

BYRON, D'HERBELOT, AND ORIENTAL CULTURE

NAJI OUEIJAN,

NOTRE DAME UNIVERSITY LEBANON

Byron's personal contacts with Easterners and his ardent involvement in their daily affairs expanded and substantiated his knowledge of Oriental life and cultures. Although he did not have a satisfactory knowledge of Eastern languages, except for Greek and some Armenian, he made remarkable references to Eastern cultural elements, especially in his Oriental tales. Those references indicate, if anything, his genuine knowledge of Eastern histories and literatures, which he acquired from both his being on the spot and from his personal readings, the most remarkable of which include Sir William Jones's dexterous translations of Eastern Literature, the *Arabian Nights Entertainment*, and Barthélémy D'Herbelot's comprehensive dictionary of Oriental culture, *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1776). Those works, besides several others,¹ attracted his inquisitive mind, and "To the East" says Count Gamba, "he had looked, with the eyes of romance, from his very childhood".² In this work, I discuss Byron's reading of D'Herbelot in the first of the Oriental tales, *The Giaour*, with emphasis on one figurative device, which exposes the aesthetic and thematic veneer of the tale and proves, if anything, that Byron's use of Oriental matter is quite similar to that of Oriental poets.

D'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* is mentioned in the three sale catalogues, recently edited by Peter Cochran.³ Thomas Moore was the first to reproduce a memorandum book (1807), which listed most of the Oriental works Byron had read before the age of sixteen. Harold Wiener brought the 1816 sale catalogue of Byron's library to scholarly attention, and Albert Tezla offered lists of the Oriental works Byron read and referred to during his literary career. It is telling that one third of the 374 works that appeared in the 1816 sale catalogue of Byron's library were volumes about the Orient (including 17 works in French).⁴

The most significant reference Byron makes to the *Bibliothèque Orientale* is in his first Oriental tale, *The Giaour*. Byron's Fisherman, the narrator of a section of the verse tale, exalts the beauty of Leila's eyes and compares their sparks to those of the jewel of "Giamschid":

Her eye's dark charm 'twere vain to tell,
But gaze on that of the Gazelle,
It will assist thy fancy well,
As large, as languishingly dark,
But Soul beam'd forth in every spark
That darted from beneath the lid,
Bright as the jewel of Giamschid. (ll. 473-9)⁵

1: For a List of Byron's reading of Oriental matter, refer to Naji Oueijan, *A Compendium of Eastern Elements in Byron's Oriental Tales* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996): pp.171-6.

2: Count Gamba, as cited in Thomas Moore, *The Life, Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (London: John Murray, 1920; rpt. St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, Inc., 1972), p.119.

3 See Peter Cochran. Ed. *Byron's Library: The Three Book Sale Catalogues*. Available at: http://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/byrons_library.pdf

4: The works that are marked with asterisks (*) are mentioned in Byron's letters, journals, and notes and are listed in the 1816 sale catalog of Byron's library. In compiling this list, I am indebted partly to Wiener and partly to Tezla. History and Religion: *Bayle, Pierre. *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1687). Beaujour, Félix de. *Tableau du Commerce de la Grèce* (1800). Castellan, A. L. *Moeurs, Usages Costumes des Othomans, et Abrégé de Leur Histoire* (1812). D'Ohsson, Mouradja. *Tableau Générale de l'empire Othoman* (1787-1790). Journandes. *De Getarum Origine* (1597). *Moreri, Louis. *Grand Dictionnaire Historique* (1759). Sainte-Croix. *Mystères du Paganisme* (n.d.). De Vertot, René Aubert. *Histoire des Révolutions Arrivées dans le Gouvernement de la République Romaine* (n.d.). Language and Literature: *Croix, Petite De La. Contes Persans* (1709). *D'Herbelot, Barthélémy. *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1776). *Pauli, Demetrii. *Lexicon Tripartitum Linguae Graecae Hodiernae, Italicae et Gallicae* (1790). *Stephani *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (1815). Travel Literature: *Chardin, Jean. *Voyages en Perse* (1811). *Eugene, Prince. *Memoirs of Prince Eugene of Savoy* (1811). Pouqueville, François. *Voyage en Morée* (1805). Stephanopoli, D. and N. *Voyage de Stephanopoli en Grèce* (1800). Tavernier, Jean-Baptiste. *Voyages en Turquie, en Perse, et aux Indes* (1677-1678).

5: CPW.

Another Persian poet, Hafiz, writes: “What cares a heart which mirrors the unseen and possesses the Goblet of Jamshid for a ring which is mislaid for a moment?”⁸ Hafiz also refers to the seven-ringed goblet which contains the potion of immortality and reveals to its beholder the mystical truth of the universe. He strikes a cross-cultural cord when he writes:

Bearer give the wine that the Holy Grail
Will make claims of sight in the Void and thus fail
Give me so that I, with the help of the Grail
All secrets, like Jamshid, themselves avail.⁹

In his note, Byron refers to Giamschid as “the cup of the sun,” a description attested by D’Herbelot and frequently used by the Persian poets. D’Herbelot provides ample space in his work for all the above mentioned Persian poets without publishing their poetry. But, it is certain that Byron had read those Persian poets in Sir William Jones’s translations of Persian poetry. Byron acknowledges their significance in the following comment: “Ferdousi, author of the Shah Nameh, the Persian Iliad—Sadi, and Hafiz, the immortal Hafiz, the oriental Anacreon” (Moore, 48-9). And it seems that in his verse tale, Byron refers to D’Herbelot to testify his interest in accuracy and to satisfy the curiosity of his readers, whom he knew would not completely perceive his salient use of the Oriental simile, which if read by an informed reader would certainly confirm Byron’s genuine Oriental scholarship.

It is significant to note here that Byron’s Fisherman does not compare Leila’s beauty to Giamschid, but to the gem this legendary king possessed: “Bright as the jewel of Giamschid”. And as I mentioned before, Byron’s first intention was to change the line in his *Giaour* into “Bright as the ruby of Giamschid,” but consented to the request of Moore, who warned Byron of the association of the ruby with blood—the precious blood which in the tale is shed because of Leila’s beauty and her love for the Giaour. Byron, here, strikes a masterful thematic chord when he refers to Giamschid, whose mythology communicates very well the tragic action in *The Giaour*. Hassan, like Giamschid, acts like a god when he gives orders to drown his pure jewel, Leila, in the sea. Byron, who is the almighty of his own narrative tale, sends the Giaour to banish Hassan from the earth. The Giaour slaughters Hassan, and both lose Leila, this jewel of perfect beauty and purity. Besides, the liquor in Giamschid’s goblet, which Hafiz asserts contains red wine, symbolizes the innocent blood of Leila, sacrificed in the tale. This image then exposes the main theme of the tale—the most beautiful and pure is almost always destroyed by man’s brutality and pomp. Here, one wonders whether Leila is a symbol of beautiful Greece, which had then been destroyed by the Ottoman sultans for decades. Whether she is or not, Byron seems to expose the best and worst in man, in his tale. He also seems to proclaim that purity and beauty are quite often blood-stained by man’s ignorance and arrogance. This thematic binary flavours most if not all of Byron’s Oriental tales as it seasons most if not all Oriental tales told by Oriental story-tellers, whose main interest was always to capture the attention and stir the imagination and emotions of their listeners. Thus, the splendour of Byron’s Oriental simile lies in its thematic indications; but, it also lies in its rich figurative and aesthetic implications.

The Fisherman asks his readers to fancy the spark “That darted from beneath the lid” of Leila “Bright as the jewel of Giamschid.” Here Byron, through his Fisherman, becomes a traditional, skilled Oriental storyteller. Martha Pike Conant explains:

Of all the glimpses of Eastern life the most interesting is the constantly recurring picture of the oriental story-teller. Everywhere in the bazaars, by the wayside, in palace gardens or fishermen’s cottages, [as is the case with Byron’s Fisherman] during the feasts or before the caliph’s tribunal, by night and by day the teller of tales is sure of an interested audience. ... The chief appeal is to the listener’s or reader’s curiosity, and little thought is given to the structural unity of the narrative. ... [and the] close of the average story is usually as movable a point as the climax”.¹⁰

The lines of Byron’s Fisherman project a climax in the tale and foretell its dramatic and tragic end in a heroic style. The “spark,” from Leila’s eye is not a normal one; it has magical powers capable of piercing the eyes of the beholder, who would immediately be intoxicated by her beauty. On the other hand, it

8: Browne, I, p.317; see also pp.151, 261, and 290.

9: It was common belief in the West to associate Jamshid with King Arthur and the goblet to the Holy Grail.

10: Conant, Martha Pike. *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), pp.8-9.

associates with the glimmer of a swift metal weapon topped with a sharp sparkling blade, probably that of an arrow. The term “darted” refers to the swift speed of this arrow; and the “lid” with its coiled figure seems to refer to its bow. Thus when Leila’s lid is open, it curves and beams forth this gleaming spark, which cuts deep into the heart. Leila’s eye becomes a goblet filled with sparkling wine which intoxicates and pleases to the point of ecstasy. Such is Byron’s Oriental image of Eastern beauty, or perhaps of Greece’s beauty, which exposes his masterful and aesthetic employment of Oriental culture.

Byron’s dependence on D’Herbelot and other Eastern sources for information is therefore triggered by a deep and sincere interest in not only studying the culture of this region of the world but also in becoming one with it; i.e., to think and write like an Oriental writer or story-teller. Byron’s use of the myth of Jamshid is therefore far more fetched and stretched than the ordinary use. In *The Giaour*, Byron employs traditional Eastern literary conventions upon which an Eastern tragic love tale would be based; however, he goes beyond his Western contemporaries in his aesthetic representations of the East by showing the difference between Orientalist scholars, such as William Beckford and Thomas Moore, and Orientalist participants. And indeed, I am exalted as an Eastern reader by Byron’s ability to participate in Oriental life and colours and to render his Eastern references artistically condensed and smooth enough to satisfy an informed Western reader, such as Moore, or a even a Lebanese-American literary figure and philosopher, such as Amine Rihani, who was Kahlil Gibran’s friend and mentor and preserver of “the Byron Marble,” which Rihani took from Byron’s grave to decorate his desk. In this sense, D’Herbelot and other Orientalists may have provided Byron with Eastern sources, but they could not have given him the artistic skill and craftsmanship to render Eastern elements in his tale function symbolically and thematically much as they do in Oriental poetry.

References:

- Cochran, Peter. Ed. *Byron’s Library: The Three Book Sale Catalogues*. Available at: http://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/byrons_library.pdf
- Coleridge, Ernest Hartley. Ed. *The Works of Lord Byron*. Vol. III. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900.
- Conant, Martha Pike. *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: The Columbia University Press, 1908.
- D’Herbelot, Barthelamy. *Bibliothèque Orientale*. Maastricht, 1776.
- Firdausi. *The Sháhnáma of Firdausi*. Vol. I. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Marchand, Leslie A. Ed. *Byron’s Letters and Journals*. 12 vols. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973–1982.
- McGann, Jerome J. Ed. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*. 3 vols. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1980–1981.
- Moore, Thomas. *The Life, Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*. London: John Murray, 1920; rpt. St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, Inc., 1972.
- Nicholson, Reynold A. *Translations of Eastern Poetry and Prose*. Cambridge: University Press, n.d.; rpt. New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1967.
- Tezla, Albert. “Byron’s Oriental Tales: A Critical Study.” Diss. University of Chicago, 1952.
- Wiener, Harold S. L. “The Eastern Background of Byron’s Turkish Tales.” Diss. Yale University, 1938.