Eastern Questions
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FORSTER’S *A Passage to India* surely owes something of its indeterminate *nostos* to Cavafy’s “Ithaka.”¹ Both works share an Orientalizing journey motif which culminates in an ambiguous point of destination. Whereas in the poem the East serves as an exotic stimulus to an ostensibly Greek voyage, in the novel the Orient stands as the cultural and spiritual antithesis of the West. For Forster, as for so many Orientalists, the East is profoundly identified with religion. Frederick Crews once observed that Forster “has the theological preoccupation without a theology to satisfy it.”² *A Passage to India* is an attempt to supply this missing “theology,” although this term is too reductive to encompass Forster’s narrative achievement. In a similar vein, Wilfred Stone has shrewdly commented that in *A Passage to India*, Forster “is not simply creating a private fictional universe; he is recreating the world of the Indian religious consciousness.”³ Forster employs the expansiveness of fiction rather than the strictures of dogma to attain his religious effect. This sacred dimension is foregrounded by means of architectural motifs that enhance both plot and character, as I hope to show below. The aim of this chapter is two-fold and involves a survey of prose writings as well as a critical reading of *A Passage to India*. My intention is to focus on Forster’s Orientalist⁴ achievement, namely the suspension of his Occidental agnosticism and the composition of an overtly religious narrative. To this end, I trace the novelist’s passage from the Near East to the Far East as reflected in various prose writings, and show how India eclipses Greece as
the heterotopia on to which Forster projects his artistic and spiritual projects. This overview of his prose writings will contextualize A Passage to India both in terms of its eclipsed Hellenism and its expansive Orientalism; the subsequent reading of the novel concentrates on Forster’s intricate use of sacred architectural motifs to create his own Orientalist masterpiece.

Forster did not altogether abandon his interests in Hellenism upon discovering India; rather, he followed the path of Hellenism’s encounter with India and approached Indian culture from this Hellenistic vantage point until he became more confident in his comprehension of the Indian world. He was most intrigued by the radical difference of these two “classical” civilizations which did intersect culturally during Alexander’s Far Eastern conquests. As a result of this historic interaction, India has been evaluated and measured against Greek standards, with much being made of the penetration of Hellenic culture into India. Forster’s own early conceptualization of India was shaped by this classical frame of reference. In a book review titled “Jehovah, Buddha and the Greeks” (1920), he offers his own assessment of Hellenism’s relation to India:

Some critics have declared that Alexander the Great is the true begetter of Indian civilization, and that Indian art in particular could not have arisen without the assistance of Europe. A shallow and impudent theory: it is now discredited, and we are in more danger from the critics of the opposing school, who assert that Greek influence, so far as it existed, is bad, and that all Graeco-Buddhist statues are inartistic and mechanical. Mr. Bannerjee, in his excellent book, goes carefully into the question. He is a patriot, but he also cares to get at the truth, and his verdict is that the influence of Greece in India, though slight, was stimulating, and revived parts of an organism which were lying dormant or tending to decay.

This critique reflects Forster’s dissent from received notions of the Greek influence on Indian religious art. Later in his life Forster would develop a more erudite and sophisticated appreciation of Indian art and aesthetics. His review was in part an attempt to release India from the grip of an antiquarian Hellenism which itself had been enlisted to serve as imperialist propaganda. For there were many who applied Plato’s principles of guardianship to British rule in India. As G. K. Das writes, “The idea that British officers forming the Indian Civil Service were rulers on the Platonic model was popularized by Platonists like Benjamin Jowett who taught the young probationer officers at Balliol College and in-
spired them in the Platonic ideal of government.”⁹ Forster rejected these theories to a great extent¹⁰ and sought throughout his life to instill in the British reading public an appreciation of Indian culture which would be free from this condescending classicism. Limited as he was by his own initial incomprehension of India, however, he necessarily relied on Hellenism and employed it as a vehicle through which he would discover the East and against which he would ultimately contrast India. His views are thus reflective of his own progress in understanding and defining a highly personal Orient; what is more, they are heavily informed by his humanism, particularly the Occidental idea of selfhood which, as Crews notes, is “indispensable to his entire system of value.”¹¹ As we shall see, he was reluctant to give up on this Western notion and often included it in his theological pronouncements.

In an earlier essay titled “The Age of Misery” (1914), Forster offers the following comments on Hellenism in India:

In strong contrast to the Maurya power stands the coming of the Greeks. The West dwells on the episode complacently; it sees in the military tour of Alexander the Great an event of profound spiritual significance, just as it sees the origin of Indian art in the bad Greco-Buddhist sculptures of Gandahara. Professor Rapson puts all in a truer perspective. He shows that whatever Alexander might have done, he did nothing, and that it is to later immigrants that we are to attribute such Hellenism as was established along the Indus valley. Even that dies. Greece, who has immortalized the falling dust of facts, so that it hangs in enchantment for ever, can bring no life to a land that is waiting for the dust to clear away, so that the soul may contemplate the soul.¹²

Here we should note the early appearance of one of Forster’s most favored Indian metaphors: dust.¹³ And in keeping with the discourse of Orientalism, India is perpetually associated with matters of the soul. From a religious point of view, Forster preferred the spirituality of India to that of Greece. Das observes that

The spiritual aspect of Hindu myths stimulated Forster’s thought, and his views in this respect were influenced by the works of two noted Indologists . . . E. J. Rapson . . . and E. B. Havell . . . Both Rapson and Havell emphasized that the distinctiveness of Hindu mythological vision as compared to Hellenistic vision lay in the fact that the former celebrated the joys of the spirit, to which the latter remained indifferent.¹⁴
To Forster’s way of thinking, Krishna was the Indian Pan, but with a more exquisite sense of humor. The obvious incompatibility of this irreverence with the solemnity of Christianity was even more to his liking. As Rukun Advani writes,

Forster prefers Krishna’s earthiness to Christ’s sternness because at a human level, Krishna the teacher-god cum worldly-lover seems more congenial than the heroic and forbidding personage of Christ. . . . Furthermore, Krishna appeals to Forster as a sage, a visionary and a rounded individual whose engaging humanity, manifest in his love of fun and occasional stupidity, propagates the value of life over abstraction, renunciation and other-worldliness.15

Due in part to such religious predilections, Forster’s fascination with India gradually supplanted his fixation on Hellenism and the Late Antique world which culminated in what was, to his mind, the objectionable triumph of imperial Christianity.16 Indeed, Forster’s passage to modernism and out of the “fag-end of Victorian liberalism”17 was possible owing to the cultural leverage and apophatic vision which India provided.18

It was India’s unique religious traditions that distinguished it most from Hellenism and the West’s classical legacy. In venturing to comprehend and depict this radical cultural otherness, Forster undertakes an immense Orientalist project. His most Orientalist moments occur precisely when he attempts to assess and explain religion in the East, specifically Islam and Hinduism. He had given a great deal of consideration to the matter, and expressed various theological opinions in many of his prose essays. He was fond of certain general theories which he frequently reiterated. Take, for instance, the following passage from his essay, “Salute to the Orient” (1923):

God is not Love in the East. He is Power, although Mercy may temper it. Of this power, in any solemn moment, the Oriental becomes conscious even if he be unorthodox, and it gives him a spiritual hardness that is often intimidating. People love one another as profoundly and as variously as elsewhere—with lust, passion, sentiment, sublimation; with abnegation even; but they do not believe that a Deity approves or transcends their love. . . . So if we say of the Oriental, firstly, that personal relationship is most important to him, secondly, that it has no transcendental sanction, we shall come as near to a generalization as is safe, and then it will only be safe in the nearer East. Farther afield, in Persia and India, an-
other idea, that of union with God, becomes prominent, and the human outlook is altered accordingly. Neither Shems-ud-din nor the Sheikh in *Goha le Simple* sought that union. . . . They do not seek to be God or even to see Him. Their meditation, though it has the intensity and aloofness of mysticism, never leads to abandonment of personality. The Self is precious, because God, who created it, is Himself a personality. . . .

The God of the Near East is closely associated with power—an Oriental despot of sorts; and there appears to be no possibility of communion between the human and the divine. (Evidently Forster has in mind the theology of Islam here, since he repeats this formula in his review on the poet Iqbal, as we shall see presently.) Although Forster offers a self-deprecating disclaimer later in this essay about the supposed worthlessness of such “generalizing” (“Based on a few memories and a few contemporary novels, what can the above remarks be worth?”), he does in fact make use of these same theories on other occasions when he is speaking more authoritatively. For instance, in *Alexandria* he presents a tidy assessment of neo-Platonism:

And here is the great difference between Plotinus and Christianity. The Christian promise is that a man shall see God, the Neo-Platonic—like the Indian—that he shall be God. Perhaps, on the quays of Alexandria, Plotinus talked with Hindu merchants who came to the town. At all events his system can be paralleled in the religious writings of India. He comes nearer than any other Greek philosopher to the thought of the East.

And in his earlier review of Rev. E. O. Martin’s *The Gods of India*, written in 1914, Forster had expressed this same doctrine:

Is this the Hindu religion? . . . The divine is so confounded with the earthly that anyone or anything is part of God. In this chaos, where shall a man find guidance? What promise does he receive?

Guidance there is, but not towards a goal that has ever seemed important to the Westerner. And the promise is not that man shall see God, but that he shall be God. He is God already, but imperfectly grasps the mystery.

Forster’s scrutiny of Hellenistic religion in his Egyptian writings has led certain critics to read *A Passage to India* as the fulfillment of his Alexandrian project. Harold Bloom, for one, although overstating his point somewhat, argues that “Forster finds his precursor culture in ancient Alexandria; indeed he helps to teach us that we are all Alexandrians insofar
as we now live in a literary culture.” Hence Bloom’s Hellenistic gloss on the novel: “In some curious sense, Forster’s India is Alexandrian, and his vision of Hinduism is Plotinean. *A Passage to India* is a narrative of Neo-Platonic spirituality, and the true heroine of that narrative, Mrs. Moore, is the Alexandrian figure of Wisdom, the Sophia, as set forth in the Hellenistic Jewish *Wisdom of Solomon*.” Whether one agrees with Bloom or not, it is undoubtedly true that Forster brought much of his Alexandrian experience to his writings on India. The emphasis, however, lies not so much with Gnostic arcana, which certainly held a great allure for Forster (and Bloom for that matter), but with Islam, a major locus for the novelist’s spiritual, cultural and political concerns. Forster’s exposure to Islam in Egypt gave him a certain familiarity with it as a living religion. Furthermore, it was the religion of Masood and el Adl, two very significant influences on the novel. The intellectual inspiration for much of this Islamic material, however, was most certainly the Indo-Pakistani poet Mohammed Iqbal, who wrote in the tradition of Rumi.

Forster published two reviews on the poetry of Iqbal, one in 1920 and another in 1946. (Incidentally, these essays are very reminiscent of Forster’s writing on Cavafy’s poetry both in their reverent tone and chagrin at Western obliviousness.) He begins the earlier of the two pieces, “The Poetry of Iqbal,” with a reproach: “It is significant of Empire that we should wait so long for a translation from Iqbal, the writer who has been for the last ten years such a tremendous name among our fellow-citizens, the Moslems of India.” During the course of this essay, Forster notes the political nature of Indian culture (“Poets in India cannot be parted from politics”) and praises a poem titled “A New Temple,” in which the “poet calls to the Brahman priest to turn from his narrowness, and to join him in building a temple more lofty than any the world has yet seen, the Temple of India.” Forster will imitate this ideological schema in his novel, the final chapter of which, of course, he titled “The Temple.” Forster then goes on to link Iqbal with the thirteenth-century Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi as well as with Friedrich Nietzsche, from whom he feels Iqbal gleaned his Occidental notion of individualism:

As a guide to conduct Nietzsche is at a discount in Europe. The drawback of being a Superman is that your neighbours observe your efforts, and try to be Supermen too, as Germany now realizes. But this is no place to criticize Nietzschean doctrine. The significance of Iqbal is not that he holds it, but that he manages to connect it with the Koran. Two modifications, and
only two, have to be made: he condemns the Nietzsche who is an aristocrat, and an atheist; his Superman is permitted to spring from any class of society, and is obliged to believe in God. No further difficulty occurs. There is a text in the Koran which says: “Lo, I will appoint a vicerect upon earth,” and another text relating that the viceregency was offered to Man after Heaven and the Angels refused it. Legalists quote these texts in support of the Khalifate; Iqbal in support of his Superman. It is our duty to imitate the divine attributes, and to pass through Obedience and Self-Control to the viceregency... But likeness to God does not mean union with Him. The contrary. The Hindus are wrong; so are the Sufis, so even is Iqbal’s own master, the great poet Jalaluddin Rumi. The nearer the Superman approaches God the fuller grows his own individuality. The desire to merge, to renounce the Self, is a sign of decay, and the doctrine has been evolved by subject races as an anodyne.31

The final pronouncement of this essay appears to be Forster’s own estimation of how religion functions in the East. Once again, Forster valorizes the status of the individual which, in his later essay (“Salute to the Orient”) he eagerly imposes on to Islam in general. Although we might question the absolute verity of these theological appraisals,32 we should note that from this Sufic tradition Forster adapted the concept of the everlasting friend—itself an allegory for union with the divine. This notion is to become the central leitmotif 33 of A Passage to India, as Mary Lago points out: “In a manuscript of the 1950’s, Forster explained that although the general public read it as a political tract, since contemporary events had made it seem particularly timely, its real theme is that of Godbole’s song and Ghalib’s poem: the search for the everlasting Friend.”34

Architectural Hermeneutics

It is a well known fact that Forster was averse to religious orthodoxy of any kind. He articulated his stance in his confessional essay, “What I Believe” (1939):

I do not believe in Belief. But this is an age of faith, and there are so many militant creeds that, in self-defense, one has to formulate a creed of one’s own. . . . Tolerance, good temper and sympathy—they are what really matter, and if the human race is not to collapse, they must come to the front before long. . . . Faith, to my mind, is a stiffening process, a sort of mental starch, which ought to be applied as sparingly as possible. I dis-
like the stuff. I do not believe in it, for its own sake, at all. . . . My motto is: “Lord, I disbelieve—help thou my unbelief.”

Forster’s agnostic predisposition proved to be a great challenge for him in writing *A Passage to India*, where he incorporates so many sacred traditions. His aversion is the reason why, paradoxically, “every system of belief is undercut” in the novel. Nevertheless, the human need for belief was something that Forster acknowledged and respected. The tension between these opposing impulses produces the rich indeterminacy and ambiguity of the novel.

Rather than entering the spiritual realm through doctrinal venues, Forster chose sacred architectural forms by which to do so, thus appropriating religious lore without becoming ensnared in the philosophical and dogmatic problems which inevitably attend theological issues. He had a profound appreciation for architectural expressions of the religious sublime and sought to achieve this very quality in his novel. (Similarly, he made use of classical architecture in his earlier novels to make both metaphoric and ironic comments on the Greek inheritance, as we have seen already). Forster was quite fluent in his use of architectural idioms, which he incorporated frequently and to great effect in many of his essays. Take, for example, a droll passage from his essay “The Temple,” written in 1919, where Forster proffers an idealizing view of Indian architecture and where the Parthenon, the great standard of Western Hellenism, serves as a comparative metaphor. This review is a critique of the *Annual Reports: Hindu and Buddhist Monuments, Northern Circle: Archaeological Survey, Eastern Circle*, published by the Archaeological Department of Mysore:

And over all of them [the neglected monuments] archaeology now presides—Pallas Athene, as patient and as dignified as ever, yet somehow not looking her best. It is difficult to say what is amiss with our goddess. Perhaps she has encountered one of the Indian deities—Krishna, for instance—and they did not get on. At all events, as one reads these Reports, one does not miss the high consecrated fervour that inspires similar publications about Egypt and Greece. The Anglo-Indian officials seem to set their teeth and get through the mirrors and limes in Nanjappa’s back yard as quick as they can. It’s a job that’s got to be done, like any other job. And their Indian collaborators, though more leisurely, have likewise the air of pursuing a profession instead of a passion. . . . One can scarcely blame them for this, for, as already indicated, the general deportment of the
Temple is odious. It is unaccommodating, it rejects every human grace, its jokes are ill-bred, its fair ladies are fat, it ministers neither to the sense of beauty nor to the sense of time, and it is discontented with its own material. No one could love such a building. Yet no one can forget it. It remains in the mind when the fairer types have faded, and sometimes seems to be the only type that has any significance. When we tire of being pleased and of being improved, and of the other gymnastics of the West, and care, or think we care, for Truth alone; then the Indian Temple exerts its power, and beckons down absurd or detestable vistas to an exit unknown to the Parthenon. We say “Here is truth,” and as soon as we have said the words the exit—if it was one—closes, and we fly back to our old habits again.37

Truth here is an evanescent Eastern quality which, for the Westerner, signifies the metaphysical sublime. Forster’s tone is one of unaffected modesty; he confesses his own crisis when confronting the threshold of India. He will seek to overcome this in his novel, where he employs an Orientalist architectural hermeneutics to help him impart and explore metaphysical ideas.

Architecture is featured in *A Passage to India* in a highly self-reflexive way. As both an organizing narrative principle and source of religious imagery, architecture serves a polyvalent function. Interiors, both religious and secular, private and public, are explored and interrogated with intense scrutiny. Forster arranges his book around three major architectural motifs which are at once sacred spaces and thematic *topoi*. Moreover, architecture manifests religious ideas and delineates “Eastern” space. It is the simultaneous juxtaposition of these dimensions that supplies the novel with its Orientalist complexity and singular narrative configuration.

*A Passage to India* commences with the titular image of a mosque. There was to have been an Islamic epigraph preceding this section which Forster removed, but which provides a very incisive gloss on how religion and architecture intersect and generate textual meaning:

Four men went into a mosque to pray.
The first said to the Muezzin, “Surely it is not the hour for prayer yet?”
The second said to the first, “Do not speak to the Muezzin.”
The third said to the second, “Do not blame him for speaking to the Muezzin.”
The fourth said, “O God, I thank thee that I am not as these other three!”

The prayers of all four were unheard. (Jalaluddin Rumi)\(^{38}\)

This clever parable is a Sufic version of the Publican and the Pharisee, with the slight twist that at the end no prayer is heard. The poem resonates throughout the first section of the novel and emphasizes the problematic issue of religious righteousness that will recur in the narrative. Although excised, its tone illustrates Forster’s determination to explore overtly religious themes in his novel, namely those of divine transcendence through prayer and union with the Godhead, which he conveys through the traditional metaphor of eternal friendship (the friend being a “Persian expression for God”\(^{39}\)).

By featuring architecture so manifestly, Forster effectively foregrounds the intricate social dynamics of his characters and establishes culturally defined spaces into which he invites his reader to trespass. For instance, we encounter our first Indian characters in the house of Hamidullah, where a discussion among Aziz and his friends transpires as to whether it is indeed “possible to be friends with an Englishman.”\(^{40}\) With this debate, Forster catapults his readers into an Oriental dimension and inaugurates his narrative with an act of cultural ventriloquism—an Indian dialogue imagined by a Western writer. He also introduces the overarchingly theme of friendship which will echo polyphonically throughout the text and ultimately bring a semblance of unity to his intricate narrative. This great resolve on Forster’s part to comprehend India from within gives the novel its great energy and vast scope;\(^{41}\) it also inevitably draws him into the realm of religion which is so inextricably woven into the fabric of daily life in the East.

This religious focus is nowhere more evident than in Aziz’s encounter with Mrs. Moore in the mosque. We experience this shrine through the senses of Aziz who, to compensate for the shabby domeless building in which he finds himself, imagines his own grand mosque onto which he will inscribe the funerary verse that he has memorized from the tomb of a Deccan king. Aziz’s sublime musings are cut short when he discovers Mrs. Moore, whom he treats as an intruding infidel, only to be disarmed by her epiphanic pronouncement that “God is here.”\(^{42}\) Feelings of sacrilege soon abate, and the first exchange between East and West occurs, with great success. Aziz’s initial pomposity subsides as Mrs. Moore shows him that prayer is only possible through emotion. Her ability to
sympathize leads him to claim somewhat absurdly that “you are an Ori-
ental.”43 Later in this chapter, Mrs. Moore will be associated with an-
other religious symbol—the moon, which further ensconces her in the
architecture of Islam:

Mrs Moore, whom the Club had stupefied, woke up outside. She
watched the moon, whose radiance stained with primrose the purple of
the surrounding sky. In England the moon seemed dead and alien; here
she was caught in the shawl of night together with the earth and all the
other stars. A sudden sense of unity, of kinship with the heavenly bod-
ies, passed into the old woman, and out, like water through a tank, leav-
ing a strange freshness behind.44

In addition to accentuating the fundamental religious dimension of
the novel, architecture creates suggestive settings for characterization
and facilitates the flow of the plot. For instance, we first encounter char-
acters inside of an Indian house. We then move into a mosque, then to
the interior of the Club (the anti-shrine of the novel), then into the en-
closed garden of the club, then into the ornate hall of the college, and fi-
nally into Aziz’s house. Numerous architectural metaphors are
employed throughout the narrative as well: picturesque India passes be-
fore Adela “as a frieze”;45 the politeness of the Indians at the “bridge
party” is described as the “echoing walls of . . . civility”;46 and, appropri-
ately enough, architecture occupies much of the discussion between
Aziz and his English audience at Fielding’s reception at the college:

“See this beautiful room! Let us admire it together for a little. See those
curves at the bottom of the arches. What delicacy! It is the architecture of
Question and Answer. Mrs Moore, you are in India; I am not joking.” The
room inspired him. It was an audience-hall built in the eighteenth cen-
tury for some high official, and though of wood had reminded Fielding of
the Loggia de’ Lanzi at Florence. Little rooms, now Europeanized, clung
to it on either side, but the central hall was unpapered and unglassed, and
the air of the garden poured in freely. One sat in public—on exhibition, as
it were, in full view of the gardeners who were screaming at the birds and
of the man who rented the tank for the cultivation of water-chestnut.47

This notion of an “architecture of Question and Answer” illustrates the
role of buildings in producing textual meaning and resolving ambiguity.
Forster is baiting his readers here by providing an interpretative clue
of sorts with this phrase. For the college audience-hall, when scrutinized
architecturally, renders the essential spiritual and dramatic meaning of this scene quite decisively. When we consider the archetype of the mosque that informs this section of the novel, then we begin to appreciate the subtle way in which audience-hall and mosque merge here. For the gathering which occurs at the college duplicates and advances the initial encounter between Aziz and Mrs. Moore in the actual mosque. More specifically, the audience-hall recalls the primitive courtyard of the mosque which we saw earlier. And judging from the juxtaposition of court and garden here, the hall functions similarly as a space of connection, with friendship and prayer coalescing to become the ultimate religious ideal of the novel.

Forster surely had an Islamic prototype in mind when constructing this space. In an essay titled “The Mosque” (1920), he notes how Islamic architecture evolved from this type of courtyard:

[T]he Mosque sets itself against a profound tendency of human nature—the tendency to think one place holier than another—and this is why it is rather a vague and unsympathetic object to a westerner. . . . Equality before God—so doubtfully proclaimed by Christianity—lies at the very root of Islam; and the mosque is essentially a courtyard for the Faithful to worship in, either in solitude or under due supervision.48

This reading is further borne out by the nature of the exchanges that occur in the college audience-hall. Those who gather there—Fielding, Mrs. Moore, Adela, Aziz and Godbole, are all sympathetic characters—the faithful or morally righteous of the novel, as it were, given that they are devoid of the profane rudeness and inhumanity that characterize Anglo-India. Their solidarity becomes even more apparent once Heaslop intrudes into their group, thus breaking up their bond of sympathy. Significantly, the gathering concludes with Godbole’s chant, a gesture that casts an unmistakably religious light on the whole affair, involving as it does the idea of union with the divine and its unfulfillment. The chant’s wistful theme of Krishna’s refusal to come to the milkmaid—a position assumed by Godbole—also calls attention to the thwarted eroticism of this chapter, where Aziz and Fielding, whose friendship begins to take root, are distracted from one another by women and an intrusive government official.49

Coincidentally, this scene involves four men who, not unlike their counterparts in the Sufic parable, seem to have trouble mastering their
self-righteousness (even Godbole, the actual holy man of the narrative, comes off as rather a Pharisee with this ritual apartness and religious airs). What is more, they have difficulty connecting with one another both socially and spiritually, as is illustrated quite plainly at the end of the scene:

So the leave-taking began. Everyone was cross or wretched. It was as if irritation exuded from the very soil. Could one have been so petty on a Scotch moor or an Italian alp? Fielding wondered afterwards. There seemed no reserve of tranquility to draw upon in India. Either none, or else tranquility swallowed up everything, as it appeared to do for Professor Godbole. Here was Aziz all shoddy and odious, Mrs Moore and Miss Quested both silly, and he himself and Heaslop both decorous on the surface, but detestable really and detesting each other.  

Earlier in this chapter, we find an explicit narrative echo of the Sufic poem in a description of Fielding, which indicates that Forster certainly had it in mind as the informing *mise en scène* when composing his chapter:  

"He had discovered that it is possible to keep in with Indians and Englishmen, but that he who would also keep in with Englishwomen must drop the Indians. The two wouldn’t combine. Useless to blame either party, useless to blame them for blaming one another. It just was so, and one had to choose…" Although Forster removed the Islamic parable from the novel, it still resonates in the text nonetheless and fuses quite powerfully with the dominant metaphor of the mosque. Thus the hermeneutics of the “architecture of Question and Answer” teases out the inability of the novel’s characters to connect either on a social or spiritual level. The failure of prayer is overtly linked to the failure of human relations.  

The next significant interior is that of Aziz’s humble house, where the convalescent doctor receives his concerned friends, among whom is Fielding. The importance of this scene lies once again in its emphasis on the idea of friendship, a theme which is raised to an almost sublime level by Aziz’s recital of a Ghalib poem: “Less explicit than the call to Krishna, it voiced our loneliness nevertheless, our isolation, our need for the Friend who never comes yet is not entirely disproved.” Fielding the friend does come and, in a superficial way, fulfills this sacred role. But, ironically, he finds himself ensnared in a debate about religion and is exposed as an atheist:
“He is ill and he is not ill,” said Hamidullah, offering a cigarette.

“And I suppose that most of us are in that same case.”

Fielding agreed; he and the pleasant sensitive barrister got on well. They were fairly intimate and beginning to trust each other.

“The whole world looks to be dying, still it doesn’t die, so we must assume the existence of a beneficent Providence.”

“Oh, that is true, how true!” said the policeman, thinking religion had been praised.

“Does Mr Fielding think it’s true?”

“Think which true? The world isn’t dying, I’m certain of that!”

“No, no—the existence of Providence.”

“Well, I don’t believe in Providence.”

“But how then can you believe in God?” asked Syed Mohamed.

“I don’t believe in God.”

A tiny movement as of “I told you so!” passed round the company, and Aziz looked up for an instant, scandalized. “Is it correct that most are atheists in England now?” Hamidullah inquired.

“The educated thoughtful people? I should say so, though they don’t like the name. The truth is that the West doesn’t bother much over belief and disbelief in these days. Fifty years ago, or even when you and I were young, much more fuss was made.”

“And does not morality also decline?”

“It depends what you call—yes, yes, I suppose morality does decline.”

“Excuse the question, but if this is the case, how is England justified in holding India?”

There they were! Politics again. “It’s a question I can’t get my mind onto,” he replied. “I’m out here personally because I needed a job. I cannot tell you why England is here or whether she ought to be here. It’s beyond me.”

Later in the discussion, when Aziz and Fielding are alone, Fielding makes a rather odd confession: “I’m a holy man minus the holy.” This
comment intrigues Aziz who, although critical of Fielding’s indiscreet remarks, begins to consider him consciously as a friend, as the final paragraph of the chapter makes clear:

But they were friends, brothers. That part was settled, their compact had been subscribed by the photograph, they trusted one another, affection had triumphed for once in a way. He dropped off to sleep amid the happier memories of the last two hours—poetry of Ghalib, female grace, good old Hamidullah, good Fielding, his honoured wife and dear boys. He passed into a region where these joys had no enemies but bloomed harmoniously in an eternal garden, or ran down watershoots of ribbed marble, or rose into domes whereunder were inscribed, black against white, the ninety-nine attributes of God.56

Thus the first section of the novel concludes, appropriately enough, with the beatific image of a mosque and an impressionist vision of divine calligraphy which lends an Orientalizing architectural unity to the novel.

*The World Mountain*

The abrupt transition into The Caves jolts the reader with its explicit geological description of the Himalayan landscape, the antithesis almost of the Islamic aesthetics of the preceding chapters. This deliberate contrast cleanses our imagination and prepares us for the unique architecture of this section of the narrative, the “ur-temple” of the Marabar Caves.57 Indeed, the caves generate the exasperating ambiguity of the novel, the “bleak, unnerving vision”58 which challenges all religious, cultural and social certainty. Although not made by human hands, and historically associated with the Jain religion,59 the caves have a definite architectural function in the text. They are the conceptual and theological basis of the World Mountain, itself the informing schema of Hindu temple architecture.60 At the time Forster was writing *A Passage to India*, he intuitively sensed this, although it was only later in life that he fully appreciated the caves’s theological and structural significance.61 As Kathleen Beyer notes, Forster did not fully understand the Hindu concept of unity until 1940, when he saw “The Photographic Exhibition of Indian Art” at the Warburg Institute: “Then he was awed by the concept of the World Mountain, architecturally embodied in Hindu temples, because this World Mountain carried the weight of life in all its myriad forms but did not crush the individual soul.”62 This paradoxical section of the novel reflects Forster’s determination to get at the root of religion
The Caves supplied Forster with a religious symbol that could accommodate his own creative and spiritual needs, as Stone has observed:

The World Mountain may in a sense be taken as Forster’s essential symbol—imperfectly anticipated in dells and rooms and houses—for which he had been groping throughout his creative career. The architecture of A Passage is the architecture of this temple. At the center is that “small, secret and dark” inner core—the ur-temple, the ultimate darkness—around which is clustered all the complexity of the daylight world of appearance.

In addition to providing the novel with its celebrated “muddle,” The Caves, as the text’s sublime spiritual center, radiate an ambiguity that defies critical interpretation. The result has been a plethora of opposing and conflicting readings. Alan Wilde, for instance, views the caves as a modernist expression of ironic fragmentation:

A Passage to India articulates a vision of life in which everything disappoints or deceives; in which appearances are equivocal and the possibility of a reality behind them at best a question; in which all things are subject to interpretation, depending upon how, where, and in what mood they are perceived; in which, at the extreme, meaning, no longer supported by value, is dissolved “into a single mess” . . . and even the extraordinary is reduced to nothing.

An opposite view is held by Wilfred Stone, who sees unity as the ultimate principle of the novel: Hinduism “restores those things that the West (and some of the East) has most repressed and forgotten. The book exhorts our spiritually impoverished, symbol-less age to connect the conscious and the unconscious spheres of our being.” A more moderate interpretation is offered by Frederick Crews who, while maintaining the “annihilation of value” that the caves signify, aligns the novel with Forster’s humanism:

A Passage to India, then, is a novel in which two levels of truth, the human and the divine, are simultaneously explored, never very successfully. Epistemological conclusions are reached, but they are all negative ones. Christian righteousness, we discover, helps us to misconstrue both God and man; Moslem love can scarcely reach beyond the individual personality; rational skepticism is willfully arid; and the Hindu ideal of oneness, though it does take notice of the totality of things, abolishes the
intellectual sanctity that makes life endurable to the Western mind. The 
inescapable point of this demonstration is that God cannot be realized in 
any satisfactory way. . . . Forster’s characters . . . if they are to understand 
themselves and one another . . . must grapple with metaphysics. They do 
their best, but it is very little—not because they are exceptionally weak, 
but simply because they are human.68

Although Forster’s humanism is most closely related to his Hellenism, 
the caves supplied him with a cultural and mystical symbol for which 
Hellenism had no religious equivalent. As such, they signify the ultimate 
eclipse of Hellenism in Forster’s oeuvre, the final death of Pan, as Alan Wilde writes.69 Forster conveys the vexation of Hellenism’s aesthetic assumptions in the following passage, where the narrator stresses 
the cultural incompatibility of West and East:

In Europe life retreats out of the cold, and exquisite fireside myths have 
resulted—Balder, Persephone—but here the retreat is from the source of 
life, the treacherous sun, and no poetry adorns it, because disillusion-
ment cannot be beautiful. Men yearn for poetry though they may not con-
fess it; they desire that joy shall be graceful, and sorrow august, and 
infinitude have a form, and India fails to accommodate them.70

The caves are the very incarnation of this “disillusionment,” the 
apophatic negation and unpoetic symbol of “a civilization which the 
West can disturb but will never acquire.”71

In keeping with this Greek/Indian antithesis, one is tempted to read 
Adela’s panic in the caves as a parodic inversion of Plato’s cave in The Re-
public, Book VII, where the enslaved, upon leaving their imprisoned 
state, move into the world of light, truth and reason. The very descrip-
tion of the Marabar Caves is replete with Platonic overtones:

They are dark caves. Even when they open towards the sun, very little 
light penetrates down the entrance tunnel into the circular chamber. 
There is little to see, and no eye to see it, until the visitor arrives for his five 
minutes, and strikes a match. Immediately another flame rises in the 
depths of the rock and moves towards the surface like an imprisoned 
spirit; the walls of the circular chamber have been most marvelously pol-
ished. The two flames approach and strive to unite but cannot, because 
one of them breathes air, the other stone. A mirror inlaid with lovely 
colours divides the lovers, delicate stars of pink and gray interpose, ex-
quise nebulae, shadings fainter than the tail of a comet or the midday moon, all the evanescent life of the granite, only here visible.72
It is not by chance that Adela dwells upon the topic of love before undergoing her Marabar experience (she asks in mock-philosophic fashion, “What about love?”). Eros produces a psychic delirium which one critic views as the manifestation of the text’s “homoerotic disappointment”:

Adela Quested must experience a delusional rape in order that her body may be transmogrified into that legal space over which Fielding and Aziz can stake out the overdetermination of their mutual loyalty. . . . In part 2 of *A Passage to India*, therefore, the symbolic geography of “Caves” becomes the territory upon which both a colonial rape fails to occur and homoerotic desire must recognize its segregation from the story of imperial friendship.

Parminder Bakshi takes this reading even further with her rather cataclysmic interpretation:

The Caves reveal to Adela the artificiality of marriage, and the awareness is traumatic for it disintegrates all the assumptions on which her life stands. Therefore the Caves dramatize the crumbling of marriage together with the religious and social mores that sustain heterosexual relations and in so far as the breakdown is presented in relation to Aziz and India, it also has a racial and political dimension. The violence that explodes in the Caves is not primarily political but signifies a wider collapse of Western civilization and heterosexual society. . . . It is at this suggestion of male intimacy that the whole universe, animate, religious and secular, rises in protest, and the sheer landscape throws innumerable barriers between them. It is to the specific proposal of love between two men that the novel’s ultimate denial applies and the distances generated are emotional as much as physical.

Thus love and selfhood, eros and psyche—the highly valorized ontological attributes of the West—are both parodied and deconstructed in *The Caves*.

Though eclipsed, the rays of Hellenism do in fact emerge at the very end of *The Caves*. The comic comparison of Mrs. Turton, “towering by [Adela’s] side like Pallas Athene” recalls “The Temple” essay cited above. What is more, the Greek aesthetic does make a surprising appearance in the novel in the person of the punkah-wallah, Forster’s Indian “kouros”: 
Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform. . . . He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god—not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impress her. This man would have been notable anywhere; among the thin-hammed, flat-chested mediocrities of Chandrapore he stood out as divine, yet he was of the city, its garbage had nourished him, he would end on its rubbish-heaps. Pulling the rope towards him, relaxing it rhythmically, sending swirls of air over others, receiving none himself, he seemed apart from human destinies, a male Fate, a winnower of souls.77

After the clamorous events of the trial, the punkah-wallah continues mindlessly to pull the rope in what is one of the most beautiful if disturbing images of the novel:

Then life returned to its complexities, person after person struggled out of the room to their various purposes, and before long no one remained on the scene of the fantasy but the beautiful naked god. Unaware that anything unusual had occurred, he continued to pull the cord of his punkah, to gaze at the empty dais and the overturned special chairs, and rhythmically to agitate the clouds of descending dust.78

Here Forster’s Hellenic perspective converges once again on the image of this Oriental kouros. Indeed, The Caves section ends with what is an unapologetic paean to the West:

Egypt was charming—a green strip of carpet and walking up and down it four sorts of animals and one sort of man. Fielding’s business took him there for a few days. He reembarked at Alexandria—bright blue sky, constant wind, clean low coastline, as against the intricacies of Bombay. Crete welcomed him next with the long snowy ridge of its mountains, and then came Venice. As he landed on the Piazzetta a cup of beauty was lifted to his lips, and he drank with a sense of disloyalty. The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas in poor India everything was placed wrong. He had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? Form stammered here and there in a mosque, became rigid through nervousness even, but oh, these Italian churches! San Giorgio standing on the island which could scarcely have risen from the waves without it, the Salute holding the entrance of a canal which, but for it, would not be the Grand Canal! In the old under-
graduate days he had wrapped himself up in the many-coloured blanket of St Mark’s, but something more precious than mosaics and marbles was offered to him now; the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form, with flesh and blood subsisting. Writing picture-postcards to his Indian friends, he felt that all of them would miss the joys he experienced now, the joys of form, and that this constituted a serious barrier. They would see the sumptuousness of Venice, not its shape, and though Venice was not Europe it was part of the Mediterranean harmony. The Mediterranean is the human norm. When men leave that exquisite lake, whether through the Bosphorus or the Pillars of Hercules, they approach the monstrous and extraordinary; and the southern exit leads to the strangest experience of all. Turning his back on it yet again, he took the train northward, and tender romantic fancies that he thought were dead for ever flowered when he saw the buttercups and daisies of June.79

Mediterranean Hellenism—the idealized standard of Western civilization, is encomiastically celebrated,80 only to be abruptly effaced by the incongruous aesthetics of Hinduism in the final section of the novel.

Architectural Necessities

The Temple section of A Passage to India functions architecturally in the novel by rounding out the narrative structure and balancing the architectural motifs that precede it. In an interview, Forster once referred to it as “architecturally necessary”: “I needed a lump, or a Hindu temple if you like—a mountain standing up. It is well placed; and it gathers up some strings. But there ought to be more after it. The lump sticks out a little too much.”81 Forster lavishes great detail on his depiction of the birth of Shri Krishna, perhaps to compensate for his spiritual and aesthetic bewilderment over the ritualistic aspect of the Hindu religion. To be sure, Forster never fully understood Hinduism. Although he may have shown a “greater curiosity” about it than other Eastern religions,82 in this section of the novel he betrays a certain amount of creative bafflement:

Infinite Love took upon itself the form of SHRI KRISHNA, and saved the world. All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear. Some
jumped in the air, others flung themselves prone and embraced the bare feet of the universal lover; the women behind the purdah slapped and shrieked; the little girl slipped out and danced by herself, her black pig-tails flying. Not an orgy of the body; the tradition of that shrine forbade it. But the human spirit had tried by a desperate contortion to ravish the unknown, flinging down science and history in the struggle, yes, beauty herself. Did it succeed? Books written afterwards say, “Yes.” But how, if there is such an event, can it be remembered afterwards? How can it be expressed in anything but itself? Not only from the unbeliever are mysteries hid, but the adept himself cannot retain them. He may think, if he chooses, that he has been with God, but, as soon as he thinks it, it becomes history, and falls under the rules of time.  

From the tone of this ceremonial muddle, we sense Forster’s dogged ambivalence at the very thought of union with God. His skepticism renders the celebration less than successful. Hinduism, “so solid from a distance, is riven into sects and clans, which radiate and join, and change their names according to the aspect from which they are approached. Study it for years with the best teachers, and when you raise your head nothing they have told you quite fits.” Forster chose a profoundly disturbing metaphor for this nebulous religion: the dead Rajah, who is ceremoniously propped up in a macabre parody of idolatry. Benita Parry sees this confusion as the narrative manifestation of Forster’s returning agnosticism as may be deduced from the description of the ceremony of Gokul Ashtami, where all is flux and chaos:

They sang not even to the God who confronted them, but to a saint; they did not one thing which the non-Hindu would feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form. Where was the God Himself, in whose honour the congregation had gathered? Indistinguishable in the jumble of His own altar, huddled out of sight amid images of inferior descent, smothered under rose-leaves, overhung by oleographs, outblazed by golden tablets representing the Rajah’s ancestors, and entirely obscured, when the wind blew, by the tattered foliage of a banana. Hundreds of electric lights had been lit in His honour (worked by an engine whose thumps destroyed the rhythm of the hymn). Yet His face could not be seen. Hundreds of His silver dishes were piled around Him with the minimum of effect. The inscriptions which the poets of the state had composed were hung where they could not be read, or had twitched their drawing-pins out of the stucco, and one of them (composed in English to indicate His
Universality consisted, by an unfortunate slip of the draughtsman, of the words, “God si Love.”

God si Love. Is this the final message of India?

“Tukaram, Tukaram . . .”

continued the choir, reinforced by a squabble behind the purdah curtain, where two mothers tried to push their children at the same moment to the front. A little girl’s leg shot out like an eel. In the courtyard, drenched by the rain, the small Europeanized band stumbled off into a waltz.

Forster later terminates this religious festival with a boat crash that sends all confusedly into the water: “That was the climax, as far as India admits of one. . . . Looking back at the great blur of the last twenty-four hours, no man could say where was the emotional centre of it, any more than he could locate the heart of a cloud.”

It is only upon returning to a mosque that Forster brings resolution to his plot. For within The Temple is a mosque, the Shrine of the Head, which proves to be the site of Aziz’s and Fielding’s reunion:

A slim, tall, eight-sided building stood at the top of the slope, among some bushes. This was the Shrine of the Head. It had not been rooted, and was indeed merely a screen. Inside it crouched a humble dome, and inside that, visible through a grille, was a truncated grave-stone, swathed in calico. The inner angles of the screen were cumbered with bees’ nests, and a gentle shower of broken wings and other aerial oddments kept falling, and had strewn the damp pavement with their flue. Ahmad, apprised by Mohammed Latif of the character of the bee, said, “They will not hurt us, whose lives are chaste,” and pushed boldly in; his sister was more cautious. From the shrine they went to a mosque, which, in size and design, resembled a fire-screen; the arcades of Chandrapore had shrunk to a flat piece of ornamental stucco, with protuberances at either end to suggest minarets. The funny little thing didn’t even stand straight, for the rock on which it had been put was slipping down the hill. It, and the shrine, were a strange outcome of the protests of Arabia.

In this passage Forster moves his narrative towards its conclusion while achieving for his novel an exquisite architectural symmetry. This Islamic setting also allows Forster to refocus on the Sufic theme of friendship which is ultimately doomed at the end of the novel. For in the final pages of the book, Aziz muses over a Rumi poem once again, “A poem about Mecca—the Caaba of Union—the thorn-bushes where pilgrims die be-
before they have seen the Friend...但他们敬畏的主题——友谊——并没有转化为现实，阿齐兹和菲尔丁在末日般的分别中走向分手：

“为什么我们不能现在成为朋友呢？另一个说道，[菲尔丁]抱着他亲切地说：‘这就是我想要的。这就是你想要的。’

但是马匹并不想这样做——它们分开了；大地也不想要，土地发出岩石声，骑马的人必须单行通过；庙宇，坦克，监狱，宫殿，鸟儿，腐尸，客舍，它们都发出了声音：‘不，不！’天空也说：‘不，不在那里。’

苏珊·格罗夫·科利克认为这个结论性的画面暗示了对经典神话，如卡斯托和波鲁克斯的暗示。

在通史批评中，基于语言学，卡斯托和波鲁克斯与印度吠陀的车手相提并论。如果福斯特借鉴了这个比较——因此两个神话——在写作阿齐兹和菲尔丁的分别时，他使用的东西在20世纪初是众所周知的。希腊和印度神话人物的比较不胜枚举，但很少有关于这些故事或意义的共识。

最终的图象是希腊和印度神话的通史性融合，它重新界定福斯特与通史性轨迹的同调。菲尔丁和阿齐兹的最终分别标志着福斯特的东方主义项目。

在极权和混乱、研究保障和完全的混乱中，福斯特的‘异托邦’——东方主义对小说的视角——存在于文本中。任何试图对它的‘印度性’进行反思‘印地安性’都无法解释这个事实。同样，福斯特小说的改编电影产生了相似的现象：一个想象中的爱德华七世的英格兰，它从未存在过。

考虑到这一点，福斯特通过一个虚构的美德从文化的需求中创造了一个‘印地安性’。正如特里·伊格尔顿所指出的，“只有思考《通往印度的旅程》，承认它的‘印地安性’的公正性，才能理解它作为文本的终点，以及它的‘印地安性’的权力。”

同样，电影改编的福斯特的小说产生了类似的奇观：一个想象中的爱德华七世的英格兰，它从未存在过。
India,” was, of course, portrayable; but the religious Orient, “the spiritual muddledom” that Forster attempted to penetrate in his “remorselessly metaphysical” depiction of Indians (to borrow a phrase from Said), was ultimately beyond his agnostic grasp. As Benita Parry aptly concludes, although the text “participates in the ambition of Hinduism… it withdraws from the incalculable and unassimilable enormity of the enterprise.”

Following the publication of *A Passage to India*, Forster returned to his familiar classicizing interests and flew back to his old Hellenic habits again with the composition of his “Priapic” short stories. His customary tone may be heard in his foreword to Constance Sitwell’s *Elephants and Flowers* (1929), where, by means of a quaint but exotic myth, he distinguishes between Western and Eastern points of view:

A flower from the tree of life was given to Adam and Eve when they were expelled from Paradise. It had no magic force, it was only a flower which had not ripened into fruit and the bestowal of immortality, they could not eat of it. Still, it was all they had to remind them of their garden, and as they wandered over the earth, engendering the future emotions of mankind, they gazed at it through tear-blurred eyes. Sometimes it seemed to them merely a flower; beautiful, valuable, unique, but no more: and from that vision was born what we in our modern jargon call the “Western point of view.” To the Westerner, be he artist or merchant, a flower is usually a flower, an elephant is an elephant, and a diamond a diamond; objects to the Westerner remain real and separable; they can be understood and described, they can be possessed or sold. But at other times Adam and Eve saw their flower differently. Its petals swelled, it became heavy and grey, and behold! it had expanded into an elephant. Or it shrunk and shone, and lo! it was a diamond. These changes in its nature increased their sadness, for they did not know which of the changes would be permanent. And from their doubt was born what we now call the “Indian point of view”; to the Indian nothing is real and nothing is separable: elephants and flowers and diamonds all blend and are part of the veil of illusion which severs unhappy mortals from the truth.

But lest Hellenism be overlooked, Forster expands his theory:

These two views, the Western versus the Indian, practical versus mystic, by no means complete our spiritual inheritance. Our forefathers had a third vision. At certain moments their flowers seemed a flower as far as it went, and the elephant as far as he went was an elephant, but nothing
went far enough. Things were separate, they were real, but oh so imperfect; they had not their full essence, they only contained hints. At what did they hint? At God? Not directly. Each suggested its own absent perfection—that is all that one could say. The flower said, “There is the topmost blossom on the tree of life, unspoiléd by human fingers.” The elephant said, “There is a huge and happy beast in the jungles of Eden whom men shall never humiliate or trap.” The diamond said, “There is a jewel beyond price and greed, safe in the treasure-house of the Father.” Plato was one of the inheritors of this third vision and the writer of this book has inherited it also. She possesses it, not as a system, but as a gift. To her, as to Plato, the world is real—as far as it goes; it is as she sets forth in her simple and profound prologue: a marriage feast to which the bridegroom has not yet come. **100**

This tripartite appraisal is as true of Forster as it is of Sitwell; for certainties and dreams, the real and the unreal, are what went into *A Passage to India* and what constitute its hybrid vision. Three perspectives define him as well, with Hellenism perpetually hovering over his fantasy of the East. In the end, however, he must abandon Marabar with its maddening boom and return to the shelter of Plato’s cave, where the West echoes itself in more harmonious and assuring tones.