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A New Bloomsbury? Forster, Cadmus and the Frenches in Greenwich Village

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E. M. Forster surprised two young painters at work in their Greenwich Village studio one April morning in 1947, bounding up four flights of the dilapidated brownstone like a man much younger than his sixty-eight years. The landing opened into a railroad apartment whose outer rooms were fashioned into workspace. Paul Cadmus’s orderly studio faced north, with a view of scraggly trees and the brick face of a tenement. Jared French’s room had “a medieval alchemist’s look of disorder: large anatomy books, an Houdon écorché with muscles painted on, bottles of powdered pigments, dirty work clothes” piled hugger-mugger.” The scent of rotten eggs hung in the air. Happily for him, Forster’s hosts had no time to tidy their cluttered workspace or to “make suitable arrangements for entertaining the Great Writer.” The three men settled down amicably. In a sea of dust Forster perched on a daybed that threatened to collapse. The British novelist and the American artists thirty years his junior spread out an impromptu picnic under the skylight of the central room, talking and drinking the afternoon away. Though they had been corresponding for a decade, it was their first meeting. It was also Forster’s first visit to New York.

Forster immediately felt at home in their company. In his diary, he noted approvingly that “the flat is Bloomsbury and unsanitary.” This block of row houses past their prime reminded him of the shabby London neighborhood where his friends repaired after they...
left Cambridge University in the first decade of the century. These writers, visual artists, and activists lived communally, their daily existence full of gossip and ephemera, honest talk and friendly sex. For Forster, Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Lytton Strachey, Bloomsbury was an ethos as well as a place.

Forster’s 1938 essay “What I Believe” began provocatively: “I do not believe in Belief.”4 He and his friends eschewed all external measurements of the good and the true, the whole Victorian bourgeois drooling over money and God and things, and put their faith squarely in friendship. While being true to themselves and their art, they invented British modernism.

Forster’s writing in the dark decade before the Second World War made it possible for Cadmus to believe that something human and good could still prevail in the belligerent and broken world. He hearkened to the old man’s credo, not in

an aristocracy of power, based on rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate, and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human condition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos.5

In the cauldron of the rise of fascism and the coming of war, Forster had clung to his belief in personal relationships. This was not the Edwardian voice of A Room with a View, but the sinewy, rueful “reflections of an individualist and a liberal who has found liberalism crumbling beneath him and at first felt ashamed.”6

The idea that he might be part of a “queer race” was particularly meaningful to Cadmus, who had been openly homosexual all his life. He had learned of Forster’s homosexuality from the gay expatriates W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. Through an affinity that was a kind of “secret understanding,” in 1943 Cadmus wrote Forster a frank letter of admiration, confessing the “admiration and devotion I feel towards your works—and through, them, towards you. ‘What I Believe’ is so much what I believe too that I always read it to potential friends. I do it with so much conviction and emotion that I and they forget that it is not I speaking.”7

Cadmus’s warmth and sensitivity struck a chord in Forster, who was delighted to receive a photograph of Paul’s postcard-sized portrait of Jared and Margaret French on the dunes at Fire Island. The tempera painting was a personal homage. The woman, fully clothed, lies on a beach blanket, reading a book with the title ‘To E. M. Forster,” while the naked man curls beside her, adoze in the hot sun. Cadmus’s affection for both his lover and his lover’s wife imbues the moment with sweet serenity.

Jared’s marriage in 1927 to Margaret Hoening, herself a fine painter, might have cast a lesser soul than Cadmus into desolation. After all, Paul and Jared had been friends and lovers for a decade,
since they studied at the Art Students League. They were an odd pair: Paul lanky, angular, with an aquiline nose and a slight overbite that made him look to Forster like “a sun-burn rodent”; “Jerry” stocky, intense, with a smoldering sexual energy. But Margaret and Paul both acquiesced to Jerry’s needs—and Jerry needed them both. Soon the trio of friends established a remarkable collaboration as artists, eschewing singular authorship of their photographs by simply signing the work with an alloy of their names: PAJAMA.

Into this strange equilibrium came a fourth artist, around the time Forster came to the St. Luke’s studio—a young wide-eyed ex-Marine of extraordinary vision, George Tooker. The trio settled into two pairs, as Cadmus and Tooker became lovers.

Over “delicious prosciutto smoked salmon, wine,” Paul and Jerry pressed Forster to make the studio his home during his New York visit that spring; they also invited him to Provincetown, where they would be painting, photographing, and lounging at a huge grey-shingled house on the beach. He accepted, observing the black men playing baseball in the park opposite Jerry’s studio. In June he took the train to the Cape, spending three idyllic days with his new coterie. He “felt to belong at Provincetown” being sketched by Jerry, photographed by Margaret, playing duets on the piano with Paul. “I have had so much kindness and received it so willingly.”

Like Forster himself, it was difficult to tell whether these four artists were old-fashioned or prophetic. They were impossible to label, but it was clear they did not care to work à la mode. Cadmus was a superb draftsman, schooled in the European tradition, whose male nudes were (in his own words) “representational, delicate, sensual.” He and French had taken up and renewed the ancient, abandoned medium of egg tempera “passing the pliant yolk back and forth between his palms, pricking the membrane, and blending pigments, layering the milky unforgiving mixture as the medieval painters had done, slowly and carefully until a detailed painting appeared.” All four were figurative painters, to various levels of abstraction: Cadmus tended toward busy, corporeal, ribald scenes; Jared French toward a cerebral restraint verging on archetype; Margaret French’s human figures were suspended in surreal serenity; while Tooker placed wide-eyed luminous innocents in uncanny urban landscapes. Their friend George Platt Lynes aligned the men in a photograph (see page 27) at the St. Luke’s studio in the summer of 1948, Cadmus, then Tooker, then French at their easels, receding into the distance. The triple portrait was an artifice, for Tooker...
never shared the studio. But as an allegory of sexual friendship it was symbolically true.

Cadmus recognized that he was neither quite Bloomsbury, nor quite of this world. Describing himself to Forster, he wrote: “I don’t look like your Bohemian with a louse in his beard—in fact I dress almost elegantly with a tendency towards chi-chi in neckties—but I live almost as he might.”

Trying to articulate both the complexity of his personal relationships with Tooker and the Frenches, and his deep belief in the promise of Forster’s humane vision, Cadmus interrupted work on a grotesque series depicting The Seven Deadly Sins commissioned by his brother-in-law Lincoln Kirstein to begin a utopian painting exploring themes of tolerance and sexual freedom. He named it “What I Believe,” in honor of the essay that brought him treasured friendship with Forster.

The figure of a whimsical, naked Forster presides over this allegory of desire—a fact that charmed and took Forster aback in equal measure. Garlanded with a ribbon reading “love, the beloved Republic,” the great gay man of letters invites lovers of all configurations into his world with “his long thin hands palms up in a characteristic gesture both eloquent and awkward, between a shrug and a beatification.” And there are other symbolic reworkings of the relationships Cadmus held most dear: Jerry embracing him, while Margaret, serene, hovering over them both, holds her hands outstretched a moment away from a caress; a second self-portrait, alone, reading quizzically from a book entitled “relationships.” Other familiar faces and bodies emerge, often in duplicate, alive in the joyous company of wives, lovers, even pets. Flesh, flesh, flesh. To the right of this polymorphous display of desire is a sharply dystopian antithesis: the figure of death, his faced covered, emerging from a half-dug grave. Beyond him, grotesque crowds of corpulent hedonists drink, carouse, and make war.

In the bright blue sky of the background, twin symbols of Forster’s harmonious vision reveal themselves: the lighthouse Pharos at Alexandria, casting its enlightening beam; and a cloud in the shape of a question mark, the enigmatic invitation to true love that George Emerson poses to his beloved Lucy in A Room with a View. The meaning of life, Cadmus argues, is love; and he learned most fully how to love from Forster’s writing. This is what Cadmus believes.