The Learned Heathen: Love and Respectability in E.M Forster's Maurice

Love and respectability, in Forster's *Maurice,* are concepts caught in flux between the moral strictures of Edwardian society and a personal reception of Greek antiquity: concepts that are constructed more than they are experienced. Through the opposed characters of Maurice Hall and Clive Durham, Forster explores the role of the classics in both the interior and exterior life, comparing the carnal and chaste, Christian and pagan, and most fundamentally the Ancient and Modern. Informed closely by his own experience with the classics and homosexual life, Forster presents the influence of the classics as both transgressive and affirming, constructing ultimately a picture of Edwardian homosexual life that selects aspects of both antiquity and modernity. This essay will explore the duality of Forster's reception of Greek antiquity in the context of Edwardian society, drawing out what Forster saw fit to admire, retain, or discard in the pursuit of his 'happier year'[1].

Paganism and Christianity- A Corrupting Influence?

Maurice and Clive's relationship begins not as lovers, but as fellow students- yet not as equals. We encounter their dynamic for the first time as something of a civilising (or decivilising) mission; Maurice the suburban 'yokel in Athens'[2] finds an intellectual sparring partner and confidant in Clive, and their initial relationship is built on an exchange of knowledge. Clive, for his part, loves quietly and influences even more subtly the beloved, stripping Maurice eventually of his faith and moral hesitancies around homosexuality. There are two layers of reception that must be considered in understanding the fraught tensions between pagan and Christian ideas. The first is personal; Clive's construction of his academic homosexuality and its reliance on the classics. The second is the reception of this catalytic effect itself, and the moral panic provoked in Edwardian society by the corrosive nature non-Christian ideas, often evidenced by the female secondary characters in the lives of Maurice and Clive respectively. Considering these ideas in conjunction, it is possible to discern Forster's overarching perspective (especially in view of his personal experience at Cambridge): where wider society may see desecration, for those with similar experiences classics is the avenue through which one might 'caper on the summit'[3].

This argument is built upon the distinctly academic construction of Clive's homosexuality, and as such it is necessary to understand the origins of Clive's particular brand of homosexual experience, which in itself connects the classics and faith. Clive's personal association with the classics is one of refuge; damned by his 'malady'[4] in a Christian sense, he looks instead to classical reflections on love and desire. In particular, Forster connects him to the *Phaedrus,* from which he draws an understanding of Plato's position on homosexuality is as 'a passion which we can direct, like any other, towards good or bad'. [5] This is a relieving departure from the clear condemnation of Christian doctrine, yet in his homosexual life he is no less restrained; here, it is a self-imposed academic restriction, focused on ideal, pure love, and is also almost doctrinal in its stringency. Nevertheless, it is non-Christian, and Forster makes explicit the idea that he was 'obliged …to throw over'[6] Christianity, instead choosing to 'withdraw higher into the classics'[7]. This creates a dichotomy based squarely in each philosophy's relation to homosexuality: the classics (broadly) for and Christianity against. Clive chooses distinction from society as a whole, using the classics as both a scholarly refuge and a means of delineation.

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[1] Forster, Edward Morgan, *Maurice* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), ii
[2] Forster, *Maurice*, 43
[3] Forster, *Maurice*, 25
[4] Forster, *Maurice*, 55
[5] Forster, *Maurice*, 55
[6] Forster, *Maurice*, 56
[7] Forster, *Maurice*, 56

What, then, of the reaction of their female relatives? Gemma Moss[8] suggests that women in Forster's oeuvre can be read as 'agents of social purity, characterised as the guardians of tradition, social interaction and the operations of suburban life, policing sexual and domestic behaviour.', which strengthens their suburban horror at the revelation of the respective students' newfound agnosticism when they refuse Communion. Indeed, it is in this case helpful to use women as a proxy for wider Edwardian society; by reacting in this manner Forster clarifies that society does in fact see this form of education as a desecration of moral order, and again separates his own perspective in that Maurice's internal experience is one of sublime enlightenment. Interestingly, the extent to which Maurice (and Clive himself) are corrupted is left mildly ambiguous. Despite his eschewal of Christian ideas, Clive never immerses himself in the shadowy world of pagan ritual. Nor is he openly malignant, with Forster placing the emphasis on his encouragement to Maurice to read the *Symposium* as an educational pursuit primarily, ulterior motives notwithstanding. While the intended provocation is an interrogation of his role as a corruptor, discerning contemporary readers (or readers of a similar persuasion) are left to consider a more redeeming role for Clive as a sharer of classical wisdom.

When considering reception of the classics, it is critical to remember that Forster himself was a student of the classics, and his reception (and subsequent construction of his own homosexual experience) at times closely mirrors Clive's. In particular, the deconstruction of faith in favour of dedication to the classics was facilitated by his membership of the Apostles, beginning on February the 9th, 1901.[9] Wendy Moffat's assessment of this group was that their 'faith in themselves, in truth, and in beauty was in effect a kind of neo-Platonic religion.';[10] the sort of fervency that has the power to catalyse dramatic changes in personal philosophy. Moreover, Risley's over-the-top corrupting figure was based on Lytton Strachey,[11] whose acquaintance Forster first made at Cambridge. When read in this way, it is straightforward to see Clive's development as analogous to Forster's own, which in turn suggests that this pattern of student ingenue, to enlightened (or corrupted) to corruptor was merely an expression of homosocial academic community. Coupled with Forster's own life, the classics become not a sinister force but a manner of intellectual inquiry into the self: his own reception informs the personal and societal perspectives of interactions with the classics in his narrative.

Sacred and Profane Love

The relationship between Maurice and Clive is, by Forster's own admission, 'idealistic'[12] in nature. Their affair is anything but torrid, focused on a pursuit of a beautiful, chaste and restrained love. In purposeful contrast, the relationship between Maurice and Alec is emotional and passionate in its embracing of the carnal, which Forster ultimately celebrates as an image of what homosexual identity could be (and by implication, suggests the discarding of the ivory tower approach). The classics here are critical to defining and separating the types of love, both in terms of textual analysis and in Forster's own intentions. Juxtaposing these two iterations of homosexuality, Forster allows himself room to pass narrative judgement on what he feels is worth pursuing, without being reductive of contemporary understandings of homosexual love.

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[8] Gemma Moss, 'Women In and Out: Forster, Social Purity, and Florence Barger' in Critical Essays on E. M. Forster's Maurice, ed. Emma Sutton and Tsung-Han Tsai (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press: 2020), 3

[9] Wendy Moffat, *A Great Unrecorded History: A New Life of E.M Forster*, 49 (n.b. page numbers subject to digital formatting)

[10] Moffat, *A Great Unrecorded History: A New Life of E.M Forster*, 51

[11] Forster, *Maurice*, Appendix B, 212

[12] Forster, *Maurice*, Appendix B, 211

As discussed, Clive's construction of homosexuality is rooted in academic discovery, particularly in the *Phaedrus*. In focusing on the *Phaedrus*, Forster draws attention to the particular style of identity that Clive curates for himself. The following passage from the *Phaedrus* typifies this, taken from Plato's metaphor of a charioteer and two horses:

The right-hand horse is upright and cleanly made; he has a lofty neck and an aquiline nose; his colour is white and his eyes dark; he is a lover of honour and modesty and temperance, and the follower of true glory; he needs no touch of the whip, but is guided by word and admonition only.[13]

This utter submission to one part of Plato's metaphorical depiction of the soul subverts our expectations of Clive's character; his acceptance of only one part of the tripartite soul is, somewhat counterintuitively, an extreme form of restraint. Presented as reasoned above all, it is made clear in his ascetic approach to passion that he is still a character of extremes, in ways that seem at first glance eminently reasonable. Both the language of this passage, with 'white' and 'aquiline' connoting purity and nobility respectively, and the explicit text make clear the academic purity inherent to Clive's homosexuality. His love of 'temperance' belies a disgust for indulgence; Forster emphasises through a strong classical framework that Clive is just as subject to human passions as Maurice, with his vice being single-minded pursuit of the intellectual. Joshua Adair conceives of Clive's characterisation as a 'point of intellectual entry'[14] into understanding Edwardian homosexual identity, which further invites critiques of the excessive and restrictive intellectualism he displays. The narrative reminders of human passion through Maurice's characterisation allow Forster to frame this intellectualism as a flaw in itself; while in isolation his asceticism could be read as flattering, it is tempered by a constant reminder of balanced passions, highlighting the characteristics Clive chooses not to cultivate.

However, there is also a degree of agency that must be afforded to Maurice in his pursuit of the profane. His experience with the classics preceding Clive's involvement is with an 'unexpurgated Martial'[15]; it is highly significant that his sexual experience and classical education are so intimately intertwined. Far from Clive's chaste academia, Forster highlights the prevalence of carnal desire in the classical world; this is a personal reception that is easily overshadowed by Clive's insistence on purity, and yet is critical to Forster's central focus on homosexual identity that is both noble and passsioante. The profane is not solely a corrupting imposition of modernity- Forster posits that the carnal impulse too has its roots in the much revered classical world.

This criticism of a character is perhaps representative of contemporary fluctuations in moral reasoning around homosexual identity, again informed directly by reception of classical works. Contemporary discourse centered largely around the hierarchy of the different types of love and their respective virtuous or immoral qualities, with intellectual and noble pursuits often taking moral relevance and superiority over carnal pleasures. Unsurprisingly, this was largely derived from works such as the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. Forster himself was subject to varying schools of thought on the matter. One of his most striking influences was the work of J.A. Symonds[16], whose thesis on Hellenistic Greek love provided both points of contention and the basis for further discourse. The crux of Symonds' argument is a reconciliation between 'inborn instincts of masculine love'[17] with nobler passions. Inherently, sensual appetites are discounted from the pursuit of nobility (in line with Platonic thought); it is this that Forster challenges. Acting particularly in line with the work of Edward Carpenter, Forster furthered a vision of homosexuality that encompassed

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[13] Plato and Benjamin Jowett, *Phaedrus*, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1636/1636-h/1636-h.htm

[14] Joshua Adair, *A Love That Cares Not Speak Its Name: Clive Durham as Narrative Guide in E. M. Forster's Maurice,* 2

[15] Forster, *Maurice*, 15

[16] Moffat, *A Great Unrecorded History: A New Life of E.M Forster*, 43

[17] Emma Roalsvig, *Symonds' Self-Revelation in Plato's Ideal Masculine Greek Love,* https://symondsproject.org/symonds-self-revelation-in-platos-ideal-masculine-greek-love/

beauty, nobility, and sexual appetites, termed Uranian love[18]. This often drew heavily on Walt Whitman's ideas of comradely love (which Symonds later espoused)[19]; a synthesis of intellectual and passionate experiences of homosexuality captured the *zeitgeist* of academic thought. From his more balanced perspective, Forster uses this nested reception of the classics (Symonds of Plato, Carpenter of Symonds, Forster of Carpenter and Whitman) as a vantage point from which to critique the narrow and unfulfilling form of homosexuality that Clive typifies. Antiquity, in his view, must be updated to suit modern passions, and Clive in his traditional recalcitrance embodies the very opposite of this.

Maurice and Alec, therefore, serve as the ideal example of the well-rounded Uranian love that Forster envisioned. Their happy escape into the Greenwood and their generally hearty relationship contrast sharply with the purified aesthetic relationship between Clive and Maurice. In a delightfully petty but narratively significant moment, Maurice returns to Penge at the end of the novel to inform Clive that he and Alec have 'shared' with one another. While this may initially seem uncharacteristically provocative, Barberà[20] describes the intention elegantly; Maurice must 'vindicate in the presence of him…a sort of Platonic Love that Clive and the rest of English society are not willing to accept.' This is ultimately also Forster's narrative aim; far from discarding the significance of classical beauty to male homosexuality, Forster instead aims to unify the sexual and intellectual aspects of personal identity, drawing from Plato not to deride him, but to uphold the equal importance of the sacred and profane, and in particular to rebut the view that moral worth can be found only in chaste or intellectual love.

Respectability and Relevance

Thus far, the key lenses through which classical reception has been assessed have been the internal and briefly the societal (in understanding where friction with the former comes from). Forster, however, makes classical reception by wider society something of a phenomenon. At points, it is society in Forster's narrative that poses the two key questions about the classics that Forster wishes to interrogate: 'How far?' and 'Why bother?'. The first of these questions asserts the secure position of Edwardian morality and societal standards, with the implication that at some point classical thought will encroach on this boundary of permissibility. The second is a reductive rephrasing of a broader question; up to what point is the pursuit of classics (and an eschewal of modernity in response) a noble pursuit, and when does modern life demand to be taken notice of? It would of course be remiss to consider the respectability of the classics without considering the main receivers, in that classical education was a pursuit of the upper class; by including this in our reading of reception, the picture of respectability in the narrative can be understood more precisely as a comment on upper-class sensibilities, as was Forster's intention, and heightening therefore the contrast between upper and middle-class forms of homosexuality against that of the working-class. In turn, Forster presents the former as influenced by the classics and the latter as more closely related to human instinct, and characteristically judging a blend of the two to be ideal.

Forster makes clear from the oustet that even within the hallowed academic haven of Cambridge, there are limits. More specifically, during the episode in Mr Cornwallis' translation class a student is asked to 'Omit: a reference to the

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[18] Forster, *Maurice*, Appendix A, 209

[19] Rictor Norton, *The Life of John Addington Symonds,* https://rictornorton.co.uk/symonds/symonds.htm

[20] Pau Gilabert Barberà, *Greece and Platonic Love in E. M. Forster's Maurice, or the greatness and limits of Antiquity as a source of inspiration*, 23

unspeakable vice of the Greeks.'[21] This is as explicit a picture of academic reception as Forster could create, highlighting the kind of necessary moral censorship that was par for the course in academic classical discussions. The topic is not treated, as Clive somewhat naively wishes, as a 'point of pure scholarship'[22] by virtue of its own obscenity. Maurice's later judgement of it as 'the one subject absolutely beyond the limit'[23] is far more accurate. The quiet vitriol of the adjective 'unspeakable' is perhaps important here; despite the importance of academic inquiry, Edwardian Christian morality is a hard line, transgression against which is not only challenging but inconceivable. Indeed, 'unspeakable' crops up again further on, this time self-referentially in Maurice's denunciation of himself as 'an unspeakble, of the Oscar Wilde sort'[24]. Contextually, it is very clear that Forster's '[coming] of age sexually in the shadow of the 1895 Wilde trials'[25] has influenced this perception, and yet it is in the tension between the classics and modern doctrine that his condition is qualified as unspeakable. Respect is afforded to academic inquiry insofar as it does not corrode society itself- this idea persists in the narrative as more a warning than a theme, but nevertheless provides a valuable moral angle to societal reception of the classics.

The second line of social inquiry is more nuanced, and in this nuance there lies a heightened challenge in trying to synthesise a perfect societal relationship to the classics. As ever in this novel of dual structure, Clive's and Maurice's situations are compared, with Forster using them as emblematic of their respective class backgrounds in charting their relationship with the classics. Turning first to Clive; as discussed, he is a character steeped so deeply in the classics that they become foundational to his very identity. It is therefore all the more shocking when he becomes abruptly disillusioned with not only the classics, but homosexuality (and indeed academics) as a whole. There is the ever present spectre of social respectability at play here, observable from the outset. To return to our earlier commentary on the role of women as social adjudicators, it is Clive's mother Mrs Durham that initially disapproves of his idea of travelling to Italy and Greece, dismissing it as 'travelling for play'[26]. Already, his fascination with the classics comes into conflict with the 'place in the countryside'[27] that Forster, and by extension England, grants to him. The trappings of an upper class education are not enough to safeguard the crumbling gentry class that Clive represents (as evidenced by the 'decaying roofs'[28] of Penge, with disrepair here symbolic of the condition of the class as a whole); he must instead accept his influence and position in politics to retain his position. Forster seems to comment, rather scathingly, on the failure of the academic sphere to maintain the social, despite his deep connection to the classical ideals. His own 'cosmopolitanism'[29] reveals an authorial perspective that is far more open-minded than Clive's narrow veneration of antiquity; it is little wonder that his intellectual position deteriorates.

In the ultimate symbolic narrative gesture, it is Clive's misguided pilgrimage that catalyses his disavowal of the classics. The dramatic image of his epiphany in a Dionysian theatre deserves interrogation on its own:

But he saw only dying light and a dead land. He uttered no prayer, believed in no deity, and knew that the past was devoid of meaning like the present, and a refuge for cowards.[30]

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[21] Forster, *Maurice*, 37
[22] Forster, *Maurice*, 37
[23] Forster, *Maurice*, 47
[24] Forster, *Maurice*, 131
[25] Moffat, *A Great Unrecorded History: A New Life of E.M Forster*, 14
[26] Forster, *Maurice*, 78
[27] Forster, *Maurice*, 78
[28] Forster, *Maurice*, 146
[29] Anthony Domestico, *E.M. Forster*, https://campuspress.yale.edu/modernismlab/e-m-forster/
[30] Forster, *Maurice*, 97

The repeated textual emphasis on death cuts to the heart of Forster's criticism of classical retreat; while perhaps noble in inquiry, classical ideals are simply not a strong enough force in modernity to serve as the basis of identity. This desolate image juxtaposes immediately Clive's 'radiant'[31] experience of the heterosexual impulse. While Forster may choose to leave this to 'inscrutable'[32] change, Adair connects this experience instead to Clive's pursuit of the 'social sanction which he values above all else'.[33] The subtle irony of the Dionysian theme is perhaps also important; associated most generally with wild abandon and ecstasy, it is deeply apt that a site dedicated to the veneration of everything Clive abhors should be the site of his disillusionment. Society's practical requirements and Clive's intellectual position are fundamentally irreconcilable, and when the former subsumes the latter Forster comments dually on the growing inadequacy of the classical ideal, and the prevalent societal perception of this inadequacy. The Ancient defers gracefully if inevitably to the pressures of the Modern.

Where Clive's estrangement from the classics is a dramatic and emotive affair, Forster frames Maurice's in a far more practical light. He frankly has 'no use for Greece'[34], and his assessment of stories from the classical cannon is that they are suited to those whose 'hearts are empty'[35]. Forster here epitomises the suburban and down-to-earth approach to homosexuality discussed in the previous section. While the classics served as a worthy impetus, they are now equally worthy of being discarded by fact of their distance. It is necessary here to comment on the involvement of Alec, who thus far has been considered fleetingly. The friction of the class structure is an integral part of understanding the shift away from the classical ideals of homosexuality. Norton posits that the pattern of cross-class (and it is of paramount importance that Maurice is understood as a middle class figure, not an aristocrat) relationships between middle and working-class men was a type of 'thoroughly middle-class ideology[36]'. Indeed, this was observable in Forster's own life, such as the relationship of his close friends Edward Carpenter and George Merrill, and his own lover Bob Buckingham, a policeman. This removes the necessity entirely of classical framing; in a relationship in which one participant (or both particpants in Maurice's case) has no intellectual connection to the classics, there is no room for emotional attachment to them either. The discrepancy in the respectability of their positions precludes classical involvement, and reception becomes a futile question, used by Forster only to enhance the masculine beauty of the escape to the Greenwood, a Whitmanesque ideal of love that exists outside respectability.

Conclusion: Forster's Vision of the Future

Forster's narrative and personal involvement with the classics is abiding, and his characters are used to admire and disregard certain aspects in equal turn. Through Clive and Maurice, Forster makes a compelling case for a syncretic construction of modern homosexuality, blending classical virtue and nobility with base passions (which he also justifies as being rooted in classical tradition). Drawing on contemporary discourses on the nature of modern homosexuality, Forster interrogates Plato and his recipients in turn to argue for classically informed, fulfilling love. Conversely, his exploration of the relationship between Maurice and Alec is a study in the deconstruction of the relevance of the classics, received, studied, and then developed into modernity. Reception is critical in even in the process of rejection, understanding the historical entanglement of homosexual identity and the classics in order to reframe moder homosexuality from a naturalistic perspective. In continual friction with this developing personal reception is the social reception of the classics, wherein they conflict with both the Christian morality and social rigidity of the Edwardian

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[31] Forster, *Maurice*, 101

[32] Forster, *Maurice*, 101

[33] Adair, *A Love That Cares Not Speak Its Name: Clive Durham as Narrative Guide in E. M. Forster's Maurice*, 5

[34] Forster, *Maurice*, 91

[35] Forster, *Maurice*, 91

[36] Rictor Norton, *Class Based Erotics*, https://rictornorton.co.uk/class.htm

period. Forster's reception of the classics within the narrative is a portrait of a dying academic God: venerated, investigated to argue points of value, but ultimately outliving their own relevance, passing safely into the realm of academic study as modernity flourishes.

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