

THE VARYING INFLUENCE OF THE ORIENT

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THE casual observer usually is of the opinion that when Occidentals have been attracted by anything Oriental, it has been as an ephemeral fad or as a touch of exotic adornment. The disdain of the West for the East is deeply ingrained. This is due primarily to two influences: the assumption of superiority because of material advancement and the traditional exclusiveness of nominal Christianity. But as the world grows smaller the West is becoming aware of many realities. Since the World War, Occidentals have been driven to adjust their flat sympathies to a round world, and to consider the men and civilizations on the underside of the oceans. Industrially, politically, artistically and religiously, we are engaged with the Oriental problem.

The evidences of this Orient-mindedness are everywhere evident. The daily press gives accounts of the progress of Gandhi's campaign in India, and the silent cotton mills of England bear mute testimony to its effectiveness. Japan, using the West's favorite militarist methods, has given the statesmen of Washington, London, Paris, and Geneva many sleepless nights. Thus our material well-being and peace seem to be at the mercy of the Orient. If Gandhi and his ideas, and Manchuria, seem to be remote from American life, consider the facts that Chinese and Japanese bric-a-brac may today be purchased over the counter of Woolworth stores, and that the odor of incense which once burned only before the images of Buddha in far-off, silent shrines permeates the atmosphere of gift-shops that line Main Street. Furthermore, one of the most popular radio features of the day is a Hindu wizard who nightly exhorts a vast multitude to buy Beechnut chewing gum. Even Lao Tsu and Confucius have of late gone on the air to the accompaniment of an American orchestra playing pseudo-Oriental music. In our literature there is no less evidence of the influence of the East. Novels and stories that have a romantic Oriental setting, a Chinese villain, or a Hindu magician, are not to be numbered in scores and hundreds, but in thousands. Our poetry-makers have but recently abandoned the habit of experimenting with the hokku and the tanka forms, and of imitating the imagistic style of Li Po and Tu Fu.

A serious study could well be made of the movement which started with Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, and which might be said to include Witter Bynner and Adelaide Crapsey, a movement whose vestal fires were fondly tended and fed with Oriental fuel by Harriet Monroe. In the religious philosophy of the West the influences of the Orient are no less evident. We hear of the strong appeal Taoism has made to German intellectual youth. Wendell Thomas in *Hinduism Invades America* discloses the effectiveness of the teachings of Indian swami. And books by such eminent European scholars as Rudolf Otto's *Mysticism East and West* and W. S. Urquhart's *The Vedanta and Modern Thought*, indicate that in a very real sense Orientalism has been added to the conventional academic humanities and is coloring the thinking of a large portion of the intelligent laity of the West.

Several decades ago, Josiah Royce is reported to have remarked jocosely as he passed the home of a Cambridge matron who had invited friends to hear a swami, "Here do the heathen rage and the women imagine a vain thing." Today there are few metropolitan newspapers which do not print notices of meetings of Oriental cults among the Sunday religious announcements. To be sure, the attendants at these gatherings often are mentally unemployed dowagers who enjoy nothing more than the novelty of contemplating navels in incense-filled salons, or religious vagrants who fortnightly cross the threshold of a new cult. But though we may scoff at the mental calibre of many adherents of Orient-inspired cults and recognize the fact of a canny commercial sense in the leaders of these cults, we cannot ignore the truth that the religious soil of America seems most fertile for Oriental seed. There are just as many reasons to believe that the audiences of swami are spiritually hungry as to conclude in an off-hand manner that the devil has found more amusement for idle minds.

The truth of the matter is that since the seventeenth century the Occidental has discovered the wealth of the Indies, material or spiritual, as he needs it. There are outstanding historical instances in which the proverbial incompatibility between the East and West seem to have been entirely non-existent. Take as typical instances the dominating world-view of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. During the latter century, the romanticists viewed the universe much as Sankara and Buddha viewed it, and we find that

the Vedanta made an appreciable contribution to Occidental thinking. The temper of the eighteenth century was essentially different. Except for rare instances when mystics dreamed in solitude, the dominating rationalism of this period precluded sympathy with the teaching of ancient India. The practical nature of Confucianism and things Chinese made an appeal, however, and we find that the Orientalism of the eighteenth century is primarily related to *chinoiserie*.

One needs only to remind himself of the philosophical controversies between the Sensationalists and the Intuitionists to realize how neatly an ancient Chinese mystic castigated the majority of the Confucian school who lived largely by the data of the senses alone, when he referred to them as summer insects that denied the existence of ice. There is nicety in the manner this metaphor describes typical eighteenth century rationalism. The romantic reaction was in one sense an attempt to add a dimension to life, to add seasons to the ephemeral existence of man. Men turned to explore the depths long before plumbed by the Hindu sages; and when they did so, they discovered remarkable parallels in the conclusions. With these discoveries came a broadening of the bases of idealistic thought. This was particularly true in America.

No more suggestive proof of this fact can be offered than to refer to a passage in Romain Rolland's *Prophets of the New India*. "It would be a matter of deep interest to know exactly how far the American spirit has been impregnated, directly or indirectly, by the infiltration of Hindu thought during the nineteenth century," wrote Rolland, "for there can be no doubt that it contributed to the strange moral and religious mentality of the modern United States. . . . I do not know whether any historian will be found to occupy himself seriously with the question. It is nevertheless a psychological problem of the first order, intimately connected with the history of our civilization." The context in which this passage appears gives prominence to Emerson and some members of his transcendental circle who were deeply interested in the Orient.

Although the space at our disposal prohibits extensive discussion of the problem Romain Rolland suggests, it is possible, I think, to describe briefly the *mood* which welcomed strange Hindu doctrines in an America still predominantly Calvinistic. I find this mood expressed in a letter which Emerson wrote to his aunt, Mary

Moody Emerson, on October 16, 1823. The letter will be found in Cabot's *Memoir*. Young Emerson had not yet reached his majority. "I have a catalogue of curious questions that have long been accumulating, to ask you. . . . I ramble among doubts to which my reason offers no solution," the boy confided. Books, he wrote, seemed old and dull and unsatisfactory. He wished an answer from a living witness and faithful lover of the mysteries of Providence. Such an answer, could he procure it, would seem of more worth than all the books of all the centuries. "Now what is the good end answered," ran the first question, "in making these mysteries to puzzle all analysis?" Was not the ordinary effect of an unexplicable enigma opposition, ridicule, and bigoted scepticism? After all, was one to be driven to the conclusion that the universe, great and glorious in its operation, aimed "at the sleight of the mountebank who produces a wonder among the ignorant by concealing the causes of unexpected effects?" Emerson admitted that his questions were youthful, starting "in the infancy of inquiry," but he was mature enough to know that they were also "the longest stumbling-blocks in philosophy's way."

But these were only general queries. There were a host of specific problems that baffled him, and we do well to consider them also. What weapons had Aunt Mary prepared in active meditations against the problem of evil? What became of a slave, born in chains, beaten and toiling incessantly, ignorant of virtue and never practising it, who died cursing God and man? Was his lot eternal darkness because he had lived in the shadow of death on earth? And what of the millions of the worldly and impure, born upon earth generation after generation, never coming up to the best rules of human virtue. They could not possibly find favor in the spiritual world toward which they were traveling. "How is it, then, that a Benevolent Spirit persists in introducing onto the stage of existence millions of new beings in incessant series to pursue the same wrong road and consummate the same tremendous fate?" As to the old knot of human liberty,—“our Alexanders still *cut* its Gordian twines.” Then came the “Scotch Goliath, David Hume . . . this uncircumcised,” but where was the stripling who could stand before him and with adroit wit prove the existence of the universe and its Founder? The years had produced a long, dull procession of reasoners; they challenged the awful shade to duel and struck

the air. Daily the youthful inquirer was referred to his own feelings as a triumphant refutation of the "glazed lies of this deceiver," but never would he feel safe till he had a "victorious answer set down in impregnable propositions."

Now Emerson had known something of the Orientals before he wrote this letter, but it was not until some time after its writing that he turned avidly to the sacred books of the Hindus. Hume ruled the Occidental world with his Sensationalist philosophy. Emerson discovered in the Hindus a corroboration of his instinctive reactions and the "impregnable propositions" which helped him to refute, satisfactorily for himself at least, the "glazed lies" of the arch-deceiver of his time. In my recent study entitled *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* I have attempted to discuss in detail the uses Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott made of Oriental thought. I therefore do not pause to analyse the issues again. Our present purpose will be attained by the briefest suggestion of the answers the Hindus gave to the questions Emerson asked of his Aunt Mary.

The doctrine of the Over-Soul, a unique analogue to the concept of Brahma as the substrate of the universe, became for Emerson the "impregnable proposition" which he searched for in youth, a principle in which all contradiction was solved. In elucidation note these passages from his writings: "Wherever is life, wherever is God, there the Universe evolves itself as from a center to its boundless irradiation." And again, "Whoever therefore apprehends the infinite,—and every man can,—brings all worth and significance into that spot of space where he stands, though it be a ditch, a potato field, a work-bench." Not long ago Mr. Gilbert K. Chesterton, an able spokesman for those who conceive of the universe as composed of three distinct and separate entities, God, man, and matter, attempted to impale all absolute idealists with the poser "Is Piccadilly Circus God?" Emerson faced the same type of criticism and as early as 1834 wrote in his *Journal*: "What is there of the divine in a load of bricks? What is there of the divine in a barber's shop? Much. All." Elsewhere he exclaimed: "God is the substratum of all souls. Is not that the solution of the riddle?" It was—for Emerson. And he recognized with gratitude the endorsement India placed upon his instinctive beliefs.

But two more passages may be quoted to suggest the correspon-

dence between Emerson's beliefs and the cardinal principles of the Vedanta. Emerson's doctrine of Illusion is a patent parallel to the Hindu principle of Maya. Although Emerson recognized this same principle in Greek thought, he preferred the Hindu expression of it. How else explain such a passage as this?—"The early Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Xenophanes measured their force on this problem of identity. Diogenes of Appolonia said unless the atoms were one stuff, they could never blend and act with one another. But the Hindoos, in their sacred writings, express the liveliest feeling, both of the essential identity and of that illusion which they conceive variety to be. The notions, 'I am,' and, 'This is mine,' which influence mankind, are but delusions of the mother of the world. . . . And the beatitude of man they hold to lie in being freed from fascination." Nor was Emerson impervious to the Hindu doctrine of Karma. This doctrine is essentially so similar to his principle of Compensation that to note differences is almost to split hairs. The amalgamated doctrines became for him the answer to the question he had asked of his Aunt Mary—why God permitted the incessant millions of mortals, worldly and impure, to fail of the best, to travel wrong roads, and to consummate a sad fate. As Emerson compared the Greek and Hindu conclusions on the problem, he decided that: "The Indian system is full of Fate, the Greek not. The Greek uses the word, indeed, but in his mind the Fates are three respectable old women who spin and shear a symbolic thread,—so narrow, so limitary is the sphere allowed them, and it is with music. We are only at a more beautiful opera, or at private theatricals. But in India it is the dread reality, it is the cropping-out in our planted gardens of the core of the world; it is the abysmal Force, untameable and immense." Finally, in the essay on "Fate" we find this sentence: "To say it less sublimely,—in the history of the individual is always an account of his condition, and he knows himself to be a party to his present estate." Where could a better sentence than this be found to explain the Vedantic doctrine of Karma? Emerson but gave it a different name in his thinking and writing, the familiar term Compensation.

Now Emerson's position as a representative figure of the nineteenth century is so secure that we may, with entire justice, see in his Orientalism an example of the general Orientalism of his time. To be sure, there were many variations. In England, there were

Southey, Tom Moore, Byron, and Matthew Arnold who used Oriental embellishment and themes; in France, Leconte de Lisle and Gauthier; in Germany, the Schlegels, Rückert, Heine, and Goethe. But whatever the differences, the common denominator was that of romanticism, and romanticism, it is perhaps needless to repeat, was primarily concerned with man's being and its affinity with the universe. The Emersonian solution of the riddle of the universe, which owed so much to India, contained many echoes of both the world-view and the world-weariness of the nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth century Occidental interest in things Oriental found expression in an enthusiastic Sinomania. This was, perhaps, inevitable. There could have been little sympathy with the metaphysics of the Vedanta in the period dominated by Voltaire and Doctor Johnson. If there was to be any Oriental influence in the life of the time, it logically was to come from China. For, as I have already suggested, Orientalism has never made many converts in the West; its adherents have almost invariably been friends who recognized similarities in method and temper, and borrowed freely as long as these remained attuned to each other.

An unusual and comprehensive introduction to eighteenth century Sinomania will be found in lines from James Cawthorne's poem "On Taste," published in 1756:

Of late, 'tis true, quick sick of Rome and Greece,
 We fetch our models from the wise Chinese;
 European artists are too cool and chaste,
 For Mand'rin is the only man of taste;
 Whose bolder genius, fondly wise to see
 His grove a forest, and his pond a sea,
 Breaks out—and whimsically great designs
 Without the shackles or of rules or lines.

In greater detail the poet continues:

Form'd on his plans our farms and seats begin
 To match the boasted villas of Pekin.
 On every hill a spire-crowned temple swells,
 Hung round with serpents and a fringe of bells.
 In Tartar huts our cows and horses lie,
 Our hogs are fattened in an Indian sty;
 On every shelf a Joss divinely stares,
 Nymphs laid on chintzes sprawl upon our chairs;
 While o'er our cabinets Confucius nods,
 Midst porcelain elephants and china gods.

Furthermore, Goldsmith in *The Citizen of the World* makes his Chinese philosopher in London say: "The English have not yet brought the art of gardening to the same perfection with the Chinese, but have lately begun to imitate them. Nature is now followed with greater assiduity than formerly; the trees are suffered to shoot out with the utmost luxuriance; the streams no longer forced from their natural beds, are permitted to wind along the valleys; spontaneous flowers take the place of the finished parterre, and the enamelled meadow of the shaven green." In extension of general English interest in Chinese gardens, it is but necessary to refer to Addison's accounts in the files of the *Spectator*.

The reasons for this Chinese fad are not hard to find. In a period when there was revolt against "methodized nature," regularity, balance, and uniformity came to be regarded as defects. The new aim was to achieve simplicity and unity. European aesthetic purpose had much in common with the Chinese. The extent of this artistic contact is ably disclosed by Adolf Reichwein in his work entitled *China and Europe*, a work which should be in the library of all students of chinoiserie.

As for the religious temper of this same period and its affinity with the Orient, it perhaps would be impossible for me to quote a more typical expression than Voltaire's sentences: "Worship God and practise justice—this is the sole religion of the Chinese literati. . . . O Thomas Aquinas, Scotus, Bonaventure, Francis, Dominic, Luther, Calvin, canons of Westminster, have you anything better? For four thousand years this religion so simple and so noble, has endured in absolute integrity; and it is probable that it is much more ancient." The deistic philosophy on which theories of government rested seized upon the Confucian principles, and we find Christian Wolff in an academic address entitled *De Sinarum philosophia practica*, delivered before the University of Halle in 1721, proclaiming that "the ancient Emperors and Kings of China were men of a philosophical Turn. . . . to their Care it is owing, that their Form of Government is of all others the best, and that as in Antiquity, so in the Art of Governing, this Nation has ever surpassed all others without exception." It is perhaps needless to point out that the "philosophical turn" in the Confucian mind which appealed to the spokesman we have selected as representative of the eighteenth century was essentially different from the Vedantic philosophy

which appealed to the romanticists of the nineteenth century, and to Emerson in particular.

It is possible that a reader acquainted with the literature of our subject will wonder at my failure to mention the vogue of the Oriental tale. Martha Pike Conant's *The Oriental Tale in England* might be mentioned as a work which has uncovered an aspect of eighteenth century thought and literature which I would seem to have neglected. But this neglect is justifiable. The reason is that the popularity of variations on themes in the *Arabian Nights* as a literary phenomenon has never possessed more significance or closer relation to the essential thought of the time in which they appeared than the modern detective story and the deeper undertones of the thought-life of our own day. True, the Oriental tale had a tremendous vogue, the extent of which is effectively suggested by the following passage from Lillie Deming Loshe's *The Early American Novel*: "One can hardly leave the subject of sentimental didacticism without referring to the *Massachusetts Magazine*, which was its shrine. . . . [A] lady, known as "Sabina," had contributed the history of a woman carried off by pirates to the harem of a Turkish noble, where her instructions led to the liberation of all the slaves. The Oriental tale was the most favored of all types, and no issue of the *Massachusetts Magazine* was considered complete without one; very few, however, were of American origin."

In contrast, for the nineteenth century, consider the facts that one of the best poems Sidney Lanier ever wrote was given the title "Nirvana," and that no poem from Emerson's pen is better known than "Brahma." Emmerson's poem is too well known to need quotation or comment, save that we might remind ourselves it is a very exact epitome not only of Hinduism but also of Emerson's personal philosophy. Of Lanier's poem I quote the first two and the last stanzas:

Through seas of dreams and seas of phantasies,
Through seas of solitudes and vacancies,
And through my Self, the deepest of the seas,
I strive for thee, Nirvana.

Oh long ago the billow flow of sense,
Aroused by passion's windy vehemence,
Up bore me out of depths to heights intense,
But not to thee, Nirvana.

* * * * *

The storms of Self below me rage and die
On the still bosom of mine ecstasy,
A lotus on a lake of balm, I lie
Forever in Nirvana.

There assuredly is significance in the fact that during the eighteenth century literary Orientalism found expression in popular magazines in tales of Occidental women carried off to Turkish harems, during the nineteenth, in such lines as those by Lanier and Emerson. It is needless to inquire which type bore the closer relationship to the basic thought of their times.

In conclusion, we may observe that the varying influences from the Orient may be explained with the truism that tributary streams of influence must be capable of blending with the main stream if they are to become one with that stream. Thus we find that in a period marked by serious consideration of man's relationship to man, Confucius, the practical sage of the unspeculative Chinese, caught the attention of the thinkers of Europe who found in his system of government and social ethics an admirable model. The vogue of the Oriental tale was merely a part of the prevailing Gothicism, and the popularity of Chinese gardens a temporary reaction to an outmoded fad in landscaping. The nineteenth century, on the other hand, was one marked by numerous "soul-crises" and by serious consideration of man's relation to the universe. Romantic pantheism and an intense yearning for the Everlasting Yea wherein all contradiction is solved is the common denominator of the thought of the time. With this mood, it is obvious that the shift in Oriental interest should have been from Confucianism to Hinduism. As for the present era, we can only say that our modern scientific temper has little in common with the ancient Orient. In fact, our science and industrialism would seem to have swamped the East, and within a generation turned its problems into our own. But despite the mutual struggle against confusion, both Oriental and Occidental are reclaiming aesthetic and mystical principles which are molding our arts and altering our sense of values. Today, the sense of awareness is livelier than ever. In time we shall have the necessary perspective to determine more fully the nature of the present synthesis.