little-known documents

Pericles in Paradise

E. M. FORSTER

INTRODUCTION BY
FOTEINI DIMIROULI

Introduction

E. M. FORSTER'S IMMERSION IN THE THRIVING COMMUNITY OF EUROPEAN WRITERS AND ARTISTS IN ALEXANDRIA INCREASED HIS CONFIDENCE as a writer; it also mitigated the social alienation he had experienced on his arrival in Egypt in 1915 to volunteer with the Red Cross. His theatrical sketch "Pericles in Paradise" (1918), published here for the first time, is populated by characters modeled on the Alexandrian elite that fostered his sense of belonging. In addition, it bears the mark of a privileged position Forster himself was uneasy about: that of an Englishman navigating a city under British rule and removed from the realities faced by the native Egyptian population.[1]

The protagonist of "Pericles in Paradise," Pericles Anastassiades, was a real-life Greek Alexandrian cotton merchant and amateur painter with literary and intellectual interests. His investment in both commercial and artistic pursuits was a rare combination that galvanized Forster's exploration of a conflict that he saw as typically Alexandrian—between the elevated realm of culture and the superficiality of a world dominated by monetary concerns. Educated in England and well-connected within the foreign community of artists and literati in Alexandria, Anastassiades was key to the expansion of Forster's social circle and to his growing familiarity with the city. In the travel essay "Cotton from the Outside" (1918), Forster fashions himself as an ignorant, bewildered outsider, one who relies on the able and knowledgeable Anastassiades to guide him through the chaotic Alexandrian cotton market. In "Pericles in Paradise" Forster revisits his anxieties about the disorienting colonial space, but the sketch remains a unique instance of his use of the narrative trope of the fantastic—amid a thirteen-year fallow period in his career as a writer of fiction—to parody Western insularity and its internal conflicts by transferring Anastassiades to a symbolic realm.[2]

Through stylistic experimentation with the humorous and absurdist tropes of British pantomime, as well as its convention, dating to the Middle Ages, of placing "heaven" and "hell" on either side of the stage, in the sketch Forster draws attention to the incongruous coexistence of artists, the military, and the colonial administration in the city.[3] Pericles is ultimately cast as the hero, facing an unyielding quandary when farcical miscommunications

FOTEINI DIMIROULI is Career Development Fellow in English and Outreach Fellow at Keble College, University of Oxford. Her forthcoming book, with Oxford University Press, focuses on the twentieth-century English and American authors whose writings secured C. P. Cavafy's entry into the world literature canon.

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and gaffes hinder consensus on whether up or down is the right way toward heaven. Yet the satire also hosts sinister undertones: the characters' loss of agency and sense of direction evokes Forster's own difficult relation to the climate of British imperialism and the political scene of wartime Britain while testing his profound belief in the power of homosocial artistic groups—what he termed "the aristocracy of the sensitive"—to reset the moral compass of a depraved world ("What" 70).[4]

It remains unclear whether Forster regarded the piece as worthy of publication, even as the setting of "Pericles in Paradise" gestures to the narrative strategies of temporal and spatial displacement that he routinely employed in the rest of his work. Expeditions to extraterrestrial sites—for example, the boy's visit to heaven in "The Celestial Omnibus" (1911) and the "heavenward" elevation of Mrs. Wilcox to "a vault as of hell, sooty black" in *Howards End* (1911 [95])—stage existential exploration or escapes from heteronormativity and conventionality not only in Forster's canonical works but also in his less-known stories.[5] Ambreen Hai turns to these stories, often deemed too "whimsical, slight, or nonserious" for critical consideration, to suggest that Forster routinely used fantasy "as a form of code" to convey a political message—one that linked homosexual desire "with interlocking forms of societal oppression such as of race, class, and gender" (218). Similarly telling of Forster's interest in marginality is Pericles's attempt to decide upon the "right" direction by comparing himself to other characters in the sketch, only to find that he does not fit in any of the categories they represent—be it in terms of vocation, nationality, religion, or politics. Beyond the text's parodic surface lies the disquieting reality of Pericles's position as a radical outsider in the society he inhabits.

Forster's preoccupation with the precarious identity of a misfit is also potently reflected in the sketch's fictional rendition of C. P. Cavafy, the Greek Alexandrian poet whom he intensely admired and whose work he promoted throughout his own lifetime.[6] Early in their acquaintance, Forster wrote a letter to the infamously reticent poet that evoked Dante's *Inferno* to contemplate the correlation between their artistic dispositions and "depravity" (a term employed by Forster to suggest homosexual orientation ["To C. P. Cavafy"]).[7] The letter's conflation of infernal allusions, questions about sexuality, and notions of artistic uniqueness prefigure the Cavafy character's decision to descend, rather than ascend, the sketch's staircase of heaven, as well as his repeated reference to the "regrettable tendency" guiding his actions.[8] This unexpected, solitary deviation sheds a different light on Forster's widely quoted description of Cavafy as an alluring presence "standing at a slight angle to the universe," in a critical essay written a year later, in 1919. If Cavafy's self-assured, and seemingly unavoidable, pursuit of an irregular route in the sketch introduces possibilities for the disruption of normative behavior, the obliqueness of Cavafy's "slight angle" in Forster's essay must also be considered among the author's many metaphoric allusions to creativity and homosexuality as interrelated agents of difference and detachment ("Poetry" 91).[9]

Cavafy's katabasis into an archetypal topos—which could be either heaven or hell, either transgressive or redemptive—and Pericles's quest, at once comical and desperate, betray the sketch's allegorical distillation of a world punctuated by rigid structural divisions. Fraught with treachery and unrealized expectations, the paradisiacal "journey" interrogates stereotypical depictions of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism as an exemplar of diversity and tolerance, while also criticizing societal norms that reach beyond the sketch's Alexandrian references. Epitomizing Forster's use of fantasy to "stage the otherwise unspeakable, presenting readers with possibilities that took them out of the realm of the conventional without having to name what those possibilities might be" (Hai 222), the alternate universe of "Pericles in Paradise" poses questions bigger than it can resolve. It provides, however, an insight into the opaque ways in which Forster's writing interweaves themes of belonging, transgression, and otherness with symbolic topographies—a fusion that is central to understanding Forster's work as a whole.

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Notes

I am grateful to the Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge, and the Society of Authors at the E. M. Forster Estate for kindly granting me permission to publish this work. I am also indebted to Eleni Papargyriou, for the timely prompt, and to the archivist Patricia McGuire, for her invaluable help.

1. The complete manuscript of the sketch was found among the E. M. Forster Papers at King's College, Cambridge. Its opening lines also appear in a letter Forster sent to the poet Robert Trevelyan (1918) during an exchange of artistic endeavors ("To Robert Trevelyan").

2. By the time Forster arrived in Egypt he had already published all his major fictional works except for *A Passage to India* (1924) and *Maurice* (written in 1913–14 and published posthumously, in 1971). Apart from the sketch introduced here, the only other text in which Forster reverts to fantasy and fiction between 1911 and 1924 is "England's Honour (Being Extracts from the Diary of Mme. Kyriakidis, Ramleh)," which was published in *The Egyptian Mail* on 26 January 1919 (Quinn and Hejazi 144–45).

3. The sketch could also be examined in relation to Forster's nonfictional Egyptian writings: the guidebook *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (1922), articles on Egypt published from 1916 onward in *The Egyptian Mail* and *The Egyptian Gazette* (*Pharos* and *Uncollected Egyptian Essays*), and "Notes on Egypt," part of the Labour Party pamphlet *The Government of Egypt* (1920). These writings have had a mixed reception—criticized for endorsing the city's expatriate culture and perpetuating an exclusionary narrative of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism (Halim 120–78), they have also been appreciated for maintaining a critical view of the "bogus 'European' culture of Alexandria" and its distance from "the reality of the indigenous world" (Jeffreys 72–73).

4. Forster's faith in the aesthetic category as a force of social betterment, tolerance, and inclusivity also encompassed beliefs in the spiritual and intellectual value of homosocial kinship inspired by Edward Carpenter's ideas on homosocial utopianism. The socially visionary aspects of fraternity making underwrite Forster's fictional plots (Martin; Rahman), his appeals to "Love the Beloved Republic" as the mobilizer of a better world ("What" 67), and his engagement with Platonism (Raschke; Poburko 31). When in "Pericles in Paradise" Sir Bartle interprets Pericles's desire for female presence in terms of artistic ambition, the moment gestures to the covert gender dynamics propelling homosocial bonding—namely, "the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (Sedgwick 25–26).

5. Among the principles guiding the fusion between fantasy and realistic storytelling in Forster's work was "the introduction of ordinary men into no man's land, the future, the past, the interior of the earth, the fourth dimension" (*Aspects* 75–78). Critics have extensively explored the homoerotic undertones of Forster's attraction to the supernatural element. The enchanted space of the dell in *The Longest Journey* partakes of Forster's signature turn to fantastical plots "marked at times by frequent contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies" to mediate his own struggles with same-sex desire and to criticize society for producing this conflict (Miracky 130). Similarly, the outer space in "The Machine Stops" (1910), a dystopian short story, appears to be "cloaking a tale of sexual transgression," in which a series of binary oppositions posits one term "as the standard or norm, against which the other one is a deviation" (55, 57). Pericles's entrapment within a dichotomous structure and his eventual failure to attain an imagined paradise recall the "vision of an alternative life frequently referred to but never unveiled" in "The Machine Stops" (Pordzik 55, 57), as well as Rickie's unsuccessful, "Carpenter-like attempts to foster fraternity" in *The Longest Journey* (Miracky 139). In these works, contradictions, anguish, and open-endedness are enabled by Forster's use of fantasy as a portal into his characters' subconscious desires.

6. Forster was first introduced to Cavafy in 1917 through Pericles Anastassiades, who was a close friend of the poet's and came into partial possession of his archive after his death (Tsirkas 234–38). This was the beginning of Forster's personal investment in Cavafy's work, which spanned thirty years and materialized in the publication of critical pieces, the promotion of translated poems in *The Criterion*, and persistent, if unfruitful, efforts to publish a volume of Cavafy's translated work in England while Cavafy was still alive. Forster once described the sketch published here to George Savidis, Cavafy's editor, as a "'skit' in which Cavafy makes an appearance" (qtd. in Savidis 169). Savidis deemed that its future publication would be valuable "evidence" of the friendship between Forster and Cavafy.

7. Forster suffered from recurrent writer's block, which he attributed to the social constraints placed upon his sexual identity. Forster's biography *A Great Unrecorded History* (Moffat) and the collection of critical essays *Queer Forster* (Martin and Piggford) consider the fraught relation between creativity and homosexuality to be key to a better understanding of Forster's life and work.

8. Drawing from the incomplete version of the sketch that appears in Forster's letter to Trevelyan, Haag considers the "staircase of heaven" to be an allusion to the steps leading to Cavafy's flat on Rue Lepsius in Alexandria (58). While the busy staircase in Forster's piece may have indeed been partly inspired by the real-life image of famous literary and artistic personalities ascending and descending Cavafy's steps, the poet's descent in the sketch still deserves attention for its metaphoric value.

9. "The Poetry of C. P. Cavafy" was the first critical essay to introduce Cavafy to an English-speaking audience. Initially published in *The Nation and the Athenaeum*

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(25 Apr. 1919), it was republished in *The Egyptian Gazette* (17 May 1919) and eventually included in Forster's collection of essays on Alexandria, *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923). Its impressionistic account of Cavafy's persona has come to symbolize the relationship between British author and Alexandrian poet.

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Pericles in Paradise

[SCENE: HEAVEN. A STAIRCASE STRETCHING infinitely in either direction up and down through space. Pericles is discovered standing in an attentive attitude upon one of the steps.]

PERICLES.[1] Someone must come along soon. Then I shall know which way to go. It's no use going up and having to come down or going down and having to come up. One assumes it will be up, but these places are very tricky. [Nodding.] There must be some rule, some arrangement. I shall just stop still and see. [His face brightens at the sound of steps far below.] Hullo Sir Bartle! So you're following me.

SIR BARTLE.[2] [Ascending into the scene.] Bless me what a climb. [He stops.] Ah! Hullo Pericles! What a delightful place, what a perfectly delightful place.

PERICLES. It's Heaven, eh, Sir Bartle.

SIR BARTLE. I should just think it was. Look at the view, and the what dye' call them and the thingummi jigs—those winged things. What do you call them?

PERICLES. [Fidgety.] Quails, Quails. Shall we be getting on?

SIR BARTLE. But isn't it a delightful place?

PERICLES. [Genial.] One just wants a woman here and it would be perfect.

SIR BARTLE. And you shall sketch & sketch & sketch & sketch and sketch and sketch. . . .

PERICLES. So shall we be getting on?

SIR BARTLE. And here comes our eminent friend Cavaffy. Oh! Better and better. [Cavaffy steps slowly into the scene but from above.]

PERICLES. [Laughing.] Hullo! Why are you going the wrong way?

CAVAFFY.[3] A regrettable tendency, my dear Perry, a regrettable tendency.

PERICLES. But surely the show's upstairs. You ought to go up with Sir Bartle and me, not down.

CAVAFFY. Follow the Baronet, my dear Perry, follow the Baronet. Perhaps regrettably, perhaps not regrettably, I descend, I descend. [He does so.]

SIR BARTLE. [Calling after him.] Have you seen any quails?

CAVAFFY. Sir Bartle, I have not, and your question frankly puzzles me. But I am pleased to have met you, very pleased.

PERICLES. Now what's one to make of a chap like that? Now there's a chap of acknowledged talent. [Sir Bartle repeating *quails* has resumed his climb.] 'Pon my word I believe Cavaffy would know. Old Sir Bartle's a bit passé. Besides I'm an artist myself. I'll risk it. [He runs down a few steps & runs into Terni who is ascending.]

TERNI.[4] Accidente.[5]

PERICLES. [Shrieking.] You call yourself an artist! Well, you ought to go down not up. Down not up.

TERNI. Seguo la mia mentalità.[6] [He moves up & disappears.]

PERICLES. Now there's another chap of acknowledged talent and a very smart chap too. What's one to make of that? [He catches sight of Agostino, also ascending.] Well I shall know now—Agostino—just a word between friends. I'm in a bit of a fix to be quite frank. I don't know whether the show—you know, the big show, the chief show—is upstairs or down. Which is it?

AGOSTINO.[7] Non posso dire. Sono incêrto anch'io, segno Terni chè montà.[8] [He follows him.]

PERICLES. Perhaps the poets go down and the musicians up. But I'm a painter, so which am I to do? [He returns to his step then sees Gen. Boyle descending the flight towards him, & gives a great sigh of relief.] Oh well that settles it. The reception is obviously in the rez-de-chaussée. Hullo General! How are you General?[9] Going down to Heaven? So am I. May I come along with you? There's

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a poet friend of mine I'd like to present if—[He stops. An Admiral is ascending towards them out of the abyss.] Hullo Admiral, excuse me, but do you care for music? [He remains upon his step.] Perhaps the navy goes up and the Army down. But I'm a cotton merchant, so which am I to do? [Enter from above Mr John Mc Neill.][10] Well he ought to know he's so popular. [Enter from below Bishop Mc Innes.][11] Well he ought to know, he's so influential. Perhaps nonconformists go down and Church of England up. But I'm Orthodox, so what am I to do? [Mr Loyd George from above.] Hooray, hooray, that's the man to win the war. [Mr Balfour from below.] Or is that the man? Perhaps Tories go up and Liberals down. But I'm a Socialist. [King George V from above.] Well you couldn't beat that. [The Kaiser from below.] Still I'm not so sure. Perhaps the English go down and the Germans up. But I'm a Greek. [He remains standing on his step. Frantically—] This won't do, I'm wasting time, I must come to a decision. I must introduce some personal cachet. . . . There must be some arrangement or something. . . . I know what, I'll follow the very next person, whoever it is, never matter whom, because whichever way I go I'm certain to be among congenial and interesting people. If I don't get the General I'll get the Bishop. And so on. Yes. [He waits. For a long time the scene is empty. Then enter at exactly the same moment Charitakis with a great many books, from above, and Madame Charitakis with not quite so many books, from below. They meet on the step and begin to exchange notes.]

CHARITAKIS.[12] Rumours of snails.

PERICLES. Snails? Snails? Well it can't be up this way.

MADAME C. Rumours of pails and of tails.

PERICLES. Still it hardly sounds hers.[13]

CHARITAKIS. [Writing.] The conclusion is obvious. Read scalae scales, stairs.

MADAME C. Obviously. [Also writes.]

PERICLES. I like this, it's tonic, it's the scientific method. One can live too much in art. [Ingratiating.] So which is it please? Down the scales or up? Music eh as well as science! [He laughs.]

CHARITAKIS. [To his wife.] This terminates the present investigation.

MADAME C. Does it?

CHARITAKIS. You have done with your books.

MADAME C. Have I? [They give all their books to Pericles.]

PERICLES. [Peevish.] Too many, too heavy, books are no use when you haven't a book case.

CHARITAKIS. [Tapping the pile.] The answer to your question is in there. Being not a philosophic question it is not answerable. [He and Madame C. disappear at the same moment, he proceeding down the staircase, she up. Pericles is left nursing their library.]

PERICLES. [Staggering.] Apparently wives go up and husbands down. But I'm—I don't know what I am. [With a burst of candour.] Yes I do. I'm a shit—[He scuttles up a few steps. The books impede him. He scuttles down and they over balance him so that he falls right over the banisters into his bed.]

THE LADY OF THE MOMENT. Mais. . . .

PERICLES. [Sitting up.] J'ai trop mangé.[14]

Editor's Notes

1. "Pericles" is Pericles Anastassiades, a Greek businessman, patron of the arts, and amateur painter who worked in the Censorship Department under Robert ("Robin") Allason Furness. Forster refers to Anastassiades as early as 1916 in a letter to Virginia Woolf in which he mentions teaching English to "a well-pleased Greek" (Forster, "To Virginia Woolf").

2. Bartle Edward Frere (1815–84) was a baronet and British colonial administrator who was involved in a string of regional wars that culminated in the invasion of Zululand (1879) and the First Boer War (1880–81).

3. C. P. Cavafy (1863–1933) was a Greek Alexandrian poet who spent most of his adult life in Alexandria work-

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ing as a clerk at the Department of Irrigation. He wrote in a Greek idiolect with a wide range of registers ranging from the archaic to the colloquial (a mixture of Katharevousa and Demotic Greek). His writing included erotic poetry that dealt explicitly with same-sex love. Forster was the first to introduce Cavafy to the English-speaking world, in an essay written in 1919.

4. Enrico Terni (1879–1960) was a composer of Italian Jewish descent born in Alexandria, where he lived until 1947. In 1921 he married the famous Italian novelist Fausta Cialente. According to Haag, Forster met Terni in 1916, when the novelist was organizing classical concerts for the troops at Montazah; Forster was staying with Furness at Abou el Nawatir and was likely introduced to the composer by Terni's neighbor, the opera singer Aida Borchgrevink (58). A friendship developed between them, and in 1917 Forster referred to Terni's work as "the music of exile" in his article "A Musician in Egypt."

5. "Accident."

6. "I follow my own mind."

7. Agostino John Sinadino (1876–1956) was an Italian symbolist poet of Greek descent who wrote in both Italian and French. His family was from Alexandria, where he spent his childhood and later life. Forster composed an unpublished poetic tribute to Agostino entitled "To See a Sinadino Again" in 1924. It appears in the same manuscript folder as "Pericles in Paradise" (KCC) and is considered to be written in imitation of Cavafy's erotic poems.

8. "I could not say. I am unsure myself; I am following Terni, who ascends."

9. R. C. Boyle, a brigadier general in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, was described by a consulting surgeon to the force as "enlightened and progressive" because of his leading role in organizing activities related to army welfare (Tubby 148).

10. John McNeill (1854–1933) was a popular Scottish preacher who resigned from the church in 1891 to become a traveling evangelist. In 1916 he took up a wartime role with the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) and served in France, Egypt, and Malta. One of his sermons, delivered in Egypt, is the subject of Forster's essay "John McNeill Has Come."

11. Rennie MacInness (1870–1931) was an Anglican missionary who arrived in Alexandria in 1899 and spent the rest of his career in the Middle East, where the presence of the Church of England was strengthened by the increasing British influence over Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century. He became bishop of Jerusalem in 1914.

12. Georgios Charitakis (1885–1943) was an economist who resided in Alexandria from 1909 to 1919 and was one of Cavafy's early admirers. In 1914 he published an essay on the poet's work in the periodical Νέα Ζωή ("New Life"). In 1926 he was appointed governmental minister by the Pangalos dictatorship in Greece; the same year, the Greek government awarded Cavafy the Silver Medal of the Order of the Phoenix on Charitakis's advice.

13. The final word is a guess; it is not fully legible.

14. "I ate too much."

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