he also began work on the novel itself. The excerpts in question — which are selectively quoted in P.N. Furbank’s distinguished biography — record how Forster, not long after he had received news of his lover’s death, found himself calling his lover’s name while strolling on the downs in the Isle of Wight. And he imagined himself being called in return by his ‘friend’: ‘you calling me and I felt we belonged to each other now, you had made me an Egyptian’. Such wishfulfilments, as Suleri sees them, achieve nothing less than ‘an illusion of cultural transference’ that is only possible now that el Adl is dead.

Undoubtedly, Forster’s desire to have been ‘made an Egyptian’ echoes the letter written ten years earlier to Masood, whom at that time he believed had made him ‘half an Oriental’. But it is important to note that in the full text of Forster’s memoir, dated 5 August 1922, this ‘cultural transference’ remains knowingly incomplete; in fact, the longing for connection is accompanied by heartfelt loss, as he writes out his grief with these words: ‘I cannot make you alive, nor can I belong to you because you own nothing. I shall not belong to you when I die — only be like you’. Throughout, this intensely conflicted document comes up against emotions that it seeks to disavow. The fantasy of separation is shot through with a longing for consummation. Even though Forster claims to think ‘more about himself and less of’ his Egyptian lover with ‘every word’, the call of ‘Margan, Margan’ at ‘Beebit el Hagar Station’ preys on his mind. No matter how much he seeks to put Egypt behind him, he finds himself haunted by a cross-cultural yearning that cannot be repudiated.

The larger context of the memoir helps explain the internal divisions to the ‘hidden tradition of imperial looking’ that Suleri rightly identifies
in Forster's novel, and it is certainly a more appropriate source to employ for this purpose than the diary entry on which she subsequently draws to strengthen her main point. Although it is not uncommon when reading Forster's mostly unpublished locked journal — along with his commonplace book — to come across statements that would, at first glance, suggest a sustained sense of physical self-loathing, these highly personal writings need to be used with some caution, especially when confused understandings of male homosexual desire — ones that persist to this day — can baffle readers. 'Famous, wealthy, miserable, ugly', writes Forster in 1925, '[I] am surprised I don't repel more generally: I can still get to know any one I want and have the illusion that I am charming, and beautiful... Stomach increases, but not yet visible under waistcoat. The anus is clotted with hairs, and there is a great loss of sexual power — it was very violent in 1921-22'. Undeniably, these sentences divulge a striking mixture of pride and disgust. But one fears that Suleri absorbs this passage into her discussion because it might confirm that Forster's uneasy outlook on empire was predicated on sexual impulses that congregated around the stereotypical site of sodomitical abjection: the anus. The negative strain of Suleri's reading becomes even more pronounced when one discovers her suggestion that the Marabar Caves — that location of inexplicable violence in *A Passage to India* — might be called the 'anus of imperialism'. If, in Suleri's words, Aziz has become 'an emblematic casualty' of Forster's 'colonial homoerotic' (with which it is more than possible to agree), then one could equally argue that she has subjected his homosexuality to a not so dissimilar form of treatment.

Rather than view Adela Quested's entry into the Marabar Caves as a violent displacement of Forster's aggressive sodomitical imagination (which is one unfortunate consequence of Suleri's analysis), it is, I think, more useful to pursue why aspects of his fiction and his essays from 1922 onwards kept returning to Egypt when it was clear that India — 'mysterious to boring point' — had failed him. One could hardly claim — particularly on the basis of 'Salute to the Orient!' — that Egypt gave Forster comfort in his experiences of empire. In fact, Port Said provides the setting for one of the most intensely murderous stories he ever wrote. But the closer his imagination returned to Port Said the more Forster felt urged to activate the conflict between empire and homosexuality that had frustrated and disappointed him while living further East.

**IV**

Only on two occasions in *A Passage to India* do we see a contrast between Egypt and India, and both are revealing in their recoil from the intolerable mystifications of the sub-continent. No one can help noticing
how much of this complicated novel thematizes its Indian geography in terms of 'muddle' or obscuration, and the trajectory of the narrative leads its English protagonists away from what the narrator calls 'the strangest experience of all' – which is India itself. When Fielding sails back to the Mediterranean, we learn how he settles into a world that he knows is his own: 'The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas everything in poor India was placed wrong'. But when Adela Quested sets sail for England, the narrative is noticeably less decided when pausing over Egypt as the first port of call with western civilization. 'With Egypt the atmosphere altered'; the 'clean sands ... seemed to wipe off everything that was difficult and equivocal'. Her dreadful time in India – how she fled the Caves, only to tumble into cactus-bushes; the wrongful charge of rape against Aziz, which is eventually dropped; her bitter excommunication by the Anglo-Indian community at Chandrapore – can be duly forgotten, now that almost every aspect of India has been cast in a despondent light. Yet no sooner does she feel that she can 'wipe off' her troubles than her brief stay at Port Said involves the following puzzling exchange:

She went on shore with an American missionary, they walked out to the Lesseps statue, they drank the air of the Levant. 'To what duties, Miss Quested, are you returning in your own country after your taste of the tropics?' the missionary asked. 'Observe, I don't say to what do you turn, but to what do you re-turn. Every life ought to contain both a turn and a re-turn. This celebrated pioneer' (he pointed to the statue) 'will make my question clear. He turns to the East, he re-turns to the West. You can see it from the cute position of his hands, one of which holds a string of sausages'. The missionary looked at her humorously. He had no idea what he meant by 'turn' and 're-turn', but he often used words in pairs, for the sake of moral brightness.

On the face of it, the missionary's idle musings have barely any significance. But that, of course, denotes the novel's outward political thrust: for the narrator is deriding both American ideals of the 'pioneer' and de Lesseps overbearing spirit of empire, in words whose satirical edge we have already encountered in 'Salute to the Orient!' This fun-poking juxtaposition of the empty-headed American next to de Lesseps' high-handed imperialism, however, indicates the aesthetic leanings of the novel as well. To begin with, this excerpt surely characterizes what had by 1924 become a fairly standard modernist dissatisfaction with industry and empire: violent ideologies driven by the apparent 'moral brightness' of the Enlightenment. But whatever amusement one might derive from this episode, the statue – with its absurd 'sausages' – has a mesmerizing pull upon the narrative, since it acts as a focal point for the 'turn' and 're-turn' that enchants the missionary, who for some reason finds the statue (which towered above him) 'cute'.

How might one account for this bizarre epithet? The only observation
I would make is that this word occurs at a moment when a great many alternating currents converge upon Port Said, locating it as a site of fearful attraction – politically repellant and physically ‘cute’ at once. This distinctly American adjective may well be invoked here because it quietly alludes to the epic celebrating the global democratic vision enshrined in Walt Whitman’s epic, from which the title of Forster’s novel is taken. The Suez Canal was the ‘Passage to India’ that Whitman annexed to *Leaves of Grass* in 1871. Even more to the point perhaps is the status that Whitman’s poem had long enjoyed in British culture, for it was read from its earliest appearance there in the late 1860s as a sexually subversive work, with its implicit homoerotic promotion of comradeship between men. Forster’s choice of a Whitmanian title for his novel alone would have signalled to some of his more literary readers the pattern of same-sex desire he was seeking to explore, as publicly as permissible, within its pages. De Lesseps’ statue, therefore, served as an icon that condensed many dreams and dissatisfactions, about which one can only speculate when confronted with the missionary’s lingering interest in the ‘turn’ and ‘re-turn’ between East and West.

The ‘turn’ and ‘re-turn’ to Port Said would oscillate wildly in contemporaneous writings by Forster, who seemed only too conscious of how this location marked a profound antagonism between Occident and Orient. His letters of 1921 and 1922 strike contrasting attitudes towards the place that would never cease to haunt him. Forster’s rendezvous with el Adl, which occurred when he was travelling East to take up his post in India, is recorded in almost gothic terms: ‘we walked down the Mole and saw the toes of the de Lesseps statue, the upper regions being invisible darkness’. This eerie image certainly suggests that the figure making his repellent salute was powerfully associated for Forster with the love he bore. But this gothic representation could not be more distinct from his description of Suez to his mother in January 1922, on his return from India: ‘The atmosphere, temperature and colours have been so exquisite and fresh; compared to India, where all is aged and complex, it is like a world in its morning’. His high expectations of Egypt, however, would be dashed when he discovered that he would not be met by el Adl at this time, since his lover was extremely ill at Mansourah, being tended by his spouse. Port Said, therefore, was a place of love and death, of the world in its ‘morning’ as well as its loss, just as it was a location where his contradictory responses to imperial power – both de Lesseps’ and his own – assuredly came to a head.

The work in which these conflicts explode – in an alarming frenzy of orgiastic violence – is ‘The Other Boat’, one of the homosexual stories that Forster suppressed during his lifetime, and which appeared posthumously in *The Life to Come and Other Stories* (1972).
editor, Oliver Stallybrass, claims that it proved difficult to establish a copy-text for this story, since several passages appear in various forms on five different sets of autograph sheets. Forster’s persistent rewriting of this narrative, which probably began in 1915 and was drawn to a close in the late 1950s, suggests an ongoing struggle with intractable material. Telling a tale of deathly desire, ‘The Other Boat’ introduces all the dramatic irony it can to presage the tragic murder of a ‘half-caste’ man by his white lover. But despite its adroitness in exploiting the well-known technical devices of the tragic genre, the narrative finds it hard indeed to manage the ambivalent responses that shift rapidly between desire and death, and which intensify as the protagonists move closer and closer towards Port Said.

‘The Other Boat’ maps two journeys, set ten years apart, between East and West. The first section is taken up with Mrs March’s return voyage to England from her unbearable time in India. Although the context for her return is at first unclear, we soon learn that she and her children had deserted her husband because he had ‘gone native somewhere out East and got cashiered’. While sailing home, her children meet the boy whom they name Cocoanut (‘because of his peculiar shaped head’), and whose ‘touch of the tar-brush’ causes her great offence, not least when Cocoanut terrorizes her by claiming she has intruded on the ‘[m]en’s quarters’ of the ship. The second phase of the story charts the passage of her eldest child, Lionel, now a grown man, from Tilbury to India. He has obtained his berth through Cocoanut, whom he met by accident in England. Lionel is travelling East to become engaged to a woman named Isabel. But when he finds that he must share the same cabin as Cocoanut (the boat is overcrowded), a rather different destiny awaits him. Even though he initially experiences guilt from having turned his cabin-mate’s advances (attempting, but failing, ‘to report an offence against decency’), the two of them soon settle into a sexual rhythm, which increases the further they drift away from England: ‘More happened off the coast of Sicily, more, much more at Port Said, and here in the Red Sea they slept together as a matter of course’.

Although we are told that Lionel’s ‘colour-prejudices were tribal rather than personal’ (which means that he publicly condemns Cocoanut while adoring his clandestine intimacy with the ‘subtle supple boy’), the imperial demand to subjugate his sexual partner deepens with their love-making. But so too does Cocoanut seek to undermine the man who feels obliged to shun him outside their cabin. What we find in ‘The Other Boat’ is a complicated negotiation of power relations between the military urges of the ‘Nordic warrior’, as the narrator names him, and the sexual manipulativeness of the man ‘who belonged to no race and always got what he wanted.’ Under these conditions, Lionel grows uneasy with his privileges as a white
imperialist who is indulging illegal sexual desires, while Cocoanut is quickly associated with corruption of all kinds. Since Cocoanut holds two passports, Lionel cannot tell whether his lover is Portuguese, Danish, ‘Asiatic’ or ‘Negro’. That is why Lionel declares ‘you’re no better than a monkey’. To which Cocoanut replies: ‘Lion, he don’t know nothing at all’. These nicknames, with their roots in legend and fable, indicate that from now on the law of the jungle will rule, as each partner tries to outwit the other, in a homoerotic allegory where intimacy across the colour line proves exciting since it is driven by a dynamic that endangers their lives. Not only lovers, the Lion and the Monkey are enemies, and they shall fight their orgasms to the death.

Hereafter, as more and more emphasis is placed upon wanting to ‘know’ the nature of this treacherous eroticism, the story becomes increasingly interrogative in tone. ‘Have you ever shed blood?’ asks Cocoanut, teasingly. Even though he promptly replies ‘No’, Lionel cannot forget his time during a ‘little war’ that resulted in an assegai being lodged in his groin. The strategically placed scar – close to the genitals – clearly conveys the tortured feelings of sexual power and sexual vulnerability, imperial pride and imperial guilt, that rack Lionel’s conscience. Forced to tell the truth about having ‘shed blood’, he instantly experiences a flickering phantasmagoria of images where ‘[v]ividly and unexpectedly the desert surged up, and he saw it as a cameo from the outside’. With all the hydraulic insistence of the unconscious with its unrepressible drives, Lionel is the protagonist in the scene that appears before him: ‘The central figure – a grotesque one – was himself going beserk, and close to him was a dying savage who had managed to wound him and was trying to speak’.

In his brilliant reading of both ‘The Other Boat’ and Forster’s equally violent account of inter-racial desire between men, ‘The Life to Come’ (which is set in sub-Saharan Africa), Christopher Lane remarks that these two colonial fantasies whose circulation Forster restricted among his closest friends lay bare the antagonistic subtext to Maurice and A Passage to India, novels in which one can detect that cross-class and cross-cultural desire has a heightened eroticism because it is split between empowerment and guilt. Lane implies that by the time Forster was writing out both these thematically related works, he had absorbed some of the popularized forms of psychoanalytic thought that may account for many of his more turbulent and hallucinatory passages. Especially important in this respect is Forster’s essay ‘What I Believe’, the earliest version of which appeared in 1938. There he notes: ‘Psychology has split and shattered the idea of a “Person”, and has shown that there is something incalculable in each of us, which may at any moment rise to the surface and destroy the normal balance’. Sexuality, to be sure, was recognized as the main force that would surge forth and wreak havoc upon the formerly sacrosanct belief that
the 'personality' was 'solid', and the 'self' a discrete 'entity'.\(^{57}\) No
longer, then, is it at all possible to 'know what other people are like'.\(^{58}\)

It is into this void of nescience that the 'The Other Boat' ultimately
descends when Lionel finds he cannot return his lover's solicitations:
'Kiss me ... Kiss me'.\(^ {59}\) By this point, Lionel knows that he must face
up his better conscience, 'for Isabel's sake, as for his profession's', as
well as for his mother who 'understood nothing and controlled
everything'.\(^ {60}\) Sensing that he must comply with the rule of his
mother's monstrous power ('blind-eyed in the midst of the enormous
web she had spun'), he snubs his lover only to feel Cocoanut biting
him on the forearm. Once blood has been drawn, Lionel is thrown
psychologically 'back in a desert fighting savages'.\(^ {62}\) Having strangled
his lover, he ejaculates, and 'with the seeds of love on him'\(^ {63}\) he takes
his own life by plunging naked into the waves. And where does this
happen? In the Red Sea. For these lovers, there is no escape from this
location, since it is the place to which Forster's most urgent sexual
journeys would return. This is the site where the closest of bonds
between East and West are made and broken, where imperial violence
and homoerotic desire find themselves most palpably entwined. No
wonder Lionel's body is left to the sharks, while the corpse of Cocoanut
is removed from the ship. Never could their love have been allowed to
circle, as the boat eventually does, to Bombay.

NOTES

It would not have been possible to complete this essay without consulting
many of Forster's papers held at the Modern Archive at King's College,
Cambridge; the archivist, Jacqueline Cox, helpfully guided me towards the
relevant materials. My thanks to The Provost and Scholars of King's College,
Cambridge, for kindly allowing me to quote from previously unpublished
material. I am grateful to Hilda D. Spear of the University of Dundee for
sending me copies of her research into Forster's Egyptian writings. Finally,
I should like to acknowledge the Stanford Humanities Center for providing the
space and time in which to finish this piece of work.

1. E.M. Forster, 'Salute to the Orient!', in Forster, Abinger Harvest (London:
   Edward Arnold, 1936), p. 247. All further quotations are to this edition and are
   included in the text. This essay first appeared in the London Mercury, 4 (1921),
   pp. 271-81.
2. Forster, A Passage to India, Abinger Edition, ed., Oliver Stallybrass (London:
3. Benita Parry, 'The Politics of Representation in A Passage to India', in A
   Passage to India: Essays in Interpretation, ed., John Beer (Basingstoke:
   Macmillan, 1985), pp. 27-43; and Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism
4. The most influential critic from the first generation of Forster scholars is Lionel
   Trilling; he was quick to note the writer's unease with the liberal ideology
supposedly enshrined in the fiction: `[A]ll his novels are politically and morally
tendentious and always in the liberal direction. Yet he is deeply at odds with
the liberal mind, and while liberal readers can go a long way with Forster, they
can seldom go all the way ... [because] sooner or later ... [t]hey suspect Forster
is not quite playing their game; they feel that he is challenging them as well as
what they dislike'. See E.M. Forster ([1943]; New York: Harcourt Brace

5. 'Minorite' is the word Forster uses in his `Indian Journal, 1912-13' to describe
the sexual episodes recorded in Searight's diary. See Forster, The Hill of Devi
and Other Indian Writings, Abinger Edition, ed., Elizabeth Heine (London:

6. Ronald Hyam, Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience (Manchester:

7. On the the work of the `Uranian' poets, see Timothy d'Arch Smith, Love in
Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English `Uranian' Poets from

Forster, ed., P.N. Furbank and Mary Lago, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: The

Further quotations from this letter are taken from this and the following page.
Robert K. Martin has suggested to me that the passage from this letter quoted
below may be read in a light altogether more favourable than the one I cast
upon it, by virtue of an implicitly ironic tone. This raises for me the question of
where irony figures in Forster's racial thinking.

10. Forster, unpublished memoir of Mohammed el Adl, King's College,
Cambridge, f.16.

11. Forster, unpublished memoir of Mohammed el Adl, King's College,
Cambridge, f.19.

Further quotations from this letter are taken from this page.

13. Forster, The Government of Egypt: Recommendations by a Committee of the
International Section of the Labour Research Department, with Notes on Egypt

14. Forster, `To Florence Barger', 18 February 1918, Selected Letters of E.M.
Forster, I, p. 287.

15. James Buzard, The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the

16. Forster, Alexandria: A History and a Guide (Garden City, NY: Doubleday,
1961), p. 204.

17. Forster, `Kanaya', in The Hill of Devi and Other Indian Writings, p. 311.


21. Forster, `The Mind of the Indian Native State', in Abinger Harvest, pp. 328,
331. This essay first appeared unsigned in two parts in the Nation and

22. [Forster,] `Rejections on India. II. The Prince's Progress', Nation and

23. Forster, `Adrift in India, 5: Pan', in Abinger Harvest, pp. 313-14. This essay was
first published as `Pan' in the Criterion, 1 (1923), pp. 402-08.
25. Forster, 'To Syed Ross Masood', 8 September 1917, Selected Letters of E.M. Forster, I, p. 269. (My transcription of this letter differs slightly from the published version.)
28. Forster, A Passage to India, p. 207.
30. Forster, memoir of Mohammed el Adl, 5 August 1922, King's College Cambridge, f.10. This sentence is quoted by Furbank, E.M. Forster: A Life, II, p. 115. Further quotations are taken from the unpublished manuscript.
35. Forster, A Passage to India, p. 271.
36. Forster, A Passage to India, p. 270.
37. Forster, A Passage to India, p. 253.
38. Forster, A Passage to India, p. 253-54.
42. Forster, 'The Other Boat', in Forster, The Life to Come, p. 183.
43. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 171.
44. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 170.
46. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 177.
47. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 174.
52. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 181.
53. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 186.
54. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 186.
60. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 193.
61. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 193. Narratorial interventions such as these form part of a much larger vein of misogyny that runs throughout Forster’s fictions, frequently signalling that maternal authority is a constraining force on male-male desire. I raise this point at some length in Effeminate England, pp. 55-99.
63. Forster, 'The Other Boat', p. 196.