

JAMES ELROY FLECKER: POET, DIPLOMAT, ORIENTALIST¹

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Although the *Thousand and one nights*—known to the West in French translation since the early eighteenth century—familiarised Europe with a fantastic, pantomime view of the Islamic East, it is not too much to say that the general reading public in the West had no idea of the realities, as opposed to the fantasies, of contemporary life in the Islamic lands until the publication in 1836 of E. W. Lane's *Manners and customs of the modern Egyptians*. Leila Ahmed has truly written (actually with others of Lane's works also in mind, but her verdict derives its validity above all from the *Modern Egyptians*) that

Lane attacked inherited ideas about the Near East and re-defined it, and defined it as the Arab world. Drawn from the reality and undistorted by the myths and legends that created their own conventions of seeing for most of his contemporaries, Lane's portrait of the Arabic world disclosed a reality that for his contemporaries was entirely novel: how novel may perhaps be gauged by the fact that no Arab now would have difficulty in assenting to the general accuracy of the portrait, and Lane's works are now drawn on by European orientalists, along with the works of Arab historians such as Al-Jabarti, as source books on Islamic society in that age.²

That views of the East and a dimly-perceived knowledge of Arabic and Persian literature (that in Turkish remained a closed book, to be opened eventually by persons like Josef von Hammer-Purgstall and E. J. W. Gibb) did have some influence on English literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is indisputable, and one only has to enumerate a few titles like William Beckford's *Vathek*; Byron's *The Corsair*, *The bride of Abydos* and *The Giaour, a fragment of a Turkish tale*; Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*; Disraeli's novel *Tancred, or the New Crusade*; and Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustam*, in order to demonstrate

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 10 December 1986.

² *Edward W. Lane, a study of his life and work and of British ideas of the Middle East in the nineteenth century* (London and New York, 1978), p. 17.

this influence. But virtually all of this interest in the East derived from second-hand information; translations of Islamic works such as those of Sir William Jones and Rückert, travellers' accounts of life in the Islamic lands or from brief personal visits, necessarily superficial since rarely surmounting the language barrier, to view the antiquities or churches and monasteries of the Levant. These limitations did not necessarily make authors feel inadequate. Moore boasted that "Although I have never been in the East myself, yet every one who *has* been there declares that nothing can be more perfect than my representation of it, its people, and life, in 'Lalla Rookh'", yet, as H. A. R. Gibb drily observed, "His poem merely transports the accents of Scott from his native land to India"; it is true that Sir Walter Scott's mediaevalism and brilliant use of local colour in both his novels and in his poems and ballads gave a powerful fillip to contemporary enthusiasm for the East and the Arab world in particular.³ Amongst the figures of nineteenth-century English literature, only Lane, as mentioned above, and the bizarre, demoniacally-driven Sir Richard Burton, could justifiably claim prolonged residence in the Islamic lands and first-rate familiarity with their languages; but the latter's extravagant way of life and his, to contemporary minds, unhealthy interest in recondite, often perverted, sexual practices made him a disreputable figure in Victorian society and disqualified him from acting as an effective mediator of Islamic literature, whether history, belles-lettres or poetry, to the English-speaking and English-writing general public and literati alike. Burton did, it is true, attempt to cash in on the vogue for an agnostic, philosophical pessimism and hedonism, considered to be archetypically oriental, engendered by the publication in 1859 of Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubā'iyāt* of 'Umar Khayyām, by publishing in 1880 his *The Kasidah of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi*, allegedly the work of a Persian friend of his, who, wrote Burton himself in his Notes to the poem, "evidently aspires to preach a Faith of his own, an Eastern version of Humanitarianism, blended with the sceptical, or as we now say, the scientific habit of mind"; but such works as these only prolonged the life of what must be considered as a

³ Gibb, ch. "Literature", in Sir Thomas Arnold (ed.), *The legacy of Islam* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 207-8; C. E. Bosworth, "The influence of Arabic literature on English literature", *Azure* (London), no. 5 (Spring 1980), pp. 17-18.

highly one-sided, if not spurious, view of the ethos of Islam.⁴ By 1916 H.H. Munro ("Saki") could write an amusing, satirical story, "For the duration of the war", about a hoax perpetrated by an English country clergyman revolving around the discovery—supposedly by a nephew serving in the Mesopotamian campaign—of the verses of one Ghurab the hunter of Kirmanshah, which "breathed a spirit of comfortable, even-tempered satire and philosophy, disclosing a mockery that did not trouble to be bitter, a joy in life that was not passionate to the verge of being troublesome".⁵ In fact, Flecker—to anticipate somewhat—knew Burton's *The Kasidah* well, and as an Oxford student wrote out long extracts from it in his copy-book, noting for the first time that "Aflātūn" = Plato and "Aristū" = Aristotle.⁶

Only at the opening of the twentieth century did English literature produce a personage who had worked for some time in the Levant and who had linguistic knowledge of the literatures of the three great Islamic tongues, Arabic, Persian and Turkish,

⁴ See Fawn M. Brodie, *The devil drives, a life of Sir Richard Burton* (London, 1967), pp. 276-9. Although *The Kasidah* may justly be adjudged to be essentially sub-Fitzgerald/'Umar Khayyām, it nevertheless, as Brodie observes, went through sixteen editions in forty years; copies of it are still frequently to be encountered in second-hand bookshops.

⁵ "For the duration of the war", in *The complete works of Saki* (London, 1980), pp. 532-6. "Saki" knew Flecker's poetry, for in his story "A defensive diamond" (in *ibid.*, pp. 354, 358) he quotes from Flecker's "The gates of Damascus" (see below, pp. 370-71). Cf. also A.J. Langguth, *Saki: a life of Hector Hugh Munro, with six short stories never before collected* (London 1981), p. 252.

⁶ The vogue of Fitzgerald's version of 'Umar Khayyām was not without its counterpart outside the Anglo-Saxon world. In Germany, Friedrich Martin von Bodenstedt (1819-92) produced his *Lieder und Sprüche des Omar Chajjam* in 1881, but had well before this preceded Fitzgerald in this genre by producing in 1850 his *Tausend und ein Tag im Orient*, which included much of what appeared in the next year as *Die Lieder des Mirza-Schaffy*, allegedly Bodenstedt's translations from the hedonistic, wine-gardens-and-nightingales type of poetry of an Azerbaijani author, Mirzā Shafī' Wāsi'. Mirzā Shafī' really existed, but the "translations" were entirely concocted by Bodenstedt himself! Bodenstedt undoubtedly caught the mood of his time, and proved lastingly popular, for the *Lieder* have attained no fewer than two hundred odd editions in Germany. See *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie*, iii. 61-2; *Neue deutsche Biographie*, ii (1955), 355-6; *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon* (Munich, 1974), xiii. 5694. (I am grateful to Professor Josef van Ess of Tübingen University, who has confirmed for me that the *Lieder* were not genuine translations from (presumed) Persian or Azeri Turkish originals).

in the shape of James Elroy Flecker, and this writer's career was to be cut tragically short by the lingering illness which dogged his later years and was finally to kill him by the age of thirty.

Flecker was born in 1884, the son of an Anglican clergyman and headmaster of Dean Close School, Cheltenham, but actually on both sides of his parentage ethnically Jewish. His paternal grandfather was Issachar Flecker, from Lwów, who had moved to Constantinople to become a schoolmaster there and eventually to England, where he had become a Baptist minister. Flecker's father, William Hermann, married Sarah Ducat, also of learned Polish Jewish origin, who parents had been forced to flee to England because of persecution when they became Christians; both families were staunch Evangelicals. Their son James (originally "Hermann") Elroy was in later life often taken for a foreigner, and this offended him deeply; as his nephew and biographer John Sherwood writes, "He wore his Englishness with an air, but the garment was not a perfect fit". The unusual Christian name Elroy was a Biblical one, from the Hebrew of Genesis, xvi. 13, in the Revised Standard Version "a God of seeing", which he later however preferred to shorten to "Roy". A conventional education at his father's own school and then at Uppingham brought him to Trinity College, Oxford, where he followed the time-honoured courses of Classical Mods. and Greats; these studies left him with an abiding love of Greece and things Greek which was not, however, calculated to give him much sympathy for the career which he was deliberately to choose, that of the Levant Consular Service, most of whose posts naturally fell within the Ottoman Empire. Whilst at Oxford, he was already writing poetry, much of it for financial reasons, since he considered that his parents kept him chronically under-supplied with money; that poetry which he subsequently thought worthy of survival he drastically revised. At this period, Flecker considered Baudelaire as his master, at a time when the general British public considered Baudelaire as decadent and unhealthy, but Flecker had already come to what was to be the more modern view of the French writer as a sin-haunted, rigorously moralist poet, driven constantly onwards by demanding parents and a dominating, possessive mother—such an impulsion being closely parallel with what Flecker himself was feeling at the time. His Oxford years also brought him the friendship—one with possibly

bisexual or homosexual overtones⁷—of Jack Beazley, eventually Sir John Beazley, classical archaeologist and a celebrated authority on Greek vases, who died as recently as 1969. His only moderate achievement of Third-Class Honours in Greats in 1906 did not provide him with an entrée to top jobs in either government service or the academic world, to both of which he aspired at various moments. After some frustrating essays at school teaching, he decided in 1907 to enter the Levant Consular Service, defined officially as “His Majesty’s Consular service in the Ottoman dominions, Persia, Greece and Morocco”. The starting salary was £200 per annum, but if an entrant failed the examinations after two years, he was liable to forfeit a £500 bond, the money for which had of course to be provided, in Flecker’s case, by his long-suffering parents. The calibre of entrants to this service was not generally high, since it meant a career in places with unattractive climates or in dreary oriental provincial towns; it was the Diplomatic Service to which the top flyers aspired. Preparations for the Student Interpreters’ examination involved two years’ study at Cambridge, learning the local languages. In Flecker’s favour, it may be said that the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, the culmination of several years’ secret agitation, and the ultimate deposition of the autocratic Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamīd II, probably did inspire him with hopes that Turkey was capable of reform and might be transformed into a liberal, constitutional state.⁸

Flecker now began to study Turkish, Arabic, Persian and Russian under the guidance of the Director of Studies for the course, Professor E. G. Browne (1862-1926), famed most of all as a Persian scholar, author of a standard *Literary history of Persia* and tireless publicist for the Persian constitutionalists of the 1906-9 period, but himself originally a student of Turkish; during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, when he was still only sixteen, he had reacted so strongly against the cant of the Gladstonian Liberals and other partisans of the Slav peoples that he felt, as he later wrote, that “he would have died to

⁷ John M. Munro (see below, n. 13) doubts whether this relationship could be “clinically defined” as homosexual (*James Elroy Flecker*, p. 32).

⁸ These biographical details concerning Flecker are derived from the excellent work of his nephew, John Sherwood, *No golden journey, a biography of James Elroy Flecker*, London 1973.

save Turkey".⁹ Although much of the interpreters' course was inevitably vocational and practical in its bent, Flecker did imbibe a certain amount of classical Arabic literature, including poetry, for, like every beginner in Persian, he studied Sa'di's *Gulistān*; he did indeed publish translations from this in the *Cambridge Review*, these marking his first use of oriental hyperbole and pomposity for comic effect. He also heard Arabic verse from the popular romance, the *Sirat 'Antar*, for Browne had had gramophone recordings made in Cairo by one of the professional storytellers there, doubtless one of the *'Antariyyin* to whom Lane had listened and whom he had described in his book eighty years before.¹⁰

Flecker's academic performance at Cambridge was for long indifferent. In the examination at the end of the first year, he was placed fourth out of six candidates, with the verdict "clever but erratic". He now seems to have pulled his socks up, realising that he could not achieve the two divergent aims of establishing a literary reputation with his poetry which would make a steady career unnecessary, and of passing the consular examinations. In the end he passed out with first-class honours, and E. G. Browne now reported to the Foreign Office that "Mr. Flecker has recovered the ground he lost last year in a really marvellous way, and deserves the highest credit for the way he has worked during the last year".¹¹

With this success to his credit, he entered the Levant Consular Service and in June 1910 departed for Constantinople, where he was to be attached to the British consulate in the Ottoman capital. He went out with an outfit which seems excessive by modern standards of travelling light as necessitated by air travel, having been recommended to take diplomatic uniform, a frock coat and top hat, an automatic pistol and two watches, one for European and one for Turkish time, among much else. Reader Bullard (later Sir Reader Bullard and British Minister, later Ambassador, in

⁹ Sir E. Denison Ross, memoir prefaced to the second edition of Browne's *A year amongst the Persians, impressions as to the life, character, and thought of the people of Persia received during twelve months' residence in that country in the years 1887-1888* (Cambridge, 1926), p. viii.

¹⁰ Sherwood, *op. cit.*, p. 94; Lane, *An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians written in Egypt during the years 1833-1835*, chs. XXI-XXIII, "Public recitations of romances".

¹¹ Sherwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-2, 95, 99.

Tehran 1939-46), then Junior Dragoman at the Consulate, records that he found his newly-arrived junior colleague good company at this time.¹² But very soon the preliminary symptoms of the tuberculosis which was to kill Flecker less than five years later were apparent, and bouts of ill health were to alternate with periods of physical well-being and mental euphoria and creativity. On the boat to Constantinople, he met a Greek lady from Athens, Hellé Skiaderessi, and married her, in the face of parental suspicion, on his exiguous official salary and when his health was known to be impaired, in May 1911. He had already spent a period in a Gloucestershire sanatorium, and the last twenty months of his life were to be spent in similar institutions at the Alpine resorts of Leysin and Davos, in the latter of which he died in January 1915.

He seems to have performed his consular duties, when he was well, in Constantinople, Smyrna and then, after September 1911, as Vice-Consul in Beirut, in a somewhat perfunctory and uninterested manner; careless and negligent about money matters, he and his wife were permanently hard up and dependent on subsidies from home. He more than once failed to pass official examinations in Ottoman law and was nearly dismissed the service, putting his £ 500 bond in peril, but the Foreign Office in London seems to have been remarkably tolerant and long-suffering over his extended periods of sick leave. Whilst in Beirut, he mentions in a letter to home that he met there "a young fellow from Magdalen College, Lawrence, who is going out to Carchemish to dig for Hittites ... an enthusiast for literature which is rare in Beirut". The most exciting event of his stay was, however, the war between Italy and Turkey over Tripolitania in the autumn of 1911. On the declaration of war, Flecker returned from a weekend at Brumana for his duties in Beirut, expecting that Britain might have to act as protecting power in the Ottoman Empire for the Italians, a role which Germany in fact assumed. Flecker wrote to his parents about the hopeless inefficiency of the Turkish naval detachment protecting Beirut, which failed to prevent the Italians from shelling the port; with an event like bombardment by a European power, there was always the danger

¹² Bullard, *The camels must go, an autobiography* (London, 1961), pp. 68-71; see also idem, "James Elroy Flecker in Constantinople", *The Listener* (London), 15 February 1951, pp. 268-9.

of a massacre of local Christians by the Muslims on the lines of the 1860 massacres, and the situation was tense:

I was woken up by a shot and looked out of my window and saw an Eyetalian warship there. Had a ticklish drive up to the Consulate when the great ships began firing on a wretched little gunboat in the port, among a panicky population: on my way back, more ticklish drive still, when despite the cavass my carriage (I was with a Russian V.C.) was stopped by an armed mob and we were only rescued by two valiant soldiers and the name of England which I repeated in my best Turkish. The two soldiers got on our carriage facing backwards and levelled their rifles against the mob.

Hellé is fortunately as calm as a cucumber, her only hope is to kill a Turk which I won't let her do. I would rather kill an Eyetalian at present, for much as I love the people, and little of a Pacifist as I am, there was something brutal because so stupid, in putting a whole town into panic to destroy a wee gunboat and wee torpedo-boat which wouldn't hurt a flea. Also their shooting was vile: they never gave the boats time to surrender: they had to bombard three times before sinking them: besides killing 50 sailors they killed about 100 people on the quay (the boats were in the harbour). They gained nothing and very nearly did for all the Europeans in the place. The danger was only momentary, however: the Vali has done splendidly: the town is under martial law and as quiet as a lamb.

Seven Europeans were in fact killed in the streets of Beirut, and Flecker and the Russian Vice-Consul were attacked by a mob, but protected by Turkish soldiers sent by the Governor. According to what T.E. Lawrence later wrote concerning this incident, the Imperial Russian government rewarded the coachman with £50, but a cheese-paring British government, to Flecker's embarrassment, merely with a silver cigarette case. One occasion recorded when Flecker's consular services were required was in connection with an Italian prostitute, whose nose had been bitten off by the pimp from whom she was trying to escape, since the pimp was a Maltese subject and therefore claimed British protection.¹³ This kind of incident was indeed a constant embarrassment to European consular powers in the region, when so many Levantines, often worthless and shady characters, claimed the protection of European countries in disputes with the local authorities; sixty years before, the British

¹³ Sherwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-4, 146-7, 150-2; John M. Munro, *James Elroy Flecker* (Twayne's English Authors Series, Boston, Mass., 1976), pp. 39-40, 43.

Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston had nearly gone to war over one of these, the Portuguese Jew Don Pacifico.

What is surprising, in view of his writings on Islamic themes and, as will be mentioned in a moment, his occasional use of Islamic verse forms, is Flecker's increasing lack of sympathy with and, in the end, his physical aversion from the Near East and many aspects of its life. In the draft of an "Open letter to the poets of England" which he apparently intended to publish in 1912 but never actually did, Flecker sets forth some of his thoughts on life in the Near East, and criticises those who praise distant lands as paradises, not having visited them, and denigrate their own country. He avers that the poets should "at least pay existing Utopias the compliment of a visit of inspection" before they "upset the constitution" to create one of their own design in Britain:

Come and live out of England and learn to rejoice in your country. Come and live for a year, not in the Lebanon, where civilisation has had its say, but in Turkey proper. Test the surface of a Turkish road and the smells of a Turkish town and learn for the first time to glory in the order and cleanliness of civilisation which you seem to take for granted. Stay long enough to overcome the first impression of the picturesque—which results from mere indifference—and let the sordid misery of those filthy stalls and flyblown wares sink into your soul. Learn to believe automatically every story of horror and oppression that you hear. They are all true. Seek for the magic of the Arabian Nights and you will learn that the East changes—all that belonged to a civilisation dead long years ago. And after that, gentlemen, if you are really too ethereal to appreciate a metalled road, an express train, or a sweet and sanded oyster bar, at least do not beat your gossamer wings on the hard blue cover of the minority report ...

The Lebanon was not, it was true, Turkey, but even this was not a paradise which would bear close inspection:

... I think you would find that the life of the soil is only good for peasants who have no ideas and for philosophers who can live on ideas alone. For an intelligent man the peasant life is a horror; and thousands flee to America every year. And happiness? To hear the Lebanese wail you would think they are ruled with a whip.¹⁴

¹⁴ Sherwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-5. The reference to the "minority report" is, as Sherwood points out (p. 155 n. 1), one to the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission of February 1910, the Poor Law being one of the social concerns with which Flecker's fellow-poet Rupert Brooke was at this time busying himself.

As mentioned above, Flecker's Phil-Hellenism, the almost automatic result of a classical education at this time, did not predispose him to an understanding of the Ottoman mentality, but it must be admitted that it was probably the debilitating disease from which he was suffering that contributed most of all to his irritability with oriental life and his aesthetic and physical reaction against the bright, sharp outlines of Near Eastern light and topography in favour of the misty, damper configuration and contours of the English countryside, the wooded Cotswold hills and the pine-covered heaths of the Bournemouth district which he had known as a boy. This disillusionment is most sharply portrayed in his poem "Brumana", written at the resort in the mountains above Beirut where he was attempting to convalesce:

Oh shall I never be home again?
 Meadows of England shining in the rain
 Spread wide your daisied lawns: your ramparts green
 With briar fortify, with blossom screen
 Till my far morning—and O streams that slow
 And pure and deep through plains and playlands go,
 For me your love and all your kingcups store,
 And—dark militia of the southern shore,
 Old fragrant friends—preserve me the last lines
 Of that long saga which you sung me, pines,
 When, lonely boy, beneath the chosen tree
 I listened, with my eyes upon the sea ...

a nostalgia brought on by what he calls the "traitor pines" of Mount Lebanon, reminding him too poignantly of the pines of the Dorset heathlands.¹⁵ An old acquaintance subsequently wrote that Flecker had told him that "he had not greatly liked the East—always excepting, of course, Greece—and that his intercourse with Mohammedans had led him to find more good in Christianity than he had previously suspected".¹⁶

Nevertheless, Flecker, in the fairly modest corpus of poetry which he published between 1907 and 1915, drew for one vein of inspiration at least on Islamic models. His studies in Cambridge, for instance, introduced him to R. A. Nicholson's *Selected poems from the Divāni Shamsī Tabriz*, and stimulated his translation

¹⁵ *Collected poems*, ed. J. C. Squire (London, 1916), pp. 179-81, cf. Munro, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-6.

¹⁶ Frank Savery, cited in Squire's introduction to the *Collected poems*, p. xiv.

from the great mystic Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-73), "The lover of Jalalu'ddin"

My darling wandered through the house,
His bow upon the rebeck, light as flame.
Soft melodies he played, astray with sweet carouse,
Mad songs without a name.
Then, changing to a solemn mode and measure,
"Cupbearer, wine!" he cried,
"Wine for the sons of pleasure,
The children of desire!"

in which he brilliantly catches the mixture of sensuousness, bacchic celebration and mystical piety of this genre of poetry.¹⁷ The Ottoman poet Nedīm (d. 1730) provided the opening lines of "Saadabad", a poem stimulated by an outing of Flecker and his future wife to Sa'dābād, in the valley of the Sweet Waters of Europe outside Constantinople, where Sultan Aḥmed III (whose reign in the early eighteenth century became celebrated as the *Lāle devri* "Time of tulips") had had a summer palace. The first verse of the poem follows Nedīm's lines about a clandestine meeting of lovers at Sa'dābād

Let us deal kindly with a heart of old by sorrow torn:
Come with Nedim to Saadabad, my love, this silver morn:
I hear the boatmen singing from our caique on the Horn;
Waving cypress, waving cypress, let us go to Saadabad!

the last line being the envoi of each verse both in Nedīm's original and in Flecker's translation; the second part of "Saadabad" comprises Flecker's own lines, expressing his enjoyment of the languorous journey, with an oblique reference to the ancient Greek dream of liberating Constantinople and making it once more, after five centuries' Turkish domination, the Second Rome and the centre of Eastern Christendom. For this poem, as for some translations which he made from the early Ottoman poet Nesīmī (d. 1417), Flecker drew on E. J. W. Gibb's classic *History of Ottoman poetry*.¹⁸ Likewise for his amusing "The Hammam

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 87; cf. Nicholson, *Selected poems from the Divāni Shamsī Tabriz* (Cambridge, 1898), pp. 162-5.

¹⁸ *Collected poems*, pp. 160-2; cf. Gibb, *A history of Ottoman poetry* (London, 1900-9), i. 343-68, iv. 44-5. For a more recent translation of Nedīm's poem by

Name (from a poem by a Turkish lady)", describing in amorous language a beautiful boy's visit to the bath, he followed in broad outline a Turkish original given by Gibb, but in fact by the male poet Beligh of Yeñişehir (d. 1760).¹⁹

A visit to Damascus for Christmas 1911, a city whose extensive bazaars enchanted Flecker, provided the inspiration for "The Gates of Damascus", a poem which, Sherwood has written, "marks the high point of Flecker's achievement in the oriental mood, since it combines powerful and concentrated ideas with an assured and free manipulation of the Persian-style internal and external rhymes", and which Flecker himself described to his friend Savery as "my greatest poem".²⁰ It comprises, after an introductory quatrain

Four great gates has the city of Damascus,
And four Grand Wardens, on their spears reclining,
All day long stand like tall stone men
And sleep on the towers when the moon is shining.

the four songs of these guardians. The Gate of the East is the road across the desert to Baghdad and Diyārbekr, and for many, the way to death, where despairing travellers shall see their hopes shattered and find only perdition:

The Sun shall eat thy fleshless dead, O Caravan, O Caravan!

And one who licks his lips for thirst with fevered eyes shall face in fear
The palms that wave, the streams that burst, his last mirage, O Caravan!

That to the West leads across Lebanon towards the Mediter-
ranean,

The dragon-green, the luminous, the dark, the serpent-haunted sea,
The snow-besprinkled wine of earth, the white-and-blue-flower foaming
sea.

in which the eager voyager is spurred ever-onwards, but for whom
adventure can bring mystery and potential danger, for

Beyond the bay in utmost West old Solomon the Jewish King
Sits with his beard upon his breast, and grips and guards his magic ring:

J. R. Walsh, see *The Penguin book of Turkish verse*, ed. Nermin Memenencioglu and Fahir Iz (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 113-14.

¹⁹ *Collected poems*, pp. 163-5; cf. Gibb, *A history of Ottoman poetry*, iv. 127-9.

²⁰ *Collected poems*, pp. 151-7; Sherwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 149, 170.

And when that ring is stolen, he will rise in outraged majesty,
And take the World upon his back, and fling the World beyond the sea.

The North Gate conveys traders and merchants, impelled by hope
of material profit, to Aleppo, where

... thou shalt sell thy wares for thrice the Damascene retailers' price,
And buy a fat Armenian slave who smelleth odorous and nice.

and where the wily trafficker is enjoined

Sell them the rotten, buy the ripe! Their heads are weak: their pockets
burn.

Aleppo men are mighty fools. Salaam Aleikum! Safe return!

But at the opposite pole from here, where craft and guile are the
watchwords, is the South Gate, that of the pilgrim en route for the
Holy Places and of the devotee, whose physical hardships shall be
amply requited by a mystical union with God:

And God shall make thy body pure, and give thee knowledge to endure
This ghost-life's piercing phantom-pain, and bring thee out to Life again.

And God shall make thy soul a Glass where eighteen thousand Aeons
pass,

And thou shalt see the gleaming Worlds as men see dew upon the grass.

And son of Islam, it may be that thou shalt learn at journey's end
Who walks thy garden eve on eve, and bows his head, and calls thee
Friend.

Flecker's symbolism is clear in this poem, since, in John M. Munro's words, "Those who elect to pursue the way of aggressive confrontation with danger, those who seek sensual pleasures, and those who seek material wealth are tempting Fate. Only those who yearn for a transcendental reality are following the proper course, for knowledge of God alone can set the soul at rest". Munro also percipiently notes that the spirituality of the poem is alien to Flecker's normal, sensuous appreciation of the present life.²¹ It may be that the prospect of early death brought his mind round to a more mystical view of existence, for he does seem to have returned at this late hour of his life to a more sympathetic and appreciative view of the Christianity which he had abandoned in his Oxford youth for a fashionable agnosticism.

Flecker's oriental studies almost inevitably made him familiar with the legends which had early grown up all through the Near

²¹ *James Elroy Flecker*, p. 70.

East around Alexander the Great, the Koranic Dhu 'l-Qarnayn, and his exploits as a military conqueror. Just as he was attracted to another, but much later one, of the great themes of imaginative literature in the West, that of Don Juan (he wrote a drama, *Don Juan*, which has however never been professionally staged),²² so the Alexander figure gave rise to his lengthy set of quatrains, "The Ballad of Iskandar", in which the Greek monarch commissions a ship, whose complement is to include a group of sages, amongst them Aflāṭūn and Aristū, (i.e. Plato and Aristotle) in search of new worlds to subdue:

He drank his bowl of wine: he kept
The flute-girls dancing till they wept,
Praised and kissed their painted lips,
And turned to the Captain of All his Ships

And cried, "O Lord of my Ships that go
From the Persian Gulf to the Pits of Snow,
Inquire for men unknown to man!"
Said Sultan Iskandar of Yoonistan.

"Daroosh is dead, and I am King
Of Everywhere and Everything:
Yet leagues and leagues away for sure
The lion-hearted dream of war.

"Admiral, I command you sail!
Take you a ship of silver mail,
And fifty sailors, young and bold,
And stack provision deep in the hold,

"And seek out twenty men that know
All babel tongues which flaunt and flow;
And stay! Impress those learned two,
Old Aflatun, and Aristu.

"And set your prow South-western ways,
A thousand bright and dimpling days,
And find me lion-hearted Lords
With breasts to feed Our rusting swords."

The ship sails onwards for thrice seven years, until its silver finery is reduced to mouldering decay and shabbiness. Then it meets another fine, silver ship, whose lord states that he likewise has been sent by Sultan Iskander, as Aristū believes, "to find Un-

²² See *ibid.*, pp.97-102; Munro's verdict is that "it cannot be regarded as other than a literary curiosity".

conquered tracts of humankind". But Aflātūn realises that they have met a phantom ship, the ideal form of their own original vessel, which will endure when they themselves have dissolved into nothingness

"Alas," he said, "O Aristu,
A white weak thin old fool are you.

"And does yon silver Ship appear
As she had journeyed twenty year?
And has that silver Captain's face
A mortal or Immortal grace?

"Theirs is the land (as well I know)
Where live the Shapes of Things Below;
Theirs is the country where they keep
The Images men see in sleep.

"Theirs is the Land beyond the Door,
And theirs the old ideal shore.
They steer our ship: behold our crew
Ideal, and our Captain too.

"And lo! beside that mainmast tree
Two tall and shining forms I see,
And they are what we ought to be,
Yet we are they, and they are we".

"He spake, and some young Zephyr stirred
The two ships touched: no sound was heard;
The Black ship crumbled into air;
Only the Phantom Ship was there.

"And a great cry rang round the sky
Of glorious singers sweeping by,
And calm and fair on waves that shone
The Silver Ship sailed on and on."²³

Flecker was proud of his mastery of formal Islamic poetical structures as well as of his achievement in conveying the themes and spirit of Islamic literature. When in 1913 a critic writing in the *New Age* carped at his "Yasmin, a ghazel", which begins

How splendid in the morning glows the lily: with what grace he throws
His supplication to the rose: do roses nod the head, Yasmin?

and stated that it was "probably rather incompetence than tame impertinence that allows Mr. James E. Flecker to call his verses a

²³ *Collected poems*, 137-43.

Ghazal", he angrily retorted, "The poem is an absolutely perfect ghazal of the *strictest possible* oriental type. If your critic cannot read Persian, he may refer to Gibb's *Ottoman Poetry* for confirmation. The word 'head' before 'Yasmin' rhymes completely through the ten verses. This is the chief mark of a ghazal. I do not suppose your critic is so fantastic as to expect me to reproduce a 'failatun' metre, or the mute izafat".²⁴

It is, however, *Hassan* (in full, *Hassan, the story of Hassan of Bagdad and how he came to make the Golden Journey to Samarkand, a play in five acts*) which most readily springs to mind when Flecker's debt to the Orient is being considered. In it, Flecker essayed for the second time (after his *Don Juan*, see above) the genre of poetic drama, one in which hardly any English poets before his time had achieved much success; *Hassan* is therefore a landmark, pointing the way to more recent successes in this field by authors like T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry. Actually, much of *Hassan* is formally in prose, but the general effect is undeniably poetic, and a great part of the play could be set out in print as free verse.

The genesis of *Hassan* lies in Flecker's stay on Corfu in the summer of 1911, when he was working on his Turkish for a forthcoming consular examination and was reading various works in Turkish, including a volume of farcical tales, in one of which a simple old man Hassan is duped over a supposed love philtre by a Jewish magician Zachariah. He was also reading at this time the French translation by J. C. Mardrus of the *Thousand and one nights*, and this must have influenced him in making the setting of *Hassan* Baghdad rather than Turkey. Flecker carefully worked over and improved all his work, usually producing tauter and more pleasing versions of his poems. *Hassan* too was much revised, and the final version, which was to form the basis for the acting text—Flecker was highly anxious that it should appear on the professional London stage—was not made till Autumn 1914 when he was at Davos, in the light of the theatrical manager Basil Dean's practical suggestions. During this process of three years' revision, *Hassan* moved from its origins as a farcical pantomime to a drama of human disillusionment with a climax of high tragedy.²⁵

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-9; Sherwood, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

²⁵ For the details of Flecker's composition and revision of *Hassan*, see Sherwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-11, and Munro, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-12.

The middle-aged sweetmaker of Baghdad, the "poisoner of children" Hassan, is the unifying character of the play. He unfortunately becomes enamoured of the widow Yasmin, beautiful but fickle, who has no time for him when he is poor and obscure, but who fawns over him when he has become the caliph's friend and for the moment an exalted personage. Superimposed on this plot revolving round Hassan and Yasmin's relations, is the main theme of the play: Hassan's unknowing rescue of the Caliph Haroun ar Raschid from a planned *coup d'état* in Baghdad of the King of the Beggars, Rafi. Hassan thereby achieves fame and royal patronage, but is compelled by the sadistic caliph to witness the self-chosen death by slow torture, after one single day of union, of Rafi and his beloved Pervaneh, whom Rafi had set out to rescue from her involuntary incarceration in the caliph's harem. Hassan now realises too late the truth of the caliph's words to him, that Hassan had of his own free will left behind his former obscurity for a life in the shadow of the caliph, but was now exposed to his dangerous whims:

CALIPH: Do not despair, good Hassan. You would not take my warning: you have left the Garden of Art for the Palace of Action: you have troubled your head with the tyranny of princes, and the wind of complication is blowing through your shirt. You will forfeit your house and be banished from the Garden, for you are not fit to be the friend of kings. But for the rest, since you did me great service the other night, go in peace, and all the confectionery of the Palace shall be ordered at your shop.²⁶

Hassan and Ishak, the caliph's court poet, in revulsion against the capriciousness and cruelty of court life, resolve to leave Baghdad for good:†

ISHAK: Hassan—where doth he lie? Hassan, O Hassan. Thou hast broken that gentle heart, Haroun, and I have broken my lute: I play no more for thee. † I am leaving this city of slaves, this Baghdad of fornication. I have broken my lute and will write no more qasidahs in praise of the generosity of kings. I will try the barren road, and listen for the voice of the emptiness of earth. And you shall walk beside me.²⁷

Taking only his old Bokhara prayer rug, Hassan accompanies Ishak, the two of them renouncing the world as dervishes, in the caravan leaving for the East:

²⁶ *Hassan* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1948), p. 110.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 114, 115-16.

HASSAN:

Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

ISHAK:

We travel not for trafficking alone;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:
For lust of knowing what should not be known;
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.²⁸

Within the play, Flecker achieves a marvellous effect of Arabic diction, with neat and often amusing turns of phrase, or passages of poetic hyperbole:

SELIM (*his face in YASMIN's bosom*): Couldst thou but see, O my Uncle, the silver hills with their pomegranate groves; or the deep fountain in the swelling plain, or the Ethiopian who waters the roses in the garden, or the great lamp between the columns where the incense of love is burned.²⁹

and

SELIM: Plunge not the finger of enquiry into the pie of impertinence, O my uncle.³⁰

and

RAFI: Truly, O most disgusting negro, comprehension and thou have been separated since your youth. Shall I then drop the needle of insinuation and pick up the club of statement?³¹

The underlying theme of the play is the inevitable clash, so Flecker asserts, between aestheticism and artistic feeling on the one hand, and the decent, unimaginative ways of ordinary life and humanity on the other. Hassan laments

Oh, cruel destiny, thou hast made me a common man with a common trade. My friends are fellows from the market, and all my worthless family is dead. Had I been rich, ah me! how deep had been my delight in matters of the soul, in poetry and music and pictures, and companions

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

who do not jeer and grin, and above all, in the colours of rich carpets and silks.³²

Yet when he attains riches, including a house in an exquisite environment within the bounds of the caliphal palace grounds, his inner peace is totally shattered, at least for the period of the action of the play, by the refinements of cruelty, linked with the beauty, which he is forced to witness and at one remove experience. Persons of aesthetic sensibility, Flecker seems to be saying, such as Haroun ar Raschid and his father the previous caliph al Mahdi (who executed the gifted Byzantine designer of a fountain at his court lest he build another to equal it), cannot use art so that it elevates and enriches mankind's experience; perhaps it is the corrupt, fallen nature of man which ensures that artistic feeling is perverted and used for sadistic ends at the worst, or at the best used only to flatter a prince's ego. This is presumably why Hassan's companion Ishak renounces his poetic trade as a "dissector of souls" in favour of that of itinerant ascetic. It is as if Flecker in the end recognised that the doctrine of art for art's sake, to which he had broadly adhered in his poetic work, is an inadequate concept for expressing the richness of all human life and thought; whilst the agonies which he piles on in the last act of *Hassan*, with the torturing and execution of the two lovers Rafi and Pervaneh and their appearance as ghosts, were conceivably a dim reflection of Flecker's own somewhat twisted emotional make-up (it seems, from hints in his letters and accounts of his conversations, that his sexual life included sado-masochistic practices).³³

The production rights of *Hassan* were made over early in 1914 to Basil Dean, a member of the great actor-manager Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's company at His Majesty's Theatre, London, but the First World War supervened; it was in any case obvious that the staging required would have to be very elaborate. Hence it was not until 20 September 1923 that *Hassan* was actually produced on the London stage (a German translation had been staged at Darmstadt three months before). With a considerable publicity

³² Ibid., p. 25.

³³ Cf. the analysis of *Hassan* in Munro, op. cit., pp. 106, 108-11; and for comments on Flecker's sexual make-up, see Sherwood, op. cit., pp. xvi-xvii, 105, 132, and Munro, op. cit., p. 92, who notes a vein of interest in flagellation running through several of Flecker's works.

build-up and the added attractions of music by Delius and choreography of the ballet sequences by Fokine, it was a remarkable success, running for 281 performances to packed houses. Subsequently, however, the dramatic flaws in what was admittedly a text of highly poetic beauty, became more apparent (we know that Flecker intended to revise and tightened up his text, but became too ill to work on it), and it was not revived until 1951. But notwithstanding *Hassan's* faults of construction and the unattractive streak of sadism which runs through it, the splendour of its language and its magical evocation of a picture-book vision of the East shine forth and give it a lasting value.³⁴

One might close by posing once again the paradox, that a man who became in the end so out of sympathy with the East—admittedly, a feeling doubtless helped along by physical causes—could write so successfully in an oriental mould (*Hassan* was in fact skilfully translated into Persian subsequently, as *Hasan yā jādda-yi zarrin-i Samarqand*, and actually staged in Tehran in Murdād 1324/June 1945).³⁵ This he seems to have recognised himself; in 1913 he had written to his friend Savery concerning his poem “The Gates of Damascus”, “I consider this to be my greatest poem ... It was inspired by Damascus itself by the way. I loathe the East and the Easterns, and spent all my time there dreaming of Oxford. Yet it seems—even to hardened Orientalists—that I understand”.³⁶

³⁴ Sherwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-5.

³⁵ The producer of this Persian version was the then Press Attaché, Broadcasting, at the British Embassy, the late Laurence Elwell-Sutton (subsequently to be Professor of Persian at Edinburgh University). The translator was Ḥusayn-‘Alī Sulṭānzāda Pisyān, Professor of English at Tehran University, and the translation appeared in print as a publication of the British Council in Tehran, n.d. [1946]. I am grateful to Dr. D. O. Morgan of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, for drawing my attention to this curious little work and for lending me his own copy.

³⁶ Sherwood, *op. cit.*, p. 184. The present paper is an expanded and substantially rewritten version of an article originally published in the now-defunct Arabic literary review, published in London, *Azure*, no. 11 (1982), pp. 10-14.