Eastern Questions
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FORSTER’S DEBT to classical Greece for inspiration and subject matter cannot be overemphasized. In keeping with the tradition of Victorian and Edwardian Hellenism, he habitually looked back to Hellenic culture as a moral and humanistic standard, what he would eventually term “the spirit of life” in his most Grecian narrative, The Longest Journey. As Susan Grove Hall writes, “At the end of the Edwardian period, Hellenism still expressed a common ideal. England was considered the center of a new Hellenism in scholarship, education, theater, philosophy, art and morality; Hellenism was a living force which was concerned intimately with thought, life, and conduct.…”¹ Forster espoused Hellenism as a cultural paradigm and transhistorical body of ideas. Above all, Hellenism served Forster as a vehicle for literary expression, and his challenge as a writer was to manifest Greek ideas in creative and relevant ways. This he accomplished most effectively in three of his narratives: “The Road from Colonus” (1904), The Longest Journey (1907), and Maurice (1914/1971), texts which illustrate Forster’s prolonged engagement with the classical inheritance.

“The Road from Colonus” recreates the disappointment experienced by many British travelers who visited Greece at the turn of the century. Forster depicts this encounter with a brutal honesty that derived from his own astute observations of his fellow British while traveling himself. He presents to us the inevitable cultural conflict between the touring sophisticate and the Greek peasant population. Forster was not content, however, to leave these categories in cultural isolation; it is the collision of these two worlds in the struggle over an old man’s soul that consti-
tutes the moral framework of this short story. Mr. Lucas, the rather cranky senex (he anticipates Mrs. Moore in this regard), poses a great problem to his family by wanting to remain in Greece. The Greece he discovers is not that of Grote or Baedeker, but that of Byron and the philhellenes who were able to see in the local landscape and populace a vision of beauty and an unbroken continuity with the ancient past. In particular, it is the Greece of nature, with its flowering anemones, asphodels and plane trees that creates a visual stimulant for the protagonist of the story. In contrast to this Romanticizing Greek landscape is the squalid allure of the peasantry which Forster portrays vividly but sympathetically:

In their [the plane trees’] midst was hidden a tiny Khan or country inn, a frail mud building with a broad wooden balcony in which sat an old woman spinning, while a small brown pig, eating orange peel, stood beside her. On the wet earth below squatted two children, playing some primeval game with their fingers; and their mother, none too clean either, was messing with some rice inside.²

By foregrounding the plane tree as the text’s central image, Forster brings an added political dimension to his narrative, linking it somewhat mischievously to modern Greek history and Byronic philhellenism;³ for it was under a plane tree where the modern Greeks swore their oath of independence in 1821. Yet the tree out of which the stream flows is curiously hollow:

it had been burnt out for charcoal—and from its living trunk there gushed an impetuous spring, coating the bark with fern and moss, and flowing over the mule track to create fertile meadows beyond. The simple country folk had paid to beauty and mystery such tribute as they could, for in the rind of the tree a shrine was cut, holding a lamp and a little picture of the Virgin, inheritor of the Naiad’s and Dryad’s joint abode.⁴

Fastened to this tree are little votive offerings, “tiny arms and legs and eyes in tin, grotesque models of the brain or the heart—all tokens of some recovery of strength or wisdom or love.”⁵ These “tamata,”⁶ as they are called in Greek, appeal to Mr. Lucas in an unexpected way, given their talismanic and superstitious function. Oddly enough, they contribute to the relapse of his Hellenic “fever,” and he begins to identify with the native customs he encounters: “To Mr. Lucas, who, in a brief space of time, had discovered not only Greece, but England and all the world and
life, there seemed nothing ludicrous in the desire to hang within the tree another votive offering—a little model of an entire man.”

In an accidental gesture that serves to further his link with Oedipus, Mr. Lucas’s foot slips into the water as he steps out of the tree. As Gavriel Ben-Ephraim writes, this ironically recalls Oedipus’s purifying ordeal with water at Colonus. In fact, the parallels with Sophocles are more significant than most critics have recognized: “An identical situation provides the dramatic tension in both Oedipus at Colonus and ‘The Road from Colonus.’ It is the conflict between a father and his child over the place of the father’s death.”

Mr. Lucas decides that he wants to stay at the inn, contrary to the wishes of his daughter and traveling companions, who deplore the poor quality of the accommodations and mistrust the local inhabitants. In the ensuing brawl, the Greek youth who tries to free Mr. Lucas from his forced departure is punched in the mouth and sent sprawling into a bed of asphodels: “‘Little devils!’ said Graham, laughing with triumph. ‘That’s the modern Greek all over. Your father meant money if he stopped, and they consider we were taking it out of their pocket.’ ‘Oh, they are terrible—simply savages! I don’t know how I shall ever thank you. You’ve saved my father.’” This brutal act may be read on a political level as a criticism of British cultural aggression, and stands as a bold indictment of the hauteur which many British “Hellenists” felt toward modern Greeks (Virginia Woolf’s “A Dialogue Upon Mount Pentelicus” ventures a similar critique). The story replots the dilemma of “Albergo Empedocle” and exposes even more forcefully than the earlier story the hypocrisy of the adulators of Greece who react with disdain and hostility when confronted with actual Greeks.

Upon returning to England, Mr. Lucas discovers the fate of the inn’s inhabitants (they are crushed by a plane tree) when Ethel by chance glances over the newspapers in which are wrapped her coveted asphodel bulbs. With this scenario, Forster creates numerous levels of irony. First, there is the pedantic display of Ethel’s reading of modern Greek, even though she could not tolerate the Greeks she met at the Khan. Secondly, the acquisition of the asphodel of classical Greece and its transportation to England recalls the Elginesque fetish for Greek artifacts which must be removed to England in order to be properly appreciated. And lastly, the text alludes most subtly to Lord Byron, whose death on April 18 (coincidentally, the eve of the incident in the story) for the cause of Greek independence was said to have been accompanied by a great
thunderstorm. All of these details heighten the arrogance of the erstwhile enthusiasts of Greek culture and expose their “mishellenic” behavior.

In addition to this rich irony, the narrative foregrounds the connection between the death of the Greek peasants and the fate of Hellenism; for as the “daimones” of the land—Graham calls them little devils—they are in a sense the “last manifestation of the Greek gods of the earth.” As such, their demise signifies the final “exile of the gods,” that recherché motif of Western Hellenism. Here, however, the setting of modern Greece lends this trope an additional urgency and raises various questions about the provenance of Greek culture. Thus “The Road from Colonus” deftly interrogates Britain’s arrogation of things Greek and criticizes the failure to recognize the paradox of Hellenism’s hollow weight, one that threatens to crush those who perpetually depend upon it as an ideology. Forster was undoubtedly conscious of all the various shades of meaning here, but it is the hollow trunk that remains the most intriguing image of the text. And though the story expresses an Arnoldian preference for the classical world of simple joy and harmony as opposed to the hurried malaise of modern life, it is the modern that wins out in the end. As the title indicates, “The Road from Colonus” leads away from the ultimate locus classicus—Greece—and anticipates the inevitable crisis of Hellenism as a cultural standard and modicum of literary values. Forster himself would gradually withdraw from Hellenism, not simply owing to its passing away as a literary vogue; for Hellenism was becoming increasingly hollow for him and could no longer sustain the weight of the humanism which he struggled to uphold and defend throughout his career.

While the short story provided Forster with a genre that allowed him to express creatively his classical interests, a novel patterned on Greek principles would prove to be more demanding. Forster took up this challenge with The Longest Journey, where he consciously structured his narrative on various Greek prototypes as he progressed from a pastoral to a more overtly dramatic Hellenism. Indeed, the plot of this novel recalls the tragedy of Oedipus, as Elizabeth Heine observes:

Granted that another hereditary defect would have done as well, Forster perhaps chose lameness as the marker because Rickie’s failure to act by what he knows of himself links him to Oedipus, whose limp also signifies his ancestry and whose pride and love, one assumes, allowed him to
make a mistake like Rickie’s, marrying the wrong woman (one old enough to be his mother) despite all prophecy. That Forster had Greek tragedy in mind is evidenced by a relatively late draft of Mrs Failing’s sibylline half-revelation, where she likens Stephen to Orestes, come to free his family from their inherited curse; clearly the comparison had to be dropped precisely because of Stephen’s lack of relationship to the Elliots.\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to these classical archetypes are the numerous Greek references and motifs with which the text is surfeited. These factors combine to make \textit{The Longest Journey} Forster’s most ambitious literary expression of Western Hellenism.

Forster took his title from a line out of Shelley’s Hellenizing \textit{Epipsychidion}, a poem suffused by Platonic thought and steeped in Romantic Hellenism.\textsuperscript{16} Rather than repeating the “dreadiest and longest journey” which Shelley denounces in his poem, Forster dramatizes the struggle for a more fulfilling moral journey. But this is not achieved by Rickie Elliot, whose failure in this regard is meant to be viewed as properly tragic—the word is used repeatedly throughout the novel. And in accordance with the Aristotelian tragic formula, \textit{The Longest Journey} portrays the character of a man who, after struggling vainly with his destiny, suffers defeat nobly. In addition to this tragic dimension, however, Forster has superimposed a quest motif: the search for the “spirit of life” which, although at times remaining obscurely defined, is unmistakably connected with Hellenism, as we shall see.

The novel commences with a philosophical debate reminiscent of the symposia of the ancient Greeks.\textsuperscript{17} Elizabeth Heine has noted the influence of G. L. Dickinson’s \textit{A Modern Symposium} here, a text which she suggests should be read as a companion piece to Forster’s novel.\textsuperscript{18} The most direct influence of Dickinson’s imaginative dialogue may be found in the pronouncement of Henry Martin, Dickinson’s own mouth-piece: “It may, indeed, be true that intellect without passion is barren; but it is certain that passion without intellect is mischievous. And since powers, which should be united, are, in fact, at war in the great duel which runs through history, I take my stand with the intellect.”\textsuperscript{19} These binaries resonate profoundly throughout Forster’s novel; the tension between Rickie and Stephen is firmly rooted in the conflict between the artificial and intellectual Hellenism of the former and the rural and dynamic Hellenism of the latter. As Claude Summers writes,
It is as the natural embodiment of the Greek spirit of life—as localized in Wiltshire—that Stephen inherits England. Stephen’s intuitive absorption of the Greek spirit contrasts with Rickie’s studied literary Hellenism. Rickie’s artificial idealization of the ancient Greeks falsifies and distances, whereas Stephen’s unconscious Hellenism translates ancient ideals into living values.20

Forster will make further use of these same opposing categories in *Maurice*, where his interests will ultimately take him beyond the Hellenic ideal in favor of the English Greenwood. In this novel, it is the “Greek spirit of life” that challenges Forster and eludes his main character.

One cannot but be struck by the abundance of classical lore in *The Longest Journey*. Forster intended this classicizing to enhance his “tragic” plot and to frame his “heroic” characterization of Stephen. He often strains his narrative to achieve this deliberately “Greek” effect. An example of this is the juxtaposition of the classical and the British which Forster brings to his description of the English landscape:

The fields were enormous, like fields on the Continent, and the brilliant sun showed up their colours well. . . . Beneath these colours lurked the unconquerable chalk, and wherever the soil was poor it emerged. The grassy track, so gay with scabious and bedstraw, was snow-white at the bottom of its ruts. A dazzling amphitheatre gleamed in the flank of a distant hill, cut for some Olympian audience. And here and there, whatever the surface crop, the earth broke into little embankments, little ditches, little mounds: there had been no lack of drama to solace the gods.21

This archaeological impressionism attempts to prepare the reader for the expansive Hellenism that follows. In fact, the chalk will become a chthonic symbol at the end of the novel, where it is directly linked with the Demeter myth. It is interesting to note how important it was for Forster to connect England with its pagan past (the same urgency attends Cavafy’s “Ionic”). As Robert Martin has observed, “Rural England, under the surface of its county families, retains a heritage that is close to that of rural Greece, as the characters of Stephen and Alec demonstrate.”22 Forster was eager to accentuate this parallel and to align England more squarely with its pagan past in order to make his classical frame of reference more tangible. This he does by emphasizing the antiquity of Wiltshire.
Cadbury Rings, the imaginary setting of part of the story, is a curious combination of the sublime and the ridiculous: “A bank of grass enclosed a ring of turnips, which enclosed a second bank of grass, which enclosed more turnips, and in the middle of the pattern grew one small tree. British? Roman? Saxon? Danish? The competent reader will decide.”\textsuperscript{23} Modeled after the Figbury Rings which, in antiquity, were Roman ringed defenses,\textsuperscript{24} this classical landscape allows Forster to conflate the modern and the antique. By coincidence, it is at the Roman crossing where the ultimate tragedy of the story occurs, one which Forster foreshadows with the death of an unknown child during Rickie’s first encounter with Stephen. Forster’s foregrounding of the Roman road vividly conveys Britain’s cultural link to Greece via Rome. On a less obvious and perhaps even symbolic level, Forster meant the Roman crossing to signify the peril of too deep a dependence on the classics. Such excessive Hellenizing may be seen in the comments of Mrs. Failing, herself a curious incarnation of the banal neoclassicism which even her house seemingly exemplifies:

“That reminds me. Another child run over at the Roman crossing. Whish—bang—dead.”

“Oh my foot! Oh my foot! My foot!” said Mrs Failing, and paused to take breath. . . .

“Isn’t it odd,” said Mrs Failing, “that the Greeks should be enthusiastic about laurels—that Apollo should pursue anyone who could possibly turn into such a frightful plant? . . .”\textsuperscript{25}

Here we should note the revealing confluence of classical elements: the Oedipal limp, the perilous Roman crossing, and the trifling thoughts of the classical inheritance, the “flat” Hellenism that proves to be Rickie’s literary and spiritual downfall.

In this same vein of juxtaposed landscapes is the implicit paralleling of the British public school and the ideal of Greek \textit{paideia} with which it fails to compare. Pedagogy emerges as one of the most significant themes of the novel; the literal idea of “leading a child,” or rather misleading, as the British system does, is explored quite ruthlessly in the text. Forster intended to expose the shortcomings of the public school and the abuse of the classical inheritance.\textsuperscript{26} He effectively conveys this in the rather bombastic exchange between Rickie and Mr. Pembroke as they tour the Sawston School: “‘Thank God I’m English,’ said Rickie sud-
denly. ‘Thank Him indeed,’ said Mr Pembroke, laying a hand on his back. ‘We’ve been nearly as great as the Greeks, I do believe. Greater, I’m sure, than the Italians, though they did get closer to beauty. . . .’ 27 The discussion continues with what is an unmistakable parody of a Platonic dialogue:

On this occasion he [Mr Pembroke] remarked that the Greeks lacked spiritual insight, and had a low conception of woman.

“As to women—oh! there they were dreadful,” said Rickie, leaning his hand on the chapel. “I realize that more and more. But as to spiritual insight, I don’t quite like to say; and I find Plato too difficult, but I know men who don’t, and I fancy they mightn’t agree with you.”

“Far be it from me to disparage Plato. And for philosophy as a whole I have the greatest respect. But it is the crown of a man’s education, not the foundation. Myself, I read it with the utmost profit, but I have known endless trouble result from boys who attempted it too soon, before they were set.” 28

Notwithstanding this veiled allusion to homosexuality, the scene achieves a Greek climax when Rickie proceeds to Hellenize the whole set at Sawston. He compares Gerald to a character out of Aristophanes, “the young Athenian, perfect in body, placid in mind,” 29 and attempts a similar allusion for Agnes: “But he could think of no classical parallel for Agnes. She slipped between examples. A kindly Medea, a Cleopatra with a sense of duty—these suggested her a little. She was not born in Greece, but came overseas to it—a dark, intelligent princess.” 30

This sort of Hellenizing typifies Rickie’s (and to some extent Forster’s) imagination; 31 indeed, in his writing, Rickie is faulted for pretending “that Greek gods were alive” and “that young ladies could vanish into trees.” 32 Thus Forster’s text engages Hellenism as a discourse of questionable relevance and even deconstructs it to some extent as a problematic ideology. The novel is fraught with an ironic tension derived from positive and negative comparisons between Greece and England. This is partly deliberate and partly unconscious, as Forster himself was struggling to convert the effete myths of Greece into an artistic whole in this his longest novel to date.

Related to this struggle is the Romantic penchant for identifying Greece with nature. Rickie’s own creative impulses are influenced by such Arcadian excesses, as he confesses to Agnes:
“You see, a year or two ago I had a great idea of getting into touch with Nature, just as the Greeks were in touch; and seeing England so beautiful, I used to pretend that her trees and coppices and summer fields of parsley were alive. It’s funny enough now, but it wasn’t funny then, for I got in such a state that I believed, actually believed, that Fauns lived in a certain double hedgerow near the Gog Magogs, and one evening I walked round a mile sooner than go through it alone.”

Rickie is “cracked on beauty,” as Agnes puts it, or rather this type of pastoral beauty. This passage betrays Forster’s own misgivings about his short stories; it also reveals the frame of mind out of which he created Stephen, the very embodiment of the Theocritean ideal, to which he adds his own concept of chthonic heroism, as we shall see.

Stephen remains Forster’s most overtly “Greek” character, the manifestation of what might be termed a “round” Hellenism. Frequently described as a hero, Stephen lives the pastoral life of a shepherd. And like many mythological figures, he is of uncertain parentage. He has been coached in his Hellenism by Mrs. Failing, whose comments to Stephen early in the novel set the tone for much that follows:

“You distress me. You rob the Pastoral of its lingering romance. Is there no poetry and no thought in England? Is there no one, in all these downs, who warbles with eager thought the Doric lay?”

“Chaps sing to themselves at times, if you mean that.”


She continues in this same manner to provide the reader with numerous glosses on Stephen: he is a “philosopher” and a “thoroughbred pagan” who worships nature. Furthermore, she casts the entire history of the brothers as a “comedy.” It is literally at the summit of this neo-classicism that Stephen lives a most precarious existence:

His room was in the pediment. Classical architecture, like all things in this world that attempt serenity, is bound to have its lapses into the undignified, and Cadover lapsed hopelessly when it came to Stephen’s room. . . . Here he worked and sang and practiced on the ocharoon. . . . He had only one picture—the Demeter of Cnidus—and she hung straight from the roof like a joint of meat. Once she was in the drawing-room; but Mrs Failing had got tired of her, and decreed her removal and this degra-
dation. Now she faced the sunrise. . . . For she was never still, and if the
draught increased she would twist on her string, and would sway and
tap upon the rafters until Stephen woke up and said what he thought of
her.  

This image of Demeter of Cnidus, the dangling mother archetype, serves
as the dominant Greek metaphor of the novel. She signifies “the spirit
of life,” the principle with which Stephen is constantly associated.
Whether this overt symbolism convinces or not, clearly Forster was ea-
ger to fashion Demeter into something more than the quaint museum
piece which he celebrated in his essay “Cnidus.” Doubtless this evoca-
tion of the Demeter myth was an attempt to restore a more archetypal di-
ension to a literary cliché. Yet she hangs absurdly from a string, a detail
which suggests the peculiar status of Hellenism itself in the text.

Before proceeding to the problematic conclusion of the novel
where Forster attempts a mythical regeneration of Rickie and Stephen, I
would briefly like to focus on Ansell who, in a curious way, functions as
a chorus of sorts by providing incisive commentary on the events of the
tragedy. (Ansell sums up the plot as reminiscent of that of a “Greek
Drama where the actors know so little and the spectators so much.”)

His plan of action is one of absolute vengeance. With a Cassandra-like
prescience, he targets Agnes early on in the novel: “I fight this woman
not only because she fights me, but because I foresee the most appalling
catastrophe.” He chooses to combat the “Medusa in Arcady,” as she is
called, with the spirit of life, that vague but unmistakably Greek attrib-
ute: “‘You can’t fight Medusa with anything else. If you ask me what the
Spirit of Life is, or to what it is attached, I can’t tell you. I only tell you,
watch for it. Myself I’ve found it in books. Some people find it out of
doors or in each other. Never mind. It’s the same spirit, and I trust myself
to know it anywhere, and to use it rightly.’”

Coincidentally, Ansell hatches his plan in the British Museum, inspired in some peculiar way
by Greek sculpture. Although he confesses to not liking “carved
stones,” he nevertheless finds himself acted upon by the plundered re-
mains of antiquity. He leans against the pedestal of the statue of Ilissus
and meanders through the Pheidian marbles “to pass by the monuments
of our more reticent beliefs—the temple of the Ephesian Artemis, the
statue of the Cnidian Demeter. Honest, he knew that here were powers
he could not cope with, nor, as yet, understand.” To be sure, Ansell de-
rives a certain fortitude and vision from these statues, and the spirit of
life with which he struggles is directly connected to the Hellenism of which these marbles are the consummate expression. And as we have seen, in a later story Forster will develop this vague theme of the power inherent in statuary into a fantasy where a statue comes to life and actually ravishes a young man (“The Classical Annex”).

Ironically, it is Ansell’s “homosexual temperament,” as Crews terms it, which gives him his most Hellenic quality, although this is muted in the novel. In fact, the powers which he fails to understand are to a certain extent related to his love for Rickie and, as such, are not to be explored until the British Museum scene is repeated in *Maurice*, where homosexuality will receive its due thematic consideration. Suffice it to say that Greek sculpture in *The Longest Journey* exerts an unmistakable allure and imparts a fatal energy. For Ansell’s plan will bring about the crucial *anagnorisis* when he eventually reveals the true identity of Stephen and spurs the tragedy on to its dire conclusion.

Related to the significant but ambiguous function of Greek sculpture are Rickie’s thoughts on the Parthenon. Reflecting on the advice of the editor of the *Holborn* to “get inside life,” he summons Renan’s vision on the Acropolis:

> He thought of Renan, who declares that on the Acropolis at Athens beauty and wisdom do exist, really exist, as external powers. He did not aspire to beauty or wisdom, but he prayed to be delivered from the shadow of unreality that had begun to darken the world. For it was as if some power had pronounced against him—as if, by some heedless action, he had offended an Olympian god.

Once again the life-affirming principle is connected with Greece and the great fetish of Western Hellenism, the Acropolis. Rickie attempts to work himself into the same ecstatic vision of eternal beauty and divine revelation. But his thoughts return to a most utilitarian and Philistine anticlimax: “Like many another, he wondered whether the god might be appeased by work—hard uncongenial work. Perhaps he had not worked hard enough, or had enjoyed his work too much, and for that reason the shadow was falling.” The shadow does fall, and the birth and swift death of his lame daughter bring about a narrative shift into a more tragic mode. Forster employs a Homeric image to enhance his “decorous drama”: “It dawned on him [Rickie], as on Ansell, that personal love and marriage only cover one side of the shield, and that on the
other is graven the epic of birth.” Rickie connects the tragic turn of events with his dishonest behavior towards Stephen, a “catastrophe” as it were, claiming that “the lie we acted has ruined our lives.” The anagnorisis brings about a tragic dénouement, for once Ansell makes his shattering revelation to Rickie, Rickie decides to leave Agnes and dedicate himself to Stephen.

The tidy Greek paradigms break down, however, in the final chapters; for “Wiltshire” proves to be the most dynamic but imperfect section of the book. Certainly the homoerotic subtext threatens to overwhelm Forster’s narrative order. Hellenism, it seems, nearly undermines itself here, as it shifts into a more irrational mode. Stephen’s “Greek” character, for example, takes on a more Bacchic quality as he persists in his bouts of drinking. And in two iconoclastic gestures of rebellion, he tears up his sixpenny reprint of Demeter and smashes the statue of Hermes at Sawston, thus advancing into a more heroic if destructive Hellenism. Forster attempts to synthesize the many different strands of Hellenism in the conclusion of his novel. The idea of the beloved is even introduced, but with a strangely Christian twist: “‘I have been too far back,’ said Rickie gently. ‘Ansell took me on a journey that was even new to him. We got behind right and wrong, to a place where only one thing matters—that the Beloved should rise from the dead.’” The narrative climaxes into a properly mythic conclusion with the return of Demeter. When Stephen, in yet another act of sacrilege, tears the photograph of his mother, Rickie has a vision of the past not as “a torn photograph, but Demeter the goddess rejoicing in the spring.” By means of this metonymic association, Demeter and Mrs. Elliot fuse archetypally to become the mother goddess. This is further developed during the final events of the book, where the earth emerges as the redeeming power to which both brothers devote themselves.

Rickie confesses his newfound dedication to the earth in a conversation with Mrs. Failing, where they discuss the recently published essays of the late Mr. Failing:

“He wrote that when he was young. Later on he doubted whether we had better love one another, or whether the earth will confirm anything. He died a most unhappy man.”

He could not help saying, “Not knowing that the earth had confirmed him.”
“Has she? It is quite possible. We meet so seldom in these days, she and I. Do you see much of the earth?”

“A little.”

“Do you expect that she will confirm you?”

“It is quite possible.”

“Beware of her, Rickie, I think.”

“I think not.”

“Beware of her, surely. Going back to her really is going back—throwing away the artificiality which (though you young people won’t confess it) is the only good thing in life. Don’t pretend you are simple. Once I pretended. Don’t pretend that you care for anything but for clever talk such as this, and for books.”

This most Jamesian exchange (Forster was reading *The Wings of the Dove* in 1904) illustrates the complicated evolution of Hellenism in the final section of the novel. For the artificiality that Mrs. Failing advocates is rejected by Rickie for what Judith Scherer Herz, in yet another Greek gloss, reads as the “Orphic” inevitability of the narrative: “desire, its near attainment, and loss.” This mythic dimension is dramatically illustrated when Rickie, with the lumps of chalk in his hands, realizes that the earth has not confirmed him:

So Rickie sat down by the fire playing with one of the lumps of chalk. His thoughts went back to the ford, from which they had scarcely wandered…. He had driven away alone, believing the earth had confirmed him. He stood behind things at last, and knew that conventions are not majestic, and that they will not claim us in the end.

As he mused, the chalk slipped from his fingers, and fell on the coffee-cup, which broke.

Rickie will have to sacrifice himself in order for any such confirmation to occur. And he does so at the Roman crossing, the ironic intersection of the modern and antique worlds. Although meant to be symbolic, this disturbing act permits an element of bathos to creep into the text and problematizes the moral progression of the novel. For the question remains, is Stephen, the “law unto himself,” worthy of such a sacrifice?
Stephen’s evolution at the end of the book into a heroic figure is one that many readers have found to be less than convincing. Furthermore, his symbolic function as the consort/bearer of the kore/daughter falls short of reaching its intended archetypal depth:

The twilight descended. He rested his lips on her hair, and carried her, without speaking, until he reached the open down. He had often slept here himself alone, and on his wedding-night, and he knew that the turf was dry, and that if you laid your face to it you would smell the thyme. For a moment the earth aroused her, and she began to chatter. “My prayers—“ she said anxiously. He gave her one hand, and she was asleep before her fingers had nestled in its palm. . . . One thing remained that a man of his sort might do. He bent down reverently and saluted the child; to whom he had given the name of their mother.

We are left, however, with reposeful image of love, the emotion which emerges as the concluding idea of the novel. The power of this emotion, enhanced as it is by so many Greek elements, certainly makes The Longest Journey “the most brilliant, the most dramatic and the most passionate” of Forster’s works.

The Longest Journey concludes in a somewhat contrived manner owing largely to the homoeroticism which Forster deliberately subverted. This is corrected in Maurice, where ironically “Greek love” takes a strident step into the twentieth century. Strangely enough, Hellenism is nearly repudiated in this text. The novel begins by establishing an elaborate Greek context only to reject Greek ideals in favor of an unmistakably British substitute—the “Greenwood.” To be sure, Forster was interested in presenting “something absolutely new—even to the Greeks”, yet he went consciously beyond the Greeks in this narrative. Viewed in this light, Maurice may be read as a transitional text where Forster expresses his emerging disillusionment with the cult of Hellenism and the idealized concept of Platonic love.

Maurice is depicted as the mediocre product of the public school system, and the Greek component of his education is noted at the very beginning of the novel. An unmistakable sarcasm pervades the text here, and the Greek oration that Maurice delivers at the age of nineteen is more a lampoon of Hellenic paideia than anything else:

He stood on the platform on Prize Day, reciting a Greek Oration of his own composition. The Hall was full of schoolboys and their parents, but
Maurice affected to be addressing the Hague Conference, and to be point-
ing out to it the folly of its ways. “What stupidity is this, O andres Europ-
enaici, to talk of abolishing war. What? Is not Ares the son of Zeus himself? Moreover, war renders you robust by exercising your limbs, not forsooth like those of my opponent.” The Greek was vile: Maurice had got the prize on account of the Thought, and barely thus. . . . So he re-
ceived Grote’s History of Greece amid tremendous applause.65

Upon entering Cambridge, Maurice finds himself overwhelmed by Helle-
anism. In comparison to Clive, who possesses a sophisticated apprecia-
tion of Greek culture, Maurice feels inadequate, “a yokel in Athens.”66
His novitiate ends abruptly, however, when Clive seduces him into the
Platonic ideal of Greek love. Their knowledge of the Greek language al-

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dows both men to explore the “unspeakable vice of the Greeks,”67 a dis-
covery that serves as a positive and liberating force at the beginning of
the novel. In fact, when Maurice admits his feelings to Clive following
his valiant climb through his window (a deft allusion to Psyche and
Eros),68 he proclaims that “I have always been like the Greeks and didn’t
know.”69

The potential of Maurice and Clive to consummate their relationship
gives the first half of the novel its great energy and intensity. We gradu-
ally discover, however, that their bond is devoid of sexual fulfillment. In
anticipation of their incompatibility, Forster aligns them with
Apollonian and Dionysian binaries. As Claude Summers writes, Clive
“ignores the Dionysian and overemphasizes the Apollonian. The ‘har-
mony of soul’ that Clive proposes is purchased at the expense of the
physical and the ecstatic. It represents comfort rather than joy; it is an ex-


ample not of moderation but of disproportion.”70 By contrast, Maurice
embodies a latent Dionysian quality which, of course, he realizes by the
end of the novel. Forster sets up this deliberate antithesis to deride the
precious Paterian Hellenism espoused by the Cambridge aesthetes.

The novel’s Greek frame of reference undergoes a radical change par-
doxically when Clive plans his trip to Greece. Forster intended this to
be more than coincidental; he once again dramatizes the crisis that en-

a
sues when a Hellenist attempts to experience the reality of Greece. Clive,
although still in poor health, remains determined to travel: “‘It must be
done,’ he said. ‘It is a vow. Every barbarian must give the Acropolis its
chance once.’”71 Maurice, on the other hand, has “no use for Greece”:
“His interest in the classics had been slight and obscene, and had van-

ished when he loved Clive. The stories of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, of Phaedrus, of the Theban band were well enough for those whose hearts were empty, but no substitute for life. That Clive should occasionally prefer them puzzled him.”72 Far from being the “spirit of life” here, Greece induces dissension and despair: “Maurice hated the very word, and by a curious inversion connected it with morbidity and death. Whenever he wanted to plan, to play tennis, to talk nonsense, Greece intervened. Clive saw his antipathy, and took to teasing him about it, not very kindly.”73

Forster’s choice of Greece as a point of discord for his lovers may be taken as an index of the author’s own sentiments about the increasing irrelevance and even oppressiveness of Hellenism; undoubtedly, the Greek ideal of eros proved to be as vexing for Forster as it was for Maurice.74 The full thrust of these ambivalent feelings comes out most revealingly during Clive’s actual visit to Greece, when Hellenism becomes absolutely odious. In chapter twenty-two, Clive muses over the topography of Greece and undergoes an experience which is the exact inverse of Renan’s celebrated epiphany on the Acropolis:

Clive sat at the theatre of Dionysus. The stage was empty, as it had been for many centuries, the auditorium empty; the sun had set though the Acropolis behind still radiated heat. He saw barren plains running down to the sea, Salamiss, Aegina, mountains, all blended in a violet evening. Here dwell the gods—Pallas Athene in the first place: he might if he chose imagine her shrine untouched, and her statue catching the last of the glow. She understood all men, though motherless and a virgin. He had been coming to thank her for years because she had lifted him out of the mire.

But he saw only dying light and a dead land. He uttered no prayer, believed in no deity and knew that the past was devoid of meaning like the present, and a refuge for cowards.75

These dissonant thoughts stand out rather perversely against so grand a landscape. Greece has seemingly undone its own erotic achievement here since after his vision, Clive writes Maurice to tell him that “Against my will I have become normal. I cannot help it.”76

The most disturbing sentiment of this chapter occurs in its final paragraph where Forster cites a line from Sophocles’s Oedipus at Colonus that harshly qualifies the entire status of Hellenism in the text:
He descended the theatre wearily. Who could help anything? Not only in sex, but in all things men have moved blindly, have evolved out of slime to dissolve into it when this accident of consequences is over. МΗ ΦΥΝΑΙΤΩΝ ΑΙΑΝΤΑ ΝΙΚΑ ΛΟΓΩΝ, sighed the actors in this very place two thousand years before. Even that remark, though further from vanity than most, was vain.\(^77\)

The translation of this line from antiquity reads “Not to be born is best.”\(^78\) In addition to being a stark example of Sophoclean pessimism, this quote portrays the humanistic achievement of the Greeks in a most negative light. Focalized as it is through Clive, the passage also hints at possible thoughts of suicide. With these sentiments, the Greek ideal dies and, along with it, Greek love. Thus the sweetness, light, beauty, truth and wisdom—the cloistered virtues of Western Hellenism—prove to be a mere deception and romantic mirage. Although this chapter certainly reflects Clive’s own homosexual despair and grim denial, the anti-Greek bias which it expresses resonates throughout the remainder of the novel. Specifically, it is the Platonic ideal that comes in for criticism, since it fails both as a workable option for the lovers and as a viable credo for Maurice.\(^79\) Indeed, Platonism becomes an arena of struggle in this text, since it stands as an “impediment to physical love and human relationships,” as Debrah Raschke argues: “Paradoxically, Platonism gives voice to homoerotic expression, but because it situates truth away from the body, it thwarts the physical fulfillment of this alternative expression. . . .”\(^80\)

Clive’s thoughts on Greece upon his return to England continue this negative line of thinking. Greece is “clear but dead” and “horrible.”\(^81\) Forster subjects Hellenism to a final debunking during the meeting of Maurice and Scudder at the British Museum.\(^82\) Their tryst becomes a near catastrophe when they encounter Mr. Ducie, Maurice’s former teacher. Forster masterfully stages this encounter around a model of the Acropolis, thus emphasizing the pedantic prudishness that Hellenism has been made to serve. In addition to this, the scene also exposes the hypocrisy of a culture that condemns homosexuality as “the unspeakable vice of the Greeks.”\(^83\) When approached by Mr. Ducie and asked about his identity, Maurice lies, claiming to be Scudder, and thereby thwarts Scudder’s attempt to bring a charge against him: “‘Where are you going with your serious charge?’ said Maurice, suddenly formidable. ‘Couldn’t say.’ He looked back, his colouring stood out against the heroes, per-
fect but bloodless, who had never known bewilderment or infamy.
‘Don’t you worry—I’ll never harm you now, you’ve too much pluck.’” 84

In contrast to the lifeless statuary, Alec stands out as robust and enticing. When Maurice confesses to Alec that “I should have known by that time that I loved you . . . . The rows of old statues tottered . . . .” 85 Here Forster strips Greek sculpture of its grandeur and reduces it to the status of ornamental irrelevance. Maurice and Alec must leave the “enormous and overheated building” in order to properly confess their feelings for one another: “Oh let’s give over talking. Here—’and he held out his hand. Maurice took it, and they knew at that moment the greatest triumph ordinary man can win.” 86 Maurice confronts his crisis “Not as a hero, but as a comrade. . . .”; similarly, Alec emerges as “not a hero or god, but a man embedded in society . . . for whom sea and woodland and the freshening breeze and the sun were preparing no apotheosis.” 87

With these statements, Forster divests his novel of its last vestiges of Hellenism and moves boldly into his vision of the English Greenwood.

Even though Forster never wrote anything specifically addressing the demise of Hellenism per se, there are traces of his own disillusionment in his essays. One such piece is “For the Museum’s Sake” (1920), where he criticizes the entrepreneurial spirit of antiquarians, the erstwhile pioneers of Western Hellenism:

It was then [the fifteenth century] that Italy began to take an interest in “the antique.” “I go to awake the dead,” cried Cyriac of Ancona; and an evocation began which seemed tremendous to contemporaries. The objects—mainly statues—were routed out of the earth, treated with acids and equipped with fig-leaves and tin petticoats; they were trundled about to meet one another, until they formed collections, which collections were presently dispersed through death or defeat, and the trundling recommenced. In the eighteenth century Egyptian objects also weighed in—not heavily at first, but Napoleon’s expedition drew attention to them; and then the pace quickened. In the nineteenth century the soil was scratched all over the globe, rivers were dammed, rocks chipped, natives tortured, hooks were let down into the sea. What had happened? Partly an increase in science and taste, but also the arrival of a purchaser, wealthier than cardinals and quite as unscrupulous—the modern European nation. After the Treaty of Vienna every progressive government felt it a duty to amass old objects, and to exhibit a fraction of them in a building called a Museum, which was occasionally open free. “National possessions” they were now called, and it was important that they should
outnumber the objects possessed by other nations, and should be genuine old objects, and not imitations, which looked the same, but were said to be discreditable. Some of the governments—for example, the French and the Italian—were happily placed, for they inherited objects from the connoisseurship of the past; others, like the German and our own, had less; while poor Uncle Sam started by having none, and Turkey relegated all to the will of Allah. The various governments passed laws restricting exportation, and instructed their custom officials accordingly; and they also hired experts to buy for them and to intrigue against other experts.\textsuperscript{88}

In should be noted that the words “I go to awake the dead” are echoed by Sismondo Malatesta in “The Tomb of Pletone,” although here they have a more cynical resonance since Cyriac of Ancona—the founder of archaeology\textsuperscript{89}—was one of the most notorious plunderers of antiquity. This text expresses Forster’s sharpest critique of Renaissance acquisitions, and the connection with imperialism is at once apparent. His attitude towards archaeological excess and abuse was most certainly affected by his experience in Alexandria, where he no doubt was privy to Cavafy’s views on the return of the “Elgin” Marbles.\textsuperscript{90} By the end of the essay, Forster works himself into an almost Spenglerian crescendo:

The dreariness and snobbery of the Museum business come out strongly beneath this [Sir Wallis Budge’s] tale of derring-do. Our “national possessions” are not accessible, nor do we insist that they should be; for our pride in them is merely competitive. Nor do such fractions as are accessible stimulate our sense of beauty or of religion: as far as Museums breed anything it is a glib familiarity with labels. Yet to stock their locked cellars these expeditions and intrigues go on, and elderly gentlemen are set to pick one another’s pockets beneath the tropic skies. It is fine if you think the modern nation is, without qualification, fine; but if you have the least doubts of your colossus, a disgust will creep over you and you will wish that the elderly gentlemen were employed more honestly. After all, what is the use of old objects? They breathe their dead words into too dead an ear. It was different in the Renaissance, which did get some stimulus. It was important that the Laocoon should be found. But the discovery of the Hermes of Praxiteles and the loss of the sculptures of Sargon II are equally meaningless to the modern world. Our age is industrial, and it is also musical, and one or two nice things; but its interest in the past is mainly faked.\textsuperscript{91}

Despite the Romantic wistfulness of these final statements, they clearly stand as the confessions of a classicist who cannot go on pretending that
the antique world has the cultural relevance it once had. The catalogue of pejorative epithets alone gives one pause: dreariness, snobbery, intrigue, disgust, inaccessibility, glib familiarity, and dishonesty all tallying in a “faked” interest in a dead past. These comments contextualize the antipathy towards Hellenism which, in Maurice, is vented in a deliberately shocking manner.

Forster had penned most of his “Hellenic” narratives prior to his sojourn in Alexandria (even Maurice was virtually completed before meeting Cavafy). In Cavafy’s poetry, Forster would encounter a more energetic and less restrictive exploration of antiquity, one that he responded to enthusiastically. Cavafy’s decadent and overtly erotic Hellenism spurred Forster on to what Alan Wilde has aptly termed the “Priapic” vision of his late unpublished writings. But by the time of his Alexandrian experience, Forster had nearly exhausted his own interest in the Hellenic past and was becoming increasingly aware of its artistic limitations as a cultural standard. In Alexandria, the meager remains of Hellenism he discovered surely piqued his interest, as his prolific outpouring of writing attests. But it was actually the Indian East that exercised his imagination and reoriented him towards a radically different civilization. The Orientalizing Hellenism that he discovered in Cavafy’s Alexandria ultimately served Forster as a transitional culture that prepared him for his eventual passage to India. Yet there was another discourse for Forster to engage, one which proved to be as daunting and, in the end, as inspiring as that of Western Hellenism: Orientalism.