CHAPTER 1

A Mutual Hellenism

The Thematics of Western Hellenism: Influences and Responses

MANY GENERAL observations have been made about the influence of Cavafy on Forster. The common assumption is that, prior to his stay in Alexandria, Forster possessed a narrow classicizing view of Hellenism that his contact with the Greek poet challenged and ultimately changed. Forster himself drew attention to the variant readings of Hellenism in his essay “The Poetry of C. P. Cavafy” (1923):

He even looks back upon a different Greece. Athens and Sparta, so drummed into us at school, are to him two quarrelsome little slave states, ephemeral beside the Hellenistic kingdoms that followed them, just as these are ephemeral beside the secular empire of Constantinople. He reacts against the tyranny of Classicism—Pericles and Aspasia and Themistocles and all those bores.¹

Lionel Trilling, one of the most enthusiastic of Forster’s early critics, noted with some misgiving that “surely the Greek myths made too deep an impression on Forster.”² Forster’s Greece is his own Greece, or [Nathaniel] Wedd’s Greece, or Cambridge’s Greece—every Greece is different from every other, each being shaped for a particular purpose. Forster’s is the Greece of myth and mystery, of open skies and athleticism, of love and democracy. It is not the “true” Greece, but no Greece is, and at least it is not the Greece of moral precept, not the Greece that, as Mr. Jackson says in The Longest Journey, produced an enlightened bishop named Sophocles and other poets who were Broad Church clergymen.³
For the most part, Forster’s Greece derived from the writings of the Victorian Hellenists. As G. D. Klingopoulos comments,

The “Hellenism” of Mr. Forster’s earlier work had been of the simple idealizing sort in which the ancient world is invoked as a standard to set off the deficiencies of modern civilization. It supplies a pervasive symbolism for the short stories, and is closely associated with the theme of cultural vitality. Sometimes there is a measure of ironic—though uncertain—detachment.4

This notion of a “simple idealizing” Hellenism, although apt as far as it goes, is too reductive to assess adequately the ideologically complex question of Forster’s Hellenism; for as a cultural construct, ancient Greece occupies the most “disputed province of Western thought”5 and, as such, remains extremely contested ideological terrain. Forster’s own perception of Greek culture stemmed largely from his study of Classics at Cambridge with Nathaniel Wedd.6 His image of Greece was firmly rooted in the late nineteenth-century writers for whom Hellenism was something of an obsession, namely Matthew Arnold, John Addington Symonds, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Butler and, of course, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson. Their various writings have significantly defined the Greek heritage in Victorian Britain, the most striking feature of which was the tyranny of the European experience over that of Greek antiquity, as Frank M. Turner notes:

There had not been and there could not have been a single Victorian image of Greece and the Greeks. Considerable variety was inherent in the Greek experience itself. . . . The Victorians’ conception of what the Greeks had been or should have been changed as their own comprehension of the physical world, of history, and of human nature changed; and as educated Victorians began to understand themselves in more complex terms, they came to ascribe a similar complexity to the Greeks . . . . Discussions of Greek antiquity provided a forum wherein Victorian writers could and did debate all manner of contemporary questions. . . . The art, history, literature, religion, and philosophy of Greece furnished British intellectuals with new points of departure and cultural reference for thinking about themselves and the new situations they confronted.7

Across the Western world Victorian authors and readers were determined to find the Greeks “as much as possible like themselves and to rationalize away fundamental differences.”8 Such claims naturally gave rise to a great deal of contention between Western Europeans and mod-
ern Greeks who, quite preposterously, found themselves “disinherited from a past whose genealogical tree was made to grow upward in the direction of the British, Germans, and French, Greece’s supposed cultural descendants. In Western Europe, everybody aspired to be more Greek than everybody else and even more Greek than the Greeks themselves (ancient and modern).”

Cavafy’s Hellenism, although similarly refracted through a European prism, was necessarily more complex. As a Hellene (or *Hellenikos* as he would insist with Lucianic bravado), he had not only the cultural legacy of Western Hellenism before him, but also the agonizing identity crisis of modern Greek intellectuals who were still addressing the “Greek Question” and combating the controversial writings of Jakob Fallmerayer, the German historian whose theories on the alleged Slavic origin of the modern Greeks sought to deny them any historic continuity with the ancients. Greatly inspired by *fin-de-siècle* conceptions of Hellenism—specifically those of the Aesthetes, Parnassians, Decadents, and Symbolists—Cavafy attempted to repossess this European Hellenism and imbue it with the Byzantine and Ottoman inheritance which constitutes a significant part of the modern Greek heritage. Ultimately Cavafy would fashion his own hybridization—an Orientalizing Hellenism that ran counter to the essentializing tenets of Western Hellenism and which would prove to be a point of literary dissension between himself and Forster.

In sum, Forster and Cavafy were working out of established literary and historiographic traditions that both expropriated and redefined Hellenism. Despite their differences of sensibility and taste, they possessed numerous common interests that allowed them to anticipate and creatively respond to each other’s work. “The influence must have been mutual,” writes George Savidis, “with Alexandria acting as a catalyst. One possibility is that Forster’s firm position on the Imperial question may have crystallized Cavafy’s view of the Roman Empire, just as Cavafy’s erotic liberation as a poet may have contributed to the rewriting of *Maurice* and to the remarkable cathartic progress of some stories first published in *The Life to Come.*” Jane Lagoudis Pinchin’s *Alexandria Still: Forster, Durrell and Cavafy* (1977) established the critical template for comparative readings. Pinchin views Forster’s *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923) as his transition into a more Alexandrian Hellenism and reads his essays as “Cavafian tales.” Moreover, she draws a number of parallels
between Forster’s vignettes and Cavafy’s poems, emphasizing their common deployment of irony, history and classicizing characters. It should be noted, however, that these elements were already present in Forster’s early writings and derive more from the shared tradition of Western Hellenism than from any degree of influence per se.\textsuperscript{17} To date, more critical attention has been focused on how Alexandria served to bridge the East, thus allowing Forster to explore India from a broader, less European perspective. What has yet to be fully assessed is the degree to which both Forster and Cavafy were initially working out of the common tradition of Western Hellenism. Both looked to ancient Greece for inspiration; their early works are haunted by a nostalgic longing for what might be termed a Hellenic objective correlative, one that eventually developed into highly personal visions of antiquity. Although ironic and increasingly “modernist,” these visions never quite shed this sentimental attachment to an idealized Hellenic past.

These common threads are evident in two texts that share a Byzantine theme: Cavafy’s unfinished “After the Swim” (arguably his most “Forsterian” poem)\textsuperscript{18} and Forster’s unpublished short story “The Tomb of Pletone.” Composed in June 1921, the poem invokes the spirit of George Gemistos Plethon (circa 1360–1452), the Neoplatonic philosopher and Byzantine intellectual who advocated a return to paganism:

Both were naked when they emerged from the sea of the Samian coast; they were slow to dress after their enjoyable swim (it was a hot summer’s day) and they regretted having to cover the statuesque nakedness which harmoniously fulfilled the loveliness of their faces.

What aesthetes the ancient Greeks were, who presented undiminished the naked beauty of youth.

Poor Gemistos was not all that wrong (and let Lord Andronikos and the patriarch suspect him as they will) when he desired that we return to paganism: My holy faith—may it always remain sacred—but Gemistos makes sense to some extent.

Back then George Gemistos’ teaching greatly influenced the young, that most wise and very eloquent preacher of Hellenic paideia.\textsuperscript{19}
The poem was largely inspired by Edward Gibbon’s account of the Council of Florence in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “At the Synod of Florence, Gemistus Pletho said, in familiar conversation to George of Trebizond, that in a short time mankind would unanimously renounce the Gospel and Koran for a religion similar to that of the Gentiles [i.e. pagans].” The events of the poem occur shortly after the philosopher’s death and touch upon the numerous cultural crises that riddled the Byzantine world, namely the Hellenic inheritance, theological heresies, and the encroaching humanism of the Renaissance which was very much indebted to Plethon. As C. M. Woodhouse writes, Plethon “was the first competent interpreter of both Platonism and Aristotelianism to address Latin audiences for a thousand years. . . . The philosophical study of Plato, as distinct from the literary task of translation . . . began with Gemistos’ arrival.” It is therefore significant that Plethon should have attracted both Cavafy and Forster, since he was one of the founders of Western Hellenism.

Cavafy’s poem, while foregrounding the sensuality of the swimmers, is unmistakably caught up in an historic moment when a nascent Neohellenism rears its rather statuesque head. For Cavafy, these young Byzantine Greeks are aesthetically connected to their forbears; a mere glance at Greek sculpture will suffice to prove their racial continuity. We have here not only an instance of Neo-platonic homoeroticism (the discourse of Hellenism provided a forum for exploring homosexuality—indeed, the term Hellenism often served as a code word for the love that dared not speak its name) but also a bold claim for the uninterrupted succession of the Greek race. For Cavafy, Plethon was not merely a preacher of Hellenic *paideia*, but a “lover” (*erastes*) of it as well, as an earlier version of the poem reads. The word *erastes*/lover takes on a heightened meaning when we keep in mind that the reestablishment of Platonism in the West would lead to the belated legitimization of Greek homosexuality as an area of academic study and the consequent emergence of Gay Studies. Thus in the poem the two Hellenic components of *eros* and *paideia*, so fundamental to the Victorian sense of Hellenism in both its decadent-aesthetic and liberal-humanist facets, are stridently celebrated. Even the Orthodox Christian faith is duly acknowledged, an indication of Cavafy’s determined integration of both Byzantine and antique Hellenism into his poetic vision.
Prior to meeting Cavafy, Forster had written two pieces on Plethon: an essay titled “Gemistus Pletho,” first published in October 1905 in the *Independent Review* and later included in *Abinger Harvest*, and a short story “The Tomb of Pletone,” written in March 1904 but never published. It is curious that Forster should have chosen this peculiar figure from the annals of Byzantine history; indeed, Plethon served Forster as an ideal persona through whom he could explore the historic rebirth of Hellenism in Italy. As the author himself wrote to E. J. Dent in April 1904, he was “engaged on the impossible—a short historical story.”26 Forster’s interest in writing “short historical” fiction, and his eventual mastery of the historical essay resemble Cavafy’s own preoccupation with history.27 It is interesting to note the terms in which the story was refused: “How crooked the world is: for my compositions are returned because they are too long ‘as well as being hopelessly perverse and overstrained in their attempts at epigrams.’”28 As critics have pointed out, Cavafy consciously strove to write epigrammatic poetry29 and his ironic use of history was similarly criticized for being “perverse.”30 To be sure, Forster anticipates the mature Cavafy and, judging from the tone and content of “After the Swim,” one could say that here the novelist proved to be a source for the poet.31

Although the essay “Gemistus Pletho” eventually superseded the story by being successfully published, “The Tomb of Pletone” remains a most significant statement of Forster’s early interest in Byzantine Hellenism. Inspired by his visit to Mistra in 1903, the story narrates Sismondo Malatesta’s historic journey to that city and his eventual transfer of Plethon’s tomb back to Rimini.32 The narrative begins rather dramatically with the sea voyage of Sismondo and Astorre, and a near disaster caused by an incompetent pilot. When the frightened pilot resorts to prayer, he is struck dead by a blow from Astorre. This rash act, condoned by the imperious Sismondo, establishes the mood of the story and its underlying tensions: political rivalries between the Latin West and the Greek East, and ideological conflicts between Christianity and a resurgent paganism:

From the dark hold two pictures emerged—a Virgin and Child of the Eastern Church and a Virgin and Child of the Western Church. They were nailed side by side on the mast—there was no time for reverence—nailed where they could see the foam upon the approaching rocks....
Sismondo, a devout man, was raised a little from the deck. But in the midst of his prayer he exclaimed, “Holy Virgin! how ugly they are!” And for a moment he contemplated the two daubs in silence. Then he asked again, “On the island of Cerigo do you see nothing of the temple of Aphrodite—not even a pillar?”

This caricature of one of the leading personalities of the Florentine Renaissance is crude but effective in conveying the prejudices that many Western Europeans felt and, owing to Gibbon, continue to feel about Byzantine Christianity. “‘He was praying when I killed him.’ ‘Yes. But he was of the Greek Church. So it would not matter.’”

In many ways, Sismondo was a precursor to the notorious antiquarians who plundered the Mediterranean in later centuries for Greek antiquities:

“We go to awake the dead!” he cried. “We will bring Greece to Italy, you and I. The tombs open, the gods start up from sleep to accompany your friend and mine. And when the sacred ship returns, in Italy too will begin the reign of beauty, wisdom and strength. I dedicate my soul to this, even as you have dedicated yours.”

The quest for Plethon’s relics is at once an act of medieval piety and humanist archaeology; their interment at Rimini marks an architectural moment when Hellenism is, in effect, enshrined in a temple that shamelessly proclaims the neopagan spirit of the Renaissance. Sismondo’s expedition/crusade stands as a disturbing metaphor for Europe’s bold appropriation of things classical, an obsession that increased in scope and magnitude during the ensuing centuries, and which Forster criticized in other essays, as we shall see below.

Forster avoids characterizing Plethon in the story, but evinces the almost abstract mystical reverence which he inspired by focusing on his absence and the search for his earthly remains. The narrative fails however to render the various conflicts demanded by the plot. Given the great value that Forster placed on friendship, his story lacks any real sense of human relations. The tenuous bond between Astorre and Jacobo proves to be the prototype of the frustrated and doomed homosocial friendships that are central to Forster’s fiction. As Judith Scherer Herz notes, “this story establishes in Astorre one of his major character types. Astorre is the first in a long line of athletic, unintellectual men who form critical friendships with their scholarly anti-type.
Usually the focus is on the athlete dying young, but in grotesquely unathletic fashion.” 37 Most critics agree that the story disappoints in its inability to evoke either an historical mood or an interesting drama. 38 Forster might even have intended it to be an indictment of the Renaissance humanists’s preoccupation with art and aesthetics which, in effect, betrayed the true spirit of Platonism as advocated by the Cambridge Apostles (under the guidance of Roger Fry, the Apostles strove never to subordinate love or truth to art). 39 There is also an implicit criticism here of how Platonism has been co-opted and distorted throughout history: its homoerotic premise has too often been negated and willfully suppressed.

The deficiencies of the story may be compensated for by turning to the more satisfying essay. Here Forster reveals some of his own peculiar prejudices: he refers to Byzantine Mistra as “an elaborate if defective civilization.” 40 Plethon’s journey to Italy in 1437 to attend the Council of Ferrara-Florence is hailed as a major event, for there he eloquently explained Platonic thought and inspired Cosimo de’ Medici to found the Neoplatonic Academy of Florence. He presented the medieval world with a new creed,

the religion of ancient Greece, “adapted to the needs of philosophy, and freed from the idle additions of the poets.”... And his choice of ancient Greece as an ideal was not always arbitrary. He saw in it a rule of temperate life, a possible escape from the asceticism which medievalism had professed, and the sensuality which it had practiced... If he is absurd, it is in a very touching way; his dream of antiquity is grotesque and incongruous, but it has a dream’s intensity, and something of a dream’s imperishable value. 41

From these assertions we are meant to understand why, in 1465, “Sismondo Malatesta of Rimini captured Mistra from the Turks, and out of the ‘great love’ he had for Gemistus, exhumed his body and translated it to Italy.” 42 Herz points out quite incisively that what Forster tried to imagine in the story—Sismondo Malatesta’s great love for Gemistos—“did not as an idea generate a sustained fiction, for it was at once sufficiently complex and historically inaccessible.” 43 Nevertheless, Forster was intrigued by Plethon’s use of antiquity and certainly strove to achieve a similar intensity and imperishable quality in his own treatment of Hellenism.
In the story, Astorre’s life ends tragically when he is crushed and disfigured by Plethon’s weighty sarcophagus. “Scarcely recognizable” after the accident, he is left by the ruthless Sismondo and the indifferent Jacobo to die unattended. Sismondo’s final pronouncement satirizes the relentless and somewhat deluded determination of the Italian humanists to resurrect Hellenism:

Sismondo was still kneeling, and had taken a long streamer of clematis in his hand.

“What do you weep?” he said gravely. They were not weeping, but that he did not see. “Do you not see our master?” He bowed his head and kissed one of the little blue flowers. “His body made this plant and his spirit has filled it. His eloquence has passed into its tendrils, his wisdom into its leaves, and the blue flowers are his soul which has contemplated heaven. For he has awoken the gods, and year by year they will renew him and increase him, till the flower which is his covers the whole earth. I will take it to Italy, this flower, and there he shall grow as a sign that Greece has risen from the dead.”

Forster himself felt some of this mystified adulation for Plethon: “The Renaissance can point to many a career which is greater, but to none which is so strangely symbolical.” Forster’s tone is somewhat sardonic: he undoubtedly valued Plethon, more perhaps for his rekindling of the “secret of civilized conversation” than for anything else; yet Plethon’s philosophy remains “grotesque and incongruous.” This sentiment is echoed in the story where, perversely, Plethon and the Platonic revival he inspired induce the failure of a friendship and even death. (In this sense, the story anticipates Forster’s later disillusionment with “Greek love.”) What should be noted here is that, so early on in his career, Forster had been attuned to the complex evolution of Hellenism, especially its Byzantine phase. “The Tomb of Pletone” attempts to dramatize an imagined Byzantine synthesis with the Greek past. With much foresight and sensitivity, Forster had actually fictionalized the story of the West’s appropriation of Greece well before contemporary historicists problematized Western Hellenism as an ideologically fraught discourse. Certainly Forster’s trip to Greece in 1903 broadened his views and served as a corrective to the strict diet of Cambridge classics. We begin to see a recurring motif whereby contact with the actual geographical topos of Greece brings about negative consequences, a pattern repeated in “The Road from Colonus” and *Maurice.*
In much the same manner, Cavafy’s poem “Ionic” (1911) expresses a similar concern for the manifestation of Hellenism’s eternal spirit. Here we encounter the poet’s almost “Parnassian” insistence on the survival of the Greek gods:

That we’ve broken their statues,
That we’ve driven them out of their temples,
doesn’t mean at all that the gods are dead.
O land of Ionia, they’re still in love with you,
their souls still keep your memory.
When an August dawn wakes over you,
your atmosphere is potent with their life,
and sometimes a young ethereal figure,
indistinct, in rapid flight,
wings across your hills. (Keeley 34)

The poem may be taken as Cavafy’s response to Gibbon’s judgment and “illicit generalization in which he blames the Christians en masse for letting the Goths pass through the straits of Thermopylae” in 396 A.D. and devastate the land. (Indeed, much of the Cavafy canon may be read against the grain of Gibbon’s over-determined and biased definition of Hellenism.) Cavafy is unwilling to place the blame for this disaster on the Christians per se, but castigates more broadly with the indeterminate “we.” The poem’s “young ethereal figure” certainly recalls the Pan of Greek mythology, the influence of whom is at once apparent here. The evanescent presence of a pagan figure flitting over the Greek landscape does little, however, to alleviate the heavy sentimentality of this set-piece of Western Hellenism.

Pan was also featured in Forster’s writing from early on. In his narrative, “The Story of a Panic,” published in the Independent Review in August 1904, Forster presents a party of English tourists in Italy who undergo the terrifying experience of the “Great God Pan.” The protagonist Eustace has a rather mysteriously corrupting encounter with the goat-god and, by the tale’s end, returns to Arcadia, claimed as he is by the pagan spirit of the land. The story was inspired by Forster’s visit to Italy in 1902 and belongs to the so-called “Edwardian school of fantasy” which was noted for its uneven combinations of fantasy and realism. Susan Grove Hall reads these stories more as idylls written in the manner of Theocritus: “The Idylls of Theocritus supplied Forster and other writers with the mythological religion of Pan and Demeter, the literary prece-
dent for the pastoral vision which dominates Forster’s fiction. . . . Forster knew Theocritus well and conceived of the *Idylls* as sources for short stories. Viewed in light of this Hellenistic perspective, “The Story of a Panic” may be seen as Forster’s first significant reworking of classical lore. In fact, the pronouncement by Mr. Sandbach (the story’s retired clergyman) that “the great God Pan is dead” establishes the narrative’s underlying irony by means of a quote from antiquity.

It is important to note how the story, like Cavafy’s poem, features the return of a god, that definitive trope of Western Hellenism. Less apparent perhaps is Pan’s traditional association with homoerotic desire, a fact well-known within Edwardian Uranian circles and one that lends the story an arcaneously erotic tinge. The scene of Eustace’s “seduction” is a pastoral hillside: “Then the terrible silence fell upon us again. I was now standing up and watching a catspaw of wind that was running down one of the ridges opposite, turning the light to dark as it traveled.” The final transformation of Eustace into a faun is unmistakable:

I reached the terrace just in time to see Eustace jumping over the parapet of the garden wall. This time I knew for certain he would be killed. But he alighted in an olive tree, looking like a great white moth, and from the tree he slid on to the earth. And as soon as his bare feet touched the clods of earth he uttered a strange loud cry, such as I should not have thought the human voice could have produced, and disappeared among the trees below.

This story—his first, according to Forster—set the tone for much that was to follow in Forster’s literary oeuvre. As John Colmer writes, the tale illustrates many of the characteristic features of Forster’s short stories: the use of an obtuse narrator, the sudden irruption of the supernatural, the contrast between the instinctive and the conventional life, the related themes of salvation and brotherhood. It also attempts that blend of realism and fantasy, the Arcadian “encounter with mythic presences, around which are grouped the complementary idyllic motifs of pastoral comradeship, rapture and death, and comic ignorance among crass people.” And in keeping with Paterian Hellenism, it evinces “a pattern common in Forster’s early fiction: a symbolic journey to Italy or Greece, the realization of an identity with the Greek spirit, and a sudden transformation into madness or death.” Forster’s reworking of the common motif of the return of the gods allowed him to participate in the confluence of ideas that constituted the discourse of British Hellenism; his liter-
ary interests curiously parallel those of Cavafy in their eagerness to reap the overripe fruits of Victorian Grecomania.

A more convincing presentation of the Pan/panic theme may be found in *A Room with a View* (1908), where Forster advances from the formulaic classicism that colors many of his short stories into a remarkably expansive exploration of Renaissance humanism. Pan functions as the liberator of the repressed “spirit of life,” the felicitous term that occurs in *The Longest Journey* but which is celebrated in *A Room with a View* with greater fervor and optimism. The Pan we encounter in this novel is prankish, a “comic version of the Pan who terrified the insensitive members of the earlier picnic party” in “The Story of a Panic.” He reigns over two scenes: the outing in chapter six, where his presence is noted by the narrator, and the bathing scene in chapter twelve, behind which he lurks as the force of delirium. As the narrator writes, “Pan had been amongst them—not the great god Pan, who has been buried these two thousand years, but the little god Pan, who presides over social contretemps and unsuccessful picnics.”

Along with Pan, other Greek deities figure in the novel. The sixth chapter opens with Phaethon and Persephone, who serve as allegories of the idealized passions of ambition and rebirth. They not only correspond to the Italian driver of the carriage and his lover, but also to George and Lucy. For, as Philip Wagner notes, Lucy recalls Persephone in that she is nearly doomed to the “Hades of convention”; and George calls to mind Phaethon as he gradually falls from the heaven of his idealism:

Persephone, who spends half of the year in the darkness of the underworld and half in the light of the surface, is Lucy Honeychurch, who breaks from the darkness of Victorian conventionality to experience the brightness of passion. And Phaethon, whose brashness causes him literally to fall from heaven to earth, is George Emerson, who forever contemplates the “everlasting Why” until the experience of passion leads him to an encounter with the physical.

These mythic parallels are worked into the fine comedy of the novel in a way that at once heightens the theme of sexual awakening while at the same time enhancing the pagan backdrop against which this theme is effectively played.
The second *contretemps* over which Pan presides, the bath at the “Sacred Lake,” is described elaborately as “a call to the blood and to the relaxed will, a passing benediction whose influence did not pass, a holiness, a spell, a momentary chalice to youth.” Here Forster offers his own tribute to the Hellenic cult of nakedness that reemerged with a vengeance in Renaissance art. The word “Michelangelesque” is applied to George, who is meant to be seen as the antithesis of the “gothic” Cecil. George stands as a paragon of masculinity and is a reproach to the repressed men in the novel. And like Lucy, who is termed “Leonardesque” and constantly compared to works of art by Cecil, George is meant to be viewed aesthetically and objectified erotically as a work of art (although Forster could not have risked indulging an entire chapter in praise of him, much as he would have liked). The nude George awakens in Lucy a sexual passion that she will deny until the last chapter of the novel, where the “holiness of direct desire” preached by Mr. Emerson convinces her of the need for beauty, truth and passion, those Hellenic ideals which, the novel reminds us, were reborn in Renaissance Florence.

In addition to the mythological figures of Pan, Phaethon and Persephone, Forster makes use of sculpture to accentuate the paganism of his novel, a literary device that he employs to greater effect in *The Longest Journey* and *Maurice*, as will be seen in the next chapter. His description of the Piazza Signoria foregrounds the subtle yet fateful effect of the pagan gods on the actions of mortals:

The great square was in shadow; the sunshine had come too late to strike it. Neptune was already unsubstantial in the twilight, half god, half ghost, and his fountain plashed dreamily to the men and satyrs who idled together on its marge. The Loggia showed as the triple entrance of a cave, wherein dwelt many a deity, shadowy but immortal, looking forth upon the arrivals and departures of mankind. It was the hour of unreality—the hour, that is, when unfamiliar things are real. An older person at such an hour and in such a place might think that [something] sufficient was happening to him, and rest content. Lucy desired more.

Neptune, mysteriously shadowed, overlooks the murder, blood from which bespatters the print of Venus that Lucy has just purchased from Alinari’s (significantly, these prints consist mostly of pagan subjects). Thus the Piazza becomes the “symbolic fountainhead in which all later images and motifs find their source,” as Zohreh Sullivan notes:
Water and blood, Neptune and Venus, are linked in the stream of red blood that emerges from the dying man’s lips and mysteriously lands on Lucy’s photographs of the naked Venus. Venus spattered with blood is an appropriate symbolic extension of the violation of Lucy’s naked but imprisoned self momentarily liberated. . . .

In another description of the same piazza just one chapter later, we are given one of the most paganizing glosses in the novel:

The Piazza Signoria is too stony to be brilliant. . . . By an odd chance—unless we believe in a presiding genius of place—the statues that relieve its severity suggest, not the innocence of childhood nor the glorious bewilderment of youth, but the conscious achievements of maturity. Perseus and Judith, Hercules and Thusnelda, they have done or suffered something, and, though they are immortal, immortality has come to them after experience, not before. Here, not only in the solitude of Nature, might a hero meet a goddess, or a heroine a god.

The statues of the Piazza Signoria seem almost presciently to anticipate the events of the picnic even as they preside with august insouciance over the bloody murder that occurs under their very noses. Forster was fond of incorporating such fantastic details in his narratives; here he strikes his most convincing balance between fantasy and realism by superimposing classical flourishes on to a fully believable story of a woman’s sexual awakening.

With these humanistic touches, Forster frames his coming of age story, a romance that makes heavy use of the “Greek” qualities of sexual passion, beauty-worship and self-knowledge, as Michael Ross has noted: the novel “endorses Arnold’s concept of Hellenism—a free and spontaneous play of mind that rejects a grim and unswerving loyalty to moral absolutes. . . .” This “infectious” paganism, as the narrator terms it, allowed Forster to foreground love and youth in a delicate yet profound way. Indeed, the novel’s credo that “love and youth matter intellectually,” as George Emerson puts it, is a thematic tribute to Eros and Pallas Athene, the deities against whom Lucy comes so close to sinning. Forster sets up a number of contrasting categories in this novel to which he will return in his more overtly “Greek” narratives: spontaneity versus artificiality, intellect versus passion, nature versus the cloistered virtues of a decadent aestheticism. The integration of art into life, the realization of spontaneity, passion, brightness and sweetness all serve as the idealized values of a triumphant Hellenism. Notwithstanding the
centrality of Hellenism in the novel, it is curious to note how the Greek landscape (topos) figures so equivocally in the text. In fact, Greece is treated with suspicion by Mr. Beebe and comes perilously close to serving as a substitute for requited love.\textsuperscript{82} As Mr. Beebe states with provincial aplomb, Greece “is altogether too big for our little lot. . . . Italy is just about as much as we can manage. Italy is heroic, but Greece is godlike or devilish—I’m not sure which, and in either case absolutely out of our suburban focus.”\textsuperscript{83} Italy serves in its stead, functioning as the “embodiment of the Hellenic spirit.”\textsuperscript{84} This fear of the actual geographical reality of Greece recurs in other texts as well, and Forster often identified Greece with destructive forces, as was evident in “The Tomb of Pletone” and will be seen in “The Road from Colonus” and \textit{Maurice}.

\textit{Belated Hellenism}

Both Forster and Cavafy were intrigued by the notion of Hellenism’s belatedness; Magna Graecia provided them with a site where they could effectively dramatize Hellenism’s decline. Indeed, Italy served Forster as the setting of an early short story, “Albergo Empedocle,” where the protagonist exhibits a strange nostalgia (in this case a truly pathological one) for a vanished Greek past. Published in 1903, the tale involves a highly imaginative youth named Harold who, while traveling in Sicily, discovers his latent Hellenic self. Prompted by the classicizing musings of his fiancée Mildred, Harold wholly espouses a Greek identity; consequently he is committed to an asylum. The text could be read as a satire on the romantic preoccupation of British travelers with classical antiquity, except that the narrator intervenes at the end to qualify such an interpretation:

But he was quite blank when spoken to either in ancient or modern Greek, and when he was given a Greek book, he did not know what to do with it, and began tearing out the pages.

On these grounds the doctors have concluded that Harold merely thinks he is a Greek, and that it is his mania to behave as he supposes that a Greek behaved, relying on such elementary knowledge as he acquired at school.

But I firmly believe that he has been a Greek—nay that he is a Greek, drawn by recollection back into his previous life. He cannot understand our speech because we have lost his pronunciation. And if I could look at
the matter dispassionately—which I cannot—I should only rejoice at what has happened. For the greater has replaced the less, and he is living the life he knew to be greater than the life he lived with us...  

Although a flawed story, the ironic yet nostalgic sentiment that it expresses serves as an index to Forster’s own growing ambivalence as a “Hellenist” interpreting the classical past and relating the “effete Greek myths” to the “undeveloped hearts of his contemporaries.” The narrative touches upon numerous cultural issues: the fear of Hellenism’s irrelevance; the rejection of the homoerotic; and the vulnerability of those who espouse genuine Greek values. Suffusing these themes is Harold’s ambiguous sexuality, particularly the intensity of his friendship with Tommy. This has led one critic to read the epithet “Greek” as a code-word for homosexuality. In Richard Dellamora’s view, the story illustrates how “Greek culture provides the opportunity of imagining a ‘better love,’ as presumably it does for Tommy, whose interest in Sicily is described as that of an archaeologist, not of a tourist.”

In a similar vein, Cavafy’s “Poseidonians,” written in 1906 and unpublished during his lifetime, recounts the fate of the Greeks of Poseidonia in Southern Italy:

[We behave like the] Poseidonians in the Tyrrhenian Gulf, who although of Greek origin, became barbarized as Tyrrenians or Romans and changed their speech and the customs of their ancestors. But they observe one Greek festival even to this day; during this they gather together and call up from memory their ancient names and customs, and then, lamenting loudly to each other and weeping, they go away.

(Athenaios, Deipnosophistai )

The Poseidonians forgot the Greek language after so many centuries of mingling with Tyrrenians, Latins, and other foreigners. The only thing surviving from their ancestors was a Greek festival, with beautiful rites, with lyres and flutes, contests and wreaths. And it was their habit toward the festival’s end to tell each other about their ancient customs and once again to speak Greek names
that only a few of them still recognized.
And so their festival always had a melancholy ending
because they remembered that they too were Greeks,
they too once upon a time were citizens of Magna Graecia;
and how low they’d fallen now, what they’d become,
living and speaking like barbarians,
cut off so disastrously from the Greek way of life. (Keeley 193)

Unlike the short story, where the Greek language functions to reclaim an
identity, in the poem the few Greek words that are uttered signify the de-
mise of the race. The descendents of the original Greek colonizers recall
their past with melancholic sorrow, bemoaning their status as
non-Greek-speaking barbarians. Both texts foreground lost Italian Hel-
enism and are concerned with the passing of the “Greek way of life.”

In his study Cavafy’s Alexandria, Edmund Keeley notes how “The
Poseidonians” stands as a contradiction to Forster’s estimation of
Cavafy’s Hellenism as a “bastardy in which the Greek strain prevailed”:

It might be more accurate to say that the civilization he loved, and nor-
mally used, was a bastardy in which the Greek strain prevailed, but the
civilization he respected—from some distance, with some coldness . . .
—was the Hellenism of Greece proper, specifically the models provided
by the mainland Greek tradition in language, literature, art, ceremony,
and love, the tradition sometimes identified in Cavafy’s work by the
phrase “the Greek way of life.” What Forster’s estimate rather slight is the
measure of chauvinism that a “loyal Greek” even of Cavafy’s broad-minded, relatively eclectic persuasion seems inevitably to mani-
fest through an abiding respect for this Greek tradition: what one might
call the cultural, rather than the political, chauvinism of Hellenes. . . . [I]n
“Poseidonians” the barbarism to which Forster sees Cavafy so receptive
quite overwhelms a Greek colony on the Western periphery of Helle-
nism, and it does so disastrously.91

For Cavafy, the Greek language is unquestionably central to any defini-
tion of Hellenicity. In the words of Constantine Paparrigopoulos, the
Greek historian who exerted a profound influence on the poet, “What is
Hellenism? The Greek language. And what is the Greek language? Hel-
enism.”92 “Poseidonians” aligns Cavafy with the intellectual tenets of
modern Greek historians as well as with those of the Victorian classicists
for whom the knowledge of Greek was of paramount importance.93
Cavafy’s poem establishes a linguistic perspective for Forster’s “Albergo Empedocle” which may be read as a psychological fantasy that at once reifies and denigrates the privileged status of the Greek language. Forster’s British characters, classically trained as they are, are really no better than barbarians in their treatment of Harold and their refusal to recognize a genuine Hellene (this theme is repeated in “The Road from Colonus,” where the local Greeks are treated with contempt). For British travelers, Hellenism was merely a commodity, as Dellamora notes: “By 1903, high culture, including Greek culture, had been thoroughly commodified for the consumption and adornment of members of Mildred’s class. . . . For a middle- or upper-class male homosexual, Greek culture could be commodified in another way in the form of sexual tourism. . . .” Beneath the surface of these fantasy stories lies an erotic angst that is directly related to Hellenism in both overtly thematic and subtly ideological ways. Forster came to terms with his homosexuality only after his stay in Alexandria. The discourse of Hellenic eros, however, is unmistakably inscribed in these and other of his short stories and should be viewed as a very significant subtext of his narratives.

A more alluring example of the parallel interests and commingling motifs of these two Hellenists may be found in Forster’s posthumously published short story “The Classical Annex” (1931) and Cavafy’s unpublished “Julian at the Mysteries” (1896). The poem recounts the botched initiation of Julian the Apostate into the Eleusinian mysteries:

But when he found himself in darkness,
in the earth’s dreadful depths,
accompanied by unholy Greeks,
and bodiless figures appeared before him
with haloes and bright lights,
the young Julian momentarily lost his nerve:
an impulse from his pious years came back
and he crossed himself.
The Figures vanished at once;
the haloes faded away, the lights went out. (Keeley 181, i–x)

Inspired by Gibbon, the poem is one of many in which Cavafy ridicules and critiques the apostate emperor. We have here yet another variation of the returning gods, but here the deities express their displeasure and depart willingly. As the Greeks tell Julian, “It was just that when
they saw you / making that vile, that crude sign, / their noble nature was disgusted / and they left you in contempt.”

Similarly, the apotropaeic gesture of crossing one’s self stands out rather conspicuously in Forster’s “The Classical Annex” (1931). The story involves the statue of a nude gladiator, “a worthless late Roman work” purchased by the city fathers for the Municipal Museum at Bigglesmouth. The curator notices that the iron fig-leaf which had been added to the statue has fallen off, and upon restoring it, he discovers that it no longer fits properly. The fig-leaf snaps off once again and whizzes across the room:

It might have killed him. “Damn and blast you, that’s too much,” he said, then shrieked, and leaped into the Early Christian sarcophagus. He was not an instant too soon. The nude had cracked off its pedestal and was swaying to fall on him.

With rare presence of mind, the Curator made the sign of the Cross, and the Classical Annex and all its contents became instantly still. It might have been a dream but for an obscene change in the statue’s physique. He gazed from his asylum in horror. He glanced at the fig-leaf, now all too small. He backed away from it, crossing himself constantly. . . .

The story ends with a fateful visit by the curator’s son Denis shortly after the strange interlude:

The museum squatted on the margin like a toad. He [the curator] inserted the key into its skin, oilily, and it received him. None of the lights were on, which gave him hope. Then far away he heard a familiar, an adorable sound: a giggle. Denis was laughing at something. He dared not call out or give any sign, and crept forward cautiously, guiding himself by well-known objects, like the oaken churns, until he heard his son say, “Aren’t you awful?” and there was the sound of a kiss. Gladiatorial feints, post-classical suctions, a brute planning his revenge. There was not a moment to lose, and as giggling started again and soared up into hysterics against a ground-bass of grunts the Curator stepped into the Christian sarcophagus and made the sign of the Cross. Again it worked. Once more the Classical Annex and all its contents became still.

Then he switched on the light.

And in after years a Hellenistic group called The Wrestling Lesson became quite a feature at Bigglesmouth, though it was not exhibited until the Curator and the circumstances of his retirement were forgot-
“Very nice piece, very descent” was the Councillor Bodkin’s opinion. “Look ‘ow the elder brother’s got the little chappie down. Look ‘ow well the little chapie’s taking it.”

The tale belongs to the group of erotic stories that Forster wrote “not to express myself but to excite myself” and recalls “Albergo Empedocle” in that both Denis and Harold share a doomed fate in a classical eternity. It also critiques the puritanical philistinism of the English bourgeoisie. “Art takes its revenge,” as Norman Page concludes; indeed, the narrative shares something of Cavafy’s post-classical aesthetic: there is an ambiguous conflation of Christian and pagan elements, specifically statues, all overlaid with an unmistakable eroticism. Although Forster’s story verges on porography, it recalls the sensuality of Cavafy’s erotic poems, specifically the physical encounter between two strangers. (The story’s Lucianic subtext betrays a distinct Cavafian influence, and it is perhaps no mere coincidence that Forster’s last visit to Alexandria occurred in 1929, months before the story was written.) The sign of the cross, however, is the most striking similarity of the two pieces: it is a gesture of panic that effects a classicus interruptus, as it were—the thwarting of the pagan spirit and the obstruction of significant rites of passage.

The Museum Ethos

The ideology of the museum that informs so much of Forster’s and Cavafy’s work was in turn favored and critiqued by both writers. Cavafy, in addition to expressing his delight over the new Alexandrian Museum in his rapturous essay titled “Our Museum” (1892), wrote two scathing articles criticizing the British Museum and the British public for refusing to return the “Elgin” marbles to Greece. He took issue with the still commonly rehearsed opinions that the marbles are safer in England than they would be in Athens, and that their return would set off a curatorial avalanche. His tangle with the Bloomsbury Brahmins notwithstanding, Cavafy was an unapologetic enthusiast of the museum as Hellenism’s ideal showcase. As the exhibition “Cavafy’s World: Ancient Passions” so eloquently showed, there is no better gloss for a Cavafy poem than the ancient artifacts themselves. Indeed, Cavafy repeatedly valorized the preciousness of the antique object; he once wrote, “The ancients worked like me . . . and I work like the ancients,” and even compared his poetry to an “amphora . . . which admits
of many meanings." Moreover, his comments on Hellenism’s com-
m mingling with the East which conclude his essay “Our Museum” are the
closest he ever came to articulating an aesthetic theory of cultural hy-
bridization:

The Alexandrian Museum is full of interest for all the friends of antiqui-
ties and learning, but especially for us as Greeks. It is a treasure of fami-
lar objects. It speaks to our fantasy regarding the glorious Hellenism of
Alexandria. It presents to us a picture of that cultured civilization that
flourished so robustly in Egypt, as in the other Greece, and which dissemin-
ated throughout the East the Greek spirit, embellishing the Oriental
ideas with which it came into contact with Greek elegance and charm.

Forster, on the other hand, held a more equivocal opinion on the si-
ence of the urns; his take on museums and antiquities evolved along
with his attitude toward Hellenism. He wrote a number of prose pieces
that illustrate his maturing beliefs in the value of antiquity and the clois-
tered virtues of the museum. In two of his early essays, “Macolnia
Shops” (1903) and “Cnidus” (1904), which directly precede “Gemistus
Pletho” in the section of Abinger Harvest entitled “The Past,” he pays
homage to the finds of archaeology. In “Cnidus” he recounts a most un-
pleasant excursion to Asia Minor:

But I did see the home of the Goddess who made Cnidus famous to us,
for, up on the right, the mountain had been scarped and a platform lev-
elled, and someone pointed it out and said: “That is the precinct of the In-
fernal Deities, where they got the Demeter”—that Demeter of Cnidus,
whom we hold in the British Museum now. She was there at the moment,
warm and comfortable in that little recess of hers between the Ephesian
Room and the Archaic Room, with the electric light fizzing above her,
and casting blue shadows over her chin. She is dusted twice a week, and
there is a railing in front, with “No Admittance,” so that she cannot be
touched. And if human industry can find that lost arm of hers, and that
broken nose, and human ingenuity can put them on, she shall be as good
as new.

I am not going to turn sentimental, and pity the exiled Demeter, and de-
clare that her sorrowful eyes are straining for the scarped rock, and the
twin harbours, and Tropia, and the sea. She is doing nothing of the sort. If
her eyes see anything, it must be the Choiseul Apollo who is in the niche
opposite; and she might easily do worse. And if, as I believe, she is alive,
she must know that she has come among people who love her, for all they
are so weak-chested and anemic and feeble-kneed, and who pay her such prosaic homage as they can. Demeter alone among the gods has true immortality. The others continue, perchance, their existence, but are forgotten, because the time came when they could not be loved. But to her, all over the world, rise prayers of idolatry from suffering men as well as suffering women, for she has transcended sex. And Poets too, generation after generation, have sung in passionate incompetence of the hundred-flowered Narcissus and the rape of Persephone, and the wanderings of the Goddess, and her gift to us of corn and tears; so that generations of critics, obeying also their need, have censured the poets for reviving the effete mythology of Greece, and urged them to themes of living interest which shall touch the heart of today.¹⁰⁸

These are revealing thoughts coming from a writer profoundly steeped in the Classics. One senses an encroaching ennui and the playful skepticism of Bloomsbury here. While the essay bears witness to the persistence of Demeter as a living presence in the twentieth century (à la Pater),¹⁰⁹ it also betrays a mild ambivalence about the goddess’s future. Forster was surely aware that the use of Greek myths was becoming effete; yet he continued to indulge in them until India eventually usurped the place of Hellas.

In contrast to this is the quaint and reflective prose of “Macolnia Shops”¹¹⁰ where we are invited into the Kircher Museum in Rome to behold an ancient Greek bronze container engraved with figures from the story of the punishment of Amycus by Pollux. Forster’s “ode on a Grecian toilet case”¹¹¹ involves the praise of water and friendship, recurring motifs in Forster’s fiction. The description is sensuous in a discreet way:

As the heroes are refreshed, their faculties awake in their fullness, and strong and vivid is the love they bear and have borne for each other. That love has never died, but it has shared the eclipse and weakness of the body. Two—the most beautiful figures of the whole composition—are standing together, leaning on their spears, with the knowledge that they have passed through one more labour in company. Another has hastened back to the Argo, and is pouring water down the throat of a sick friend. That man is as many centuries from self-denial as he is from self-consciousness. In spirit he is further still from the magnanimous Alexander, who empties water on the sand in the midst of a dying army.
Thus the motives go: the Praise of Water and the Praise of Friendship. The second is greater than the first; but it must needs come after it in place.

“Praise of Water! Praise of Friendship!” cries the angry shade of Dindia Macolnia, rising on its elbow out of the quaint Etruscan Hell. “I bought the thing because it was pretty, and stood nicely on the chest of drawers.”

It may be that the Greek artist, sitting solitary and content amidst Elysian asphodels, now values that praise more than ours.112

This image of a Greek artist sitting solitary and content in an ersatz Hellenic eternity, while humorous in the context of Forster’s essay, is presented more seriously and sublimely in many of Cavafy’s poems, where the Greek obsession with male beauty is routinely celebrated. Take for example his “Craftsman of Wine Bowls,” composed in 1903 and originally titled “The Amphora,” where we find a poetic illustration of Cavafy’s previously mentioned idea of himself as an ancient crafter of vases:

On this wine bowl—pure silver,  
made for the house of Herakleidis,  
where good taste is the rule—  
notice these graceful flowers, the streams, the thyme.  
In the center I put this beautiful young man,  
naked, erotic, one leg still dangling  
in the water. O memory, I begged  
for you to help me most in making  
the young face I loved appear the way it was.  
This proved very difficult because  
some fifteen years have gone by since the day  
he died as a soldier in the defeat at Magnesia. (Keeley 119)

Although the poem possesses little of the jovial tone of Forster’s essay, both pieces share an aesthetic delight in ancient metalwork and the circumstances of its production. Cavafy authenticates his poem by introducing a sobering historic event—the Battle of Magnesia (190 B.C.)—whereas Forster effusively celebrates soldierly camaraderie in an almost Whitmanesque way. This shared descriptive rhetoric—\textit{ekphrasis}\textsuperscript{113} as it was technically called—exemplifies what Barbara Hughes Fowler calls the “Hellenistic aesthetic” whereby “descriptions of elegant works of art are done with words denoting craft or technique. . . . Elegance and craft are in both the poets and the artists inextricably intertwined.”\textsuperscript{114} Other
poems that illustrate this preoccupation with art are “For the Shop,” (1912), “Sculptor of Tyana” and “Picture of a 23-Year-Old Painted by His Friend of the Same Age, an Amateur” (printed 1928), “Before the Statue of Endymion” (1895) and “The Retinue of Dionysius” (1903). There is something of the curator in the poet who fashions these mock-antique poems that partake of that Keatsean spirit which evokes a reverential awe for the beheld artifact.

In Cavafy’s repudiated “The Mimes of Herodas” (1892) we find the jovial tone so characteristic of Hellenistic poetry, the “playfulness and lightness” commonly associated with Alexandrian art:

Remaining concealed for centuries
within the darkness of the Egyptian earth
within this despairing silence
the graceful mimes were wounded;

but those years have passed,
wise men arrived from the North,
and the entombment and oblivion
of the iambics ended. Their humorous tones

brought us gaiety once more
of Greek odes and market places;
and we enter with them into the spritely
life of a curious society.—

Straightaway a very crafty procurress
meets us, who seeks to corrupt
a faithful wife! But Mitrachi
knows how to protect virtue.

But later we see another scoundrel
who keeps a shop
and crazily charges a Phrygian man
for having harmed the—school for girls.

Two chatterers, elegant women,
pay a visit to Asclepios;
the most savory of their chats
greatly cheer the temple.

We enter a large tannery
with the good Mitro.
here are lovely goods piled in stacks
here the latest fashion is found.
How many of the papyri are missing; how often a delicate and ironic iamb became the prey of foul worms!
The unlucky Herodas, fashioned for mockery and merriment, how gravely wounded he came to us! (Dalven 225–26)

This poem illustrates David Ricks’s point that Cavafy’s “Alexandrianism” was “on the one hand associated with poetry and the erudite” yet “forever connected with Eros and the appetites. . . . Cavafy exploited to the full the sensual connotations of his city.”116 As in “Macolnia Shops,” the poem presents a Hellenistic narrative that leaves us with an image of a Greek artist ravaged by the passing of time and the fickle tastes of the critics.

The sensual ethos of Hellenistic Alexandria surely informs Forster’s mock-Alexandrian tale “The Obelisk” (1939), which Oliver Stallybrass places in the “facetious” sub-group of homosexual stories.117 Its title draws attention to the anti-climactic focal point of the narrative: a rendezvous at the obelisk that neither Hilda nor Ernest manages, owing to their trysts with the sailors. The actual obelisk never appears in the story except indirectly as a post-card:

They reached the bus-stop with several minutes to spare. There was a picture-postcard kiosk, and she had a good idea: she would buy a post-card of the Obelisk, so that if the topic came up again she would know what it looked like.

There was an excellent selection, and she soon visualized it from several points of view. Though not as tall as Cleopatra’s Needle, it boasted a respectable height. One of the cards showed the inscription “Erected in 1897 to the memory of Alfred Judge, one-time Mayor.” She memorized this, for Ernest often mentioned inscriptions, but she actually bought a card which brought in some of its surroundings. The monument was nobly placed. It stood on a tongue of rock overlooking the landslip.

“Well, you won’t have seen that today! Will you?” said the woman in the kiosk as she took payment.

Hilda thought she would fall to the ground. “Oh gracious, what ever do you mean?” she gasped.

“It’s not there to be seen.”
“But that’s the Obelisk. It says so.”

“It says so, but it’s not there. It fell down last week. During all that rain. It’s fallen right over into the landslip up-side down, the tip of it’s gone in ever so far, rather laughable, though I suppose it’ll be a loss to the town.”

“Oh there it is,” said her husband coming up and taking the postcard out of her hand. “Yes, it gives quite a good idea of it, doesn’t it? I’ll have one displaying the inscription.”

The obvious absurdity of the Orientalist obelisk and its comparison to Cleopatra’s Needles (which Forster mentions repeatedly in Alexandria and Pharos and Pharillon) call to mind the notorious transferal of these Egyptian masterpieces to London and New York. Forster’s conversion of this symbol of colonialist acquisitionary power into a pathetic monument to an obscure mayor is in keeping with his light satire. The comic story that ensues partakes of those “vivid pictures of bourgeois and low class life” that characterize the “Mimes of Herodas” and the Hellenistic aesthetic in general. Add to this the erotic element that Cavafy’s poems proclaimed so openly, and you have a very “Alexandrian” tale.

One could continue on in this intertextual mode of parallel readings. There are a number of other poems and short stories that have overlapping themes: Forster’s “Ansell” (1902/1903), which involves a young anemic scholar writing a dissertation on the Greek optative whose entire trunk of books and notes falls irretrievably into a river, calls to mind the men of Cavafy’s “He Had Come There to Read” (1924) and “From the School of the Renowned Philosopher” (1921) who are both distracted from their studies by erotic thoughts and pursuits. “Arthur Snatchfold” (1928), the story of a sexual encounter between Sir Richard Conway and a young milkman, is reminiscent of Cavafy’s “The Twenty-fifth Year of His Life” (1918), “Days of 1896” (1925), and “Days of 1903” (1909), all of which involve young men who are ruined and devastated by illicit love affairs. Since it is nearly impossible to prove any degree of textual influence here, we may simple conclude that novelist and poet were preoccupied with and inspired by similar interests, primary among which was the cult of Hellenism with its fetish for exiled gods and beautiful young men. Their personal Hellenisms, however, were constantly challenged by the East. For Cavafy, the Orient was absorbed into his vision of a
greater Hellenistic *ecumene*, one that was nevertheless riddled with “Orientalist” fantasies. In Forster’s case, the Orient seduced him into a radically different world, one that forced him to part with the secure cultural perspective of European Hellenism and its inherent imperialist and totalizing assumptions.