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The Muslim World in British Fictions of the Nineteenth Century

This is rather like giving a talk on snakes in Ireland. Let us not get too excited by this topic. Those British novelists who did not write novels about Muslims or Arabs include Austen, Dickens, Peacock, the Brontes, Trollope, George Elliot, Thackeray, Gissing, Gaskell, Hardy, Conan Doyle, Charles Kingsley, Bram Stoker, George MacDonald, Charles Reade, Harrison Ainsworth, Frederick Marryat and Oscar Wilde. And, of course in France Dumas, Flaubert, Zola and Proust were also among those busy not doing the same. This fairly pervasive literary indifference to the Muslim Orient must raise doubts about the all-encompassing importance of the Orientalist discourse.

Not much was written, but most of the Orientalist fictions written in nineteenth-century Britain were published in the period up to around 1830. Thereafter the craze fell off sharply and only the odd novel featuring oriental settings and themes was published (using ‘odd’ in both its senses). I will come to the odd late-published books later. First, it is useful to have the imperial context in mind. The nineteenth century as a whole can be seen as the age of empire. Or, if one wishes to follow Eric Hobsbawm, then the period from 1874 onwards to the First World War was ‘The Age of Empire’. Possibly Hobsbawm’s more restrictive chronology works better. Certainly the explicit literature of empire, as exemplified by works by Rider Haggard, Kipling, Henty and others, only properly developed in the late nineteenth century. Although the British Empire in India was already substantial by the late eighteenth century, if one considers the Middle East, then Britain’s occupation of Aden in 1839 gave it its first toehold in that region. Much later, in 1882, Egypt was occupied and from there the British went on to conquer Sudan, but Britain’s ‘Moment in the Middle East’ (as the historian Elizabeth Monroe dubbed it) came with the settlement after the First World War which gave Britain mandates in Palestine, Jordan and Iraq, as well as a dominant position the Gulf.

William Beckford’s Vathek, published in 1786, and Samuel Henley’s annotations to that novel lit the touch-paper for romantic fictions about the Orient. It was acknowledged as a source of inspiration by both Southey and Byron, though whether ‘inspiration’ is quite the right word for Southey’s productions is questionable. Robert Southey’s Thalaba the Destroyer (1801) was a novel in verse, based on a bogus Arabian Nights tale fabricated by Chavis and Cazotte. Like Vathek, it came equipped with notes that drew on learned Orientalists. Thalaba, the Fox, has to battle against Domdaniel, a school of magicians, which can be seen as an early and dark version of Hogwarts. In the end, Thalaba (a good Muslim)

triumphs, but only at the cost of sacrificing both his magic and his life. Later Southey published The Curse of Kehama (1810), a romance set in India, which had no better success than Thalaba and Madame de Stael writing to Byron referred to these works as Southey's 'unsaleables'.

Southey was, like Byron, a convinced anti-imperialist. But in other respects they did not agree and Byron loathed Southey. Among other things, Southey despised everything to do with Islam, whereas Byron had no such prejudice and thought that the Qur'an was sublime. Byron seems to have watched Southey fail and then judged that he could do better with similar material. Byron has to be the central figure in any consideration of British literary engagement with the Muslim Orient in the nineteenth century. When Thomas Hope's novel, Anastasius was published, it was at first believed to be by the pen of Byron. Shelley declared of Byron's Don Juan that 'every word is stamped with immortality'. It was Byron who urged Thomas Moore to pick an Oriental subject and it was Byron whom the young Disraeli modelled himself upon. Byron's Oriental Tales were one of the sources for Scott's The Talisman, and, looking beyond Britain, the influence of Byron's Orientalism on Delacroix, Gericault, Hugo, Lamartine, Leopardi, Goethe and Pushkin was crucial.

'Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle
Are emblems of deeds that are done in their clime?
Where the rage of the vulture, the love of the turtle,
Now melt into sorrow, now madden to crime!'

These are the opening lines of The Bride of Abydos (1813), perhaps the most successful of his Oriental Tales. The others are The Giaour, The Corsair and The Siege of Corinth. They are all narrative fictions that rhyme and scan, for they were written in an age when it was common for books to be read aloud at the family hearth or amidst other groups. (This is also to be born in mind when considering the fictions of Southey and Moore.) There is no time and probably no purpose in relating the plots of these fictions. The main point is that Byron, whose Oriental Tales won him a lot of acclaim and money, established the Middle East as the fictional locus of adventure, high passion, violence and tragedy. He created or at least profited from the Regency taste for action-packed adventures in exotic settings. He also invented the Byronic hero, lonely, passionate, masterful, brooding, ill-fated – the father of Heathcliff and the grandfather of Rupert Campbell Black. Byronic heroes are fighters, though they are bereft of a political or religious ideology. Their posturings are accompanied by lots of exclamation marks.

Byron's engagement with the Orient and, more specifically the Ottoman Empire, also comes out in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Sardanapalus,

(1812), Beppo and Don Juan. Although he drew on literary sources for his portrait of the Orient, including Vathek and Jonathan Scott's famous introduction to The Arabian Nights Entertainments and though he provided the then more or less obligatory annotation, Byron's portrait of manners and customs of the Ottoman Empire was mostly based on his own travels in Albania, Greece and Constantinople and his direct engagement with the people there.

Later Byron, in satirical vein, was happy to send up his oriental yarns and in Beppo, (1818) he wrote:

'A Grecian, Syrian or Assyrian tale;
And sell you, mix'd with western sentimentalism,
Some of the finest Orientalism!' (Sharafuddin?p.51)

Byron was, famously, a Hellenophile, but he also admired the Albanians and Lady Byron testified retrospectively to Byron's enthusiasm for the Turks: 'He spoke often of a mysterious necessity for his return to the east, and vindicated the Turks with a spirit of nationality, admiring above all their complete predestinarianism. He would say "The East — ah. There it is," . . . and he has two or three times intimated to me that he abjured his religion there. In the autumn in London, he said with a shudder of conscious remembrance, "I was very *near* becoming a Mussulman." He preferred the Turkish opinions, manners & dress in all respects to ours.' [Sharafuddin, p.224] He thought the Turks 'sensible people'. 'There is not much difference between ourselves & the Turks, save that we have foreskins and they none, that they have long dresses and we short, and that we talk much and they little'. Byron thought of Islam as potentially a liberating force.

As I have noted, Byron was opposed to all empires and all kinds of imperialism, but this did not get him off the hook as far as Edward Said's Orientalism was concerned. According Orientalism: 'English writers on the whole had a more pronounced and harder sense of what Oriental pilgrimages might entail than the French. India was a valuably real constant in this sense, and therefore all the territory between the Mediterranean and India acquired a correspondingly weighty importance. Romantic writers like Byron and Scott consequently had a political vision of the near Orient and a very combative awareness of how relations between the Orient and Europe would have to be conducted.' [p.192] But there is no discussion in Orientalism of Byron's actual political opinions and the insinuation that Byron favoured an aggressive British imperialist policy in the Near East is an outrageous and anachronistic libel on a politically honourable writer. It would be interesting to learn what the political message of The Bride of Abydos is. Also I have found no evidence that Byron cared a jot about India. (Only, it featured in Don

Juan when he wrote about Nadir Shah's invasion of India in 1738.) Also, there is no direct evidence that Said actually read Byron. He features in those infernal lists that Said was so fond of, but he is never directly quoted.

Again, according to Said, '... Beckford, Byron, Goethe, and Hugo restructured the Orient by their art and made its colors, lights and people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs. At most the "real" Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it'. [p.21] But this has to be nonsense in Said's own terms. He had already made it plain that there is no such thing as a real Orient. So how can the literary artist be guided by the "real" Orient? And what is the force of the quotation marks placed by Said around the word "real"? And, I would add, even if the Orient really did exist, would a colourless documentary account of it be the only acceptable approach? And it is plain from Byron's correspondence that his direct experience of the Ottoman Empire did inform and guide his poems. For example, in The Giaour, the sewing up of Leila in a sack preparatory to drowning her seems to have been based on a real incident in which Byron was involved.

I shall briefly pass on to Shelley – only very briefly, because though he pretended to write about the Middle East, he was, like so many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, writing about Europe. The epic political poem The Revolt of Islam (1818), ignoring Islam altogether and actually set in Greece, is really a lightly disguised autobiographical and retrospective meditation on attitudes to the French Revolution and to Napoleon, as well as an attack on established Christianity. But the prose introduction is of some interest, as Shelley, always a libertarian and anti-establishment figure envisioned a liberating force emerging in the Middle East: 'In Syria and Arabia the spirit of human intellect has roused a sect of people called Wahabees, who maintain the unity of God, and the equality of man, and their enthusiasm must go on "conquering and to conquer" even if it must be repressed in its present shape'. He was also enthusiastic about the enlightened projects of Muhammad Ali in Egypt, but the Turks he condemned as oppressors of the Greeks. [Issawi]

Napoleon in Oriental disguise also loomed large in Thomas Moore's Moore's Lalla Rookh. Moore was Byron's friend and was urged by him to cash in on the Orient. Lalla Rookh, published in 1817, did indeed make Moore a lot of money. The book consists of four stories in poetic form linked by prose. The Princess Lalla Rookh travels from Delhi to Kashmir where she will be wedded to an unknown bridegroom. Then a storyteller called Feramoz appears and, as they journey on, he tells her four stories: 'The Veiled Prophet of Khorasan'; 'Paradise and the Peri'. 'The Fire Worshipers'; and 'The Light of Heaven'. As with Shelley,

Moore had chosen a setting that was superficially Islamic, but as he wrote in the preface, 'The melodies of Ireland soon found itself at home in the East'. Moore had no intrinsic interest in the East at all. 'The Fire Worshippers', a tragic romance given the perfunctory background of the war between Muslims and Zoroastrians, is actually about Ireland's struggle to be free and the hanging of Robert Emmet in 1802, whereas 'The Veiled Prophet', another ill-fated love story this time set against the background of a heresiarch's uprising against the Caliphate, is actually a meditation on the French Revolution. But the Veiled Prophet, who stands in for Napoleon, perhaps also has something of Daniel O'Connell about him. The stories are overwritten lush with excessive beauty, glittering jewels, sumptuous palaces, as well as being coy and tearfully sentimental. They come with what were then the obligatory Orientalist footnotes. Lalla Rookh sold extremely well and Gladstone read it to his wife after marriage.

Anastasius: Memoirs of a Greek Published at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century was first published anonymously in 1818. It is a very long picaresque narrative related by a rebellious, scoundrelly young Greek who escapes adulterous love affair gone wrong by running away and converting to Islam. His various careers and his travels all over the Levant, ending up with Anastasius eventually married into a Mamluk household in Cairo, allowed the author to present a comprehensive didactic picture of the manners and customs of the Ottoman Empire in the opening decades of the nineteenth century – and one moreover that was clearly based on direct experience, rather than on dipping into d'Herbelot's Bibliothèque orientale. The account of the protagonist's fortunes and misfortunes is morbid and weepy and a touch Byronic. As with Byron's heroes, all the women Anastasius falls in love with die tragically. (Much later Pierre Loti was to work with the same topos in his Orientalist novels.) But the author's obsession with costume might have provided a clue to his identity. It was Thomas Hope (1769-1831), the well-known classicising designer of furniture and interiors, who had travelled around the Levant to study architecture and perhaps also furniture. The book (which I struggled through) is ponderous, wordy and attitudinising. But it made Hope rich and famous. A regency novel, it fell out of fashion with the Victorians as being too sexy, (though not sexy enough for me).

[On Hope see Cornucopia + Sweetman.]

Edward Said's attitude of nil admirari, of not allowing literary merit to fictions set in the Middle East has fostered misreadings of several novels. In denouncing Sir Walter Scott's The Talisman (1825), Said fastened on a passage in which one of the heroes of the novel, Sir Kenneth, encounters Saladin (in disguise). Kenneth praises Saladin as an individual, yet finds

it curious that his race and religion descend from Iblis, the Devil. Said remarks on the offensiveness of ‘the airy condescension of damning a whole people “generally” while mitigating the offence with a cool “I don’t mean you in particular”’. Said suggests that the accusation of descent from Iblis was something Scott took from Beckford or Byron, without presenting any evidence that this was the case. [Orientalism, p.101] In fact Kurdish descent from the Devil was an item of medieval Arab folklore. Said also seems to assume that the fictional Kenneth speaks for his author on this matter, but Scott, who I think knew no Kurds or Arabs, may or may not have shared his fictional creation’s opinion. Moreover, it was historical fiction that Scott was writing and most readers would have found it odd if a twelfth-century Scottish knight on a crusade announced that he was basically pro-Islam and pro-Arab. That would have seemed both anachronistic and out of character.

Additionally and disgracefully, Said failed to concede that Saladin is, together with Kenneth, one of the two heroes of the novel. [c.f. The Kingdom of God] It was the brave and wise Saladin who cured Richard the Lionheart of his fever and rescued Kenneth from disgrace and death, whereas the villains of the novel are all Europeans. Thus, with respect one of the villains, King Richard reflects on the Grand Master of the Temple ‘were it fair to take the Holy land from the heathen Saladin, so full of all the virtues which may distinguish unchristened man, and give it to Giles Amaury, a worse pagan than himself – an idolator – a devil worshipper – a necromancer – who practices crimes the most dark and unnatural, in the vaults and secret places of abomination and darkness?’

According to Said’s Orientalism [p.43] ‘Orientalism imposed limits upon thought about the Orient. Even the most imaginative writers of the age, men like Flaubert, Nerval and or Scott, were constrained in what they could either experience of or say about the Orient.’ But what was it that Scott, or Beckford, or Disraeli or Morier could not say about the Orient? Said never explained what it was that was unsayable, nor did even hint at what they were constrained from saying. Well if you can’t say it, you can’t say it and you can’t whistle it either.

According to Orientalism, the Orientalism of James Morier and Edward Fitzgerald was ‘merely a stylistic matter’. The opening pages of Morier’s The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isbahan (1824) praised The Arabian Nights as giving a true picture of oriental life. The main narrative which is picaresque contains other framed stories and one of the framed stories seems to be an adaptation of the Hunchback story in the Nights. The chequered career of Hajji Baba, by turns a barber, brigand, dervish, assistant executioner, assistant to the Shah’s doctor and finally secretary to an ambassador heading to London, with its numerous ups and

downs, can be read as an extended version of the Arab genre of Faraj ba'd al-shidda (relief after grief) and it is indeed likely that Morier was familiar with Petis de la Croix's reworking of Tanukhi's Faraj ba'd al-Shidda in The Thousand and One Days. Hajji Baba shares the fatalism and optimism of Tanukhi's heroes. Moreover, as numerous critics have pointed out, Morier was certainly familiar with the work of Petis de la Croix's collaborator, Lesage and the plotting of Hajji Baba of Isbahan was quite closely modelled on Lesage's picaresque masterpiece, Gil Blas (1715 seq.). I suppose that Morier must also have read Anastasius.

It is clear that, in the case of Morier, Said was too kind in his verdict and that, far from Morier's Orientalism being merely stylistic, he should have been arraigned as one of the Orientalist villains, for Morier patronisingly presented the Persians as innately mendacious, treacherous and cowardly (by contrast with the noble English and the valiant and reliable Armenians and Russians). He had a low opinion of Persian literature and he thought that Islam was a ghastly religion. (It is obvious that Said had never so much as glanced at the book before delivering his verdict on it.) Later Lord Curzon was to judge that Morier did the Persians a justice by presenting them as lying and treacherous. His book was one of the sources of James Elroy Flecker's Hassan (especially the harem scene) and Flecker was another person who thought the Middle East was quite ghastly. But it should be admitted that despite the racism and hostility to Islam, Morier's novel does have wit and pace, as well as some degree of documentary accuracy. It has certainly survived much better than Lalla Rookh.

The romantic engagement with the Orient more or less over by 1830. It was part of a quest for alternative protagonists, tropes and landscapes to those provided by classical literature. The struggle of the Greeks to be free (1820-30) had focussed the eyes of the Romantics on the eastern Mediterranean and the rediscovery of Moorish Spain had encouraged an interest in Muslim culture. In 1832 Washington Irving had published Legends of the Alhambra. In that book he drew upon the Guerras Civiles de Granada, a chivalric romance published by Ginez Perez de Hita 1595 and 1604, but only translated into English in 1803. Perez de Hita and Washington Irving presented the Moors as brave, chivalrous and civilised. So did Bulwer Lytton in a truly awful novel entitled Leila or the Siege of Granada (1838). Apart from being badly written and poorly constructed, the novel is shockingly anti-Semitic. But the Muslim defenders of Granada are presented in an entirely sympathetic light and Boabdil is one of the heroes of the novel. The novel came equipped with obligatory footnotes.

I turn now to Benjamin Disraeli's novel Tancred, or the New Crusade (1847). In 1830 Disraeli had travelled to Albania, Constantinople and Jerusalem. He later declared that his week in Jerusalem 'the most delightful in all my travels' and the novel arose out of his travels. According to Orientalism [p.102]: 'his [Disraeli's] novel Tancred is steeped in racial and geographical platitudes; everything is a matter of race, Sidonia states, so much so that salvation can only be found in the Orient amidst its races.' ... all are Orientals at heart ... An Oriental lives in the Orient, he lives a life of Oriental ease, in a state of oriental despotism and sensuality, imbued with a feeling of Oriental fatalism'. Elsewhere Said observed that Disraeli's novel was a mess because of Disraeli's unawareness of Middle Eastern realities. I can certainly agree with Said that the book is a mess and I would only recommend Tancred as reading matter to my most hated enemies. It is also true that race plays a crucial role in the novel. But what Said was concealing is the nature of that racism. Disraeli the Jew really did believe passionately that he was a sort of Arab or, to put it the other way, that Arabs were Jews. They were, he thought, one race with two religions. This may be rubbish as ethnography, but it is the reverse of patronising. As Patrick Brantlinger has pointed out, Disraeli thought of himself as an Oriental. What Disraeli was primarily concerned with was to combat British anti-Semitism and to boost the Jewish self-image.

As for Said's guff about Disraeli's indolent East, did he actually read the book? Did he not notice that a very large part of it is devoted to a revolt of the Arabs in the desert? And did he not notice that the first part of the book, practically 'a silver fork novel' in its own right, is about the indolent West, the world of dinner parties and aristocratic idleness? And did he not notice the young Disraeli's oddly anti-imperialist sentiments (particularly odd given the sort of prime minister he later became)? In Tancred Disraeli wrote that 'Jerusalem can never be occupied by a colonial power and have a Western monarch. It 'will ever remain the appanage either of Israel or of Ishmael'. [p.170] i.e. either it will belong to the Jews or the Arabs. Tancred is, among other things, a novel about the liberation of both Arabs and Jews from Turkish rule without the intervention of the European powers. Moreover, Said has missed the fact that Tancred is primarily not about the Middle East at all. It is a book about British politics. It is an attack on Palmerston, liberalism and free markets. When Tancred set out on his eccentric pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he was in flight from the materialism, ugliness, and philistinism of Europe and he was heading for Asia that was birthplace of the three great religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism. As Tancred declares 'it is Arabia alone that can recreate the world'. As a Christian of Jewish descent, Disraeli was not so very interested in Islam,

since he was primarily preoccupied in presenting Christianity as the completion of Judaism.

When Said quotes Disraeli as saying in his novel Tancred that ‘the East is a career’, he is fallaciously identifying one of the minor characters in the novel, Mr Coningsby, with the author. Moreover, as the novel’s early chapters make plain, Tancred’s decision not to enter parliament, but to travel to Jerusalem in quest of spiritual enlightenment was regarded by all around him as the very reverse of a career move. And obviously Disraeli, himself, did not make the East his career. Also, a great deal of the first part of Tancred, the ‘silver fork’ bit, is broadly comic, but Said missed the comedy

In Orientalism and in Culture and Imperialism Edward Said restricted his discussion to canonical writers - the giants of English and French literature - Austen, Flaubert, Conrad and so on - without explaining why he did so. It is possible that a more representative account of British attitudes to Islam and the Middle East might be achieved by casting the net more widely and considering the potential agendas of works that do not happen to be on the syllabuses of modern lit. crit. departments, for literary merit should not be a consideration here. So any comprehensive account of literary Orientalism should call up as witnesses such works as James Baillie Fraser’s The Kuzzilbash, a Tale of Khorasan (1828) and its sequels, Juliet Pardoe’s The Romance of the Harem (1839), Charles Stuart Savile’s Karah Kaplan; or The Koordish Chief, a Tale of Persia and Koordistan, (3, vols., 1842), Humphrey Sandwith’s Hekim Bashi (2 vols., 1864), G. Norway’s Hussein the Hostage; or a Boy’s Adventures in Persia, and Hall Caine’s The Mahdi (1894). But I shall not be discussing them here because obviously I don’t have the time and besides I have not actually got round to reading them yet. But I will, as I believe that it is actually necessary to read the books one criticises.

[NOTES: Fraser (1783-1856) the Persian Adventurer (1830), the sequel to Kuzzilbash. Also wrote Tales of the Caravanserai (1833) and Alee Nemroo, the Bukhtiari Adventurer.

Sandwith’s novel a largely autobiographical account of a doctor in Turkish service who became disillusioned with ottoman rule

Savile a Berlin based diplomat

Juliet Pardoe, The Romance of the Harem (1839) allegedly authentic Turkish tales with frame. Based on familiarity with Istanbul and its elite. Allegedly authentic Turkish tales told in harems at festival times.

Purported educational purpose. In fact pastiche.

Hall Caine, a big bestseller, though unpopular with the critical establishment, like Rider Haggard and John Buchan, an Empire writer, the lateness of their appearance.////

The revival of the Oriental novel around the time of the First World War. Talbot, Mundy, Buchan etc.]

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is noteworthy that it was for the most part the Turks and, to a lesser extent, Persians and Indian Muslims, rather than Arabs, that attracted the interest of the Romantics. British literary Orientalists were quite likely to be armchair Orientalists, in contrast to the French who more often wrote of where they had been – Chateaubriand, Nerval, Lamartine, Flaubert, Fromentin, Loti, Gide – and therefore the French narratives tended to be more documentary and less imaginative. If I am right about the heyday of British literary Orientalism – that heyday with its themes of revolt, passion, abduction and arbitrary power - being in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, then this is odd. For its chronology does not match that of empire, nor of that of Orientalist painting, nor that of Orientalist music. Orientalist painting only really took off among the British with David Wilkie, David Roberts and John Frederick Lewis from the 1830s onwards, when steamship travel across the Mediterranean and the slow easing of quarantine requirements made Egypt and the Holy Land much easier to access. As for musical Orientalism, setting aside the eighteenth-century vogue for Janissary music, this became significant in the late nineteenth century, with Borodin, Rimsky Korsakov, Ravel, Satie, Bantock and others. As for British academic Orientalism, that was also something that started or revived in the late nineteenth century, with William Wright and Robertson Smith inaugurating the revival. So I wonder if it really makes sense to talk of a single Orientalist discourse.

Of course, in the larger scheme of things, the fact that I have shown (I hope) how Said misrepresented Byron, Scott, Morier and Disraeli does not so much knock down the theoretical claims of Orientalism as chip away at single bricks and, of course, I have done nothing to discount the fertility of Orientalism's misrepresentations for other academics.