

ALEXANDRIA AS E.M. FORSTER'S RAINBOW BRIDGE TO THE MIDDLE EAST & INDIA:

A COMPARATIVE INQUIRY

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10 E.M. Forster's sojourn in Alexandria, Egypt during the WWI, i.e., between 1915 and 1919, though it had not received the critical attention it deserves, reflects a division among the students of the British novelist: Some view this juncture in his life as a period of utter sterility after a flurry of successive novels: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room without a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910) and a collection of short stories, *The Celestial Omnibus and Other Stories* (1911). Others argue that Forster who has derived the themes of his novels and short stories from travel experiences and set them in foreign milieus, spent this period of wartime in gestation before he produced his Indian masterpiece. This paper proposes to throw some new light on these rather contradictory views.

What follows will attempt: (a) to examine closely these conflicting approaches, (b) to study the vagaries and vicissitudes of his personal and intellectual life in Alexandria, and (c) to juxtapose, in the light of available documents, his public and largely charitable image of Egypt with his decidedly racist/colonialist image of the country he portrays in his essays first published in the *Egyptian Mail* and the *Egyptian Gazette* (never republished in book form), and most particularly in his posthumously published two volumes of *Selected Letters*.

While in Alexandria Forster spoke on different occasions of a "psychological hitch" that emanates from a 'disjuncture' between our 'private' and 'public' selves. Much as he tried to guard against it, he seems to have suffered personally both from this disjuncture as well as from vestigial imperialism. His objective, at times gracious, attitude towards Egypt and the Egyptians in his Alexandrian writings, *The Government of Egypt* (1920), *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (1922), *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923) and pertinent essays in *Abinger Harvest* (1936), is in sharp contrast to what he appears to maintain in private. To illustrate the point, note the following

extract from a letter to his friend, Malcolm Darling, dated 6 August 1916:

I'm mainly writing to ask for another letter—I loved yours, and my idealisation, we won't say regrettable and ahemmable, of India, mounts and mounts and mounts. Egypt feeds it by contrast. I hate the place, or rather its inhabitants. This is interesting, isn't it, because I came inclined to be pleased and free from racial prejudices, but in 10 months I have acquired an instinct dislike to the Arab voice, the Arab figure, the Arab way of looking or walking or pump shitting [sic] or laughing or anything—exactly the emotion I censured in the Anglo-Indian attitude towards the native there. What does this mean? Am I old, or is it the war, or are these people intrinsically worse? Any how [sic] I better understand the Anglo-Indian irritation though I'm glad to say I'm as far as ever from respecting!! It's damnable and disgraceful, and it's in me.

Now and then I have a hideous war. Will this sojourn in the spurious East put me against the true East—Dewas, Aurangabad, Judhpur?...I want to come from England direct, unstained by the Nile. (*Selected Letters* I 238-39)

As for the contribution of WWI to his attitudes, both he and his pacifist fellow-Bloomsburyites detested it; nevertheless E.M. Forster volunteered in 1915 to serve with the British Red Cross in Alexandria, Egypt. He outlines his assignment as a "Red Cross Searcher:"

I go round the hospitals and question the wounded soldiers for news of their missing comrades. It is depressing in a way, for if one does get news about the missing it is generally bad news. But I am able to be of use to the wounded soldiers themselves in various unofficial ways—I lend them books, get their watches mended, write their letters, &c. (*Selected Letters* I 232)

The poet-warrior, Rupert Brooke, describes graphically, if uncomplimentarily, Forster and his pacifist comrades as "nice and nasty children outside a circus, who alternately peep under the flaps and explain to each other how they despise circuses" (Furbank 3).

There are more powerful private issues in this mix—Forster had good reason to seek, under the flaps of this circus, refuge from a few acute personal and literary problems of his own. On the one hand, his great Indian novel, began in 1912, was interrupted by a creative block, and, on the other, his homoerotic novel, *Maurice*, which remained unpublished, failed to achieve its intended therapeutic and cathartic effect. It was in this unfortunate mood that he headed for Egypt.

Although Forster anticipated his Egyptian venture with almost the same eagerness and enthusiasm he had for such places as Italy, Greece and India, his first impression of the country was one of disappointment. India was and remained his prototypical embodiment of the East. His posthumous letters reflect his feelings towards the country, ranging from the reference to it as "spurious, pseudo-oriented Egypt" to profuse and unqualified hatred for the country and its people" (*Selected Letters* I 239).

In 1915 Egypt was under the British mandate, beginning with the bombardment of Alexandria and the suppression of the 'Itrabi nationalist revolt in 1882. From then on,

Egypt was officially regarded by the occupying authorities as a second-rate part of the Empire. However, the British barbarity expressed in the so-called Denshawai incident signaled the immanent end of the occupation—in June of 1906 a few army officers went on a pigeon-shooting spree at the Denshawai village, the ensuing confrontation with the fellahin resulted in the shooting of a farmer's wife and the death of an army officer, presumably of a sunstroke. The British reprisals were prompt and extreme: gallows were erected in the village, a half dozen farmers or more were hanged, and others were flogged during the execution, all in full view of their relatives, while others were sentenced to varying prison terms. In his pamphlet of "Recommendations on the Government of Egypt," commissioned by the Labour Research Department of the Fabian Society in 1920, E.M. Forster observed that "the hatred of the British has hardened the national character" of a people "who were allowed the plebeian virtues of industry and good temper" (*Government of Egypt* 11).¹

12 In spite of his negative reaction to his new ambience and to cosmopolitan Alexandria that makes it difficult for him to see the country, he gradually adjusted to his assignment and developed varying interests in the country. The Alexandrian-Greek poet Constantine Cavafy was a stabilizing factor in his life that helped him channel his intellectual energies towards a series of lectures, a regular column in the English-speaking daily, *Egyptian Mail*, and eventually two important books on the history and culture of Alexandria. Forster, in turn, spared no effort in introducing this classical reclusive poet and his work to the west at large and particularly to such contemporaries as T.S. Eliot, Arnold Toynbee, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon.

His three-year sojourn in Egypt proved crucial to his emotional life as well. In a letter dated Oct. 16, 1916, the thirty-seven year old novelist writes his most trusted confidante, Florence Barger, that:

Yesterday, for the first time in my life I parted with respectability. I have felt the step would be taken for many months. I have tried to take it before. It has left me curiously sad.

He adds in the conclusion of his letter:

My life has not been unhappy, but it has been too dam lop sided for words and physically dam lonely. (*Selected Letters* I 243-44)

This cautiously-couched letter makes an elliptical reference to Forster's gratifying homosexual friendship with Mohammed El-Adl, a young Egyptian tram conductor for whom Forster managed to find a job as a "spy" with the British Intelligence in the Canal Zone. Their chance friendship materialized when El-Adl appreciated Forster's courteous treatment of him, something he never experienced from the English before. It is at least arguable to suggest that this event was later fictionalized in *A Passage to India*, if we recall that a similarly unexpected civility on a part of a foreigner leads to the friendship between Mrs. Moore and Dr. Aziz. The setting is also metamorphosed from the tram, where Forster and El-Adl first met, into an Indian mosque; the native

'character' in the two incidents happens to be a native Muslim.

Although the homoerotic aspect of their relationship seems to have ended, their friendship continued through El-Adl's death of tuberculosis in 1922, hastened perhaps by a six-month prison sentence, a miscarriage of British justice. Shortly after his Egyptian friend's death, Forster embarked on writing a ninety-one page, unpublished memoir that took seven years to finish. This most intimate memoir concludes with the following words:

I promised you I would never return to Egypt after your death. The remark did not interest you and I have broken my promise and taken Florence to see the H[ospital] of M[ontazah]. It is still standing ...Am glad I went back to Alexandria. I was happy there.²

I find myself in the company of the critics of the Forster canon who believe that Forster's intellectual and emotional commitments to Egypt underwent a radical transformation that eventually led to the completion of his masterpiece, *A Passage to India*, in 1923 (1924). It is also worth noting here that Forster expressed on several occasions the wish that he had written *Maurice* after, rather than before, meeting his Egyptian friend.

In the light of available evidence, students of Forster will be persuaded to agree that he draws heavily on his Egyptian experience, at all levels, in the ultimate makeup of his Indian novel. The first page of the opening chapter of the "Mosque" section has the description of the inhabitants of Chandrapore as follows:

"The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving." (*API* 2)

This formulation is taken verbatim from his early Egyptian letters where he speaks to his Indian friend, S.R. Masood, about the native inhabitants of Alexandria as: "the soil is mud, the inhabitants are of *mud moving*" (*Selected Letters* I 233). Thus, it is not too much to insist that the stock-in-trade of his three-year experience in Egypt is consciously distilled and ultimately integrated into *A Passage to India*.

Forster's first-hand knowledge and critical awareness of the intricate relationship between the colonizer and the colonized was undoubtedly enriched by his Egyptian experience when he found himself guilty of the same practices and attitudes he decried in Anglo-Indians. Still, apart from some conversational reference to his abortive Indian novel, there is hardly any indication that Forster worked on the novel during his Red Cross assignment in Alexandria. One would argue, however, that his stay in Egypt served as a gestation period from which his aborted novel would be re-generated and whipped into its final form.

On his return to England in 1919, Forster, through his journalism, became an established authority on the Egyptian affairs. He wrote articles, book reviews and letters to editors on contemporary and ancient issues pertaining to Egypt. Reference has been made earlier to his pamphlet of recommendations on the Egyptian question. Although he accepted to write this Fabian pamphlet "with hesitation" at first, he later "grew confident" and told Leonard Woolf that he found "how easy it is to write

impressively about politics.”

The two important books he wrote while still in Egypt, *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (1922) and *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923), were published successively in the UK and in the USA, and have since ran into several editions. At the same time, the Egyptian phase of Forster's career and his contributions to the *Egyptian Mail* are generally overlooked. This prevailing critical attitude may well be attributed to three features concerning his career:

1. Forster wrote no fiction during his sojourn in Egypt between 1915 and 1919. Indeed, he practically wrote no other fiction at all between 1912, the date he first began writing his Indian novel and 1923, the date its final form was submitted for publication.

2. The dearth of critical studies on the Egyptian phase of Forster's career.

3. There is, thirdly, another bio-bibliographical handicap that makes it extremely difficult to do any meaningful research on Forster in this particular area, namely, the inaccessibility of Forster's journalism during those years: Although he revised a good many of his Egyptian articles and incorporated them in *Pharos and Pharillon* and *Abinger Harvest*, the rest of these articles remained buried in the archives of the *Egyptian Mail*, which is now superseded by the *Egyptian Gazette*. Forster's indifference to these unprinted articles may well be an added factor that contributes to this critical silence and/or negligence.

On close examination, the content of these articles may well provide us, with important insights into his creative process and the development of his Indian theme. Infatuated with India, his first and most solid introduction to the Orient, Forster never loses sight of his Oriental prototype, and there is practically little in his personal and public writings during his Egyptian experience that is devoid of a reference to or a comparison with, India. In a letter to his mother after his arrival in Alexandria, Forster sadly observes that Egypt “is a feebler India, as flat but without the sense of immensity, “and notes that the people were better nourished, and hence more handsome than those in “that land of thin legs, and swollen tummies.” In a similar vein, he writes his Cambridge friend, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, and makes the mathematical equation that “Egypt = India + water and - idolatry.” “Cosmopolitan Alexandria” that makes it difficult for him to see Egypt, let alone appreciate it, is in his opinion, “completely given over to work...a grim stony place.” This probably accounts for his attempts at the time to transfer to Cairo. In his excursions outside Alexandria, into the cities of Damanhur in the Delta, and Damietta on the Mediterranean coast, Forster realizes that “in the purity of the air and the first shining of the stars Egypt did seem the enchanted land that tourists have found it.”

As he becomes gradually more reconciled to his Red Cross function, Forster observes sadly that the Mareotic desert to the west of Alexandria does not measure up to Jodhpur, but he becomes increasingly taken by the Hellenistic character of his ambience, and begins to read history, as his biographer P.N. Furbank suggests he usually did for balance and perspective: “The civilization—and the ruins—of all this

Alexandria is Mediterranean rather than Egyptian if you see what I mean. One is a whole world away from the Sphinx and the Pyramids of Cairo, and all the associations are with Greek islands and places like Girenti and Pesto.”

His visit to the Red Sea yields a rapturous account of the juncture at which Asia and Africa are parted: “Far East, beyond the canal and vast sands, are mountains of Noab. Faint purple and pink shot with gold, while westward the great Egyptian range shoots 2000 feet straight out of the plain...There are no trees or vegetation, but the light is exquisite.” In April 1916, while now in a better disposition, Forster pays more attention to his surroundings and writes his essay, “Shakespeare and Egypt.” He finds it sad and ironic that Shakespeare's death would be “celebrated by a distracted and divided world.” Forster reflects on Shakespeare's relevance to Egypt, observing that although it is customary to refer to *Antony and Cleopatra* as Shakespeare's Egyptian play, Shakespeare's conception of Egypt was determined by his total dependency on classical authors, with the usual European misconceptions of the East. Hence, Lepidus declares that the Ptolemies built the Pyramids, while Charles VII of France attributes the construction of the Great Pyramid of Cheops, through Pliny, to Rhodope (Rhodopis), “a Greek courtesan whom the brother of Sappho loved and rescued out of Egypt.” Similarly, Mark Antony labours, according to Forster, under the illusion that the Pyramids contain a device to measure Nile floods, while nearly everyone now knows that the height of the ancient river was taken by several nilometers, the most famous of which is located in the southern tip of the island of Rhoda on the opposite bank from Giza. However, the lover of Cleopatra displays a more accurate understanding of the relationship between the great stream and the Egyptian agriculture:

...the higher Nilus swells

The more it promises: as it ebbs, the seeds man

Upon the slime and ooze scatters the grain,

And shortly comes the harvest.

(*Antony and Cleopatra* II.vii. 23-26)

Even Falstaff dabbles at Egyptology, when he complains that after having drowned in the Thames, he too would swell to become “a mountain of Mummy.”

With all Shakespeare's dependency on Plutarch, the playwright, in Forster's opinion, added “infinite passion and eternal life” but no local atmosphere. Forster suggests, however, that the English bard was fascinated “by the slow Nile, snake-like and home of snakes” as the very mud of Egypt was working through the trail of an asp in his mind, the very mud of Egypt was ultimately to seep into Forster's Indian novel.

The year 1916 was quite eventful in Forster's life: he met his Egyptian friend Mohammed El-Adl, and their intimacy cured him of his chronic loneliness and rendered him more appreciative of the Egyptian, rather than the Indian East.

Furthermore, his friendship with Cavafy was deepened and, through the latter's urging and encouragement, Forster began the history and guide of Alexandria.

The *Egyptian Mail* began to publish on Sundays his articles, under the rubric "Our Diversions," featuring for the first time Forster's newly adopted pen-name, "Pharos" (after the lighthouse in the Alexandrian harbour that was once one of the wonders of the ancient world). His first contribution in this series of articles, "Diana's Dilemma" deals with the then-fledgling cinema and questions the value of the medium, dismissing it as "duller than life." Amazed by the cinema's mesmerizing effect on the audience, Forster says, in the fashion of a McLuhan or better still, post-McLuhan media-critic:

If people took the cinema frivolously one could understand its appeal. But they take it seriously. They attend, they do not talk. They talk in plays or concerts or operas, but during a cinema they are quite silent, and if one looks at them in the semi-darkness one sees they are all wrapt at the screen. ("Diana's Dilemma" 2)

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Interpreting their captivity to be more physiological than psychological, Pharos concludes that the spectacle consists merely of "vacuity [gazing at] vacuity. "After such entertainment, Pharos contemplates that the diversity represented by a fruit shop in the market place, a sight to his mind "more beautiful and amusing than art" and offers a conviction that the buffs of cinema as a new art form are mistaken in their confidence that "film can be a great educational force."

His second "Diversion" is a sketch entitled "Sunday Music" in which he tries to capture the peculiar atmosphere of a Sunday Beethoven concert at San Stefano, a then-posh district along the beach east of central Alexandria. Pharos describes a situation familiar to concert-goers today in Egypt: audiences so lively, talkative, and preoccupied with social posturing, and the antics of the unrestrained children that the music is all but forgotten in the din. Even when, as rarely happens, the noise from the audience subsides, the very sparrows commence a chorus of their own-leading Pharos to reflect that of the Alexandria Antony and Cleopatra knew, only the sea, sand and little birds survive. Recalling, with a shiver, the stiff formality of Wagnerian occasions in Germany, he is convinced that "It is better to be inventive with Latins and Levantines than to attend with Teutons, and San Stefano, whatever its defects, is not a censorious place" ("Sunday Music" 2).

As he becomes more accustomed to the easy informality of Egyptian life, Forster's attitude mellows, his now more tolerant disposition yields to a positive enthusiasm for the country. The mystique of Alexandria soon exerts its influence on Forster, drawing him away from stern aestheticism to a more relaxed celebration of life. The "satire of contrast" that is the essence of *A Passage to India* has come to fruition.

Approaching again the musical scene around him, Pharos writes in October 1916 a piece entitled "A Musician in Egypt" in appreciation of his Alexandrian-born Italian musician friend, Enrico Terni (1879-1960). Although Forster finds heroism in art—of the magnitude of Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Tolstoy-impossible

among eclectic exiles in the coastal strip of Levantine Egypt, he waxes romantic when he portrays Egypt as "a country that sits astride Africa like a delicate bird perched upon a rhinoceros." It is Levantine Egypt that "strains its eyes beyond the sea, always turning away from Africa, the vast, the formless, the helpless, and unhelpful," not the touristic Pharaonic Egypt, or the "incomprehensible" Arab Egypt, that Pharos identifies with. Painting, with tender strokes, Terni and his musical virtuosity, Pharos pinpoints a musical genre he calls "the music of exile" ("Musician in Egypt" 2). In his symphonic Indian novel, with its plaintive final movement of Mrs. Moore's exit, and the intricate rapport between Dr. Aziz and Cyril Fielding, Forster makes a notable contribution to this genre.

Forster then turns an eye to other artistic features of modern Alexandria in his essay, "XXth Century Alexandria: The New Quay." In this piece, Pharos deals with the newly built breakwater wharf skirting the cornice, the Eastern Harbour in a splendid stone parabola between the Silsilah and the Qait-Bey Fort, site of the ancient Pharos. Forster's imagination is stimulated by the quay which "curves away out of our poor little lives like some magnificent comet" to become "the successor of the old Ptolemies' causeway that once divided the two harbours." In an aestheticist's flight, he goes into a rhapsody over the impression created by this structure:

Seen from the south, when there is mist in the morning, its beauty is fairylike; seen from northern extremity, it forms a complete ring round a circle of blue water.

Yet he would archly note the faults of the structure: "the quay splashes and stinks," but its beauty, he contends transcends human concerns, expressing a well-wrought "poetry through mathematics—an appropriate achievement in the city of Eratosthenes and Euclid" ("XXth Century Alexandria" 2).

The liberties taken by the Egyptians with English, the language of the conqueror, constitutes the subject of his hilarious "Gippo English," where Pharos records the comic incongruities of restaurants placards inviting passersby to "Have you first-class meals of Breakfast for Lunch Tea and Supper," conductors crying: "Come here Mustafa Pasha, Come here Sidi Bishr" as the trams approach each destination, and bootblacks shouting: "Clean boot shine." One sign over the western entrance of Montazah carried the elliptical warning: "No admission this way even if the Fence has Fallen Down." In this transmogrification of English by the natives, Pharos distinguishes a symbol of "the attempt of the East to resist Western methodology, an attempt," he notes, "that must always fail" ("Gippo English" 2).

This theme is carried over to, and further developed, in the Indian novel. In his first encounter with Fielding, Aziz, missing one sentence because of its unfamiliar pronunciation, asks Fielding to teach him some new words in order to improve his English.

When one goes back to the Indian novel one recognizes both the early Alexandrian journalist and the mature novelist, on reading Forster's description of Fielding on his first meeting with Aziz:

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He was often struck by the liveliness with which the younger generation handled a foreign tongue. They altered the idiom, but they could say whatever they wanted to say quickly; there were none of the babuisms ascribed to them up at the club. (*API* 59)

El-Adl's English, Gippo English, and "Army English," and Indian English are all masterfully interwoven into the fabric of Forster's articulation of East-West dialectics in *A Passage to India*.

18 In an attempt to bring Alexandria and, by extension Egypt, into sharp focus, Forster changes the title of his regular Sunday column from "Our diversions "to" Alexandrian Vignettes." As a counterpoint to his previous essay on Enrico Terni's Alexandrian-Italian music, Pharos turns to the sentimental middle-class "English" music brought to the wartime Protectorate, in an article entitled "Handel in Egypt." "The Messiah" at Christmas in the Albert Hall with its "monster" choir amid the "crush of mackintoshes and umbrellas" and an audience rising in unison for the Hallelujah Chorus is finally recalled and compared to a less spectacular performance at the English church in Alexandria. Forster reflects on the reactions of aliens, "intelligent and musical Levantines," to the performance which "must have seemed to them so formless and provincial."

The most striking aspect of this vignette, in our opinion, is the figure of the Arab organ-blower, to whose function in the scene Forster devotes several lines. The context, tone and significance of the passage foreshadows a similar instance in the "Caves" section of *API* in which Adela Quested notices an Indian pulling a punkah (a ceiling, hand-operated fan). The unmistakable parallelism between the Arab organ-blower and Indian punkah wallah (operator) warrants juxtaposing extracts from both scenes:

i. The Arab Organ-blower in "Handel in Egypt":

here was the crush all right—a dense block of khaki...They did find a place—one always does in Handel—some on the floor and the organ steps, myself in a window sill...And there was someone else in the church who struck a note even more critical than the Levantines, I refer to the organ-blower. This organ blower no doubt through no wish of his own—was an Arab. He blew not far from my Presbyterian window-sill, and he had dined on garlic. Being merry by nature he kept grinning in the hope that one of us would lighten his labours by grinning back, which we were too respectable to do. What would this man have thought of our performance, supposing him to think? Of course he didn't think. He was just a humble servitor. But in his person Egypt and the East were represented in that church—the East that generated Handel's religion and receives it back in an explosive form...There is nothing mystic here—only a promise of permanent comfort such as no Oriental thinker would tolerate. As the Oriental grows thoughtful he grows sad—that organ-blower would stop smiling if his brain developed. As the Englishman grows thoughtful he grows hopeful—it is the main source of his strength. ("Handel in Egypt" 2)

ii. The Punkah-Wallah in *A Passage to India*:

The court was crowded and of course very hot, and the first person Adela noticed in it was the humblest of all who were present, a person who had no bearing officially upon the trial: the man who pulled the punkah. Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform near the back, in the middle of the gangway, and caught her attention as she came in, and seemed to control the proceedings. He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god—not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impress her. This man would have been notable anywhere; among the thin-hammed, flat-chested mediocrities of Chandrapore he stood out as divine, yet he was of the city, its garbage had nourished him, he would end on its rubbish heaps. Pulling the rope towards him, relaxing it rhythmically, sending swirls of air over others, receiving none himself, he seemed apart from human destinies, a male fate, a winnower of souls. Opposite him, also on a platform, sat the little assistant magistrate, cultivated, self-conscious, and conscientious. The punkah-wallah was none of these things; he scarcely knew that he existed and did not understand why the court was fuller than usual, indeed he did not know that it was fuller than usual, didn't even know he worked a fan, though he thought he pulled a rope. Something in his aloofness impressed the girl from middle-class England, and rebuked the narrowness of her sufferings. In virtue of what had she collected this roomful of people together? Her particular brand of opinions, and the suburban Jehovah who sanctified them—by what right did they claim so much importance in the world, and assume the title of civilization? (*API* 207)

The two scenes are scenes of sharp contrast of class values between the Arab organ-blower and the punkah-wallah who represent the unassuming lower class natives and the overbearing sophisticated higher and middle class Britons. They are also an eloquent statement of the unbridgeable gulf between the colonizer and the colonized. In a sketch entitled "Photographic Egypt" Pharos explores the disparity between the actual sights, sounds, and smells of Egyptian streets and the touristic sentimentalized Egypt of the commercial photo albums and picture postcards. Egypt of boys expectorating sugar cane, of long, horse-drawn wagons, filled with women squatting on their feet, of trays with loaves of bread and balanced upon the head of a man, of eyes blinded by trachoma, and of the ever present vagrants—this Egypt is contrasted with the idealized version of Queen Victoria and the novels of Robert Hitchens. "[A] sumptuous and exotic country...with cushions in front and the Pyramids behind and maidens going with pitchers to the well in the middle distance," sheikhs praying on leopard skins beneath date palms, harem girls draped against mashrabiyyeh, and fond, appealing children asleep on the necks of dewy-eyed donkeys. In short what is presented is the Orient of Western imagination, the East designed to tantalize the Handel audience.

Expressing admiration of the sensitive letters of Lady Duff Gordon (the English traveller who chose to die in Egypt), Forster longs for the authentic representation that would include "the little muddles and messes" of the modern Alexandrian scene

and thus eradicate for ever the “myth” (“Photographic Egypt” 2) of photographic Egypt. In other places of his canon, Forster is solidly for an Orientalism that is rid of sentimentalism, yet retentive of romance.

In another *Egyptian Mail* insertion under the heading “John McNeill Has Come: Impressions of a Meeting” Pharos focuses his attention on the British expatriate community, launching a scathing attack on the clergymen who foist their biblical and moral wares as a panacea with neither vision nor insight into human nature. Forster once again analyses a public event, that is the Scottish Evangelist’s address to a mass of soldiers, officers and chaplains at Montazah.

20 While commending McNeill’s warmth and showmanship, Forster—the historian—faults the preacher’s homely exposition of the story of Naaman for artistic insincerity in the same way he debunked false presentation of touristic photographic Egypt. McNeill’s oration failed both to move his critic and to hypnotize the troops because the preacher “had never visualized to himself the events he was pretending to describe. “As an artist,” the frustrated novelist complains, “he is insincere to his fingertips. He uses words not because he understands them but in the hope they will stick.” McNeill’s denunciation of “sin”—by which is meant “sexual irregularity” and of the disease which is its “inevitable consequence” is classed by Forster, at the time preoccupied with Mohammed El-Adl, as “empty rant” on a subject “better approached from the scientific side than from the emotional” (“John McNeill” 2). Moreover, McNeill’s defect seen against the background of occupied Egypt can be understood as one with the mortal blindness of Major Callendar and of official Anglo-India in *A Passage to India*.

During his last year in Egypt, Forster flew in an airplane for the first time—an experience vividly rendered in his essay entitled “Higher Aspects” and recounted in a letter published in the *National Review* after his return to England. Forster found his flight awesome, exhilarating and occasionally even frightening, but as in earlier vignettes it is the effect on his apprehension of reality that attracts sustained attention: “Moments of funk divided by a vision so glorious that one forgets them instantly.” His airborne perception was of a “triumphant exhibition of reality...the reality that is neither scenery nor map,” a force that had eluded the imagination of Dante and Shelley. Pharos says in conclusion, “There is nothing mystic in aviation, but no earthly pleasure resembles it. It has opened up a new kingdom of material beauty” (“Higher Aspects” 2).

Flying, like swimming, sex and learning how to use the telephone (three skills Forster acquired in Alexandria), was to him another gesture of independence, and ultimately accepting life’s possibilities. For him, as for his Alexandria-related successors Robert Liddell, Lawrence Durrell, and D.J. Enright, East provided a unique window on reality.

Forster’s piece “Royalty” is a minor sketch on a visit of a former Egyptian Sultan to Alexandria. Nevertheless it provides further illustration of Forster’s keen attention to detail and of his satiric presentation of contrasts and paradoxes. His dreamlike

account of the carnival is soon interrupted by the press of the crowd. What is noteworthy about this sketch is that, both in texture and phrasing, it anticipates his description of the straw-hatted Cavafy on the Rue Lespius “standing motionless at a slight angle to the universe.”

With the conclusion of the armistice, and approaching the end of his sojourn, Forster feels free to assess “Army English” with much the same flair as he had earlier dealt with “Gippo English.” A common layman’s error about military language according to Pharos is the assumption that army diction thrives on commands when in fact it “prophesies - a sublimer course.”

Such posted notices prove the point:

“No person will loiter within the vicinity of these steps,”

“Troops will not pass this way,”

“The attention of NCO’s and men is called to the fact of the danger of losing dentures while bathing. NCO’s and men will therefore remove dentures before bathing.”

“Army English,” Pharos continues, “has little need for the imperative mood. It has merely to state what is going to happen. The notices are really communiques that describe the future instead of the past. They are edicts of the Immanent Will.”

Other characteristics of “Army English” include an indefinable “richness” of vocabulary and the corresponding habit of hesitating to “employ one word where four will do”. Hence, an even more cryptic notice:

“The numerous convalescent officers at present to be seen perambulating Cherif Pacha St. in blue bands will thus be obviated.”

Not even the Oxford English Dictionary, he submits, seems equal to the task of “obviating” an officer. Pharos, here as before, balances his satire and thus develops another trenchant comment on the behaviour of official Britons abroad - with the last laugh on the forces of the Empire itself. His general approach to the English expatriates and critical attitude towards Anglo-Egyptians will culminate in his caustic indictment of the Anglo-Indians in *A Passage to India*.

The final vignette Pharos was to write before his departure is “England’s Honour.” For the first time Pharos returns to the medium of fiction that he had forsaken since the beginning of the war and the completion of *Maurice*. This satire on the strained relations between a Greek Alexandrian and her English nurse constitutes Forster’s first overt effort to transmute his Egyptian experience into a form more closely related to his Indian novel. One feels as though Forster’s creative instincts, having lapsed into remission during the war, are beginning to stir and revive.

The narrative relates the manoeuvres of one Miss Plummer who resigns from her job ostensibly for the sake of “England’s Honour,” an oblique phrase intended to convey a distaste for “being in service under a foreigner, only to negotiate a higher

salary with an Armenian family. The efforts of her Greek mistress to retain Miss Plummer are finally resolved by an imperious delegation from the local expatriate servant colony, presided over by “the doyenne of the community,” Mrs. Maggs. In what must have been a familiar upstairs-downstairs sitcom, Miss Plummer’s wages are doubled, she takes the job with the Armenians, gives a month’s notice as soon as she arrives, “and England’s honour is thus preserved.”

Against the pretensions to superiority and consuming greed of British jobbers in Egypt, Forster clearly sides with the native, as he did in his afore-mentioned pamphlet, *The Government of Egypt*, and he will more openly do with native Indians in *API*.

The character of Miss Plummer and attending circumstances prefigure the more amply developed Miss Derek in *API* who, besides taking advantage of her Indian employer, joins the chorus in the British Club in disparaging him.

22 What is more important, however, about Miss Plummer’s and other such cases is Forster’s fictionalized handling of a theme, which emerges at many points in his sketches for the *Egyptian Mail*, and which would provide the governing principle for his yet uncompleted masterpiece.

Alexandria, therefore, was a time, a place, an emotion, and a crucial intermediate phase from which the distinguished English novelist, inspired by the mystique of the East, could examine and explore his human and artistic potential and approach what would be his definitive work.

Even though his journalist contributions to the *Egyptian Mail* may well be minor literature, they provide not only a valuable perspective on the British expatriate community in Egypt during WWI, but also offer perceptive insights into Forster’s creative intellect grappling with the themes and preoccupations destined to dominate *A Passage to India*.

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ENDNOTES

1. EMF describes the people elsewhere as follows: “The mild and cheerful Egyptians seemed (especially to one who had known Indians) an easy people to live with” (*Government of Egypt* 5).

2. Autograph manuscript scraps on Mohammed El-Adl, F2/11, [Kings].