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In These Times (/forums/these-times)

Feb 2, 2017 Edited by: Debra Rae Cohen

In These Times is a space for our community to explore issues of social justice, teaching, and research in uncertain times.

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Contributors

On or About November 2016, Modernist Studies Changed (/forums/posts/or-about-november-2016-modernist-studies-changed)

James Gifford

On November 9th, 2016, I was teaching my last class on Hemingway's *in our time*. I had only one North American student in the room, and...

Late to the Party (/forums/posts/late-party)

Melissa Dinsman

In his insightful contribution to "In These Times," James Gifford takes inspiration from Woolf to state that on or about November 2016 something...

Echoes of Fascism (/forums/posts/echoes-fascism)

Kate Macdonald

In January I was teaching speculative and science fiction from the modernist period to show my students how fascism emerges, and how to recognise...

Modernism Ungoverned (/forums/posts/modernism-ungoverned)

Julie Beth Napolin

For the first time in 7 years, I am not teaching full-time. I'm on sabbatical. The morning after the election, there was no place I was supposed...

Rummaging through E. M. Forster's Loot

Oct 13, 2020 By: Cedric Van Dijk (/user/1576)

Volume 5, Cycle 2

Tags: colonialism (/tags/colonialism) museums (/tags/museums)



Fig. 1. E. M. Forster in Egypt, 1917. King's College, Cambridge. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Along an Alexandrian road that ran from the Nouzha Gardens to Sidi Gaber, near the old Rosetta Gate, a British archaeologist unearthed two colossal statues in 1840: Anthony as Osiris and Cleopatra as Isis. They were found, reburied, and dug up again by a French Algerian in 1893. E. M. Forster, who lived in Alexandria during the First World War, leads readers of his travel guide to the local Graeco-Roman Museum, where

The Limits of Resistance (/forums/posts/limits-resistance)

Benjamin Tausig

No single word has signaled a repulsion toward Donald Trump—and the impulse to respond to him—like “resistance.” The term emerged immediately...

Modernist Memories of Fascism: Women's Writing in the Age of Trump (/forums/posts/modernist- memories)

Julie Vandivere

As a scholar of early-twentieth-century literature, I have not found it necessary to address contemporary political issues in my work. However,...

Sign of the Belated Times (/forums/posts/belated-times)

David Farley

Modernism has always been bound up for me with travel, with politics, and with protest. I got my first passport and traveled to what was then the...

Auburn Prison and Carceral Modernity: A Performance History (/forums/posts/auburn-prison)

Nick Fesette

Originally constructed in 1817, Auburn Correctional Facility in Upstate New York stands as the oldest continually functional maximum-security...

In Search of Lost Time: Precarious Research in the UK (/forums/posts/search-lost-time)

Séan Richardson

On a recent episode of the Modernist Podcast, I asked “What does precarity mean to you?” My inquiry came in the wake of the strike action that...

The Quantified Self (/forums/posts/quantified-self)

Lisa Mendelman

The information superhighway is paved with good intentions. This thought occurred to me earlier this summer, as I drove the Silicon Valley...

American Memory, Forgotten Wars (/forums/posts/american-memory- forgotten-wars)

Patrick Deer

November 2018 not only sees the US midterm

they can marvel at a lonely half of the once entangled pair. The entry runs: “Against the wall behind: colossal green granite head of Anthony as Osiris. From near Nouzha. The companion head of Cleopatra as Isis is in Belgium.”[1] The guide quickly moves on to the next artifact, two reconstructed tombs from the Chatby Necropolis. Cleopatra is forgotten.

By the time I moved to Cairo to research Forster's years in Egypt, late in the summer of 2018, I was already familiar with his cabinet of lost artifacts and vanished statues. In “Cnidus,” for instance, a 1904 story for the *Independent Review*, the protagonist stumbles across the site of an ancient Greek theatre on the Ottomar coast, falling off the stage into an orchestra planted with Jerusalem artichokes. Nearby once stood the Demeter of Cnidus, a statue kept in the British Museum since the late 1850s, where she is “dusted twice a week” and “cannot be touched.”[2] The goddess, the narrator makes sure to underline, is not to be pitied her eyes rest more happily on “the Choiseul Apollo who is in the niche opposite” in the London gallery than on “the scarped rock, and the twin harbours” of Asia Minor (Forster, “Cnidus,” 172). Yet, the statue's reappearance in *The Longest Journey*, Forster's second novel, suggests a gloomier fate. A photograph of the Demeter of Cnidus hangs by the window in Stephen Wonham's room; it “faced the sunrise; and when the moon rose its light also fell on her, and trembled, like light upon the sea.”[3]

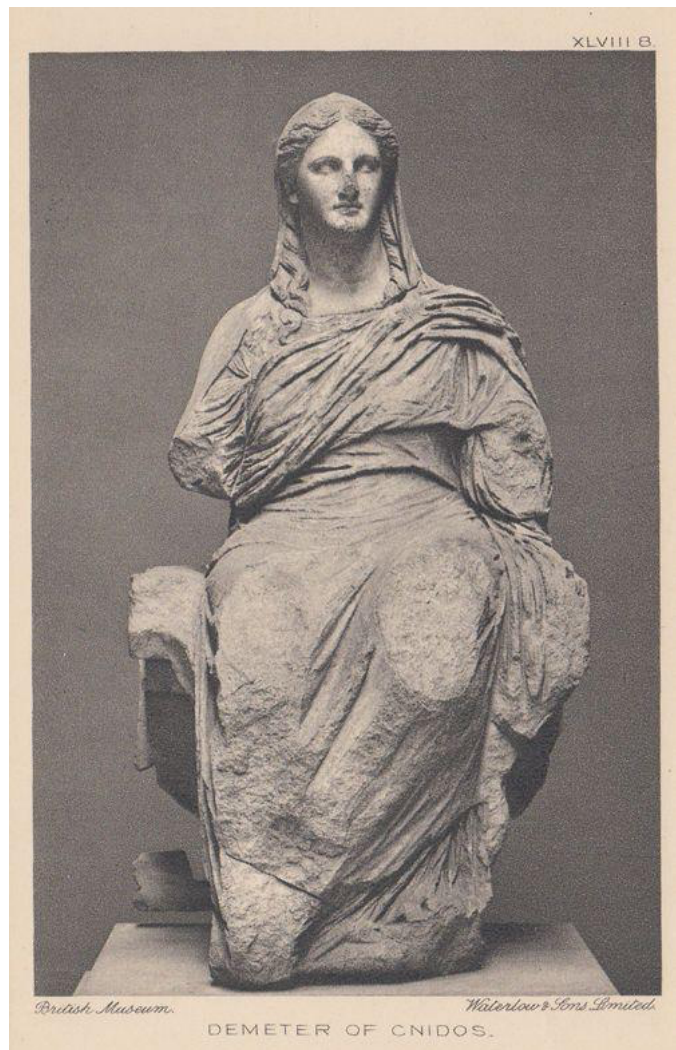


Fig. 2. Demeter of Cnidus. Turn-of-the-century postcard.

Looted artifacts loom large in the Forster canon, whose author would briefly go on to work as a cataloguer and wartime watchman in the National Gallery. “In the nineteenth century,” he once wrote, “the soil was scratched all over the globe . . . hooks were let down into the sea.”[4] Much of what came to the surface went missing, only to re-emerge in western Europe. A Dutch Bible brought back from the Boer War appears in *Howards End*. In *Maurice*, at the temple of Athena on the Acropolis, Clive “might if he chose imagine her shrine untouched, and her statue catching the last of the glow” but sees instead “only dying light and a dead land.”[5] A visit to the British Museum, in *The Longest Journey*, brings to mind precisely these “deserted temples beside an unfurrowed sea” (124). In *Maurice*, the same museum features as “a tomb, miraculously illuminated by spirits of the dead” (194).

elections which will allow the American people to respond at the ballot box to the tumultuous and often...

Looking Backward on a Strike (/forums/posts/looking-backward-strike)

Megan Faragher

When the cold January turned to an even colder February, I would have loved nothing more than to begin teaching Edward Bellamy's *Looking...*

Joyce & the Dems: Ulysses, Politics, and Cultural Capital (/forums/posts/joyce-dems)

Jonathan Goldman

"We are still learning to be Joyce's contemporaries," intones Richard Ellmann, the first words of his James Joyce, published in 1959. [1] Sixty...

Aesthetic Education for the Anthropocene (/forums/posts/aesthetic-education-anthropocene)

Thomas S. Davis

Austral summer on the Antarctic Peninsula. Eight of us climb out of our zodiac onto the shore of Petermann Island. This place dazzles and...

Modernism, Eco-anxiety, and the Climate Crisis (/forums/posts/raine-eco-anxiety-and-climate-crisis)

Anne Raine

Fig. 1. Hannah Rothstein, *National Parks 2050: Great Smoky Mountains*, 2017. Limited edition print. <https://www.hrothstein.com/#/national-...>

Keyword: Pacification (/forums/posts/keane-keyword-pacification)

Damien Keane

A couple of years ago, I published a book that worried the quantitative conception of information, by suggesting that "information" constituted a...

She Works Too Hard for the Money (/forums/posts/colesworthy-she-works)

Rebecca Colesworthy

Shortly after starting as an executive assistant in development at a nonprofit organization in 2012—my first nonacademic job following a three-...

Art Repatriation, Then and Now

Forster's at times ironic, at times melancholic engagement with looted art goes to show that our current debates on decolonizing Europe's museums have long histories. At the center of the controversy today is the British Museum, reportedly "the world's largest receiver of stolen goods" (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/04/british-museum-is-worlds-largest-receiver-of-stolen-goods-says-qc>). In recent years, it rejected or delayed requests from Greece, Egypt, Nigeria, and Easter Island (among others) for the return of the spoils of the former British empire. The museum has argued that the sculptures at the heart of these requests—the Parthenon Marbles, Rosetta Stone, Benin Bronzes, and Hoa Hakananai'a—were not stolen but acquired through gift and trade. They are available for loan to their original locations on the condition that the borrowing institution acknowledges the British Museum's ownership of the object in question—a self-defeating condition.[6] Another claim often made by museum representatives is that these objects belong to the world's shared heritage and, in London, are on display free of charge to millions of visitors every year. To me, the suggestion elides the realities of economic mobility. Is it really feasible for members of the Rapa Nui, who live on Easter Island, to travel to the U.K. to admire Hoa Hakananai'a, a lava rock sculpture that embodies the spirit of one of their ancestors?[7] And what of the pieces that are not on display? Many institutions only showcase a very small percentage of the collections at any given time—"the rest, I suppose, put away in cellars," as Virginia Woolf also knew.[8] While there have been a few success stories in recent years, including the return of artifacts from Oslo's Kō Tiki Museum to Easter Island, the issue remains hotly contested.[9]

Indeed, it has been contested for a long time. More than a century ago, Forster pointed to these tensions and rehearsed the main lines of these arguments. His most profound engagement with the repatriation of cultural heritage is a 1920 review of the memoirs of Sir Wallis Budge, Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum. Forster's critical voice in the review may seem surprising at first. The novelist read classics at Cambridge, a liberal education that meant to foster an appreciation for precisely a place such as the British Museum. He was also indirectly complicit in (and felt very uncomfortable about) the British occupation of Egypt, where he lived from late 1915 to early 1919 and enjoyed the privileges that came with being an Englishman in the Empire. Still, his piece for the *Athenaeum* reads as a blatant attack. It is structured around an object Wallis Budge stole for the nation: the world-famous Papyrus of Ani, now "B.M. 10470." (Forster, "The Objects," 599). Ani's Book of the Dead was discovered in a tomb in Luxor in 1888, taken by Budge, who broke its seal, confiscated by the Egyptian government, stolen (again by Budge) through a tunnel, and smuggled up the Nile and out of the country in the luggage of British officers. "It may not be on exhibit, but we have it," Forster comments, ironically; "It would be humiliating to think it was on exhibit at Cairo" (599).

In Forster's response to Budge's *By Nile and Tigris: A Narrative of Journeys through Egypt and Mesopotamia on Behalf of the British Museum* we encounter the stakes of the debate as they are articulated today. On the one hand there is Forster, who believed that "our pride" in national possessions "merely competitive" (600). Berlin, Paris, and London had been plundering Egypt since Napoleon's invasion. Representatives of Europe's museums cared so little for Mohammed Ali's 1835 export ban on antiquities and Egypt's own fledgling attempts at establishing a national collection in an old post office in Bulaq that it left Forster with "an increased determination to rob the British Museum" (600). Then there is Budge, who visited the Bulaq museum in 1886. In an effort to justify his own pillaging, he reported finding mean deal cases, broken glass panes, damage from a Nile flood and "no apparatus for extinguishing fire." [10] On that expedition to Egypt, the first of many, Budge acquired 1,482 artifacts for "safekeeping" at the British Museum, in addition to the objects secured for the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

Out of Egypt

Shortly before returning to England, as his work with the Red Cross came to an end, Forster, too, took stock of his Egyptian possessions. Among the keepsakes he packed in January 1919 were a handful of ephemeral things: copies of the *Egyptian Mail*, letters, and a tram ticket, marked "Alexandrie à Cléopâtre," which reminded him of Mohammed El Adl, the tram conductor with whom he had fallen in love. Just before his untimely death in 1922, El Adl sent Forster a photograph which the novelist carefully added to his affective booty. In 1958, and again in 1963, he came across these "scraps" in a box in his Cambridge study and was seized by a feeling that the past is "evoked by smallness." [11] One memory that may have floated to the surface—though there is no record of it apart from a 1917 letter—was of El Adl in his crumbling room in Alexandria all those years ago as he suddenly flung open a "little trunk" with his belongings: "Now I have

Grievability, COVID-19, and the Modernists' Pandemic (/forums/posts/outka-grievability-covid)

Elizabeth Outka

For the past five years, I have been immersed in research on the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic and the unexpected ways it weaves its way into...

Rummaging through E. M. Forster's Loot

Cedric Van Dijck

By the time I moved to Cairo to research Forster's years in Egypt, late in the summer of 2018, I was already familiar with his cabinet of lost...

shown you all there is to show.”[12] Today, Mohammed El Adl's gesture reads as an allegory for a country robbed and cheated under a colonial regime. The Papyrus of Ani, from Forster's review in the *Athenaeum*, left Egypt in 1888; the statue of Cleopatra as Isis, from his *Guide to Alexandria*, followed in 1912.



Fig. 3. Cleopatra as Isis. Musée Royal de Mariemont. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

On a recent Sunday morning, I paid a visit to the exiled Egyptian queen. She fell into the foreign hands of Belgian industrialist touring Egypt and now hangs high on a wall in the Royal Museum of Mariemont, a somewhat neglected place an hour south of Brussels. Not much survives of the once colossal statue: an upper-left arm, a shoulder, a formidable head with a circlet of cobras for a crown and eyes that look direct at the viewer (which, I am told, is remarkable for Ptolemaic sculptures). Because of COVID-19 restrictions, visitors at Mariemont have to enter the Egyptian Room through the back door. Once the first artifact to command attention for its location and size, Cleopatra is now harder to find: one has to turn, look up and search for a glimpse of the Egyptian queen. She is easy to miss; she looks unloved. Had Forster toured the Belgian museum (which he never did), he might have found some enjoyment in pointing out that Egypt already had two major national collections at the time of Cleopatra's disappearance to the north, with the

Egyptian Museum founded in 1863 and the Graeco-Roman Museum in 1892. Next year, after more than a century on Tahrir Square, the Egyptian Museum is moving to new premises in Giza. Perhaps it is time for Cleopatra to move home, too?

Notes

- [1] E. M. Forster, *Alexandria: A History and a Guide and Pharos and Pharillon*, ed. Miriam Allott (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2004), 102.
- [2] E. M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1946), 172.
- [3] E. M. Forster, *The Longest Journey* (1907; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 124.
- [4] E. M. Forster, "The Objects," *Athenaeum* (May 7, 1920): 599-600, here 599. The review article was later republished in *Abinger Harvest* (1936).
- [5] E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (1971; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005), 101.
- [6] See, for instance, the Trustees' statement (<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/objects-news/parthenon-sculptures/parthenon-sculptures-trustees>) on The Parthenon Sculptures.
- [7] "My grandma, who passed away at almost 90 years, she never got the chance to see her ancestor," said Tarita Alarcón Rapu (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/20/easter-island-british-museum-return-moai-statue>), governor of Easter Island, in 2018.
- [8] *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol 2: 1912–1922, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautman (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), 260.
- [9] See for instance Ellen Peirson-Hagger, "Can We Decolonise the British Museum" (https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/art-design/2019/07/can-we-decolonise-british-museum#:~:text=It%20is%20possible%2C%20but%20it,objects%20came%20into%20the%20collection.))? (*New Statesman*, July 20, 2019); Mary Norris, "Should the Parthenon Marbles be Returned to Greece?" (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/should-the-parthenon-marbles-be-returned-to-greece>)" (*New Yorker*, November 22, 2019); and Adam Hochschild, "The Fight to Decolonize the Museum" (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/when-museums-have-ugly-pasts/603133/>)" (*Atlantic*, February 2020).
- [10] E. A. Wallis Budge, *By Nile and Tigris: A Narrative Journey in Egypt and Mesopotamia on Behalf of the British Museum between the Years 1886 and 1913* (London: John Murray, 1920), 84.
- [11] *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, vol 2: 1921–1970, ed. Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank (London: Collins, 1985), 287.
- [12] *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, vol 1: 1879–1920, ed. Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank (London: Collins, 1983), 263.

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Grievability, COVID-19, and the Modernists' Pandemic

Elizabeth Outka, University of Richmond
(</forums/posts/outka-grievability-covid>)

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