



Romantic License: Imagined Easts

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‘[A] set of “orient pearls at random strung”’¹

In his panegyric to Byron’s *The Giaour*, Thomas Moore quotes a line from a translation by Orientalist scholar Sir William Jones of a 14th-century lyric poem, or *ghazal*, by Iranian poet Hafiz. Jones’ ‘A Persian Song of Hafiz’ (published in his *Poems, consisting chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick languages*, 1772) was admired by Byron and his contemporaries, though has been criticised for its translation; the line quoted by Moore is translatory invention.² Twentieth-century Orientalist academic A. J. Arberry forgives as ‘neither offence nor surprise’ what others have deemed as ‘faults’ — namely the altered rhyme scheme and extended length, which Arberry considers naturally symptomatic in rendering any Persian-English translation. However, he finds Jones’ line ‘an unfortunate, a most regrettable translator’s gloss; it has no justification in the original’.³ For Arberry, the ‘random’ approach to art inferred by Jones’ insertion ‘maligns the ancient skill of the oriental jeweller’, throwing into readerly doubt the precision of Persian craftsmen generally, the misrepresentation thus revealing Jones ‘a casual, careless jeweller of words’.⁴ A metaphorical ‘jeweller’ perhaps — he has added his own ‘pearl’ to the poem — but ‘casual’ and ‘careless’ are terms that encapsulate an attitude towards eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Orientalist writers too freely endowed, the (mis)perception that writers lacked control over the images they created, that they were not aware of their altered mimesis of the Orient. Perhaps Jones did not recognise the ideological repercussions that his Western line entailed. Semiotically, and no doubt for most post-colonialist scholars following the lore of Edward Said, this linguistic intrusion might read as a sign of imperialist sensibilities; appropriation in poetic form into the cultural Other, a claim to authorship or ownership; a colonisation. The cultural impact of such discrepancies contributes to stubborn perceptions of the source culture in the minds of readers. That said, as a competent speaker of not only Persian, but reputedly twenty-seven other languages, Jones cannot have been ignorant to his creative translation of Hafiz’ words.

For Said, unintentional cultural distortion was rife among Romantic and nineteenth-century writers:

...William 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.⁵

¹ Thomas Moore, *Life of Lord Byron, with his Letters and Journals* (London: John Murray, 1851), p. 179

² See A. J. Arberry, ‘Orient Pearls at Random Strung’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 11 (1946)

³ Arberry, pp. 700, 701, 703

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 703

⁵ *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 22

In his reading, the motivation to present ‘the Orient’, ‘provoked’ by personal experience or erudition, is the only controllable intention; restructuring it is not. The ‘visibility’ offered to the reader is thus an unintentionally distorted one. However, this assumes that writers endeavoured only to present ‘the “real” Orient’.

The two poems predominantly examined here, Robert Southey’s *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) and Byron’s *The Giaour* (1813), efface that notion. Neither poet claimed to the ‘reality’ of their poetic imaginary — in fact they explicitly reveal their conscious manipulations of their Oriental sources, or personal experiences, in their notes to the poems. And surely, as creative writers, they had every *license* to do that? We find, at a basic level, two divergent Easts working in tandem: the surface ‘poetic’ or ‘fictive’ East backed by a copious prose or ‘factual’ East — cultural minutiae at a subordinate textual level; literally a footnote. There are within that collocation further Easts: didactic, pantheistic, religious, material, topological, imperial, administrative, (auto)biographical, sexual, mythological, *et cetera*. Each of these function implicitly in the works discussed, and some will be touched upon in this essay. However, to demonstrate that that plurality was not unconsciously ‘random’, the focus here will be the assertion of license to creativity and distortion through that annotative textual layer. Specifically, this will be discussed through examining the textual motion of ‘receding’ Easts. In both Byron’s and Southey’s poetry Eastern epithets drop away, become less explicitly ‘visible’, to expose an at once philosophically and psychologically charged vendetta and a stark focus on (in)fidelity. For Southey’s Thalaba, that is a perpetual faith in Allah and Mohammad. Byron signals the theme eponymously; ‘giaour’ is ‘[a] Turkish term of reproach for non-Muslims’.⁶ It serves as a double entendre since the giaour is a religious infidel but a faithful lover and thus, sexually, Leila also befits the appellation, ‘[h]owe’er deserv’d her doom might be, | Her treachery was truth to me’ (1066-7).⁷ Both writers are as (un)faithful as their characters to the Orients they have read or seen.

Moore took a relaxed view of Byron’s relaxed approach. (Byron himself boasts that his *Giaour* took only a week to write).⁸ To extend my opening quote:

The plan, indeed, which [Byron] had adopted, of a series of fragments — a set of “orient pearls at random strung,” — left him free to introduce [...] whatever sentiments or images his fancy, in his excursions, could collect; and how little fettered he was...⁹

In appropriating Jones’ ‘Persian’ line as an explanation for the seeming structural incoherence of *The Giaour*, Moore demonstrates his counter-interpretation to Arberry’s: artistry *with* precision. For Moore, the artistry is the selection and then collection of ‘sentiments or images’, not in ‘stringing’ them coherently. For Moore, *The Giaour* is at once ‘wild and beautiful’; its fragmented structure ‘[enables Byron] to overleap those mechanical difficulties [of] a regular narrative’.¹⁰ It is here, however, that my reading diverges from Moore’s; a ‘fragmented’ poem need not be randomly structured, and Byron’s is not.

Though temporally incoherent, it is tripartite, with a basic beginning (1-351), middle (352-746) and end (747-1333) based simultaneously on perspective — observation, action,

⁶ OED

⁷ All line references will refer to *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), iii

⁸ Moore, Byron’s journal entry, 17 November 1813, p. 202

⁹ Moore, p. 179

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 178

reflection — as well as setting — ‘fallen’ Greece, Ottoman Greece, Christian monastery.¹¹ Set in Greece under restored Ottoman rule led by Hassan Ghazi, the first part has an ideological undercurrent and a hint towards Byron’s later philhellenism in support of Greek independence. Its allegorical topology represents destruction; first, downtrodden Greece (1-179) ‘trample[d], brute-like’ by man (the Ottomans) who ‘[s]hould mar it into wilderness’, a foreboding paradise lost, ‘Tis Greece — but living Greece no more! (46-53, 91); then, after a heroic vision of the riding giaour (180-276, a coming and going enigmatically encapsulating the events of the entire narrative), Hassan’s fallen palace is envisioned (276-351). Thus the first part is a parable of the whole tale, still images connoting destruction at imperial hands. The second part enacts the events that engendered that desolation and consist of the actions outlined in the ‘Advertisement’. We find here stark Eastern epithets not obvious in the third part, which takes a philosophical turn, seeking to reconcile those actions through Christian confession, ‘[c]onfessor — to thy secret ear, | I breathe the sorrows I bewail’ (1320-1).

Such structural distinctions make clear that half of the poem (747-1333) is not overtly ‘Eastern’ at all. So what makes this ‘Turkish Tale’ Turkish? It is set in Greece, and of the three main characters, a Venetian (the Giaour), a Circassian (Leila), and a Turk (Hassan), the narrative fixates on the Venetian. *The Giaour* is then Turkish because it confronts an apparently Turkish Islamic custom:

The new governor [...] had of course the barbarous Turkish ideas with regard to women. In consequence, and in compliance with the strict letter of Mahomedan law, he ordered this girl to be sewed up in a sack, and thrown into the sea, — as is, indeed, quite customary at Constantinople.¹²

This letter from Lord Sligo proceeds to outline Byron’s apparent heroic involvement in saving the girl. In his published notes, these autobiographical elements are elided in favour of a word of mouth telling by a Levantine ‘coffee-house [storyteller]’.¹³ Jerome J. McGann tells us, ‘[p]art of the sensationalism of the poem rested on the belief, which Byron did not discourage, that the narrative was based upon events in which Byron himself took part’.¹⁴ In an unpublished note to the poem, he flaunts that idea,¹⁵ and the attraction and validity of personal experience is exhibited throughout his notes. The fleeting vision of the riding giaour, ‘[a]way — away — for he rides — | Swift as the hurled on high jerreed’ (250-1), is figured by a Turkish ‘exercise’ that, in the notes, Byron facetiously qualifies with the inference of having witnessed it himself; ‘It is a favourite exercise of the Mussulmans; but I know not if it can be called a *manly* one, since the most expert in the art are the Black Eunuchs of Constantinople’.¹⁶ Repartee is reserved for the annotative level, not the poetic.

Whether or not such occasions are true is for the reader to surmise, yet he later references many of his encyclopaedic descriptions to Barthélemy d’Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque Orientale*.¹⁷ That said, having spent two months in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1810, Byron felt he was sufficiently equipped to write about the Muslim faith and customs that permeate the middle section of his poem. For him, to write entailed the prerequisite of practical experience. In a later letter to Moore he writes: ‘I could not write upon any thing, without

¹¹ Caroline Franklin interprets a structure of *The Giaour* based on the interchanging narratorial voices, though this remains incoherent since distinctions between voice and personae are not clear; ‘*The Giaour*’, in *Byron* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 51-54

¹² Moore, Letter from Lord Sligo, 31 August 1813, p. 178

¹³ *Complete Poetical Works*, pp. 422-3n. 1334

¹⁴ *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 277n

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, *Complete Poetical Works*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 417n. 251

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 423n. 1334

some personal experience and foundation'.¹⁸ For Moore, Byron was not 'fettered' by his medium or his subject. He was 'free to introduce' to his reading public the unknown 'orient pearls' they craved, the Orient as he perceived it — a license to subjective expression. '[T]he public hailed this new offspring of his genius with wonder and delight'.¹⁹ Following its success, Byron knew he had tapped into an awe-inspiring topology. In a letter to Moore, Byron urges him to turn his literary attention to the East, 'the public are orientalising, and pave the path for you'.²⁰

Nigel Leask exaggerates Byron's mercantile sentiments, conflating them with imperialist proclivities and re-figuring him a poet-cum-sales executive profiteering on Easts ripe for the taking:

Byron speaks like a Levantine or East India merchant who has tapped a lucrative source of raw materials in a newly opened up market [...]. He offers Moore partnership in his business venture which, he has been assured by Europe's leading consultant in cultural capital, cannot fail...²¹

Problematically, Leask commits to the assumption of Saidian scholarship that a writer adopting an Eastern locale necessarily 'fetters' their fiction to imperialist motivations. Said goes further, rendering the setting of *The Giaour* a supposedly objectified Orient, 'a form of release, a place of original opportunity'.²² That is, a place to accommodate selfish catharsis coupled with personal gain. This is a reading that I cannot negotiate with my own. *The Giaour* has nothing to do with English imperialism; it exposes the impact of Ottoman rule and is thus a different imperialism altogether. That explicit correlation recedes in the third part, foregrounding the psychological impact that proceeds from being culturally and religiously a 'giaour' in favour of secular love, '[b]ut this was taught me by the dove — | To die and know no second love' (1165-6). We mark, however, the persistence at an obscured semantic level of Eastern referents. The rejection of plural loves is a cultural dig at Hassan's polygamy.

Similarly, Southey's suspect colonialist attitudes do not surface on the poetic layer of *Thalaba*. His acquisitive sensibilities proved the East an unreachable temptation. In 1801, he had failed to secure a post in Constantinople, an imagined Eastern Eden, 'the best of all possible places', alongside the Coleridges;²³ a year earlier his capitalist sights were on India: 'Were I single, it is a country which would tempt me, as offering the shortest and most certain way to wealth, and many curious subjects of literary pursuit. About the language [...]; it is a baboon jargon not worth learning...'.²⁴ That air of condescension is reserved for his notes, '[t]he little of [the East's] literature that has reached us is [...] worthless. Our barbarian scholars have called Ferdusi the Oriental Homer'.²⁵ The poem is not itself explicitly imperialist but for one remark pertaining to 'fallen' Baghdad (V. 73):

So one day may the Crescent from thy Mosques
Be plucked by Wisdom, when the enlightened arm
Of Europe conquers to redeem the East.
(V. 84-6)

¹⁸ Moore, 5 January 1816, p. 291

¹⁹ Moore, p. 178

²⁰ Ibid., 28 August 1813, p. 193

²¹ *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 13

²² *Orientalism*, p. 167

²³ Letter to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 11 July 1801, *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey, 6 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849-50), ii, pp. 150-51

²⁴ *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793-1810*, ed. Lynda Pratt, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), iii: *Thalaba the Destroyer*, ed. by Tim Fulford and others (2004), p. 193n. l. 41. Line references to the poem are from this edition

²⁵ Ibid., p. 194n. l. 114

Topographically too it is England that befits an oasis:

But oh the Joy! the blessed sight
 When in the burning waste the Travellers
 Saw a green meadow, fair with flowers besprent,
 Azure and yellow, like the beautiful fields
 Of England...
 (IV. 417-21)

Light relief for travellers of the Arabian desert ‘wilderness’ (a term harbouring biblical connotations) venturing towards the juxtaposed desolation of Babylon/Baghdad in Book V. Eastern lands in *Thalaba* are wild, archaic or fantastical — like the ‘[un]earthly Eden’ (VI. 205-17) of Book VI, an impure Epicurean palace of revelry figured on an Islamic temple — a climax of exoticism set to tempt Thalaba from his absolute faith in God.

But these magical, archaic images are necessitated by Southey’s frame of reference. His notes display an extraordinary erudition that gives credence to Diego Saglia’s assertion, ‘Southey’s East appears to be more that of the scholar and the imperial administrator than that of the artificer’.²⁶ He is a hoarder of Orientalist writing, quoting vast excerpts of traveller accounts, and George Sale’s Koran and ‘Preliminary Discourse’. Misleadingly, however, Saglia proclaims Southey a magpie for Eastern jewels, reducing the plurality of images in *Thalaba* to one, a ‘jeweller’s East’:

Thalaba abounds with references to ‘golden goblets’, the use of ‘vermilion gilt’ plates and cups in Persia, the ‘silver pails’ employed to water the king of Ispahan’s horses [...]. The abundance of gold makes writing repetitive, forcing it to resort to ellipsis and suspension.²⁷

Saglia accuses him of the same ‘dull tautology’ Southey finds in the Koran (below).²⁸ This is an exaggeration. Ornamentation abounds in places, Book VI and Shedad’s palace in Book I (358-407) for example, though for the most part the reader journeys through epic landscapes, desert ‘wilderness’, the Baghdad with ‘fair cupolas’, ‘high-domed mosques | And pointed minarets’ (70-1) though devoid of architectural intricacies, and mythological settings like the Domdaniel. Southey makes a point of this reserved application of Islamic architectural embellishments. Of Shedad’s palace he says, ‘I have ornamented his palace less profusely than the oriental writers who describe it’.²⁹ Earlier, in his notes, Southey lambasts what he considers excessiveness in all aspects of Eastern art, ‘[a] waste of ornament and labour characterises all the works of the Orientalists [Oriental peoples]’.³⁰ His preferred vision of the East is not abundant in gold, as Saglia implies. He reduces the Orient, tones it down but does so brazenly. It is the lore of his own poetry, however, to be wary of such distortions:

Things viewed at distance thro’ the mist of fear,
 In their distortion terrify and shock
 The abused sight.
 (155-8)

In Book I (41-2), he has no qualms with a Muslim ‘mouthing’ the Bible: ‘I have placed a scripture phrase in the mouth of a Mohammedan; but it is a saying of Job, and there can be no impropriety in making a modern Arab speak like an ancient one’.³¹ His distortion is based on

²⁶ Saglia, p. 170

²⁷ pp. 172-3

²⁸ *Thalaba*, p. 193n. l. 41

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194n. l. 114

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ l. 41n., p. 193, my emphasis

a personal acceptance of some shared aspects of the monotheistic religions originating in the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), but also based on an interpretation of the Koran that renders it inappropriate for poetry, '[i]t had been easy to have made Zeinab speak from the Koran, if the tame language of the Koran could be remembered by the few who have toiled through its dull tautology'.³² For Byron, the bible offers an opportunity to exert his poetic playfulness. In a note to line 494 he acknowledges '[a]n oriental simile, which may, perhaps, though fairly stolen, be deemed 'plus Arabe qu'en Arabie''.³³ Like Southey, Byron has doctored a biblical image. In the poem, Leila's cheeks are described thus:

On her fair cheek's unfading hue,
The young pomegranate's blossoms strew
Their bloom in blushes ever new
(493-5)

The lines evoke a simile in *The Songs of Solomon* (4. 3), '...thy temples *are* like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks.' If Byron was drawing from the sexual imagery in *Solomon*, he also appropriated its Oriental exoticism.

Both poems become increasingly dependent on these annotative commentaries as their verse Easts become less stark. After that orgy of Eastern stereotypes in Book VI of *Thalaba* the visual East diminishes with progressively fewer explicit referents to Eastern epithets on the poetic surface level. Though, closer inspection of Southey's notes reveals faithfulness to Oriental mythology. It is here then, in the notes, that both poets exert their licence to not just write the East, but to create it. Neither Southey nor Byron strove to write an "[un]real" Orient, yet neither did they strive to write a "real" one. Southey's is a 'Romance' and Byron's a 'Tale', and such genres rarely demand a claim to historicity or truth. Byron does so, however, by embellishing a 'memory' of an event received or encountered while in Ottoman ruled Greece.³⁴ While Southey felt he was improving on an Oriental artistic prototype. However, their anxiety for accuracy, their fidelity to copious Oriental sources despite a dearth of experience, is exposed at the same annotative level in which they assert, as Romantic Poets, their license to subtle creative infidelity.

³² *Thalaba*, p. 193n. l. 41

³³ Ibid., p. 419n. 494

³⁴ *Complete Poetical Works*, p. 423n. 1334

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