INTRODUCTION

ANY PARALLEL reading of such distinct writers as E. M. Forster and Constantine Cavafy must be qualified; for what bearing do Forster’s quintessentially British novels, stories and essays have on the abstrusely historical and erotic musings of an Alexandrian poet? The answer is somewhat complex, as theirs was a peculiar literary relationship. Despite the fact that they were working out of different genres and had markedly disparate literary tastes and historic sensibilities, they did exert some degree of influence on each other. One may conceivably bridge these polarities by emphasizing Forster’s penchant for antiquities and interest in matters Oriental, along with Cavafy’s Anglophilia and British education. In addition to this, there is the common homosexual identity which most certainly entered into the dynamics of their friendship. These facts have generated much comparative criticism that has tended to posit novelist and poet in a Hellenistic continuum of sorts. While true as far as this line of thinking goes, it overlooks the ideological tensions that separate these two modernists along a cultural divide. Although Hellenism is assuredly a way into their shared interests in the classical past, it also marks a point of dissension as well, functioning as a highly subjective heterotopia\(^1\) which ultimately brought them to erratic genealogical theories regarding the essence of Greek civilization. Similarly, their Orientalist visions led them to radically diverse configurations of the East.

What interests me particularly and what I set out to critique in this study is the common appropriation of the discourse of Hellenism and the Orientalism that followed ineluctably in its wake. For Forster, Hellenism served as a vehicle which enabled him to expand his British world view and eventually enter into the more polymorphous East. Cavafy’s Hellenism, arguably a more subaltern affair, possessed an Oriental component which acted as a leaven, giving it a distinct cultural consistency. Thus the Orient was indispensable to his signal conceptualization of Greece. Novelist and poet met at this intersection of Hellenism and Ori-
entalism. My parallel reading endeavors to juxtapose their work with a view to identifying both their similarities and critical differences.

In my first chapter, I discuss Forster’s and Cavafy’s shared “Western Hellenism” and outline the sources from which they drew their early inspiration for their respective obsessions with Greek antiquity. Forster, as a trained classicist, was endowed with a rich intellectual background in Hellenism that he creatively distilled into much of his fiction. When reading Forster, one frequently detects the pagan hoofprints of Pan. Indeed, his short story “The Curate’s Friend” (1907) could serve as an allegory for the presence of the Greek inheritance in his own work. The story involves a curate attended to by a faun who, by means of mischievous pranks, prevents him from marrying, thus securing for him a life of blissful bachelorhood. On one level, the faun functions as a metaphor for Hellenism—he remains a lingering presence who teaches the curate about love, joy and the “self-effectuation” of the soul. The story narrates a self-fulfilling prophecy: for Hellenism would remain Forster’s informing ideology, “the spirit of life” as he termed it in *The Longest Journey*. I take up Forster’s artistic response to Hellenism in my second chapter, where I focus on three texts—“The Road from Colonus,” *The Longest Journey* and *Maurice*—and trace the novelist’s creative exploration of the Greek inheritance as well as his gradual realization of its limitations.

Cavafy’s relation to Western Hellenism is somewhat more complicated than Forster’s. In addition to shouldering the weight of European Hellenism, Cavafy had also to forge his own identity as a poet of Greek descent. Like Forster, he was very much indebted to Western redactions of Greece; and, like other Greek poets, he struggled with the overwhelming weight of the Greek inheritance. Cavafy eventually emerged as one of the most original and innovative poets writing in modern Greek. Yet the traces of Western Hellenism are never quite absent from his work (it is hardly coincidental that his first poems were published in Leipzig, a great academic center of classical Greek studies). Both he and Forster greatly depended on Hellenism as a vehicle for literary expression. What is more, this common tradition allowed them to anticipate and, to some extent, respond creatively to each other’s work, as I will show below.

Common influences notwithstanding, they soon embarked on diverging paths. I take up the causes of the inevitable deviation from their mutual Hellenism in my third chapter, where I posit their relationship within the framework of Balkan politics and the complex events of the
Asia Minor Catastrophe. By reading them contrapuntally, as it were, I attempt to isolate the many differences that ultimately distinguish the Hellenism and Orientalism which inform and define so much of their writing.

Both Forster and Cavafy were greatly influenced by their geographical and historical circumstances, particularly the events of the First World War. Of the two, Cavafy was the more vulnerable, since fame came to him very late in life and his social standing remained precarious following the war. Neither a Greek poet in the nationalist sense of the word, nor a cosmopolitan in the European, Cavafy was truly a marginal personality. He embraced his marginality however and interrogated history from this vantage point, what Forster famously referred to as the “slight angle.” Cavafy realized well before the radical historicists of today the discursive qualities of history. His poetics were, in many ways, a cultural poetics, which is to say that he shared many of the same interests as contemporary cultural theorists, particularly those of the so-called New Historicism who view texts as inscriptions of history. The poem that best illustrates this is “Zenobia” (1930), which exposes the distorting activity of Greek sophists who create a false Macedonian genealogy for the “Asiatic” queen.

Cavafy understood how indispensable Asia was to the totalizing notions of Western civilization; his “Waiting for the Barbarians” is nothing short of an acknowledgment of this paradox inherent in Occidental thinking. He espoused this Eastern barbarism as an energizing and necessary complement to Hellenism, as I argue in my fourth chapter. His pragmatic approach to the East and the refracting power of Hellenism allowed him to historicize the Hellenic world in a less idealized way while at the same time re-presenting it as the more ecumenical Hellenism of the Diaspora. To be sure, Cavafy was acutely attuned to the struggle between culture and power; he chose an arch, sophistic approach to both, which becomes apparent when one considers the numerous poems that foreground sophists and their clever exchanges with the ruling elite. This view of the past distinguishes Cavafy more than anything else from Forster, for whom history was more monolithic and late Hellenism oppressive, especially in its Christian phase. Forster was disinclined to view culture from such a distended perspective. Playful and ironic though his essays were, they seldom entered into the Byzantine spirit that characterizes the dramatic duplicity of many of Cavafy’s po-
etic personae. This is not to imply that Cavafy was an incorrigible decadent. For Cavafy could also treat history sentimentally and patriotically. From the newly published “unfinished” poems, we are better able to assess the maturing current of the poet’s ideas. He often revisited Hellenism during those moments of crisis when the onslaught of hostile forces sought to assimilate or annihilate it. But he never cringes when approaching the arena of struggle or the irony of Hellenism’s own peripeteia. Rather he seems to indulge in the histrionics of history and to foreground the enduring Hellenic spirit.

Forster, on the other hand, looked to India as a refuge from such Hellenic excesses. As he well knew, both India and Greece are “burdened with a classical past.” Forster’s interest in Greek antiquity was temporarily eclipsed when he forsook his Greek muse for an Indian one. Forster was most intrigued by India’s religious traditions which he approached with an Orientalist’s curiosity. He was determined to penetrate the mysteries and muddles of this exotic civilization. This is the great creative impetus behind his novel A Passage to India. My fifth chapter involves an Orientalist reading of the text preceded by a survey of Forster’s prose. This overview will contextualize Forster’s intellectual journey eastward and elucidate the eclipse of Hellenism which this passage brought about.

Throughout my study I have selected a number of lesser-known texts, both fictional and nonfictional, not merely as a gesture towards anti-essentialism but more so as an attempt to broaden the often pedestrian course of Forster and Cavafy studies. In the case of Cavafy, this has been abetted by Renata Lavagnini’s scholarly edition of the thirty “unfinished” poems, which I read more for their content than for their aesthetic completedness. With Forster, I have selected texts from his remarkably rich essays which, I believe, offer significant glosses on his fiction. It has been my intention to undertake a more expansive reading of both Cavafy and Forster. By including some of their more obscure writings, I have attempted to introduce new critical perspectives on their work. In this exchange between literary and non-literary texts, prose and poetry, I hope to have achieved two ends: to locate the ideological center of Forster’s lifelong engagement with Greece and India, and to identify the discursive essence of Cavafy’s prolonged fixation on matters Hellenic.