Monumental Matters
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IN LATE APRIL of 1788 William Hodges exhibited his painting, *View of Benares with Aurangzeb’s Mosque*, in the Royal Academy (figure 1). It can be seen in the famous print of the exhibition’s opening, hung “above the line” in the Great Room of Sommerset House (figure 2). In the center of the print stands the royal family, with King George III looking over to the left wall (figure 2a). If we follow his line of vision, it might take us to Hodges’s riverfront scene. Exhibited in the most prestigious space of the London art world, the painting presented a picturesque view of the never-before-seen Indian landscape, its architecture, nature, and people. The subject of the print, however, is obviously not Hodges’s work, but the spatial dynamics of the Great Room in which it was viewed. It was one of many paintings hung from floor to ceiling, creating a dizzying quilt of floating frames. Adding to the unruliness of the exhibitionary space was the frenzy of the new art-going public to see, and to be seen viewing, the nation’s most eminent art. In this context the deeper meaning of the art would easily have been lost to the spectacle. To prevent this sort of obfuscation and to fix the contingency of the exhibition to the national principle, the surveying eye/I of the king becomes operational. As the embodiment of the British people and the exemplar of tasteful viewing practice, his magisterial gaze and confident stance fix both the art and the subject into the greater symbolic order of the nation. It is through this context and this viewing practice that Hodges’s *View of Benares with Aurangzeb’s Mosque* comes to be signified as a British painting.

There is, however, another more submerged component to this visual experience. A person’s viewing of a picture is far from stable and unopposed, but is instead a highly fraught exercise of identification that occurs between the desiring eye and the lacking gaze. The beholder of Hodges’s Indian landscape, while considering the color, form, and control of the artist’s hand, would have sensed something more in a far-off corner: a dark spot or an unrecognized

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figure. To the late eighteenth-century British public this discordant element would have had the same resonance as the nefarious energy that possessed the newly minted “nabobs” as they tore through the social fabric of Great Britain. The picture contained a stain of the repressed knowledge of British aggression in India that rendered fictitious the transcendent and universal claims of its national ethos. In the picture, this stain is what Lacan called the “gaze,” the returning vision (of India) that transfixes the (British) subject and quietly devastates it with the truth that “there is no there, there.” Such voiceless forms of resistance are rarely represented in writing, historical or otherwise, subsequently causing a distorted picture of the unobstructed movement of power and its knowledge.

The study of the Mughal monument is informed by a similar conceptual predicament, in which only the ideological practices of its spatial ordering are critically considered and the resistance of the monument to this symbolization is left unexamined. I argue that this is a matter of the limited perspective of the full ontology of monumentality. In this chapter I examine poetry, picturesque painting, and travel writings to reveal how, in the eighteenth century, new symbolic orders vied for the domination of Indian reality at the Mughal monument. I also reveal how the realities of subject formation and monumentality resisted this ordering, causing crisis and conflict in the representations of the monument.

The Persistence of Memory and the Poetics of the Mughal Ruin

At the time the British obtained their territorial power in India in 1765, the Indian landscape was still feeling the effects of the political entropy of the Mughal state that had started after the death of the last great Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, in 1707. Struggles over succession, the secession of territories, the corruption of nobles, and the torpidity of later emperors are the often-cited principal causes of the decline of Mughal authority. Hastening this decline were the periodic invasions of the Mughal capitals of Agra and Delhi. Between 1739, starting with the invasion of Nadir Shah, and ending in 1787 with Ghulam Qadir’s attack, Delhi was sacked by the armies of the Persians, Afghans, Marathas, Jats, Sikhs, and Rohillas. The residents of the northwestern empire, and particularly those of Delhi, were massacred, and those not killed were left impoverished. The Mughal Empire shrunk from an
area that stretched from Kashmir to the Kaveri River to the extent of land between Palam and the Red Fort. The material conditions of the forts, palaces, mosques, and shrines the Mughals had built in their capital cities served as another important index of their declining power. Some religious structures lost their imperial endowments (awqaf) and fell into disrepair; others continued as they were, but without imperial oversight, they too lost the splendor of past centuries. The ruins and decay of these imperial buildings would become the principal subject of artists reflecting on the changing power relations in the Indian landscape and their place within it.

By the mid-eighteenth century power relations in India were no longer based on an imperial configuration but on provincial sovereignty. Power continued to be measured by the maintenance of armies and revenue collection, but it was dispersed among the regional kingdoms that took advantage of Mughal weakness. In 1765 the British East India Company became one of these regional rulers after accepting the diwan of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa from the Mughal emperor. All these new rulers in one way or another adopted aspects of Mughal culture and political procedure to legitimize their new power. In architectural terms this manifested in the grand building projects of the regional rulers that outpaced the concomitant ruination of Mughal structures. In establishing their seats of power, these rulers abandoned old capitals, let them fall into ruin, or repurposed their stones. In the new capitals they commenced public works like bridges, roads, caravanserais, and markets to ensure the efficient movement of trade in their territories. The rulers also built palaces, congregational mosques, and shrines and laid down public gardens. The new built environments found in the capitals of Bengal, Hyderabad, and Oudh often combined Mughal spatial rituals and design with local ornamentation, which helped indicate the ruler’s independence. This can be seen most clearly in the inclusion of the distinctive jharoka, or raised platform topped by a cupola, in the public audience halls of new palaces. The Mughal emperor sat in such an elevated seat for his daily durbar, or public audience, a practice essential to performing the political order and making visible relationships of power.

In addition to architectural emulation, Mughal power continued to be asserted through the nostalgic themes of Urdu poetry. When the finances of the Mughal court in Delhi began to dwindle, court poets sought new patronage
from regional rulers. Lucknow, the capital of Oudh, for example, became the foster city of poets, artisans, scholars, and Muslim jurists fleeing the devastating invasions of Mughal Delhi. Among the poets were Mir Hasan, Mir Taqi Mir (known as Mir), Mirza Muhammad Rafi’ Sauda, and Khan-i Arzu who found refuge in Nawab Asaf-ud-daula’s court. Poetry, art, and architecture flourished in Lucknow in the eighteenth century, and the city remained a religious and cultural center until the British annexation of Oudh in 1856. While other artists settled into their new employment in Lucknow, the poets of the Mughal court never accepted the city as the empire’s legitimate heir. Their resistance to the changing power structure expressed itself through the poetry of the shahrashob, or “lament of the fallen city.” The poets’ evocation of the memory of the Mughal city as a perfected space is nostalgic, and the description of its present state is maudlin in tone. When heard in the royal court setting, it would have produced a striking contrast to the well-known and more exuberant verse of the Persian poet Abu Talib Kalim (d. 1651), who wrote of the unequaled beauty of the Mughal cities a century earlier. For example, in describing the Red Fort of Shahjahanabad, Delhi, Kalim writes:

How splendid is the tall fortress, its foundation in the skies!
The earth is honored in your shadow.

Such radiance your beauty has bestowed
That your shadow made a mirror of the ground.

Through you the land has come to know the heavens,
If not [for you], where would one be, where the other?

Through you the land has come to be revered in the world;
At times the father gains his name from the son.2

Kalim’s verse describing Delhi’s Red Fort is an indirect tribute to the greatness of Shah Jahan. It also brings the Mughal Empire into the orbit of the larger Persianate world, where it surpasses the progenitor of its culture, the Safavid court of Isfahan. The Red Fort is therefore a space that permits the Mughals to take their place among the greatest powers of Islamic civilization. The shahrashob, a result of turbulent eighteenth-century India, represents the Mughal palace and greater city in a very different state. As a product of the
declining times it provides a richly textured picture of how the cultured Muslim elite imbued the Mughal city with poetic symbolism to resist obliteration and to spiritually survive amid the shifting power relations of northern India.

The shahrashob came to India from Ottoman Turkey and Persia and became an active genre after 1739, the year Nadir Shah sacked Delhi and turned what was then still a city of peace and prosperity into a scene of dystopian horror. In India the shahrashob was written in Urdu, which with the decline of the Mughal power displaced Persian as the language of court poetry. The turn to Urdu signaled India's turn away from pan-Islamic or Persian culture. The subject matter of shahrashob also changed after its adoption in India. In Persia and Turkey it was a humorous genre that used the city merely as a backdrop for mocking descriptions of urban youths and their occupations. In the Urdu variation of shahrashob the focus is directly on the city, the tone is more somber, and the verse is written in a direct and simpler style. The content of the Urdu shahrashob is characterized by an exaggerated nostalgia and despondency over the desperate state of the world. In the poetic figuration of Delhi, for example, the city's former greatness is juxtaposed to its current state of ruin, evidenced by decrepit homes, empty mosques, decaying palaces, and dirty streets. The ruin in the shahrashob serves as a central metaphor of decline. Written by poets suffering through the material conditions of loss of status, wealth, and Mughal patronage, the shahrashob offers a view into how the Mughal city and its parts were reordered by the demands of eighteenth-century social reality.

Most articulate on this theme of decline was the poet Mir, who left Delhi after Ahmad Shah Abdali, an Afghan invader, sacked the city in 1757. Taking up residence in Lucknow, which he found lacking in the stateliness of Delhi, Mir wrote of his beloved Mughal city: “A hard time I spent in Delhi—stiffening my heart to stone / No honor, no grace, no glory—ignominy intoned / I did not have a friend to counsel or console—desolate every home / Barren wastes stared in the face, I felt benumbed—wearie and forlorn.” Earlier in the poem Mir elaborates on the city's past perfection: “Delhi's streets were not alleys but pages of a painting / Every face that appeared seemed like a masterpiece.” Having taken us on a walk through the beautiful streets of Delhi, which he likens to walking through a perfected miniature painting, Mir shows us what has become of this picture in the next few verses: “Thy gift,
that picturesque life / The heavens’ lack of sympathy has effaced all those impressions.” The poet’s evocation of painting to describe Delhi’s streets is not just an elegant symbol but also functions as a framing device of the material conditions of a devastated city: the beauty of a miniature painting, whose perfection eludes words, signifies the vibrancy that was Delhi, now all but gone.

Another major poet who wrote on the ruins of Delhi is Sauda. His verse has a satirical edge and is critical of the social and political decline of Delhi after the Persian invasions. Like Mir, he too witnessed Delhi’s ruin and uses the same metaphor of the erased picture: “Delhi, did you deserve all this? Perhaps at one time, this city was the heart of a lover / It was wiped out as if it had been an ephemeral drawing.” The city is here cast as the lover, whose betrayal has cost the people the social order and cultural excellence they were used to.

Sauda’s satire focuses on the emptiness and ruins of the city.

If I would begin to do speech/poetry about the desolation of the city,
Then having heard it, the wits of the owl would take flight.
There is no house in which the jackal’s cry would not be heard.
If anyone goes in the evening to the mosque for prayers.

There’s no lamp there, except the “lamp of the ghoul.”
In no one’s house does a grinding-wheel or even so much as a stove remain,
Among a thousand houses, perhaps in one house there burns a lamp.
It’s hardly a lamp! [Rather,] that house has a wound of grief for all the [other] houses.
And among those houses, in every direction asses bray.

Where in the spring we used to sit and hear the hindol [raga].
They are ruined, those buildings—what can I say to you? —
The sight of which used to remove hunger and thirst.
Now if we look, the heart would become disaffected with life.
Instead of roses, in the flower-beds there’s waist-high grass.

Here a pillar lies fallen, there an archway lies.

... 

When did Jahanabad deserve this oppression?
Not even a lamp is lit there, in a place where there was a chandelier,
The pride of mirror-chambers now lies fallen in ruins,
Tens of millions of hearts full of hope, became despairing.
From the houses ladies of the nobility have emerged,
They didn’t get an ordinary palanquin—they who used to be possessors
of fancy litters.¹⁰

Yet the representation of the ruin in the shahrashob provides more than docu-
mentary information about the decline of Delhi in the eighteenth century.
The ruin also functioned in this poetry as a space of the poets’ subjective
desire to preserve their Mughal identity and worldview and thus resist the new
regional power structure.

In the poetical representations of Mir and Sauda the ruins of the Mughal
city elevated the architectural space to an object of fantasy. More than an
index of the political conditions of the period, the ruin also operated in the
symbolic register to transform the subjectivity of the defeated Muslim com-
munity and to help it find its way back to order and reason. The principal cause
of their suffering was attributed to God’s displeasure with the community of
the faithful. For example, Sauda writes of empty mosques and of how they
were now less valuable than mule posts.¹¹ Carla Petievich explains his signifi-
cation of the empty mosque: “That Muslims should fail to say their prayers,
thereby declining to identify themselves as the slaves of Allah, was the most
fundamental breach they could make in their contract with the Almighty.”¹²
Having once been the ruling class of most of India, a status bestowed by God,
the elite Muslims now had to share this position with Hindus, Sikhs, and for-
eign Christians. A parallel loss of power had occurred internationally, as India
could no longer claim an eminent place in the pan-Islamic world.

To help stay this rapid decline and loss of identity the poet introduced the
nostalgic motif of the ruined Mughal city. The ruin in the shahrashob func-
tions to give order to the chaotic world, thus in much the same way as the
Lacanian point de capiton, or “quilting point,” that holds down the floating
signifiers of chaotic times and gives them an order and meaning.¹³ The poem
uses the ruined Mughal city to center and stabilize the disoriented subject of
eighteenth-century India. In this regard the shahrashob and its reiteration
of the perfected city frames Mughal space as more than an empty ruin. It
instead stands as a symbolic site that thoughtfully veils the contradictions of the period through nostalgia and reaffirms Mughal power relations. The Mughal ruin in the shahrashob is thus a space helping the poet and his audience sublimate the traumas of the declining Mughal Empire and find meaning in and give structure to their lives.

Na’im Ahmad further explains that the representations of the shahrashob had social importance and states that although the poet identifies with the general sorrow and pain of the times, he is not powerless. Ahmad explains the restorative possibilities of shahrashob and tells what it can teach us about the worldview and historical struggles of Indian Muslims: “A look at the genre as a whole does not give an impression of throwing down one’s weapons in the face of difficulties, but rather evokes the courage to stand up firmly against unfavorable circumstances. The shahr-ashob teaches us forcefully about man’s ability to endure sorrow, and his unconquerable power of repelling disasters.”

Ahmad thus importantly suggests here that the ruins of Mughal India were never completely abandoned. In the poet’s efforts to make sense of tragic times, preserve the memory of Mughal power, and offer a space to imagine a stable Muslim identity, the ruin becomes a pivotal space. More precisely, the ruined Mughal city serves to restore the fragmented and traumatized subject through an imagined relationship with the glorious past.

Not all Muslims agreed with the backward-looking poets and their longing for the old ways of the Mughal city. While they shared with the poets the notion that Mughal decline resulted from God’s disfavor, they found different solutions. Instead of identifying with the lost glories of bygone days, they sought religious reform. One such movement, led in the eighteenth century by the Sufi philosopher Shah Waliullah (1703–62) and his sons, was influenced by the reforms the Wahhabis had initiated in the Hijaz of the Arabian Peninsula. Waliullah called for the careful study of the Qu’ran and the hadith, or the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed. He also wanted the Indian Muslim community to identify solely with the ummah, or universal community of Muslims. Like the Wahhabis, Waliullah criticized the corruption of Islam by the introduction of non-Islamic beliefs and rituals. His followers would translate this spatially by disavowing the veneration of the heterodox Sufi saints and the pilgrimage to their shrines.

In the eighteenth century many Sufi leaders lost Mughal financial support,
or awqaf, for the shrines and either sought alternative support from local rulers or became self-sustaining through reformist programs. It was at this time that Waliulla, a follower of the Sufi order of Naqshbandi, initiated his restructuring of Indian Islam. The schools founded after this movement, such as the Deoband and the Ahl-i Hadis, and the ulema or legal scholars they produced, increased their suspicion of the cult of shrines, casting them as seats of corruption and duplicity. Social unruliness was particularly associated with the festival of the urs, the commemoration of the death anniversary of the saint. In this context of reformist Islam, the ruination of the Sufi shrines and the decaying city signaled not the end of a golden age but the end of the era of Mughal debasement of Islam and heterodoxy: the shrines and decaying city were spaces at which to imagine Muslim renewal and a reorientation to the pure religion of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Sufi shrines, however, did not altogether go away in the eighteenth century. The descendents of the orders continued to attend to the spiritual needs of local worshippers, both Muslim and Hindu. Some, like the Chishti order, went through their own revival, placing a new emphasis on the shariat, or Islamic law. By the end of the eighteenth century, two general perspectives existed in Indian Islam regarding the Mughal era and the Sufi shrines built during Mughal rule. The reformists saw the shrine as an obstacle to their ultimate goal of uniting Indian Muslims with the international umma and cleansing it of all non-Islamic customs. The Sufi orders, on the other hand, continued to emphasize cultural syncretism and preserved the shrines of saints as the spatial axis on which their Islamic teachings and practice turned. Like the Mughal city and its architecture presented in the shahrashob, the shrines of Sufi leaders were also rendered critical spaces whose symbolization helped the Muslim community survive the tumult of the times and reorient itself.

Subject and Subjection: Hodges’s Encounter with the Mughal Monument

As the eighteenth century wore on, the poets of the shahrashob began to share the spaces of Mughal architecture with British artists. For the new British rulers, both the ruins and the still functional palaces, tombs, gardens, and mosques of the Great Mughal became spaces of desire, parallactic objects that continuously vacillated between affirming the ethics of colonial subjectivity
and rejecting its very possibility. Emerging from the gap between the two points of identity, the monument simultaneously represented the colonial Real—with its terror, unrestrained expansion, and unethical actions—and the colonial imaginary based on the natural progress of civilization, divine providence, and moral duty. Sara Suleri identifies the gap as the Indian sublime, whose articulation she finds in the speeches of Burke. His speech in Parliament in support of Fox’s East India Bill that sought to place the East India Company under parliamentary control, for example, offers image after image of colonial terror and epistemological failure, making India unrepresentable by the usual methods of cataloguing, mapping, and inventory. As Suleri explains his rhetorical representation of the Indian sublime: “India as a historical reality evokes the horror of sublimity, thus suggesting to the colonizing mind the intimate dynamic it already shares with aesthetic horror; such intimacy provokes the desire to itemize and to list all the properties of the desired object; the list’s inherent failure to be anything other than a list causes the operation of sublimity to open into vacuity, displacing desire into the greater longevity of disappointment.” It is important to note here that in Burke’s rhetoric the sublime sanctions rather than negates colonial expansion. His pointing out of the current failure to know India does not mean that the British should stop trying to know it, and indeed he wanted the British not to leave India but to govern it more ethically. Burke’s strategy of colonial rule was one organized around the essence of failure and lack. The Mughal ruin arises from this epistemological tension of wanting to understand, control, and rule India and from the knowledge that behind these efforts always lies the impossibility of Real, that will not underwrite the symbolization of colonial representations but that nonetheless sanctions the effort to find ever more precise operations of knowledge as ethical endeavors. The void or gap that results from the Real’s objection to the symbolization of Indian architectural spaces will thus be perceived by the colonial artist as the monumental lack, which only he or she can complete through picturesque imagery and writing.

The clearest representation of the volatile encounter with Mughal monuments occurs in the pictorial and written representations of William Hodges. The son of a blacksmith, Hodges apprenticed with Richard Wilson, the landscape painter and founding member of the Royal Academy. His first important appointment was as the commissioned artist of Captain Cook’s second
voyage to the South Pacific. On his return he applied to the East India Company to travel to India, hoping to find similar success in depicting foreign landscapes and people there. He arrived in Madras in 1780 and one year later came to work under the patronage and protection of Warren Hastings, the governor general. For the following three years he toured northern India, sketching its landscape and noting geographic details. The paintings he made from these sketches would later earn him membership in the Royal Academy, but he was quickly eclipsed by more objectively disposed picturesque artists like the uncle-and-nephew team, Thomas and William Daniell. Art historians who have studied Hodges focus on establishing the nascence of a colonial aesthetic in his art and often represent his Indian landscapes as the visual and ideological translation of the English picturesque landscape style. My aim is different. I want to examine Hodges’s encounter with the Mughal monument as it was informed by the material realities of eighteenth-century British India and the ideological process of framing the Indian landscape. The questions I seek to answer are how the monuments structured his reckoning with the Indian Real, and, more critically, how the process of identification and symbolization of his art produced a fundamentally different perception of the Mughal monument from that of Burke.

Hodges spent four years in India, from 1780 through 1783, but most of the firsthand information we receive about his tours of the country comes from his travel journal, published in 1793. It is vital to note that the book, written ten years after his return to London, speaks directly to the current debates of colonial policy and the trial of Hastings for committing high crimes and misdemeanors while governor general in India. The style of the text is divided between the spontaneous, ethnographic, topographic, and reflexive writing of the monumental encounter and the distant, philosophical, and disinterested meditations of an artist-philosopher. The two written modes are structured by the parallactic view through which the nondiscursive encounter with the Mughal monument is first mediated in its material existence; only later—ten years later, in fact—does it become signified by colonial ideology. That Hodges preserves both moments in his published book renders his narrative disjointed and difficult. At the same time this disorderly text provides us with a rare glimpse into how Mughal monuments were produced between the artist’s encounter with their raw or sublime state, causing awe and desire,
and his idealized encounter when he retroactively inserts himself and the sites into the symbolic order of colonial rule.

The Terror and Tyranny of a Mughal Mosque

Among the many sites that Hodges visited, the one that most exemplifies the parallactic view of the Mughal monument is Aurangzeb’s mosque in Benares. After destroying the Vishvanath temple in 1669, Aurangzeb, the last of the great Mughal emperors, ordered the Gyanvapi mosque to be raised in its place. The original temple, built by Raja Man Singh of Amber, provided the foundation and building materials for Aurangzeb’s monumental construction. The mosque was meant to project across the otherwise Hindu cityscape the power of the Mughal state and the religion that it identified with and in whose name it ruled. But the choice of destroying a Hindu temple to construct a mosque was most certainly made to psychologically punish Jai Singh II, the grandson of Raja Man Singh, for offering succor to Maratha Shivaji, the Mughal’s archenemy.20

The morphology of the mosque, defined by tall minarets and domes, thus had two principal imperatives: to proclaim the presence of Mughal rule in India and to identify this rule with Islam. When Hodges came to Benares, the mosque, which continued to be used by local Muslims, proclaimed to the new British power the unsettling fact of continued Mughal influence over the landscape. Hodges’s paintings and subsequent writing of the mosque done in London veil this reality and represent the British as ethical actors in an unethical landscape, and Aurangzeb’s mosque, while awe inspiring, was ultimately symbolized as an example of Muslim depravity. This well-ordered representation of the Mughal mosque, however, belies the truth of how Hodges originally encountered it. Shortly after his arrival in Benares, Hodges witnessed the trauma of war that followed Governor General Hastings’s arrest of Raja Chait Singh, the zamindar of Benares, for not paying the extra tribute above the amount agreed on in a prior treaty. The raja’s troops came to rescue him, killing British soldiers and Indian sepoys. A war quickly ensued that eventually led to the absorption of Raja Chait Singh’s lands into the Company’s dominion. Hastings would later be tried and impeached for this and other similarly impulsive acts that would be described in dramatic detail for the British public.
In light of these events, Hodges’s representations of Benares are informed by his aesthetic goals of capturing the Indian geography in the idiom of British landscape art and the sublimation of his experience of a war instigated by his patron. In his journal he states his great desire to see the sacred Hindu city, for here he would for the first time be “able to contemplate the pure Hindu manners, arts, buildings, and customs, undepraved by any intermixture with the Mahomedans.” Hodges then notes that “the unhappy events that immediately succeeded frustrated, for the present, those designs.” These words present the basic outline of British perception of India and the internal crisis of such perception that will come to destabilize any representation of the Mughal monument. The symbolic ordering of the Indian landscape, traumatically interrupted by the realities of colonial rule and war, will shape Hodges’s encounter with Aurangzeb’s mosque and inform the painting and writings that follow with ambivalence. After another ill-fated battle in the town of Ramnagur, the raja’s soldiers turned against the British in Benares, and Hodges was ordered to evacuate, “leaving behind me the whole of my baggage, excepting my drawings, and a few changes of linen.” He remained in Chunar—a town twenty miles upriver from Benares—until peace was restored. Hodges devotes the remainder of his first two Benares chapters to descriptions of the fighting, records of the number of deaths, and an account of the Company’s final victory.

What Hodges elides in this written report, however, is the cause of the war and the fact that it resulted from economic urgencies wrought by the shifting power relations in India that saw British influence spread without reason or restraint outside the territories of the presidencies. Spurred on by the demand to draw a profit for the Company after the costly wars with Hyder Ali, Hastings demanded extra tribute from allied zamindars or landholders. Back in London, politicians like Charles Fox, William Pitt, and Burke saw in these acts evidence that more government oversight of the East India Company was needed. Interestingly enough, when making his case, Burke entered his view of the Indian monument as an ethical sign to contrast the arbitrary and spontaneous misjudgments of the British in India. As he stated in 1783 in support of Fox’s East India Bill: “Every rupee of profit made by an Englishman is lost forever to India. With us are no retributory superstitions, by which a foundation of charity compensates, through ages, to the poor, for the rapine
and injustice of a day. With us no pride erects stately monuments which repair
the mischiefs which pride had produced, and which adorn a country out of
its own spoils. England has erected no churches, no hospitals, no palaces, no
schools; England has built no bridges, made no high roads, cut no navigations,
dug out no reservoirs. Every other conqueror of every other description has left
some monument, either of state or beneficence, behind him.”24 Burke might
easily have been referring to the practice of religious endowments or awqaf of
Muslim rulers, which he saw as still operative and as a testament to the endur-
ance of Mughal authority and its spatial practices. Company rule, in contrast,
based on unethical commercial practices and power gains, ruined the land-
scape and erected no monuments or other structures to serve the public good.

Hodges saw the same monuments very differently. Due to his emplacement
in the power relations of British India and to his unquestioning support of
Company rule in India, he regarded the monument not as an ethical symbol
of Indian rule but as a sign of Indian lack (civilizational, political, economic,
etc.).25 He allocated an entire separate chapter to this perception, in which he
locates the Mughal monument as the principal site to fathom this lack. All
around the monument Hodges delineates the limits of colonial perceptibility
and presents his own symbolic meaning of the various forms he encounters
in the landscape now under Company rule. In his paintings and prints of the
monuments, the real terror of war, the unbridled use of power, and resulting
suffering will be suppressed and sublimated in the Mughal ruin. Conversely,
the same suppressed reality becomes evident in Hodges’s prose when it appears
in the illogical turns the narrative takes as he attempts the impossible inser-
tion of Indian architecture into the symbolic order of British colonialism.

At the start of chapter 4, Hodges reintroduces Benares as a city that is inter-
esting for only one reason: “The same manners and customs prevail amongst
these people at this day, as in the remotest period that can be traced in history:
and in no instance of religious or civil life have they admitted of any innova-
tions from foreigners.”26 This idea of timelessness is pictorially represented
in the painting he exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1788 (figure 1). The
Hindus are presumably the small figures moving about on the ghats above
the river, engaged in everyday activities; the architecture itself is crumbling
and reveals no trace of modern improvements. More telling is the rendering
of the climate; as one reviewer in the Morning Post noted: “This picture is
stiff and hard; there is no appearance of air throughout, and it is full as cold
and heavy as anything we have seen of this artist.”27 The lack of life and im-
provement that Hodges projects onto the cityscape of Benares is represented
as climatic stagnation. In this view British power is cast as not arbitrary but
ethical. It is destined to fulfill Indian lack by protecting India from the forces
of unethical tyrants and by ushering in the winds of progress. The illegal an-
nexation of the city from the Hindu Raja Chait Singh is thus transformed in
Hodges’s painting into a fantasy of the Hindu city’s desire for British presence
and protection.28

Having set up the temporal frame, Hodges then begins to describe the
physical attributes of the city distinguished by tall buildings and horizontal
ghats lining the river. He interestingly mentions the construction of gardens
along the river that were meant for enjoying the cool breeze of the evening air.
These structures, Hodges explains, were “erected by the charitable contribu-
tions of the wealthy, for the benefit of the public.” The positive observation
of the construction of public gardens is then quickly mitigated by the introduc-
tion of “a considerable Mahomedan mosque” raised “by the most intolerant
and ambitious of human beings, the Emperor Aurungzebe, who destroyed
a magnificent temple of the Hindoos on this spot, and built the present
mosque, said of the same extent and height as the building he destroyed.”29
Hodges proceeds to describe the streets and houses of Benares. He completes
his description of the city with the outlying areas. Amid the distant rubble he
spies the remains of a Hindu temple and takes the opportunity to iterate his
core assertion about Muslim culture: “Surrounding the city are many ruins of
buildings, the effects of Mahomedan intolerance.”30 Hodges’s framing of the
ontological field of northern India now becomes clear. It is structured around
the Mughal monument: the Gyanvapi mosque becomes a point de capiton that
interpellates the British subject, who then retroactively signifies the mosque
by way of colonial ideology. After the process is complete, Hodges becomes
an ideological subject of the mosque, and for its part the mosque is turned
into a fantasy space of Indian loss that desires fulfillment through the British
subject. The mosque and the man are now connected and mutually signifying.

Yet this retroactive process of signification produces its own residue, what
Slavoj Žižek calls “the objectal remnant of the signifying operation.”31 In
Hodges’s text and paintings of the Mughal monument the objectal remnant
is the excess of its materiality that cannot be represented yet points out the truth of British colonialism: that the current activities of the British—the ousting of native rulers—ultimately do not differ from those of the Muslim tyrants of the past; and that greed and ambition can be found in all people no matter their place of birth, skin color, or religious identification. It is this unspeakable truth that haunts Hodges’s images and texts and renders them ambivalent representations of the Mughal monument.

The Melancholy and Horizons of Mughal Agra

The vicissitudes and shifting power relations of the eighteenth century also shaped the Mughal city and architecture of Agra, where the poets of the shahrashob and the artists of British colonialism intersect. Like Delhi, Agra suffered loss of trade, violence, and ruin at different times in the eighteenth century. As the poet Nazir Akbarabadi (1735–1830), known popularly as Nazir, writes of the city’s status between 1780 and 1781: “Be they Noblemen or artisans, all are helpless for want of livelihood / The wind of disaster seems to have blown away everything.”32 Of the city’s once beautiful riverfront gardens he writes: “All the gardens in Agra are lying desolate / Without thorns, not to speak of fruits and flowers / Fruit trees stand scorched and dried and alleys covered with dust / In short, all are in the grip of devastating autumn.”33 The desolation Nazir describes followed the great famine of 1780 that lasted to 1784. Additionally, the decline of the noble classes of Agra is indexed in his verse about the dried-up gardens, as it was they who planted these gardens and built pavilions along the Jumna River. The trading classes and bankers actually prospered during this period of unrest, and commerce continued to grow in Agra. Only the mosques and tombs that had imperial endowments continued to function and meet the needs of the local population and of pilgrims. The shifting demographics, Agra’s marginal status, the material ruin of the built environments of the old Mughal noble classes, and the new growth in trade made the city a heterogeneous urban landscape, defined simultaneously by decline and productivity.

Hodges and Mir both represent Agra through their respective artistic idioms, Hodges through the picturesque and Mir through the shahrashob. This section will consider how Hodges’s and Mir’s encounters with the city were structured according to their respective tropes of decline. Their writing and
art veil the multiplicity of Agra’s Mughal monuments. As Lefebvre describes
the effects of the symbolic operation that they enact: “The world of images
and signs exercises a fascination, skirts or submerges problems, and diverts at-
tention from the ‘real’—i.e., from the possible. While occupying space, it also
signifies space, substituting a mental and therefore abstract space for spatial
practice—without, however, doing anything really to unify those spaces that
it seems to combine in the abstraction of signs, so the produced differences
are supplanted in advance by differences which are induced—and reduced to
signs.”34 As we will see, in their encounter with the diversity of the Mughal
city of Agra, Mir and Hodges abstract its monuments into signs of decline and
ruin that veil the spatial practices of the mosques, shrines, and tombs they seek
to describe. This is why their representations meet resistance both internally,
from the monument’s refusal of the symbolic ordering of both colonialism
and the shahrashob, and externally, from the contending aesthetic practices
that emphasize and celebrate the productive, differential nature of Agra and
its spatial practices.

Hodges reached the outskirts of Agra on 23 February 1783 in the company
of Major James Brown and his troops. At this point the artist had been in
India for almost four years. He had trekked back and forth across the terri-
tory in and around the British diwan, but it was not until his tour with Brown
that Hodges ventured into a land peripheral to British influence. Brown was
sent into the Mughal heartland by Hastings to gain a foothold in the emperor
Shah Alam’s greatly divided court and to drive out Maratha influence there.
The power of the Great Mughal, while nominally honored, was understood
as fragmented along many factions and open to intrigue. Along with the Jats,
Marathas, and Afghans, the English circled the court in Delhi, ready to make
use of any clear opening to gain influence. It was in the accompaniment of
this mission that Hodges came to Agra, and once again his actions and goals
would be informed by the demands of military conquest and the desire to
expand British colonial power. The attempt to weaken the emperor’s power
would be represented by the British back home as unethical. Of the twenty-
two charges Burke and his colleagues brought against Hastings, the second
charge concerned the continuous mistreatment and impoverishment of Shah
Alam that began with Hastings’s denial of imperial tribute in 1772.35 Hastings
for his part defended his actions as appropriate to the context and claimed
that he performed them to protect the Company’s territorial and business interests, which the ineffectual Mughal emperor jeopardized.

Hodges would help Hastings build this case through the exhibition of his representations of the Mughal heartland with its monuments in ruin. However, as in Benares, these representations must be understood as retroactively signified by the ideology of British colonialism. While on the ground in Agra, standing in the midst of the Mughal monuments, Hodges would have witnessed the material decline of the Mughal Empire, but he could not have missed the concurrent continuation of its culture in the activities at the tombs, mosques, and other shrines that continued to be visited by both Hindus and Muslims. In his representations of the Mughal monuments, he suppressed the spatial practices in the sign of ruin, fragmenting the landscape along the lines of the Mughal past and the empty present and foreclosing on the possibility of the city’s rebirth. These practices do not totally disappear but leave traces in the text. As Michel de Certeau explains: “But whatever this new understanding of the past holds to be irrelevant—shards created by the selection of material, remainders left aside by an explication—comes back, despite everything, on the edges of discourse or in its rifts and crannies: ‘resistances,’ ‘survivals,’ or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of ‘progress’ or a system of interpretation.” Therefore the spatial practices that kept Agra’s monuments animate were not definitively erased from Hodges’s representations. The indelible ambivalence of the monumental sign threaten to expose the history imposed by colonial power as a fiction, as no more than a rhetorical device holding no claim to the truth. In Hodges’s text this threat manifests itself in the iteration of the Mughal monument as nothing more than an empty space of a distant and irretrievable past.

This spatial operation, whereby the multiplicity of Agra is submerged under the sign of ruin, is demonstrated in Hodges’s visit to and subsequent representation of Akbar’s tomb in Sikandra. His visit begins with his entering the garden through the main gateway, a monumental structure decorated with multicolored marble and two stories of arched windows. He descends into the garden and sees Akbar’s tomb through the trees lining the pathway leading to it. Hodges describes the hot sun and its blazing rays on the tomb’s surface as producing a sublime and ineffable effect, “a glare of splendour almost beyond the imagination of an inhabitant of these northern climates to
conceive.” The tomb is then described in great detail, lending credibility to his representation. Desirous to see the sarcophagus, he meets “an old Mollah,” presumably the mutawalli (caretaker) of the tomb, who unlocks the entrance for him. This man leads Hodges into the inner chamber, where he is confronted with the truth of Akbar, “an Emperor, whose great actions have resounded through the world” and whom Hodges, in contradiction to his usual tropes of ruin and decay, acknowledges to be “still held in veneration.”

The persistence of the memory of and reverence for Akbar in the everyday life of Agra, which Hodges is forced to recognize, resists the historicizing gaze that would otherwise render the site a ruin. But he is quick enough to cover the gap between his own symbolism and the spatial practices of the tomb through an immediate moralizing description of what he sees after climbing to the top of the tomb’s gateway minaret and looking out across the landscape:

“From the summit of the minarets in the front . . . a spectator’s eye may range over a prodigious circuit of country, not less than thirty miles in a direct line, the whole of which is flat, and filled with ruins of ancient grandeur: the river Jumna is seen at some distance, and the glittering towers of Agra. This fine country exhibits, in its present state, a melancholy proof of the consequences of a bad government, of wild ambition, and the horrors attending civic disensions; for when the governors of this country were in plenitude of power, and exercised their rights with wisdom, from the excellence of its climate, and some degree of industry, it must have been a perfect garden; but now all is desolation and silence.” This sorrowful description of the monumental landscape of Agra, one of the oldest Mughal capitals, along with a graphic representation of the monumental gate of Akbar’s tomb (figure 3), veil the spatial practices at the site under the trope of ruin. Although figures are presented walking into the tomb and sitting around it, that they are diminished by the broken architectural ornaments reaffirms Mughal demise rather than survival—forestalling any onset of guilt over British trespasses on the realm of the emperor’s authority.

The Taj Mahal produces a deeper crisis in Hodges’s narrative of Mughal ruination. With money coming from revenues of land endowed to the tomb by Shah Jahan himself, the site did not fall into ruin like other structures in its vicinity. At the Taj Mahal the spatial practices of prayer, veneration, and monument pres-
ervation put in place by Shah Jahan continued. The caretakers Hodges describes “appear most orderly and decent,” differing from others he had encountered. The efficient custodians, working fountains, well-maintained gardens, and the architectural masterpiece of the tomb itself produced a tableau of sublime beauty that resisted Hodges’s symbolic order of Mughal decline and decay more than any other monument he encountered. The tomb’s undiminished presence, Hodges remarks, was due to “the lands allotted for the support of the building not being dismembered from it,” a clear acknowledgment of the endurance of Mughal charitable endowments. The striking beauty of the tomb cannot be contained by Hodges’s architectural categories and thus forces him to abstract it even further from the surrounding landscape, signifying it as an exceptional space, separate from all other Mughal monuments. As he writes: “The center building is in a perfect state; but all those which surround it bear strong marks of decay.” The spatial practices that explain the persistence of the Taj Mahal’s
preservation (that it was attached to the charitable lands left by a munificent Muslim ruler to maintain his memory) is again suppressed, and the ethereal beauty of the monument is all that comes to signify its space in Hodges’s text.

Both Akbar’s tomb and the Taj Mahal could be said to contain within their space the monumental Real that refused Hodges’s symbolization of decline. The Real and the survival of Mughal spatial practices work to “discretely perturb the pretty order of a line of ‘progress’ or a system of interpretation” in the artist’s text and image. Spatial practices that menace the text also mark the place of the differential; as Certeau further explains, they “symbolize a return of the repressed, that is, a return of what, at a given moment, has become unthinkable in order for a new identity to become thinkable.” Thus the ideological impossibility of Mughal spaces rendered them to be more than abstract spaces of Mughal decline, as a pure ideological reading of Hodges’s art would have them appear. On the contrary, Hodges’s pictures and writing were inflected by the heterogeneity of Agra, where materiality intersected with memory to produce the city as a differential space, a space of corporal experience. Through his visit to Agra, his march up the minarets, his treks through the ruins, and his visits to tombs, Hodges confronted the spatial practices of Mughal India. Traces of that contradictory confrontation suppressed in his representations return in the anxious iteration of the trope of Mughal ruin.

A similar practice of the suppression of the spatial practices of Agra and of its monuments takes place when Mir comes to the city in 1763. He too uses melancholy and memory to perceive the city, much as he did with Delhi, in a state of decline. As he writes of his impression of the city in his autobiography:

Two or three times I walked through the city end to end and met with its scholars, Sufis and poets. But I did not find any person to talk to who could comfort my restless heart. I said to myself, “Allah be praised! This is the same city whose every street once had [its share of] Gnostics; perfect masters; scholars; poets; writers; sages; jurists; dialecticians; philosophers; Sufis; scholars of the Hadith; school teachers; dervishes; spiritual mentors; mullas; Qur’an memorisers; Qur’an reciters; imams of mosques and those who called to the prayers, as wells as madrasas, mosques, hospices, abodes of faquirs, inns for travellers, family homes and gardens. But now I see not one place where I can sit and enjoy myself, and I find not one man
whose company I may share.” All I saw was a terrifying wasteland. And so I grieved and returned [after] I had spent four months in the city of my origin. I left with my eyes awash with tears of longing and reached the forts of Suraj Mal.45

In Mir’s description, Agra’s ruins serve the same function as the ruins of Delhi, to keep the memory of the city’s former greatness alive as a means to resist the spatial practices and power relations of the present. The extent of Mir’s suppression of Agra’s life, its flux and energy under his trope of decline, will be observable when I discuss the poetry of Nazir below. The crucial point I am making here is that both Hodges’s and Mir’s representations are aligned with the powers of the eighteenth century, and both want to present their patrons, the East India Company and the Mughals, respectively, as ethical. To create a pleasing prospect, the spatial practices of Agra—the brutal truth of power, of Mughal decline and British ascendancy—were suppressed in the poetic and pictorial representations of the landscape.

Fanny Parkes: Performing Difference in Agra’s Mughal Spaces

Both Hodges and Mir erase the multiplicity of Agra through the tropes of Mughal ruin and nostalgia. Their creative processes, shaped by the distinct power relations and processes of identification of Delhi and the British diwan, veiled the antagonism between their symbolization of Mughal space that fragments the built environment into past and present, as well as the spatial practices that continue to unify and signify it. Hodges work in Agra has been critiqued as aesthetically unsuccessful due to the difficulty of representing the monument in the style and mode of British landscape art. Giles Tillotson remarks that the awkwardness of Hodges’s scenes of the Taj Mahal resulted from the limitations of the picturesque style he employed: “Quite apart from the symmetry and formality which it shares with many other Mughal buildings, every salient quality of the design powerfully disqualifies it: the material is smooth, the colour unified, large surfaces are plain, and its perfect finish is a defiant challenge to decay.”46 While this stylistic conflict is certainly present, a crumbling ruin being much better suited for the picturesque style, the problem of representing the Taj Mahal must also be linked to the persistence of Mughal spatial practices that contradicted Hodges’s symbolism of the decay
of Mughal India. The Taj Mahal functioned as a social space whose practices and ordering were maintained indefinitely by the emperor’s charitable endowment that had supported the veneration of the tombs, regular prayer, gardening, and restoration of the Taj Mahal since the structure was completed. Both the Taj Mahal and even Akbar’s tomb were living monuments whose space not only ensured the persistence of these sites in the lives of Agra’s inhabitants but also connected them to the economy, rhythms, and everyday life of the rest of the city. As such, they refused to lend themselves to picturesque perceptions and categorizations.

Not all artists reduced the multiplicity of Agra into signs of ruin and lack. Some saw the waning status of Agra not as a difficulty but as an opportunity to explore the creative possibilities its sites held. They used the spaces of the Taj Mahal, the gardens, the bazaar, and other sites to recreate themselves, to celebrate everyday life, and to engage with the spatial practices that informed it. Two artists that offer such a view of the multiplicity of Mughal monumental space are Parkes and Nazir.

Fanny Parkes was the wife of a lower-level servant of the East India Company and lived in India between 1822 and 1846. Not taking to life in the company’s service, Parkes routinely struck out on her own and crossed India on horseback and by riverboat. Fluent in Urdu, respectful of Indian history and customs, and constantly in pursuit of picturesque scenery, she entered the space of Mughal palaces, tombs, and gardens, joining in native practices whenever possible. Writers of women’s space in British India who have studied Parkes’s travel narratives focus principally on her text and its symbolic ordering of space. These writers abstract the geographical and monumental materiality of the landscape that Parkes reckoned with into an idealized construct of gender and colonialism. Sara Suleri, for example, views Parkes’s encounter with the Indian landscape in this way: “Parks’s picturesque dehistoricizes the subcontinent into an amorphously aesthetic space.” The starting point of most postcolonial writing on gender and colonial space is the symbolic or tropological constitution of this space, that is, space that already comes disposed as a picturesque art object for the subject. Suleri’s assessment that “the shrines that Fanny Parks seeks out are already relics, experiences to be represented with an elegiac acknowledgment of their vacated power,” is predicated on this assumption. However, Parkes’s accounts of her visits to the Mughal pal-
aces and tombs not only contradict such a representation but also provide us with a chance to see how these sites can become radically open spaces of social ordering and resistance in the colonial era.

Parkes’s visits to the women’s quarters, or zenana, of the Mughal palace in Delhi and to the Taj Mahal were, as we will see, unique for her time and gender, and her description of these visits resists the symbolization of colonial or even postcolonial ideological orders. Unafraid to point out—and at times celebrate—the lived spaces of these monuments, or to grieve their slow decay, Parkes’s writings provide a striking contrast to Hodges’s and should certainly not be regarded as the repetition “in diminution proportions of the male sublime.”

Parkes’s vision of Indian life focuses strongly on the status of women, the present state of architectural ruins, and religious customs. Her writings offer a rare blend of visual description, historical explanation, and social critique. This triangulated narrative is apparent in Parkes’s portrayal of the zenana in the Red Fort in Delhi. She describes the women’s quarters as “mal propre [not very clean],” the fountains of a “superb hall” as not working and filled with black water from the kitchen drains. She then remarks on the relative beauty of the women in the zenana, “there be two or three handsome women and all the rest remarkably ugly.” Finally she writes of the gifts she received as she departed: two necklaces of jasmine flowers and a bag of spices. Parkes was later chastised by the British authorities for accepting these presents, but she knew that this gift giving was a custom, and she herself offered one gold mohur, or coin, in return. What she goes on to write about her time in the palace is very telling of her particular sensitivity to the pathos of the exchange: “Look at the poverty, the wretched poverty of these descendents of the emperors! In former times strings of pearls and valuable jewels were placed on the necks of departing visitors. When the Princess Hyat-ool-Nissa Begum in her fallen fortunes put the necklace of freshly-gathered white jasmine flowers over my head, I bowed with as much respect as if she had been the Queen of the universe. Others may look upon these people with contempt, I cannot; look at what they are, at what they have been!” Unlike Company servants and British historians, who looked down on the Mughals in their declining years, Parkes acknowledges their authority, which in her eyes remains undiminished. The Red Fort and the private quarters of the palace are represented as spaces
enlivened with the memory of Mughal culture and practices. They are not the dominated spaces of British power or the empty shells her male counterparts represent.53

Parkes’s visit to the Taj Mahal in 1835 illustrates more precisely how her participation in the spatial practices of the Mughal monument structured her understanding of these spaces. Her written narrative is a heterogeneous representation comprising a description of the tomb and its history as well as of its present use by the Muslim community: “The Musulmans who visit the Taj lay offerings of money and flowers both on the tombs below and the cenotaphs above; they also distribute money in charity, at the tomb, or at the gate, to the fakirs.”54 She represents the relationship of the Taj Mahal with the rest of Agra in her portrayal of the festival of Eid held both outside the great gateway and inside the first courtyard of the tomb complex. She describes the diversity of the scene: “Crowds of gaily-dressed and most picturesque natives were seen in all directions passing through the avenue of fine trees and by the side of the fountains to the tomb: they added great beauty to the scene, whilst the eye of taste turned away pained and annoyed by the vile round hats and stiff attire of the European gentlemen, and the equally ugly bonnets and stiff and graceless dresses of the English ladies.”55 Parkes is struck by the oddity of the British in this scene, where it reveals their estrangement from such lively contexts in which tradition, history, and religion commingle. The spatial practices that give meaning to the space unsettle the ideological symbolization of the monument as an empty ruin that Hodges and other picturesque artists represented in their work.

The radical dimension of the Taj Mahal that Parkes captures is described by Lefebvre as a monument’s open horizon of meaning, “a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of—and for the sake of—a particular action.”56 Through her sensory experience with the space, Parkes was in sympathy with the spatial practices of the monument itself. In the context of the festival and party at the Taj Mahal, the monument becomes a differential space whose lived realities and practices contradict the ideological ordering of the dominant power.

Parkes’s writing of the physical upkeep of the Taj Mahal and its constant renewal by its caretakers also resists the symbolic order of British power and
the trope of Mughal ruin. “The marble is cleaned every year and kept in a state of perfect purity and repair. Constant attention is requisite to remove the grass and young trees that shoot forth in any moist crevice: the birds carry the seeds of the peepal tree to the roof, and the young trees shoot forth, injuring those buildings that are in repair while they impart great beauty to ruins.” Parkes does not end her visit to the Taj Mahal without performing an act of communion with its female occupants. She goes to the less visited tombs inside the Taj Mahal complex, the tomb of Akbarabadi Begum, from which she takes away a piece of the fallen red stone, and of Fatehpuri Begum, made of white marble. As a parting gesture she follows the local custom, practiced by both Hindus and Muslims, of leaving rupees and roses at the cenotaph of Shah Jahan’s wife, Mumtaz Mahal. This gesture, she points out, brought her in “favour in the eyes of the attendants.” To express their respect they in turn offered Parkes bouquets of flowers and turned on the fountains as she walked through the gardens and kept them on until she left. The sight of a British woman showing deference to the customs of the tomb and recognizing it as a historical Muslim space, while others of her kind used it for lunch parties, no doubt touched the attendants. Her experience at the Taj Mahal sets Parkes apart from her social group and caused her to realize that she occupied a space different from theirs: “Can you imagine anything so detestable? European ladies and gentlemen have the band to play on the marble terrace, and dance quadrilles in front of the tomb!”

Parkes ends her description of the Taj Mahal by asserting that the tomb is first and foremost an Islamic space where the memory, rituals, and religion of the Mughals are still alive and renewed daily: “I cannot enter the Taj without feelings of deep devotion: the sacredness of the place, the remembrance of the fallen grandeur of the family of the Emperor . . . , the solemn echoes, the dim light, the beautiful architecture, the exquisite finish and delicacy of the whole, the deep devotion with which the natives prostrate themselves when they make their offerings of money and flowers at the tomb, all produce deep and sacred feelings; and I could no more jest or indulge in levity beneath the dome of the Taj, than I could in my prayers.” Parkes’s writings offer us a view of the Mughal monuments of Delhi and Agra through the prism of spatial practice. Although she may share the same picturesque aesthetic and historical disposition as Hodges, her marginal status as a woman allowed her a certain
freedom to express her awareness of realities that contradicted the images of the British colonial project. In her writings, Mughal monuments are accorded a greater horizon of meaning and represented as spaces pulsating with Mughal culture and power.

The Contingent Poetry of Agra by Nazir Akbarabadi

The other example of nonauthorized representations of the Mughal monument come in the poetry of Nazir. Celebrated for their catholic reach, greater than even that of the shahrashob, Nazir’s poems are concerned not only with the nobility but also with the wider social fabric of Agra. What further distinguishes Nazir’s poetry is the level of creative freedom he enjoyed due to his employment as a teacher (rather than being a court poet). Although he was invited repeatedly to work at the court of the nawab of Oudh, he remained in Agra to live a life of austerity. His writings are focused on the subject of everyday life in the Mughal city, its nature, festivals, games, rituals, lovers, climate, and space. He writes about Muslim festivals like Eid-ul-Fitr and Shab-i Barat as comfortably as he does about the Hindu holidays of Holi, Diwali, and Basant.

When Nazir’s poetry focuses on the subject of the city, it provides a new perspective of the tumult of the end of the eighteenth century, or more precisely, of the resulting creative opportunities to restructure society based on the ideal of egalitarianism. As Ishrat Haque writes, “Nazir’s writings present a refreshing response to the ‘times of troubles,’ instead of expressing a sense of nostalgia or frustration for the world that was no more, he faced the challenge of the age by exploring the present and by seeking inspiration for his poetry from the common man.” In his satirical poem “Life Is a Great and Varied Show,” he outlines the many wonderful contradictions of his world: “The whole scene seems to have been created by one great spell of magic.” Although he produces an inventory of oppositions—the weak are strong, the strong weak, the poor are rich, and the rich poor—each stanza ends with the euphoric surrender to the great show. Unlike Mir and Sauda, whose verse resists the perceived decline in the Mughal social order, Nazir takes an ironic and almost giddy tone as he explores the possibilities of a new social order that this decline offers. The built environments of Agra, its palaces, river, gardens,
and mosques, are suffused with Nazir’s awareness of the radical reordering of society spurred on by the challenging times.

In his poem “Swimming in Agra,” the banks of the Jumna, once a leisure space for Mughal nobility, are transformed into a free public space.

In the swimming season in Agra, the beautiful ones go to the river. Some spectators go to watch them, but others are genuinely interested in watching the performance of expert swimmers. However, it is mainly a festive occasion for the majority of the crowd. The young boys, the grown-ups, even old people love to join in the fun. The crowd extends for miles along the bank of the river.63

The rest of the poem describes the integrated crowd constituted by the young and old, the handsome and ugly. The rich in their fancy houses and on their barges play music and drink. They are presented as enjoying the swimming presentations with “ordinary folk.” Everyone is in the moment, and for a time the sensuality of the swimming festival overtakes the burdens of everyday life and turns the banks of the Jumna River into the differential space of play and enjoyment. If one juxtaposes this lively scene with Hodges’s view of the ruins, the contradictions inherent in the latter’s perception become clear: while the decay of built environments may signal a change in power relations, the social landscape continues to be abundant and vital in Agra.

When Nazir writes of the Taj Mahal, he criticizes the extravagant outlays made by the rich to maintain the architecture of the Taj Mahal, but in the end he agrees that the money is well spent, pointing to the Taj Mahal’s global fame. The poem is not among his best, as his verse is better attuned to descriptions of the lively scenes of Agra than to outlines of architectural form, but in its relative simplicity it affords us a glimpse of the entire complex of the tomb through Nazir’s eyes. He describes the beauty and perfection of the tomb, its color, decoration, and parts, and he even recognizes those that maintain the complex: “The care-takers who live in [the few other buildings] are fortunate. The smell of jasmine and roses in the flower-garden around the buildings is all-pervading.”64 Nazir presents the monument as embedded in the living fabric of its environment—a stark contrast to Hodges’s perspective, which abstracts the Taj Mahal from its social meaning and cultural context.
The poetry of Nazir and the travel narrative of Parkes, alongside the shahrashob and Hodges’s paintings, reveal the eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Mughal monument as a parallactic object that is not simply a ruin of history but an unstable space defined by multiplicity. For Hodges and the shahrashob poets it was the impossible object of desire that also signified the shifting power relations of Mughal India. Nazir and Parkes, free of ties to the courts or governments in power, were at greater liberty to experience the Mughal monuments on a visceral level that defied the logic and logos of such power.

After these poets and artists, the Mughal monument would remain to defy all those that came next to impose a symbolic order on it. This is the impossibility of the parallactic object that, as Žižek explains, “eludes the symbolic grasp and thus causes the multiplicity of symbolic perspectives.” By tracing the Mughal monument’s condition of multiplicity back to the late eighteenth century I have shown how the symbolization of the Indian landscape was marked by failure and frustration, but also by radical openness and creativity. The failure, however, does not mean that artists and officials would stop trying to make sense of the Mughal monuments. Indeed, it ignited their desire to find other and better strategies of reckoning with these spaces, as the ensuing chapters will reveal.