
Haag's Many Alexandrias

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I.

MICHAEL HAAG knows Egypt. Both writer and photographer, his many books include *Egypt: Cadogan Guides* (London 2004), *The Timeline History of Egypt* (New York 2005), *The Rough Guide to Tutankhamun* (London 2005), and *Cairo Illustrated* (Cairo 2006). The first three are good to read because they have a point of view, written by an opinionated guide with a sharp eye, who's sometimes acerbic, always acute. You may not agree with everything he says; nevertheless, he's compelling, you like listening to his voice. These books are also handy references, good places to get facts—but as everyone knows or should know, facts can be deceiving. Somewhere well east of Suez, during the “official inquiry” near the beginning of *Lord Jim*, Marlow says, “They demanded facts from [Jim], as if facts could explain anything.”¹ Conrad knew how little facts explain about human experience, and his presentation of facts often serves to deepen mystery, a major aspect of his art.

Haag's other works have a similar effect. They read like literature. The products of a cultural and literary historian, they elucidate the past, uncover the background of people and events, and then deepen the mystery that Conrad cherished. Unlike Conrad, however, whose disdain of facts leaves the port of Singapore unidentified as the probable location of Jim's inquest,² Haag situates himself squarely and unambiguously in a real port, as the following titles indicate: *Alexandria: City of Memory* (New Haven 2004), *Alexandria Illustrated* (Cairo 2004), and *Vintage Alexandria: Photographs of the City, 1860–1960* (Cairo 2008).^{*} He is cur-

rently working on a biography of Lawrence Durrell, also to be published by Yale, and once it is completed, Haag will have his "Alexandrian Quartet," as Durrell had his, the novels *Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive*, and *Clea*. Moreover, like Durrell, Haag emphasizes Alexandria's Mediterranean heritage, not its Islamic, and *Mediterranean* refers to ethnic diversity, inhabitants often fluent in Greek, French, Italian, Ladino, Arabic, and English.

2.

Alexandria: City of Memory concentrates on C. P. Cavafy, E. M. Forster, and Lawrence Durrell. To this tradition should now be added Michael Haag.³ One city, one muse, many views. The grouping, however, does not include someone like André Aciman. He is not in this lineage. His highly praised *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (New York 1994) is an exquisite and wonderful story of a Sephardic family and its relations as they live in Alexandria prior to the diaspora of the early 1960s. (The family's flight was an eventual consequence of Gamal Abdel Nasser's revolution of 1952.) Like Haag's books, Aciman's narrative is compelling, but it is not what I would call Alexandrian.

The contrast helps to define the category. Writers in the Alexandrian tradition make the city paramount or, at the very least, give it special prominence, but Aciman's subject is not Alexandria—it's his family and Sephardic roots. His Alexandria is marginal and without vivid identity. It doesn't have, in Durrell's preferred term, a "*deus loci*," a spirit of place. Although Aciman's blue Mediterranean dazzles supreme—"that color blue lining the limitless horizon, quiet, serene, and forever beckoning: the sea"⁴—the city itself shrinks to a pleasing corniche, a seaside resort where fasci-

*Michael Haag, *Alexandria: City of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xiv + 368 pages, \$37.00; *Vintage Alexandria: Photographs of the City, 1860-1960* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), x + 139 pages, \$39.95.

nating people converge, a Levantine *Magic Mountain*, with a French, Italian, and Jewish milieu. Nor does he acknowledge his Alexandrian predecessors, making only two slight references to Cavafy and none at all to either Forster or Durrell.⁵

The tradition proposed here requires some explanation. Durrell calls Alexandria his “capital of Memory,”⁶ and Haag aptly chooses a variant of this phrase as his own subtitle, for Alexandria has many strata of memory: Hellenistic, Roman, Islamic, Mediterranean. Cavafy, of course, began the whole approach of mining the city as a source of historical memory, but he largely went unnoticed until Forster shone a spotlight on him in his seminal *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (Alexandria 1922) and then in *Pharos and Pharillon* (London 1923). In 1986, Haag published a new edition of Forster’s *Alexandria*, and in an afterword, “The City of Words,” recounted his first visit to Alexandria in 1973 and acknowledged his debt to Cavafy, adding that “in Alexandria the poet created a world in which later Forster and Durrell would build many possible Alexandrias.”⁷

Remembering can be mythmaking. Cavafy died in 1933, but his memory is incorporated in the *Quartet* as the presiding genius of those novels, as “the old poet of the city” (AQ 18, 203). What Cavafy began has been amply and ably described by Edmund Keeley in *Cavafy’s Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress* (Princeton 1976) and by Pinchin in *Alexandria Still: Forster, Durrell, and Cavafy* (Princeton 1977). And Cavafy’s eminent position as poet is secure, as attested by Daniel Mendelsohn’s recently published “Constantine Cavafy: ‘As Good as Great Poetry Gets.’”⁸

However great Cavafy’s poetry, the contrast remains between the shabbiness of the city itself and the richness of its past. Forster emphasizes this point in *Pharos and Pharillon*. He ruefully describes Rue Rosette (the splendid Canopic Way of the Hellenistic period) as one of the city’s “premier thoroughfare[s]” and then exclaims, as though the street were now something out of Pope’s *Dunciad*, “Oh it is so dull! Its dullness is really indescribable.”⁹ Fifty-three years

later Keeley bluntly writes, "Today's Alexandria strikes one first of all as squalid."¹⁰ Little evidence of the city's former grandeur is visible, for those ruins are either destroyed, buried, or underwater—or in the case of Alexander's lost tomb, possibly all three.

There are exceptions, naturally. Jean-Yves Empereur's heroic efforts in marine archaeology are recovering Ptolemaic statuary and artifacts (see his *Alexandria Rediscovered* [New York 1998]), and plans are underway for an underwater museum in the Eastern Harbor, where ruins would be viewed *in situ*. This impressive project has many obstacles to overcome, not least the murkiness of a harbor without adequate sewage treatment. If successfully completed, the museum would invite comparison to the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, where visitors stroll among towering glass tanks of marine life. The idea is appealing but probably fanciful. Regardless, it highlights the difficulties in making accessible what is left of the material culture of Alexandria's glorious past.

Although Forster succeeds in imagining aspects of ancient Alexandria, his "city of the soul,"¹¹ his outright rejection of the modern city begins and ends two prominent essays. These sentiments are the alpha and omega of his coda on Alexandria. Forster's flat assertion, "Modern Alexandria is scarcely a city of the soul," opens the famous piece "The Poetry of C. P. Cavafy," and in the conclusion to *Pharos and Pharillon* he compares the city to a historical pageant, one which ends badly:

But unlike a pageant it would have to conclude dully. Alas! The modern city calls for no enthusiastic comment . . . Menelaus accordingly leads the Alexandrian pageant with solid tread; cotton brokers conclude it; the intermediate space is thronged with phantoms, noiseless, insubstantial, innumerable, but not without interest for the historian.¹²

But does his harsh critique of modern Alexandria really do justice to the city? Isn't his dull city the very one that in-

spired others? In a subtle way, Cavafy, Durrell, and Haag all demur. The critique does not do Alexandria justice.

Love—sensual and spiritual, expressed or suppressed or diverted—defines the relationship of these four authors to Alexandria, the city that Haag calls a “cosmopolis” and that Forster says once clung “to the idea of Love.”¹³ In “The God Abandons Antony,” Cavafy’s speaker bids Mark Antony to “say your last good-byes / To Alexandria as she is leaving” (AQ 202); Durrell has his own “beloved Alexandria!” (AQ 17); and Haag’s selection of period photographs in *Vintage Alexandria* betrays an equal infatuation with the modern city. Unlike Forster, the tone among these three writers is elegiac. They share a sense of loss and sadness, and you cannot bereave what you do not love.

Cavafy and Durrell have similar approaches, if not similar methods, as they invest the city with their own kinds of erotic memory. Again, Cavafy shows the way. He confines his Alexandria to small rooms and quiet streets. “In the Evening” begins ambiguously in what may be a bedroom, as the speaker recollects a transient love affair, and concludes on a balcony, perhaps Cavafy’s own balcony at 10 Rue Lepsius, as he observes dusk descend:

Then, sad, I went out on to the balcony,
 went out to change my thoughts at least by seeing
 something of this city I love,
 a little movement in the street and the shops. (13–16)¹⁴

Cavafy’s erotic eye casts a soft glow, perhaps a postcoital glow, on mundane things. Durrell’s wanton eye, on the other hand, tends to pick out squalor or depravity. At the beginning of *Justine*, he visualizes Alexandria from afar, from a promontory on some island, perhaps Cyprus, and says, “Flies and beggars own it today—and those who enjoy an intermediate existence between either” (AQ 17). I would stress the word *enjoy* in this description. Forster’s “intermediate space” is not Durrell’s “intermediate existence,” and—in a way that Forster wouldn’t, or couldn’t—Durrell is taking his full pleas-

ure in the sights of modern Alexandria. Like Cavafy, he too looks out over the city—from a remote promontory in this case—reflects on the past, and enjoys the moment.

Michael Wood, in a recent reassessment of the *Quartet*, calls attention to Durrell's "adventive moment."¹⁵ The phrase "adventive minute" appears in *Justine* (AQ 31) and later in the poem "Cavafy." Wood is unsure of Durrell's meaning, but he takes it as an attempt to capture small moments of experience, perhaps as Cavafy does. In this attempt, he sees the *Quartet* as ultimately failing. Wood has it wrong, I think, on both counts. "Adventive" means something extraneous, and applying that idea to time suggests something foreign to the moment. I think Durrell preferred to exist somewhere outside the here and now.

Many Egyptians fault Durrell for an unfair, grubby caricature of their country. Perhaps as many Western critics fault him for a romanticized portrait of that same place. At heart, however, Durrell is a Romantic, and the Romantics just loved contradictions and delighted in the imagination, where they could indeed *enjoy* that "intermediate existence."

3.

"IMAGINED CITIES," to use Robert Alter's term, is the underlying subject here, the subjective recreation of a place.¹⁶ A related concern is the relationship between literature and factual works. Ralph W. Rader argues persuasively for elevating some narratives beyond their usual classification as purveyors of fact.¹⁷ Few histories and biographies, as Rader notes, ever merit consideration as literature, but I believe these recent books of Haag's on Alexandria do. Why?

Rader reminds us that "literature in general is, in Coleridge's phrase, that species of composition which proposes pleasure rather than truth as its immediate object."¹⁸ Coleridge explains that the enjoyment of literature also derives from the "part," in effect, reflecting the "whole." Works of literature, then, should be able to withstand the scrutiny of both their de-

tails and their overall form, so that the former increases the pleasure of the latter. This is true of *City of Memory*.

I myself prefer parts over wholes, which is to say fragments, and perhaps Coleridge did too. The poet himself declared “Kubla Khan,” a fragment, one of his great poems, and his entire poetic career, brilliant as it was, broke off early and itself became a fragment. This is all Romantic Hellenism: the love of fragments, ruins, and a shattered classical past. Friedrich Schlegel provided a philosophical basis for this genre in the *Athenaeum Fragments*, where he offers a pithy, if odd, definition: “A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine.”¹⁹ A porcupine? A metaphor for something compact and solitary? Not entirely. Schlegel’s idea of a fragment also contains the notion of prickliness. A fragment goads the onlooker and excites the imagination.

Haag, a meticulous historian, may object to the proposition that he prefers “pleasure” over “truth,” and he may not like the idea of an attempt to fragmentize his narrative. *City of Memory*, however, is indubitably a history of parts, composed with parts. It recounts parts of the lives of three great writers and recreates a small part of Alexandrian history during the twentieth century, recovering part of a lost culture in a once-cosmopolitan city on the Mediterranean littoral.

Haag’s narrative flows—but deceptively. It is in fact a skillful compilation of many sources, whose fragments coalesce like tesserae in a Hellenistic mosaic. He uses comparatively few secondary sources and relies on primary materials, like personal interviews and unpublished diaries and letters. The narrative becomes like a chorus with the author as conductor. Haag selects, modulates, and yet allows these voices to speak for themselves, as he gathers together sources from far and wide: various libraries, residences, and private collections in Alexandria, Cairo, Athens, Mani, Paris, Sommières, Burgundy, London, Sussex, Cambridge, and Oxfordshire. What unifies all these parts is Alexandria as a trove of the

imagination, that is, its rich history and culture as a source of inspiration. And what sustains this sense of Alexandria is the voice and judgment of the historian himself: thorough, judicious, pointed, and, above all, ironic. Like Schlegel's porcupine, Michael Haag is also prickly.

The reader hears this voice in the prologue to *City of Memory*. It is the voice of the visitor to Cavafy's flat at 10 Rue Lepsius, now a museum, who observes a representation of the famous poet and remarks, "His death mask, like a prize cabbage at a farmers' fair, is propped upon a cushion" (ACM 4). Cavafy would surely have been delighted. It is also the voice of an author who knows when to be silent and let his subjects reveal themselves. In 1977, an old and tired Lawrence Durrell returns to his "capital of Memory," sits in the bar of the Cecil Hotel, and admits, "It sounds silly . . . but I am extremely incurious, and my real life seems to pass either in books or in dreams" (ACM 2). The genesis of *The Alexandria Quartet* encapsulated in one casual sentence. Acid, mordant, terse, funny—in short, ironic—these are the distinctive qualities of Haag's voice.

Early in *Justine*, Darley, one of Durrell's stand-ins, gives a talk on Cavafy the "ironist." Darley reflects on the irony of his own situation—how he finds himself lecturing on the poet of the city's lowlife to a "dignified semi-circle of society ladies" (AQ 31). Justine attends the lecture and says nothing. Darley leaves. She follows and corners him in a grocer's shop, where he's eating Orvieto olives. Then she demands to know what he meant by "the antinomian nature of irony"; he notes "her dark thrilling face" (AQ 32). Darley claims to have forgotten, rudely returns to his olives, and so begins their great love affair, on a note of irony. Enjoyment of *City of Memory* begins a little like that: irony mixed with Mediterranean olives and mysterious beauty.

Love affairs comprise much of *City of Memory*. One of the greatest of these is the strange relationship between E. M. Forster and Mohammed el Adl, an Arab tram conductor, whose role in the author's life Haag describes fully. Haag's

handling of their romance demonstrates tact, restraint, and impartiality, and yet—implies judgment.

This unlikely relationship was sporadic, punctuated by numerous separations, and lasted six intense years. Adl died in 1922, Forster in 1970. For forty-eight years Forster kept the affair private and revealed it only to a few friends. As Haag points out, Forster cleverly dedicated *Pharos and Pharillon* to “Hermes Psychopompos.” The meaning is complex, a cryptic allusion to Adl the tram conductor, for the Greek attribute means “conductor of souls,” and Hermes has phallic associations, as represented in ithyphallic herms (*ACM* 109).

The affair poses a problem. If Forster’s love of Adl is “one of the two most cherished events in his personal life,”²⁰ why does he disparage the environment in which it occurred? Why does he call modern Alexandria soulless and “dull” in *Pharos and Pharillon*? Why doesn’t he say, as Darley does twice, with minor variation, “A city becomes a world when one loves one of its inhabitants” (*AQ* 57, 832)?

Was Forster seeking safety through obfuscation? Was he making “dull” and insensate what in fact had not been? Could Forster’s emphatic denial of the modern city have been a subterfuge, an act intended to divert attention away from or possibly to cover up a homosexual affair? Haag quotes Forster as calling Octavian, later Augustus, “one of the most odious of the world’s successful men,” especially because “vice, in his opinion, should be furtive” (*ACM* 77). The irony is all too human. As Haag shows, Forster keeps his affair with Adl “furtive,” and homosexuality during Forster’s time was indeed considered a “vice.” It was a crime punishable under British law, as the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde illustrates, even if Forster was not subject to that law in Egypt.

The affair ends with Adl’s death and two letters. He dies of tuberculosis in Egypt, and his last letter, dated May 6, 1922, ends with the valediction, “My love to you,” repeated twice (*ACM* 108). Forster’s last written words to Adl appear in “The Letter to Mohammed el Adl,” written after Adl’s death, a letter begun on August 5, 1922 and finished on December

27, 1929.²¹ The last sentences read, "I did love you and if love is eternal I may start again. Only it's for you to start me and to beckon. So much has happened to me since that I may not recognise you and am pretty certain not to think of you when I die. I knew how it would be from the first, yet shouldn't have been so happy in Egypt this autumn but for you, Mohammed el Adl—my love, Morgan" (*ACM* 118).

The letter must be sincere; it has no audience other than Forster himself. It's a private apology. But the farewell also sounds like a Dear John letter, and Haag makes the phrase "if love is eternal" the title of this chapter. It is ironic. He offers no comment but ends their story with three dry sentences: "Four months later in London Forster met Bob Buckingham, a policeman. Not long afterwards, Bob married, and after some initial stormy scenes by his wife the three settled into a lifetime of mutual devotion. Forster died at their home in 1970" (*ACM* 118).

Haag leaves the final judgment to the reader, but the implication lingers: Mohammed el Adl got shortchanged—unavoidably so, but shortchanged nonetheless. The affair recalls "Tonio Kröger" and Mann's dictum about the penalty of unequal and impossible relationships: "He who loves the more is the inferior and must suffer."²²

4.

ALTHOUGH HAAG tells love stories and other personal histories, he never strays far from his major subject—Alexandria. So Forster's London gets short shrift, and nearby Cairo earns scant mention and little description. Moreover, odd details about the city pop up. They have little bearing on the story but have major importance for the background, which is really the foreground.

Forster's first rendezvous with Adl occurs at the municipal gardens in eastern Alexandria. Adl tells Forster to meet him at "the column." Haag is too subtle to make a cheap comment on phallic possibilities, proleptic or otherwise. In-

stead, he prefaces the story of this first meeting with a short history of the column itself, officially known as the Khartoum Column, which is a colonial war memorial. His narration is bland and straight-faced. The reader learns of the column's Ptolemaic origins, "a monolithic shaft of pink Aswan granite," of sphinxes and Sekhmet, the ancient Egyptian "lion-headed goddess of war," of the Mahdi and the death of General Gordon in 1885, and of the exact date of General Kitchener's victory near Khartoum, on 2 September 1898 (*ACM* 38).

This may be Haag at his funniest. It is also the voice of Haag the tourist guide, the informed person who suddenly stops the tour bus on its journey elsewhere, points out the window, and explains some landmark by the side of the road. Very interesting, you say, but is it relevant to the main story? Yes, absolutely, if the purpose of your narrative is to imbue a place with history and spirit, to give it an emotional archaeology, to do with modern Alexandria what Forster does not do with the "dull" city of his day—instead, following in the footsteps of Durrell, who gives the city of his experiences a soul. Now, with Haag's retelling of Forster's love affair, the column has a bit of literary history added to its significance. You might say that it has another (figurative) carving on its granite surface, like those left by Greeks and Romans on numerous Egyptian monuments, a kind of lover's graffito.

Another part of this reimagining of Alexandria is the adverb *now*, one of Haag's favorite words (as in *now* Sharia Horreya, formerly Rue Fuad). It's the signal of an emotive time shift: the contrast between the present and the past, always to the detriment of the latter. He uses it continually to update names, events, and other facts in Alexandria's ever-changing landscape (*ACM passim*, but e.g., 1, 3, and 5).

Other techniques contribute to this effect. Catalogues enrich the city's modern history. The long list of wealthy Greek families has a Homeric ring—"They were the remnants of Byzantium"—and the enumeration of flowers around Lake Mariut creates a garden like one out of Theocritus's pastoral

lyrics (ACM 72–73, 78). The description of Mariut and the Delta is another example (ACM 76–77). It traces the history of the region back to the origin of ancient Egypt, starting with Narmer and the Harpoon Kingdom, and brings to mind Durrell's poetry at the beginning of *Balthazar*: "Taposiris is dead among its tumbling columns and seamarks, vanished the Harpoon Men" (AQ 209).

And then there are the maps. Both *City of Memory* and *Vintage Alexandria* have the same detailed maps: one of Alexandria and its environs, one of Cavafy's city, and one of Durrell's. These are overlays of time as well as precise visual aids. On these maps is to be found virtually every important place mentioned in the text (thus the Khartoum Column gets plotted), and it is here that Haag follows the paths of Cavafy, Forster, and Durrell.

The overall effect is at times Jamesian, not in stylistic convolution but rather in terms of sensation, atmosphere, and density: James's genius at making small things bear the heavy weight of the past. Houses are major vehicles for creating this impression. Here, for example, is Spencer Brydon in "The Jolly Corner," relating his nostalgia for a childhood home in a wealthy part of New York City:

He spoke of the value of all he read into it, into the mere sight of the walls, mere shapes of the rooms, mere sound of the floor, mere feel, in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors, which suggested the pressure of the palms of the dead; the seventy years of the past in fine that these things represented, the annals of nearly three generations, counting his grandfather's, the one that had ended there, and the impalpable ashes of his long-extinct youth, afloat in the very air like microscopic motes.²³

Haag redirects this kind of focus on Alexandria. For example:

Brinton was thinking in particular of Baron Felix de Menasce's great rambling house on the corner of the Rue Menasce and the

Rue Rassafa in Moharrem Bey. Baron George de Menasce, Felix's son by his first wife, lived there too and was a more than competent classical pianist whose Tuesday afternoon concerts, in which he was often accompanied by like-minded friends, became an Alexandrian institution. His half-brother Jean, Felix's son by his second wife Rosette, was that friend of Cavafy's and promoter of his poetry whom Forster had met at Lady Ottoline Morrell's. Whenever he returned from Europe to stay with his family in Alexandria Jean would speak of his friendships with a wide variety of literary figures, among them T. S. Eliot, who called him my 'best translator': he translated *The Waste Land* and later *Ash-Wednesday*, 'East Coker' and other of Eliot's works into French. Felix and Rosette's two daughters lived in the house as well, Denise until she married Alfred Mawas, who practised at the Mixed Courts, and Claire for several years after her marriage to Jacques Vincendon, who was secretary-general of the Land Bank of Egypt, of which her father was director. Claire Vincendon's passion was the theatre, which was how Brinton and most other people got to know her; she acted in and designed costumes for the entertainments she staged for guests at the great house in the Rue Rassafa, where her daughter Claude was born in 1925. (ACM 137)

The passage is an evocation of weight and scope, an era in microcosm. Geographically it ranges from Rue Rassafa in Alexandria to a country estate in England. Biographically it reprises the rich culture of Alexandrian society between the two wars: three generations of Jewish high society; the arts of music, poetry, and drama; the artists Cavafy and Forster. Eliot, a founder of high modernism, also makes a brief but grand appearance. He was Durrell's mentor at the London publishing house of Faber and Faber. The introduction of Jean de Menasce suggests the literary scene in Paris, and the reference to Lady Morrell's manor in Oxfordshire further broadens the geographical sweep to include the literary landscape of rural England in the 1920s.

Here Haag does not specifically mention Durrell, who arrived in Alexandria almost two decades later, but his hidden presence hangs in the air, much like Brydon's "microscopic motes," especially at the open and close of the description.

To achieve this effect, the historian turns novelist and enters the mind of Jasper Brinton, an actual jurist in the Alexandrian Mixed Courts. Haag uses Brinton as a kind of Darley figure, unlikely as this role may be, for Brinton was a very proper American lawyer. The judge mirrors the main narrator of the *Quartet*, who is far from proper, and acts as a guide into the city's complicated world. When the lawyer "thinks" of "Menasce's great rambling house," he sounds like Darley when he visits Justine's mansion on Rue Fuad and says, "That was the first time I saw the great house of Nessim" (AQ 32). "Great" appears at the beginning and the end of the paragraph. This signature adjective is possibly Durrell's favorite intensifier.²⁴ It serves as an entirely suitable tribute that honors both the house and the occupant named last, Claude Vincendon. She later became Claude Durrell, Lawrence Durrell's third wife, his favorite and most beloved.

Quietly and without introduction, Haag has snuck Durrell into the social setting of the Menasce mansion and household—and probably much to the dismay of Jasper Brinton, had he ever been aware of this sly irony and his unknowing complicity. For Judge Brinton clearly disapproved of Durrell, and Haag uses one of Brinton's published remarks as a preface to this chapter: "[Alexandria] was a very European city, very cultivated, artistic and musical. I don't want to pick an argument with that gentleman [Lawrence Durrell], but I thought it very wrong of him to describe it as a degenerate city. The people were aristocrats, behaved themselves; just as well behaved as the elegant society of old Philadelphia" (ACM 119). On occasion, Haag has a wicked sense of humor. Old Philadelphia undoubtedly has many things in common with old Alexandria—protecting the virtue of its young women being one of them, as he points out (ACM 184)—but the Mediterranean city does not appear as staid or proper as the judge from Philly would have it.

5.

Vintage Alexandria is both companion and supplement to *City of Memory*. The collection of photographs can be studied and enjoyed on its own or in conjunction with the previous history, which is by far the richer experience. It also helps to keep Durrell's *Quartet* well in mind. Like the maps, the old photographs elaborate on and give greater substance to Haag's main text, suggesting new ways to look at old things.

As the subtitle indicates, the collection covers the years 1860 through 1960. This is roughly the period of Cavafy, Forster, and Durrell. Cavafy was born in Alexandria in 1863 and lived there continuously from 1885 until his death in 1933; Forster resided there during the First World War, from 1915 to 1919; and Durrell during the Second, when he worked in the city, between 1942 and 1945. That leaves fifteen years to round out the century and allows the emphasis to end on Alexandria, Haag's cosmopolis, the main subject, after all, of these photographs.

Many of them record the development of the city over the century, the way things were and are now, the changes in the social and urban environment. These are always fascinating as they reveal shifting styles and landscapes. Some of the photographs, however, also have an erotic component—erotic in the sense of enticement. They are a sensual apprehension of a culture and a place, even as they provide an insight into the imaginative processes and the urgings of desire that possessed Cavafy, Forster, and Durrell. I would like to pick out a few of these.

The frontispiece is a photograph of Rose de Menasce, née Tuby (fig. 1). She was married to Baron Edmund de Menasce, a cousin of Baron Felix de Menasce, both prominent members of Alexandrian society. She was a friend of Cavafy and Durrell.²⁵

The legend tells us Rose is attending an event at the Sporting Club in 1914, whose location we ascertain by glancing at the map on page viii. She is standing in front of a small

group of men and women in sporty attire, wearing a black feathery hat and long black dress, which highlight her pale face. She is aloof, standing apart from her group and turned slightly to address the camera. All the other faces are obscured; she alone looks directly at the viewer. She neither smiles nor beckons; hers is not an aristocratic hauteur. Her gaze seems to say, in her customary French, "*Vous pouvez regarder—mais ne plus.*" Or she may have shrugged and said, in equally proficient English, "I am here, and this is my world." We are neither invited inside nor prohibited from entering, but we may stay and look awhile.

Rose de Menasce appears in four other photographs, five in total and more than any other figure. She may be Haag's heroine; she is certainly his favorite, with a place reserved at the forefront. (As it happens, Haag did not choose this picture for his frontispiece. It was the inspiration of the designer, Fatiha Bouzidi, who grasped something crucial about the book.) The Baroness poses for two formal portraits, taken outside her home (VA 47). The rest are either informal or spontaneous, as the one at the Sporting Club appears to be. Her character changes between the two types of pictures. In the formal portraits she strikes a pose of feminine submissiveness. She's demure, looks down, and avoids eye contact. She's what Judge Brinton would probably call aristocratic and "well behaved." In the informal photographs she displays her assertive side. She's confident, bold, and looks into the eye of the camera. She has the look Durrell ascribes to Justine when Darley first describes her demeanor as "man-nish" and having an "air of authority" (AQ 31, 32).

The model for Justine was Eve Cohen, an Alexandrian and Durrell's second wife. Haag includes one of her early photographs (fig. 2), when she's about twelve. Even then Eve has something of that look, although she's a schoolgirl and slightly tentative. She's a little sad around the eyes—perhaps because of the dark shading or perhaps because she's been forced to take a school picture—but put a hat on her and isolate that face and you have Rose's self-assertion beginning to



FIGURE 1. Rose de Menasse at the Sporting Club, 1914.

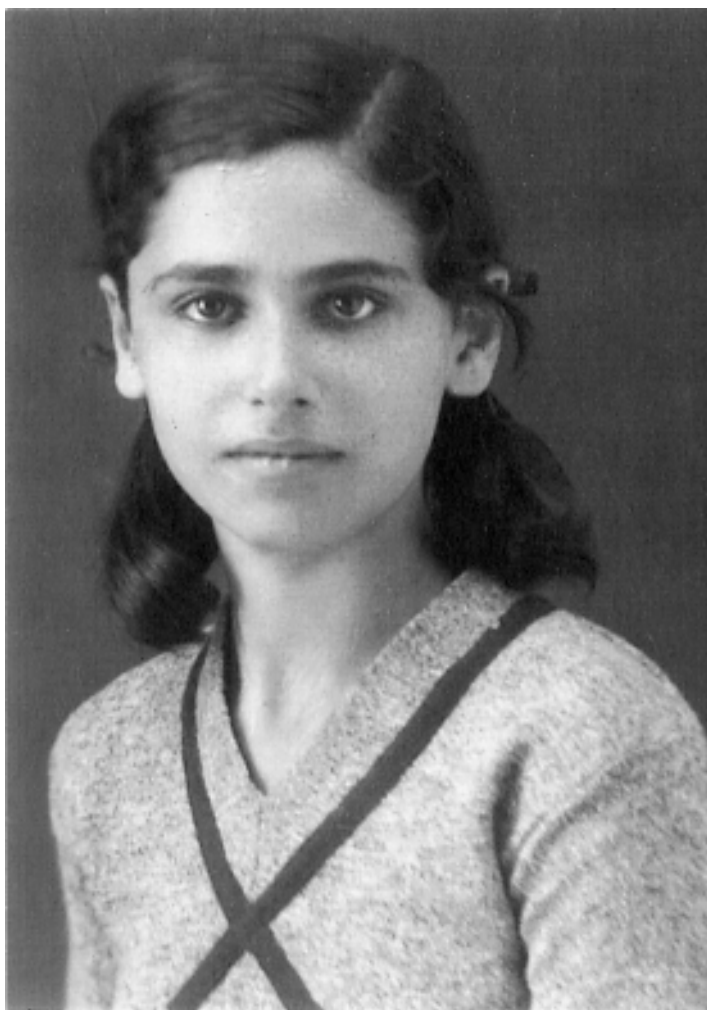


FIGURE 2. Eve Cohen at St. Andrew's School, about 1930.

form. Other Alexandrian women have this gaze, both aristocrats and common folk: Irène Valassopoulos, Argine Salvagos, Claire Vincendon, Safinaz Zulfikar, the Greek girls in a cigarette factory (VA 47, 50, 52, 64, 69). It is caught also in some of the men, like Cavafy and Adl (VA 49; ACM 29).

This expression is always unsmiling, the stare directed at the camera or fastened on some distant elsewhere. The fixed gaze makes the viewer feel like an intruder—someone irrelevant, insignificant, unwelcome, and tolerated only for the moment. It's very old and very Egyptian. Art historians sometimes describe this attitude as facing eternity or "gazing into eternity."²⁶ It certainly goes back a long way, to the Old Kingdom, at least. Look at the Great Sphinx. It's there; even time cannot erode or obliterate it. The paradox of this gaze is that what rejects also attracts. We see this confirmed in Rose de Menasce's photographs. The irony of her pictures is that she's most alluring when least feminine, and the converse is also true: she's least appealing when most feminine. Durrell knew something when he gave Justine "mannish" characteristics.

Another photograph of Rose shows her on a beach (fig. 3). *Vintage Alexandria* has many images of Alexandria's citizens enjoying themselves at the seashore—relaxing, strolling, showing off. These snapshots are innocent, amusing, and uncomplicated. But the same cannot be said of Rose and her beach party.

The camera captures a scene of eight people, three men and five women, sitting or kneeling on the sand. Their dress is curious but typical of the formality of the period. Two of the men are in formal or semi-formal attire, one in a white tuxedo, his homburg tossed before him, and the other in homburg and tie but without a coat. These styles mix and become confused. Two of the women wear hats and dresses. Rose and another woman are in swimming costumes. A third man also wears a swimming outfit, but his face is outside the frame. The picture appears unposed, but the arrangement is as suggestive as one of those *tableaux vivants* or costume photographs which Alexandrians were fond of

staging (cf. *ACM* 167, fig. 45). It's also reminiscent of that "faded photograph" Darley pores over in *Balthazar*, when he studies a barbershop scene and reconstructs the interconnecting lives of his friends and acquaintances (*AQ* 218–21).

As in the frontispiece, Rose dominates the scene. She presides in the center of the group and is taller than everyone else. She and two other women stare into the lens, but the others are less intimidating: one smiles and opens her lips; a shadow obscures the eyes of the other. Rose, confident and unsmiling, alone confronts the intruder.

Haag identifies only two people in this photograph, Rose and her husband Edmund, the man in the homburg. The identities of the others, I suspect, are deliberately withheld. The man in the tuxedo may be Baron Felix de Menasce (cf. *ACM* 138, fig. 35), whose mansion we've seen previously. The young woman resting on Edmund's arm could be his daughter or relative, and the woman in a white dress next to Rose may be her sister, since they strongly resemble one another. Rose raises her arm to adjust her hair, just as a breeze disturbs it and her (possible) sister's scarf. Thus, the photograph seems to present an innocent and tranquil scene of an extended family on an outing at the beach.

But that is not certain. The context is obscure. I'm reminded of a scene in *Justine*, when Darley and Justine are in bed at her home. They hear footsteps on the staircase and fear they're about to be discovered by her husband Nessim. Darley relates, "Looking over Justine's shoulder I saw developing on the glass panel of the frosted door, the head and shoulders of a tall slim man, with a soft felt hat pulled down over his eyes. He developed like a print in a photographer's developing-bowl" (*AQ* 123). Although probably Nessim, the man does not enter, and his identity is not ascertained.

This photograph has the quality of an image on frosted glass. It is also like a primal scene in a Freudian manual. Obscuring the identities of people allows Haag to inject uncertainty and cast a sinister light on the setting. Another scenario unfolds: A shadow covers Rose's left eye, like a pi-



FIGURE 3. Rose de Menasce in black at rear, about 1928.

rate's eye patch, and she raises her right arm, exposing an underarm in what could be a hostile or sexual gesture. The group activity acquires sexual connotations. Her husband appears to be caressing a young woman, who is about to stroke the ear of an older man, who is courting another young woman. All rather strange, but not impossible in this city, Alexandria. Through the silence of the photograph, its withholding information even as it offers it, Haag has created a scene as ambiguous, complicated, and bizarre as the love affairs in the *Quartet*, and he has done this through understatement, which is just another form of irony.

Such photographic understatement is not unique. In another picture, Rhona Haszard, an artist, appears in her rooftop garden tending flowers. Haag provides some information about the artist and her husband, but concludes with a kind of non sequitur: "On the day after the opening of her second exhibition at Claridge's in 1931, she mysteriously fell to her death from the tower rising behind her in this photograph, where she had been sketching" (VA 94). The tower of her death has what appears to be a sturdy parapet. It's a reasonable conclusion that Rhona Haszard didn't just fall. She would have had to climb over the balustrade and then leap to her death. Haag gives no background, offers no suggestions, and her death remains mysterious. Why include such a photograph? What is Rhona's connection to the other people in the collection? Keep in mind that a major event in Durrell's *Quartet* is the suicide of the artist Ludwig Pursewarden. His suicide is never adequately explained and variously attributed to politics, incest, or ennui. It remains a mystery, and Durrell wanted it that way. He wanted to puzzle his reader and provoke the imagination.

6.

HAAG'S FAREWELL to Alexandria is a photograph of wealthy Greeks celebrating the end of 1957. Three men in suits and an attractive woman toast the New Year (VA 135). The

dark lady and her companion smile at the camera. The occasion is an appropriate but sad example of dramatic irony. The smiling couple may not know it, but it's the end of an era. Nasser has nationalized the canal; the Israelis have fought Egypt on behalf of the British and French; and the USA and USSR are now the superpowers of the modern world. Greeks founded this cosmopolis, and now they conclude a tradition. The restaurant is Pastroudis on Rue Fuad. It was one of Durrell's favorite meeting places and appears several times in the *Quartet*. This photograph, however, brings us back to still another valediction, even more evocative and certainly more sensual, six pages earlier.

Anna Bajocchi leans on her balcony over Rue Fuad and looks at the city below (fig. 4). It's 1952, the year of Nasser's revolution, but Anna has other things on her mind. She is young, blond, and pretty. In the Alexandria of the imagination, she resembles Clea Badaro, the artist who becomes Clea Montis in the *Quartet*. Anna wears a light, checkered dress. It might be a "new summer frock" (AQ 54). Melissa Artemis wears one in *Justine*, and she is one of Durrell's most appealing and sympathetic women. The caption traces Anna's lineage back to "an Italian doctor in the service of Muhammad Ali and Ibrahim Pasha." Here Haag leaves no doubt about identity: Anna is an Alexandrian of long and good standing.

Anna's vision is unfocused. Her gaze wanders left. It's not clear what, if anything, she is looking at. She could be lost in reverie, or observing the people and traffic on Rue Fuad, or she could be dreaming of Alexandria's Eastern Harbor and Corniche. For if we glance outside the frame of the picture, which the layout clearly encourages us to do, we see that she is really focused on the facing page, which is a view of the harbor at night (VA 128). Haag has given her another option: Anna dreams of her city and its enduring beauty. Durrell's term for this dreamy state is "abstracted" (AQ 77, 166, 274, and *passim*). The condition occurs often in the *Quartet*; it's chronic and suggests an authorial predisposition for such activity.

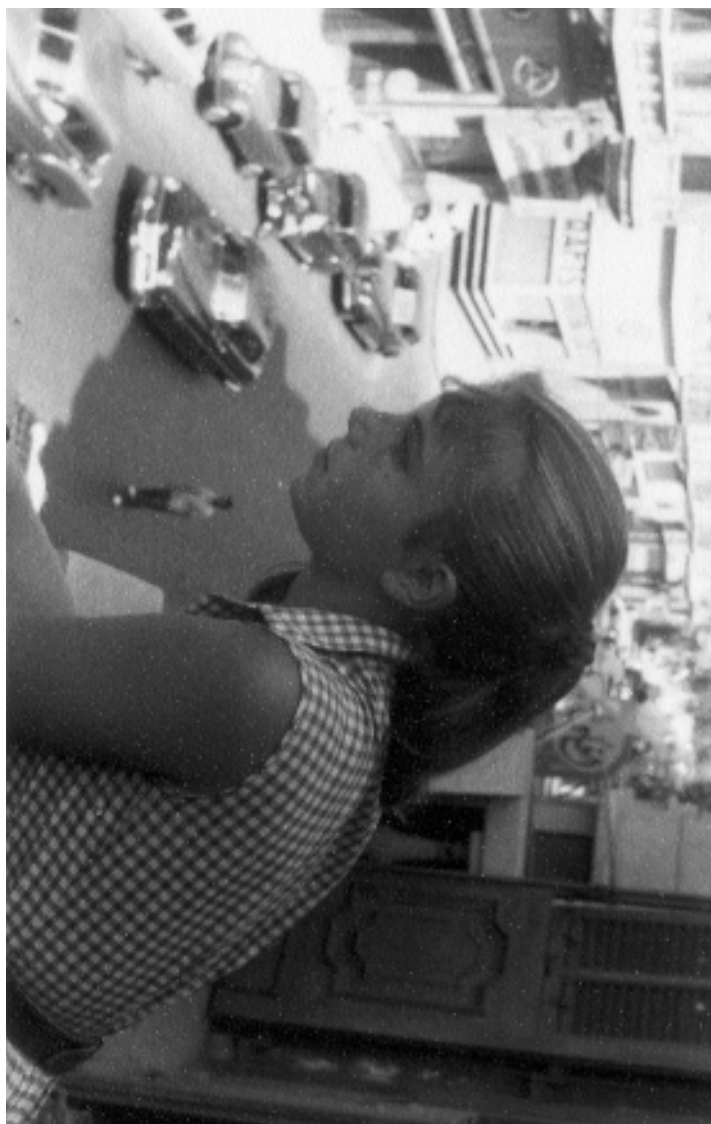


FIGURE 4. Anna Bajocchi on a balcony, overlooking Rue Fuad, 1952.

So Anna leans on a balcony, one of those prominent fixtures in Cavafy and Durrell—platforms, springboards, windows, enablers of immersion in the moment or in memory. They are like those “magic casements” in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” those entrances into the imagination. Or, since we are in Egypt, they may be like that balcony in Amarna where Nefertiti and Akhenaten stood over three thousand years ago. On the other hand, perhaps Anna doesn’t dream—perhaps she listens intently, as Antony once listened from an “open window” when the Rue Fuad was known as the Canopic Way. In “The God Abandons Antony,” Cavafy says the Roman heard in the streets of Alexandria beautiful music, which Durrell freely translates as the “ravishing music of invisible choirs” (AQ 202). Or perhaps Anna hears the music that Keats calls, in “Grecian Urn,” the “ditties of no tone.” We have many possibilities. Which is surely the way Haag would want it.

There is one other possibility to consider. On a balcony, Anna Bajocchi rises, steps out of her frame, and joins those other beautiful blond women who inhabit Haag’s and Durrell’s worlds: Clea Badaro, Claude Vincendon, and Clea Montis.

Michael Haag offers many Alexandrias—Cavafy’s, Forster’s, and Durrell’s—but his special contribution to this tradition may be his recovery and preservation of a great city’s past, before it becomes completely lost and forgotten. He has rescued what ought to be saved. He tells the stories of artists, individuals, and families in the mix and flux of events. His great theme is modern Alexandria. His achievement is both history and art.²⁷

NOTES

1. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Tale* (London 1900, 1974), 27.
2. Norman Sherry, *Conrad’s Eastern World* (Cambridge 1971), 59.
3. See Peter Green, “Alexander’s Alexandria,” in *Alexandria and Alexandrianism: Papers Delivered at a Symposium Organized by The J. Paul Getty Museum for the History of Art and the Humanities and Held at the Mu-*

seum, April 22–25, 1993 (Malibu, 1996), 3. Green alludes to the “myth” of modern Alexandria as “evok[ing] memories of E. M. Forster, Constantine Cavafy, and Lawrence Durrell.” Green’s linkage of these three authors identifies a literary tradition, as previously described by Jane Lagoudis Pinchin in *Alexandria Still: Forster, Durrell, and Cavafy* (Princeton 1977).

4. André Aciman, *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (New York 1994), 107. Similar descriptions appear on pages 119, 125, 264, 284, and 306.

5. Aciman (note 4), 290, 292.

6. Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet: Justine, Balthazar, Moun-tolive, Clea* (London 1962, 1968), 152. Hereafter cited as AQ in text. The *Quartet* also contains Durrell’s “free” translations of some of Cavafy’s poems. One of these will be cited later.

7. E. M. Forster, *Alexandria: A History and a Guide*, introduction by Lawrence Durrell, afterword and notes by Michael Haag (New York 1986), 239.

8. Daniel Mendelsohn, “Constantine Cavafy: ‘As Good as Great Poetry Gets,’” *New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2008, 55–58.

9. E. M. Forster, *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* and *Pharos and Pharillon*, Miriam Allott, ed. (London 2004), 243.

10. Edmund Keeley, *Cavafy’s Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress* (Princeton 1976), 4.

11. Forster (note 9), 244.

12. Forster (note 9), 245, 250.

13. Michael Haag, *Alexandria: City of Memory* (New Haven 2004), 84, 85. Hereafter cited as ACM in text. Forster (note 9), 68.

14. C. P. Cavafy: *Collected Poems*, rev. ed., Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, trans. (Princeton 1992), 73.

15. Michael Wood, “Sink or Skim,” *London Review of Books*, January 1, 2009, 11–12.

16. Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (New Haven 2005), x: “To write a novel, after all, is to re-create the world from a highly colored point of view—inevitably, that of the novelist, and, often, that of the principal character as well.”

17. Ralph W. Rader, “Literary Form in Factual Narrative: The Example of Boswell’s *Johnson*,” in *Essays in Eighteenth-Century Biography*, Philip B. Daghlion, ed. (Bloomington, IN 1968), 3–42. A shorter version of this famous essay appears in *Boswell’s “Life of Johnson”: New Questions, New Answers*, John A. Vance, ed. (Athens, GA 1985), 25–52. Further citations are to the original essay.

18. Rader (note 17), 3. Rader condenses Coleridge, whose original definition reads: “A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*.” See *The*

Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions, James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, eds. (Princeton 1983), vol. 2, chap. 14, p. 13.

19. Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, Peter Firchow, trans. (Minneapolis 1991), 45, no. 206. Schlegel's phrase is "wie ein Igel," and the German normally translates as "like a hedgehog." The animals are similar in shape. Porcupines are larger, but both have protective quills or spines. See *Athenäums Fragmente und Andere Schriften*, Auswahl und Nachwort von Andreas Huyssen (Stuttgart 2007), 99.

20. Allott (note 9), xx. Allott deduces that the other "cherished event" is Forster's love for Robert Buckingham. See p. 252, n. 6.

21. Allott (note 9), 329–34.

22. Thomas Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, H. T. Lowe-Porter, trans. (New York 1955), 86.

23. *Henry James: Complete Stories, 1898–1910* (New York 1996), 704.

24. This habit, which some consider pretentious, has received scathing criticism. See Martin Green, "Lawrence Durrell: A Minority Report," in *The World of Lawrence Durrell*, Harry T. Moore, ed. (Carbondale, IL 1962), 134–35.

25. Michael Haag, *Vintage Alexandria: Photographs of the City, 1860–1960* (Cairo 2008), 46. Hereafter cited as VA in text.

26. W. Stevenson Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, rev. William Kelly Simpson (New Haven 1981), 113; cf. the Ancient Egypt Web Site (<http://ancient-egypt.co.uk/boston/index.htm>). Both sources comment on the graywacke dyad of Menkaure and his queen Khamerernebty in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

27. My special thanks to Nicholas Poburko for his keen eye and sharp knife.