

## Edgar Allan Poe's Orientalism

KURT F. LEIDECKER

Poe [American poet, critic and short-story writer] was born [19 January 1809] near enough the Concord empyrean, but unfortunate circumstances compelled him to stray from such isles of content. His task was to bring forth exquisite flowers from stony and arid environment.

Such flights into rarified atmosphere as the Concord sage would indulge in habitually, were denied Poe. The 'transcendental' capacity was innate in him. He demonstrated his ability along these lines not a few times, and he found the quality of 'supernal beauty' at the bottom of fine poetry. All this would indicate that Poe was endowed with an idealistic strain. He felt the true intuitively when it assumed the form of poetry, but he failed to see it when it presented itself in a logical garb, buttressed by prosaic argument. He would undervalue a Kant, a Hegel and even the pensive Goethe. Those who approach the problems of so-called transcendentalism conceptually, he would not follow. But the Orientals—those of the Far East, not those of the Near East—are, above all, 'conceptualizers'. And thus we have indicated broadly the difference in the Orientalism of a Poe and even men of the type of Thoreau.

There is nothing very striking in Poe's allusions to the Orient. He had never come in contact with the Oriental scene except through books. He may not have met any Orientals. The only vital influence that might be noted are the time in which he lived

(1809-1849) and in which falls the general awakening to the reality of the Far East, and, more particularly, the period from 1827 to 1829 which saw him in Europe where the interest in the Orient was keener than in the United States, and where the researches of Egyptology held the attention of the public. That Poe should have stood under that influence is, of course, extremely uncertain as we know nothing of his doings during that period. But the fact that he had a decided bias for Egypt brings such an assumption well within the bounds of the problematic, even though he may have kept in touch with the intellectual world only slightly during that period.

By way of introduction it may be said that Poe shares with many of his contemporary writers the use of certain adjectives, phrases and comments with an Oriental background which we will have to mention in detail. This bears testimony, on the one hand, to the poverty of knowledge and information obtainable then, and, on the other, to the fact that these meagre sources were quite generally read. Poe's reading was confined mainly to *belles-lettres*. He was not even an amateur scientist. Life and history he interpreted in those qualities that point to a region beyond the natural and even imaginary, in the milder sense of the term. If ever a poet made the noumenal his realm it was Poe. The allusions and the references to the literature he perused are, therefore, mere dry leaves when culled from their context.

They are the spices in narrative and poem, herbarium specimens when collected.

That an American should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea—and at best is a questionable point. We would do well to bear in mind that ‘distance lends enchantment to the view.’ *Ceteris paribus*, a foreign theme is, in a strictly literary sense, to be preferred. After all, the world at large in the only legitimate stage for the autorial *histrion*.<sup>1</sup>

More than expressing an opinion on a much discussed topic, Poe seems to be apologizing in these words for his own spiritual rambles that carried him as far as Egypt, Arabia and Palestine and even to the Dutch possessions in the East. Had he lived longer he surely would have stopped in India several times and gone into China and Japan. *There* would have been romance and mystery, enough to tax language to the utmost in making it conform to fancy! Unfortunately, Poe lacked the time to work up a background. The bee-like industry of a Thomas Moore he had, but he would produce, if at all, something novel and original in its entirety. The *Lalla Rookh* he deems good in its individual parts, but in the aggregate ‘the happiest originalities’ weary, and he therefore considered Moore as having ‘comparatively failed’ in this romance<sup>2</sup>. In passing we might mention that this criticism reiterates, in different words, the contention in his *Poetic Principle*.

There are enough indications that Poe thought of the Orient in terms not dissimilar to the reader of Oriental love and romance stories. The Orient is truly the ‘Far’ East, the out-of-the-way and dark corner of the globe in which the unexpected, the stupefying, the wondrous holds sway. The *MS Found in a Bottle* teems with the portentous. Again, the

East breathes voluptuousness and luxury—themes for which our ‘sex-less’ author however cared nothing. It is those subtler forms of sensuality he and the epicure have in common which we meet in his writings. The insinuations of Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, which he knew, were foreign to him. Stimulating a somewhat identical experience he could, however, acclimatize himself to the opium-heavy atmosphere of the setting of the tales of Scheherazade.

Coming now to the subject-matter of Poe’s Orientalism, one treads everywhere on uncertain ground in his names of places and persons. More than any other poet he had the innate tendency to mystify and adapt for the purpose of ridiculing or for the excitement of awe and terror.

At the head of an exposition such as we attempt must stand the reflections of Egypt in Poe’s works. Among books we note particularly Stephen’s *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petrea, and The Holy Land* which, as his unkind literary executor relates, he reviewed in the *New York Review* for October, 1837. Moore’s *Alciphron*, dealing mainly with the Egyptian scene, he placed far above his *Lalla Rookh*, for literary and poetic reasons, but, as we suspect, also because the topic appealed to him as such<sup>3</sup>.

There is no reason for doubting that Poe read widely, if not deeply, in accounts of Egyptian archaeology, and that he was greatly impressed not so much with what this ancient people achieved as with the results which a comparison of the civilization of his day yields. The distance in time which separates us from the Egyptians should have evolved works of architecture, institutions and traits in human nature that would put us moderns into a favourable light. To show that it did *not* he wrote the half caustic, half humorous *Some words with*

*a Mummy* in which he turned his knowledge of some phases of Egyptian civilization to good use. It is a sedative for optimism and—though Poe did not intend it for such—a balm for pessimism, and no one would look for accurate or serious material in this outburst of one who was ‘sick of this life and of the nineteenth century in general.’ And yet there is a kernel of sound sense in it in that it teaches not to overvalue our own nor belittle the ancient culture which, after all, has laboured to give foundation to all modern endeavours.

In no other tale did Poe make as clever a use of things Egyptian. But the *objects d’art* of this African country were too good to be overlooked by him in building up a background for the grotesque. The ‘solemn carvings of Egypt’, the ‘huge carvings of untutored Egypt’ and gigantic sarcophagi ‘of black granite, from the tombs of the kings over against Luxor, with their aged lids full of immemorial sculpture’ will be remembered as pieces of furniture, or ‘the sphinxes of Egypt’ as decorations, by the reader of *Ligeia* and *The Assignment*. Tropes from Egyptian antiquity are employed very sparingly.

The temples and pyramids and obelisks, as well as the inevitable Nile, Thebes and Karnak and a few other sites may be met in Poe’s writings, but never with such frequency as among some other contemporary American authors. It would surprise us greatly, however, had this cryptogram-solver passed by Champollion’s feat of deciphering the hieroglyphs.

If we can count Libya an Oriental country at all in virtue of its close association in Poe’s mind with Egypt, we must mention here that he thought of it as harbouring a sufficiently out-of-the-way and poorly known region to provide the stage-

setting for the perhaps weirdest of his writings, *Silence—A Fable*. And this leads us over into Arabia.

Poe’s *The Thousand-and-second Tale of Scheherazade* is told in a delightful story-telling style. Not any Western story book, but the cycle of the *Arabian Nights* he found suitable as a natural medium for relating the truth that is stranger than fiction. He purports to give a summary of the *Tellmenow Isitsoornot* wherein the thousand-and-second and last tale of the beautiful Scheherazade is laid down and which details in a mythical way modern discoveries and inventions which the stupid king stamps as lies.

Apart from such phrases as he uses, for instance, in describing the beauty of Ligeia as being that of the ‘fabulous Houri of the Turk’, i.e., the nymph of the Muhammadan paradise, or such similes as carrying one’s shroud on earth<sup>4</sup> or the ‘narrow and tottering bridge which Mussulmans say is the only pathway between Time and Eternity’<sup>5</sup> he sees, on a whole, the humorous side of Muhammadan life and thought, or at least employs them for the purpose of emphasizing the incongruity of a certain situation. Cases are not numerous, but we mention the *Heaven gives relief*<sup>6</sup> and the Koran motto: ‘There is *no* error in this book,’ adduced twice in the *Marginalia*. It is very characteristic that, to take two examples, the Arabian perfume and the beauty of the Arabian landscape, do not answer his needs for infusing into his descriptions all the subtle qualities which his imagination ascribed to a particular aroma or a particular view. The deep, early poem *Israfil* belongs into this general category of writings with an Eastern motif.

Semitic civilization has been mined by Poe for material of still another sort. The

history of antiquity yielded him parallels and illustrations such as he needed on occasion. Babylon and Nineveh, Shalmaneser and Sardanapalus, and a small number of other names could be assembled here. But more important are the tales. *Four Beasts in One* is based on the life and times of Antiochus Epiphanes, King of Syria, whose 'impious, dastardly, cruel, silly and whimsical achievements which make up the sum total of his private life and reputation' were so much food for Poe's mind ever hungry for the horrible and eccentric, especially if some suggestive facts would support, as it were, the natural appearance of the abnormal. In quite a different vein is written *A Tale of Jerusalem*. Simeon, Abel-Phittim and Buzi-Ben-Levi in the beleaguered city lower a basket with treasure from the temple to the enemy in order that they might receive, in return, a lamb for use at the impending ceremony, but find to their horror a hog in the hoisted basket, which they speedily drop.

Of Poe's religious convictions we shall have to speak in another connection. Here we point to his review of J. T. Headley's *The Sacred Mountains*<sup>7</sup> which is devastating because he detested quackery, especially in theologians who talk about the supernatural in familiar language. Similarly, though in a much more tolerant manner, he criticized the Rev. George Busch.<sup>8</sup> He could not 'admit the imaginary axioms' from which his *Anastasis* starts. Then he also ventured into the field of higher textual criticism. In *Marginal Note CXXI* he discusses Isaiah 34.10 and Ezekiel 35.7, both with a view to discrediting the literal interpretation of prophecy. A letter from the *Griswold Collection*<sup>9</sup> by Professor Charles Anthon addressed to him supplied the technical apparatus for the discussion. Poe here evidently undertook something for which he

was not qualified. A similar attempt may be seen in *Marginal Note CXXVIII*.

If Poe had much knowledge of Persia and Persian literature he did not divulge it in his writings. Every reference—and they are sparse enough—seems to disclose a knowledge received at second or third hand. About three references to Persepolitan sculpture, insignificant and obscure mentionings of the Magi and the 'Ghebers,' and an express reference to 'the Persian Saadi in his *Gulistan*' is all that need be called to attention in this place. The *Tale of the Ragged Mountains* introduces us to India itself as Poe reconstructed it from his reading. A certain Mr Bedloe, an addict to the habit of taking morphine and a patient standing *in rapport* with his private physician, Templeton by name and a firm believer in mesmerism, recounts an experience he had while wandering off into the neighbourhood of Charlottesville, Virginia. On the hills he suddenly realized that the scenery had changed into a sub-tropical one with an 'Eastern-looking city' on the margin of the river. He entered the city and, seeing a band of soldiers engaged in battle with the natives he joined them and was killed by an arrow in his temple. But, 'all these things,' he said, 'I felt—not saw.' Templeton, who had listened attentively, produced a watercolour, drawing of an old friend of his, Oldeb, an officer in the army of Warren Hastings who fell, in the manner described by Bedloe during the riots at Benares, in 1780. The implication of the story is that Bedlo (e) was the reincarnation of Oldeb whom the much older Templeton knew intimately and whose resemblance to Bedloe had caused the physician to attach himself so closely to the latter.

Poe realized keenly the possibility of a dramatic story based on the caste conflict in

India; yet such a story would have neither been original nor suitable to his own temperament. India, apart from accounts of British complications, was at that period regarded in the light of metaphysics mainly. Thus we understand why Poe has the letter written on board the balloon 'Skylark' in *Mellonta Tauta* signed by 'Pundita' (Panditā, we would write now), and why 'Pundit' (Pandit) figures in this ramble and scramble with Aristotle, Hogg, Bacon and the rest of philosophers. A lyric picture from Indain lore we reproduce from *Al Araaf*:

And the Nelumbo bud that floats forever  
With Indian Cupid down the holy river—  
Fair flowers, and fairy! to whose care is  
given  
To bear the Goddess' song, in odors, up to  
Heaven.

Some Indian miscellanies need not detain us here, but inasmuch as we dwelled on Egyptian furniture we might also take note of the 'ottomans and candelabra, of Eastern figure' and the 'Bridal couch, of an Indian model,' 'sculptured of solid ebony, with a pall-like canopy above,' for the Lady of Tremaine. It is rather uncertain whether Poe ever read original translations from the Sanskrit, as did Emerson and Thoreau. We would expect to be able to gather more material if he had really tapped the sources and if he was as 'read in Eastern fable' as he seems to imply in one place. Evidence forces us to believe that Thomas Moore, Simms, Lucretia M. Davidson and others were really his authorities.

From the port of Batavia 'in the rich and populous island of Java' we do not follow the author of *MS Found in a Bottle* on his adventures in that region, but sail directly to China and Japan. The latter country he remembered only for its slipper manufacture,

and thus we can confine ourselves to China merely.

Quoting Davis and Barrow again does not imply that Poe read at all extensively in Chinese literature. In fact, his satire *How to Write a Blackwood-Article* and Miss Zenobia's article itself (See *A Predicament*) may be taken to indicate the truth of this assertion. For he makes fun of those who cite Chinese works, and he promptly invents two titles of novels, *Ju-Kiao-Li* and *Jo-Go-Slow*. Introducing such words would 'evinced your intimate acquaintance with the language and literature of the Chinese. With the aid of this you may possibly get along without Arabic, or Sanskrit, or Chichasaw.' Unintelligibility to him is synonymous with Chinese. (See the beginning of *The Angel of the Odd*) The soliloquies and 'asides' in the modern drama appear to him less rational than the performance of Chinese actors, while romance writers might take 'a hint from the Chinese, who, in spite of building their houses downwards, have still sense enough to begin their books at the end.'<sup>10</sup> He also was to all appearance in sympathy with the Chinese belief that the abdomen is the seat of the soul.

The Chinese love of opium made them his friends. The beauty of Ligeia he likened to the 'radiance of an opium dream, and airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hover about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos.' He could describe vividly the experiences in dream when 'in the shackles of the drug,' he knew the qualities of the 'after-dream of the reveller upon opium.'

Returning, however, to more serious matters, he at least once characterized China genially as 'the simple and enduring.' The other characterizations<sup>11</sup> are not as happy; nevertheless, we bring them here: 'Assyria,

the architect,' 'Egypt, the astrologer,' 'Nubia, more crafty than either, the turbulent mother of all Arts.'

The purpose of our investigation should be forfeited were we to apply ourselves to a criticism of all the allusions which Poe makes to things Oriental. What he saw was poetical reality, not plain pragmatic fact. There are, indeed, many inaccuracies even where he is serious. To disparage Poe on account of such peccadillos would be like reproaching a scientist for lack of poetic license. We prefer to look upon Poe's Orientalism from the point of view of appreciation.

In conclusion we must consider some parallels in Poe's thinking to the distinctive attitude of the East as it has been elevated into a philosophical system in India. That for Poe such conceptualizations *sich nicht lesen lassen*, does not preclude his having had some conception that may be called identical with these. There is no indication throughout his writings that he received a definite influence from the Orient in the ideas which we are to discuss briefly. The parallelism, in our view, is revelatory of the possibility of similar experiences or thoughts under widely different conditions of time and place.

The general proposition prefixed to an outline of Poe's philosophy in a letter by his own hand,<sup>12</sup> dated February 29, 1849: 'Because Nothing was, *therefore* All Things are' should be compared with some passages from the ancient *Chāndogya Upanishad*:

In the beginning, . . . this world was just being (*sat*), one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say: 'In the beginning this world was just non-being (*a-sat*) . . . From that non-being being was produced.' But, verily, . . . how from non-being could being be produced?<sup>13</sup>

And,

All creatures here . . . have being at their root, have being as their abode, have being as their support.<sup>14</sup>

This is the poet's metaphysics of joyous assent to the reality of all that is and was and will ever be.

From the universality of the law of gravitation Poe, the speculator, derives an 'original unity,' a 'perfect totality' or '*absolute unity*.'<sup>15</sup> Compare with this the 'one only, without a second' of the Upanishad and all the mystics. This unity, however, Poe goes on to prove to be really nothingness. Matter springs from it, i.e., is created out of it, while all will eventually return to unity.<sup>16</sup> Now, this is pure Vedanta, which, *in nucleo*, is contained in the same Upanishad which further proclaims that the finest essence (which is indistinguishable, perceptually, from nothing) is what this whole world has as its soul, as reality.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as the rivers all become one in the ocean, so all creatures, having come out of being, shall return to being.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Poe suddenly turned philosopher and in doing so has laid himself open to charge of being more abstruse than Hegel even. He is dealing here with the most recondite problems of metaphysics and epistemology, and we are gratified to know that at heart, though not always in words, Poe is at one with all great idealists of ancient and modern times.

The Word as the fountainhead of all creation Poe speaks of plastically in *The Power of Words*, in the dialogue between Oinos and Agathos. The latter says:

This wild star . . . I spoke it—with a few passionate sentences—into birth.

The *logos* idea in this deistic confession is too much on the surface as to require comment. *Logos* is the Greek counterpart to a very ancient Indian concept, *vāc* or speech,

which is at the bottom of this created universe. Interdependent with this is the contention that all (motion) is thought whose source is God.<sup>19</sup>

The remainder of this dialogue of the angels is somewhat lacking in depth of reflection, but the definition of God as 'The Most Happy' is good—though not for the reason given by Poe—and is in keeping with the Hindu *ananda*, beatitude, as the highest object of realization. The fourth condition of bliss described in the second paragraph of *The Domain of Arnheim* falls again short of the true nature of beatitude. True bliss is not in the acquisition of knowledge, nor is it 'the object of unceasing pursuit,' however spiritual the object might be. It is in the degree of realization of the oneness of all.

The problem of identity made in such a singular manner the subject-matter of *Morella* has, formulated in this fashion, no exact counterpart in the mystic thought of the East. But it leads us over the sleep-speculation, especially in *Mesmeric Revelation* which again cannot be exactly paralleled, to the problem of rebirth. Poe was, despite himself, an intuitive philosopher who felt the difficulties involved in the rational belief in re-incarnation, and so wavered between this and the belief in a hazy spiritualistic after-existence, as *Marginal Note XCIV* would confirm:

It is by no means an irrational fancy that, in a future existence, we shall look upon what we think our present existence, as a dream.

There can be little doubt that Poe, to say the least, had much sympathy with the idea of rebirth. Dr Snodgrass also made allusion to the inclination of our author. *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains* which raises this problem and portrays it with great clearness, has already been discussed. Different

approaches present themselves in *Ligeia*, in *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, and, in an outspoken form, in *Metzengerstein*. There he quasi offers an apology, justifying his dealing with metempsychosis at all on the ground of precedents. Unmistakable too is this sentence in *Mesmeric Revelation*:

What we call 'death' is but the painful metamorphosis. Our present incarnation is progressive, preparatory, temporary. Our future is perfected, ultimate, immortal. The ultimate life is the full design.

This is not re-incarnation as the Hindus teach it. They hold that all those forces which converge to form this present individual will, in due time, after death reassemble themselves to form a new individual, and so on indefinitely. The forces are determined by *karman*, the aggregate of good and evil thoughts and actions during life time. This *karman* will accumulate and thus keep the individual in the round of rebirth until such time as the person realizes to the full his essential and complete oneness with the All. He then merges into it and is liberated. Poe wrestled hard with this problem without arriving at a final conclusion as to the technique of re-incarnation.

One significant item which aligns him with the Eastern thinkers we may be allowed to refer to in conclusion. Though put into the mouth of Allemistakeo, it enunciates a working principle of tolerance and makes God the one and only reality to which all peoples bow:

No Nation upon the face of the earth has ever acknowledged more than *one God*. The Scarabaeus, the Ibis, etc., were with us (as similar creatures have been with others) the symbols or *media* through which we offered worship to the Creator too august to be more directly approached. ■

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| 2 <i>The Literati</i> , etc., by Edgar Allan Poe, with a sketch of the author, by Rufus Wilmot Griswold (New York, 1850), pp. 190-196. This collection, including the <i>Marginalia</i> , which we cite as such, is here briefly referred to as <i>Literati</i> . | edited by James A. Harrison, Vol. xvii, pp. 42-3.                  |
| 3 Cf. <i>Literati</i> , pp. 374 ff.   | 10 <i>Marginalia</i> CLXIX and LXXXI.                              |
| 4 See <i>Morella</i> .  | 11 Cf. <i>The Colloquy of Monos and Una</i> .                      |
| 5 See <i>A Descent into the Maelstrom</i> .   | 12 See Harrison's edition of the <i>Works</i> , Vol. xvii, p. 339. |
| 6 Cf. <i>Never Bet the Devil Your Head</i> .  | 13 6.2.1—2.  |
| 7 Cf. <i>Literati</i> , pp. 249-253.  | 14 6.8.4 and 6.  |
| 8 <i>Ibid.</i> p. 24f.  | 15 <i>Ibid.</i>  |
|   | 16 p. 340.   |
|   | 17 6.8.7, etc.   |
|   | 18 Cf. 6.10, etc.  |
|   | 19 <i>Ibid.</i>  |

\* An Orientalist of note and author of several books on philosophy and education, Dr Leidecker was Cultural Affairs Consultant, USIS, Bangkok. He also delivered a number of lectures at the Institute in 1956.

## The silent mesmerism of Indian thought

So, you see, our message has gone out to the world many a time, but slowly, silently, unperceived. It is on a par with everything in India. The one characteristic of Indian thought is its silence, its calmness. At the same time the tremendous power that is behind it is never expressed by violence. It is always the silent mesmerism of Indian thought. If a foreigner takes up our literature to study, at first it is disgusting to him; there is not the same stir, perhaps, the same amount of go that rouses him instantly. Compare the tragedies of Europe with our tragedies. The one is full of action, that rouses you for the moment, but when it is over there comes the reaction, and everything is

gone, washed off as it were from your brains. Indian tragedies are like the mesmerist's power, quiet, silent, but as you go on studying them they fascinate you; you cannot move; you are bound; and whoever has dared to touch our literature has felt the bondage, and is there bound for ever. Like the gentle dew that falls unseen and unheard, and yet brings into blossom the fairest of roses, has been the contribution of India to the thought of the world. Silent, unperceived, yet omnipotent in its effect, it has revolutionised the thought of the world, yet nobody knows when it did so. ■

—Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*,  
Vol. III, p. 274.