

Oriental Antiquity and Romantic Locality: The Gaze Backward and Inward

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Abstract: *The Romantic literary figures found in the distant antiquities of the Orient, of Greece, and Arabia, irresistible attractions embodying the underlying genuine history of Western civilization and culture. Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, the Arabian Desert, and Egypt reflected a world of antiquity, which provided the Romantics with the opportunity to gaze backward and, consequently, explore remote otherness—itsself responsible for shaping present Western Self. The Romantic artists and literary figures believed that this region enfolds within its antiquities the mysteries of the mind. They found in the tranquility of Oriental antique places, whether in reality or through the power of their imaginative faculties, possible prospects of hidden realities essential for self receptiveness, which had been despondent amidst the contradictions and complexities of the urban civilizations of Europe; i.e. those remote places, whether directly or indirectly gazed at, provided them with the opportunity to personally experience and perceive fundamental realities, which may have been underside Western civilization. To them, to dig into the mysteries of Self, they had to locate Self in Oriental antique sites. Crossing the demarcation line between the present and the past was an irresistible venture, which set in motion the recreation or location of Self by transcending its consciousness (the present or West) into the sub-consciousness (the past or East). Accordingly, the gaze backward was indeed a gaze inward.*

1. Romantic Interest in History and Oriental Antiquity

For the Romantics, ‘The history of mankind, as well as the history of the reflective individual, was conceived not as a probation for an other-worldly heaven but as a process of the self-formation, or self-education, of the mind and moral being of man from the dawn of consciousness to the stage of full maturity,’ says M. H. Abrams (1971: 187–88). Indeed, the German romantics such as Ferguson, Schiller, Herder, and Kant were philosophers and historians who perceived the history of mankind as an essential course of study leading to self-discovery or locating Self.¹ No wonder, then, the British romantics devoured History books although they had their doubts about them. Samuel Coleridge clarifies:

But I have mentioned it from the full persuasion that, armed with the two-fold knowledge of history and the human mind, a man will scarcely err in his judgment concerning the sum total of any future national event, if he have been able to procure the original documents of the past together with authentic accounts of the present, and if he have a philosophic tact for what is truly important in facts, and in most instances therefore for such facts as the DIGNITY

OF HISTORY has excluded from the volumes of our modern compilers, by the courtesy of the age entitled historians (*Biographia Literaria*, 1817, Vol. I: 216).

Coleridge's view not only gives priority to the study of History, but also implies, if anything, that some historians deviate from fact. This drove Lord Byron, who was a devoted reader of history books, to write, 'It is from *experience* not *Books*, we ought to judge of mankind.—There is nothing like inspection, and trusting to our own reason' (Marchand, ed. 1973–1982, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, Vol. I: 173).² History to the romantics is not only printed in books but it has its traces in Nature, especially in the distant and antique sites. John C. Blankenagel (1940: 6) explains in a seminal article entitled, 'The Dominant Characteristics of German Romanticism' that,

Romantic longing for the infinite finds its reflex in an interest in the distant past and in distant regions. At a distance, said Novalis, everything becomes poetic, everything becomes romantic. The magic power of the imagination is freed from the limitations of time, space, and actuality both in the past and the future. ... It is not surprising to find a penchant for the Middle Ages ... and the widening of the human horizon through contact with the Orient.

The romantic literary figures found in the distant antiquities of the Orient, of Greece, and Arabia, irresistible attractions embodying the underlying genuine history of Western civilization and culture. Sydney Nettleton Fisher (1966: 10) confirms, 'Scholars still debate whether Western civilization began first in the Nile Valley or in Mesopotamia along the Tigris-Euphrates River'. The telling fact in the above quotation is that both regions are parts of the land of Arabia; and this part of the antique world was envied by the ancient Greeks (Hout 2000: 112), because it was embroidered with ancient civilizations such as those of the Hittites, Sumerians, Babylonians, Pharaohs, Assyrians, Arameans, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Persians, and Arabs. Besides, this region was the origin of the three Abrahamite religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; geographically, it was the bridge between the West and Far East.

Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, the Arabian Desert, and Egypt reflected a world of antiquity³, which provided the Romantics with the opportunity to gaze backward and, consequently, explore remote otherness—itself responsible for shaping present Western Self. The Romantics believed that this region enfolds within its antiquities the mysteries of the mind. John Beer poses an ingenious question: 'Why should Arabia have been for [some Romantic writers] the place where the riddle of the One and the Many might be solved?' Beer (1995: 263) explains:

It should not be forgotten, however, that from the Renaissance onward the East provided for some imaginative writers this different resource, ... that had been more decisively lost in Western culture, but in its most primitive forms of a desert simplicity that could cradle a unified culture, reconciling mathematics and artistic harmony, one which still might have a solution to offer for western intellects, increasingly bewildered by the contradictions and fissures opening up in their own more 'advanced' societies.

Romantic artists and literary figures found in the then tranquility of Oriental antique places, whether in reality or through the power of their imaginative faculties, possible prospects of hidden realities essential for self receptiveness, which had been despondent amidst the contradictions and complexities of the urban civilizations of Europe; i.e. those remote places, whether directly or indirectly gazed at, provided them with the opportunity to personally experience and perceive fundamental realities, which may have been underside Western civilization. To them, to dig into the mysteries of Self, they had to locate Self in Oriental antique sites. Besides, Crossing the demarcation line between the present and the past was an irresistible venture, which set in motion the recreation or location of Self by transcending its consciousness (the present or West) into the sub-consciousness (the past or East). Accordingly, the infatuation of the Romantics with the ancient Orient was a consequence of their ingenious search for knowledge of Self, the kind of knowledge they believed was hidden in the eternal correspondence between Man's past, present, and future, which were not only inseparable but which also carried the kernel of the reality of Self. W. F. Albright, who observes that man is 'all too conscious of the impracticability of escaping from the past,' asserts that every 'archaeological and philological discovery made in the Ancient Orient has contributed something to show the continuity and essential solidarity of Western culture, beginning in the eastern Mediterranean basin, including Mesopotamia, and shifting to Europe'(1936: 138). Thus, the relics of Arabia tickled the romantics' imaginative and visionary faculties, and thrilled their sense of self-discovery or locating Self.

2. The Romantic Gaze Backward and Inward

In an essay entitled, 'Speculations on Metaphysics: The Mind,' Shelley confirms:

If it were possible that a person should give a faithful history of his being, from the earliest epochs of his recollection, a picture would be presented such as the world has never contemplated before. A mirror would be held up to all men in which they might behold their own recollections, and, in dim perspective, their shadowy hopes and fears,—all that they dare not, or that, daring and desiring, they could not expose to the open eyes of day. (Mary Shelley ed. 1840, Vol. I: 246)

Shelley's emphasis on the 'picture,' the 'mirror,' and the 'open eyes' brings about a significant set of symbols related to the gaze notion: the *mirror* reflects a *picture* of Man's inward Self; it replicates a vision stimulated by a deeper contemplation of the *open eyes*; i.e., the gaze. Accordingly, the gaze for the Romantics turns into a medium evoking contemplation and reflection; and when this contemplative gaze, direct or indirect, sensory or imaginative, is aimed at antique objects, it enhances contemplation and reflection of inward realities of Self. As thus, the Romantics' gaze correlates with the Lacanian because both bring about a relation with the gazed at via meditation.

Jacques Lacan (1981: 73) defines ‘gaze’ as a medium for constructing a relationship with the gazed at ‘by the way of vision, and [when] ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze’ . In other words, the gaze creates a set of symbols in a vision which reveals inward realities of Self; what the eye sees may not provoke the gaze unless ‘the feeling of strangeness begins too’; this feeling is induced when ‘something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage’—here we must not forget Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s perceptions of strangeness vs. familiarity whereas the familiar via the contemplative eye becomes strange and vice-versa. The gaze then ‘not only does it look, *it also shows*’ (Lacan 1981:75); it shows what lies beyond the sensory capabilities of the eye, and what it shows lies within the terrain of conclusive perception. Thus, it becomes the visionary locus of the relationship between the gazer and the gazed at; and in the case of a romantic figure, gazing at antique objects, the gazer, the representative of *Present* or *Consciousness*, connects, rather unites via a vision, with the gazed at, the representative of *Past* or *Sub-consciousness*; thus, *Past* and *Present* merge, and the backward gaze turns inward. Coleridge writes, ‘Behold a VISION gathers in my soul’—who present, past, and future sees, and who recounts the history of mankind, from primeval past through the revolutionary present to the millennial future’ (Qtd. Abrams 1971:265). William Blake confirms in his ‘A Vision of the Last Judgment’: ‘Vision or Imagination is a Representation of What Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably’ (Perkins ed. 1967:161).⁴

At the beginning of Chapter I of *Jerusalem*, William Blake’s most extended visionary poem, the poet hopes

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God.

(Johnson and Grant eds. 1979, Chapter I, Plate 5: ll. 18–19)⁵

Blake here hopes that his poem might turn man’s outward gaze from the sensory and materialistic into an inward gaze to perceive the eternal and spiritual. The condition for locating the ‘Eternal Worlds’ of Self, the worlds of spiritual illumination, becomes possible when this gaze be directed backward towards Jerusalem, the most eminent Eastern antique site in the Western mind. Giant Albion, who represents degenerated Self, sets on a complex visionary and mythological quest towards Biblical antiquity because, according to Blake, ‘The East is Inwards: & the West is Outwards every way’; in other words, the East is the world of spiritual emancipation, and the West is that of materialistic repression. Also, one of Blake’s four elements of the human psyche, Luvah or emotion, represents the East while another element, Los, or prophetic inspiration, symbolizes the North. But Los also represents Jesus Christ, whose birthplace was Jerusalem. And last, the other two elements, Urizen or thought and Tharmas or sensation, symbolizing the South and the West respectively, cannot fulfill their full role unless they perfectly coexist in harmony with Luvah

and Los, both associated with the Biblical Eastern antiquity. In other words, Blake's visionary quest for Western spiritual revelation and redemption cannot but set its gaze direction toward the antique Land of the Orient, the land of revelations and prophets.

In *Jerusalem*, Blake's allusions to Eastern Biblical antiquities are too numerous to cover in this limited paper; however, it is telling that most of these allusions almost always coexist with allusions to Western sites. Blake hopes that Cambridge, Oxford, and London would live in harmony with the Eastern antique towns of Gaza, Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, and Sinai. London turns its gaze towards Jerusalem as the British Isle greets the Lands of Moab, Ammon, Amalek, Canaan, Egypt, Assyria, and Aram. Even the mountains of the Alps and the Appenines bow together with the Eastern mountains of Hermon and of Lebanon to greet Jerusalem, and the waters of the Thames flow with the waters of the Dead Sea and the Euphrates. It is as if Blake wanted in his poem to bring about a harmonious fusion of *present* with *past*, of West with East, to achieve the elevated goal of liberating Western Self from egocentric geography to relocate it in the realms Eternity. In this respect, Albion's Self search for emanation and redemption must be in the Eastern antique world. He confesses by the end of *Jerusalem*:

... 'O Lord what can I do! my Selfhood cruel
Marches against thee deceitful from Sinai & from Edom
Into the Wilderness of Judah to meet thee in his pride
I behold the Visions of my deadly Sleep of Six Thousand Years
Dazling around thy skirts like a Serpent of precious stones & gold
I know it is my Self. O my Divine Creator & Redeemer.'

Jesus replied, 'Fear not Albion unless I die thou canst not live
But if I die I shall arise again & thou with me
This is Friendship & Brotherhood without it Man Is Not.'

(Chapter IV, Plate 96: ll. 8–16)

Accordingly, Blake's vision of the Eastern Biblical antiquities projects the significance of a Western backward gaze at the antiquity of the Eastern world in the process of Self's spiritual emanation and salvation. The gaze backward turns into an inward visionary gaze capable of contemplating the truth of British Self or Albion's Self, engulfed with the evils and vices of industrialization and materialism, and of purging such a self through its annihilation and fusion with the Eternal Divine Self. Further down in the poem, Albion ends up his quest when he

... threw himself into the Furnaces of affliction
All was a Vision, all a Dream: the Furnaces became
Fountains of Living Waters Howing from the Humanity Divine
And all the Cities of Albion rose from their Slumbers, and All
The Sons & Daughters of Albion on soft clouds Waking from Sleep
Soon all around remote the Heavens burnt with flaming fires
And Urizen & Luvah & Tharmas & Urthona arose into

Albions Bosom: Then Albion stood before Jesus in the Clouds
Of Heaven Fourfold among the Visions of God in Eternity.

(*Jerusalem*, Chapter IV, Plate 96: ll. 35–43)

Awake! Awake Jerusalem! O lovely Emanation of Albion
Awake and overspread all Nations as in Ancient Time
For lo! the Night of Death is past and the Eternal Day
Appears upon our Hills: Awake Jerusalem, and come away.
So spake the Vision of Albion & in him so spake in my hearing Father.
Then Albion stretchd his hand into Infinitude.

(*Jerusalem*, Chapter IV, Plate 97: ll. 1–6)

While Blake's backward and inward gaze is geared towards locating Self's spiritual liberation, Wordsworth's and Shelley gaze is geared towards locating Self's elevation. I have written elsewhere that 'the Orient provided Wordsworth with this Otherness that may mirror the original and primal in the self' (Oueijan, 2005: 180). This is quite clear in 'Book Fifth' of *The Prelude*, in which the poet gazes in a dream at the antique world of Arabia in search for the eternal truth of philosophy and science. At the beginning of his poem, Wordsworth makes clear that Truth 'lodge[s] in shrines so frail,' in books, and he confirms that in the elements of nature Truth is everlasting (*The Prelude*, VI: ll. 45–49). He then turns his gaze toward the wide sea and contemplates 'poetry and geometric truth,/And their high privilege of lasting life'; the conscious gaze turns into musing, and musing turns into dream, a visionary backward gaze to the Arabian desert where he meets an Arab Bedouin holding the stone of geometric truth, the truth of science, and the shell of the prophetic voice, the truth of philosophy and spirituality (*The Prelude*, VI: ll. 64–70). As the dreamer seeks the guidance of the antique Oriental character, he envisions the shell and the stone as the true history books of mankind. The poet's vision turns into a subconscious inward gaze, which ends 'in terror' when he could not keep up with the Arab Bedouin; that is when the dreamer could not get hold of the truth of the human mind. This vision, constructed through the complex arena of a deep desire for unfolding inner mysteries of the human mind, translates Wordsworth's 'desire to make a pilgrimage to the burning sands of Arabia,' where he would find 'the Man who could explain to [him how] there can be *oneness*, there being infinite Perceptions' (*The Prelude*, VI: ll. 86–114). This desire to create a vision is best explained by Hegel, who says:

In the production of the work of art even images of the phantasy, which well up instinctually from the unconscious, must be subjected to the intellectual and self-conscious control of the artist. Although the phantasy does, indeed, open a secret door through which the dark images of the unconscious enter into dreams, in the artistic consciousness the images of phantasy are wed with the images of waking experience to produce symbol (inner-directed) or allegory (outer-directed). (Qtd. Burwick [nd.] 'The Romantic Concept of Mimesis': 199).

The poet sees. And when what the poet sees gets hold of him; spontaneous seeing turns into gazing, and gazing turns into perception beyond the gazed at.

Only then does the poet's conscious backward gaze open a secret door into the unconscious inward Self which locates images of reality in symbols, such as Wordsworth's shell and stone.

The above viewpoint correlates with Shelley's backward gaze in 'Ozymandias' and 'Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude.' In the first poem, the poet meets in a vision a 'traveller from an antique land,' the land of Egypt, the cradle of Eastern antiquity; the traveler first describes his backward gaze at the half-sunk-in-the-desert-sand statue of Ozymandias; but this backward gaze ends with an inward gaze changing the huge stone into a symbol of truth, representing the futility of human pomp and power. Thus, Shelley's backward gaze at an Oriental antique site prompts his perception of human history. This insight, however, is surpassed by that of the poet of Shelley's 'Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude.' Here, too, the gaze backward, directed at Arabia's antiquities, is also cradled in a fantastic vision turning those antique sites into symbols reflected in mirrors representing the most mysterious realities of the human mind. Shelley's bewildered Western poet leaves his homeland 'To seek strange truth in undiscovered lands' ('Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude': l. 77); and it is not a coincidence that this strange land happens to be the land of Arabia, where he has the opportunity to gaze at the relics of Tyre and Baalbek in Lebanon, Jerusalem in Palestine, Memphis and Thebes in Egypt, and the desert of Ethiopia where, 'He lingered, poring on memorials' and

Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

('Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude': ll. 123-28)

'But ever gazed/And gazed,' and the quest goes on in the virgin antique landscape of Persia and India. In Cashmire, where the poet is enamored and tended by an Arab maiden, he has a dream of a veiled Arab maid-poet whose

'Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,
And lofty hopes of divine liberty,
Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,
Herself a poet.'

('Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude': ll. 158-161)

His 'bright silver dream,' his inward gaze, however, must end, but the visions of the 'majestic past,' '—even that voice/Which hither came, floating among the winds,' this inward voice of the veiled maid-poet still lingers in his mind ('Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude': ll. 591-92). Thus, what starts as a backward gaze at Oriental antiquities ends as an inward gaze flashing with 'The thrilling secrets of the birth of time,' the exhilarating truth of the human mind, which Leigh Hunt represents in his poem 'The Nile' as a dream flowing through the mysteries of the glorious antiquities of Egypt,

....through old hushed Egypt and its sands,
 Like some grave mighty thought threading a dream,
 And times and things, as in that vision, seem
 Keeping along it their eternal stands,—
 Caves, pillars, pyramids, the shepherd bands
 That roamed through the young world, the glory extreme.

(ll. 1–6.)

Hunt's backward gaze at the antique world of Egypt, transforms the Nile into a 'mighty' mind which carries the eternal wisdom of Nature, all the reason why Hunt's Nile correlates with Coleridge's 'the sacred river' of 'Kubla Khan,' a river which also flows in the antique land of the East.

The antiquity of Arabia attracted the contemplative gaze not only of Romantic literary figures but also of several 19th century Western painters, especially those who ventured across their national borders. Among those, French painters such as Léon-Adolphe-Auguste Belly, Auguste Renoir, Henri Matisse, Horace-Emile-Jean Vernet, and Gérôme were most eminent. On the other hand, British artists were no less enthusiastic than their French contemporaries to visit the Arabian land of antiquity. Among those, John Fredrick Lewis, Arthur Melville, Frederick Goodall, William Holman Hunt, Edward Lear, John Frederick Lewis, Thomas Seddon, and David Wilkie sought those antique relics in search for knowledge and originality. But none was more infatuated with the antique world of Arabia than David Roberts, who drew in minute detail Arabian antiquity in more than 100 paintings. Roberts toured Cairo, Abu Sinbul, and Nubia, where Ramses II dug his temple in the rocks. In January 1839, he left Cairo to Sinai and Petra and then to Jerusalem, Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, and Baalbek, which made him famous after he was accepted at the Royal Academy via his painting of the huge engraved doorway of the Temple of Bacchus, *The Gateway to the Great Temple at Baalbec* (1841). After his return to England and between 1842 and 1849, the images of the Oriental antique sites lingered in his imagination; and via his inward gaze he reproduced 247 lithographs of Oriental antiquity. Roberts works influenced several nineteenth century British painters, one of whom was, Frederick Goodall, who painted several scenes of Egyptian artifacts. However, another native of Roberts, Edward Lear, toured parts of Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon and painted masterpieces like *Philae on the Nile* (1855), *The Cedars of Lebanon* (c.1862), and *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, Sunrise* (1859), all of which explode with bright colors and light, the light of the wisdom of the East. Gazing at the temples of Baalbek, Roberts' contemplative inward gaze mirrored his 'feeling of humiliation at the transitory greatness of all human conceptions'; and contemplating the Temple of Denderah on the Nile, he reflected similar insights recalling Shelley's in 'Ozymandias' reflecting 'the mutability of human greatness and the perishable nature of even the most enduring works of human genius' (Roberts [nd.] Vol. II: 81).

In short, the Romantics believed that Oriental antique sites cradled the deep-rooted dimensions of the mind. They also believed that Man's attempt to separate *Past* from *Present* is a futile one, and they were quite aware of Man's incapability for fully perceiving *Present*, or foreseeing *Future*, without gazing backward to *Past*. To them, *Present* is conscious gaze locating Self in the physical arena of the world and *Past* is subconscious gaze relocating Self to its original mysterious eternal quarters. Accordingly, their willingness to escape *Present* and envision *Past* is a willingness to transcend the temporal into the eternal, the *now* into the *then*; and in this respect, the distant and antique, especially the Oriental, framed a mirror where true Self may be reflected. Paul Bowles once confessed, 'Like any Romantic, I had always been vaguely certain that sometime during my life I should come into a magic place [the Oriental desert] which, in revealing its secrets, would give me wisdom and ecstasy—perhaps even death' (Qtd. Hout 2000: 112). Bowles could not fulfill his wish, but the romantics did, at least in their visions and dreams, where their backward gaze turned inward to locate Self.

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¹ Ferguson wrote his *Essays on the History of Civil Society* (1767); Schiller was a professor of History at Jena and wrote *Something Concerning the First Human Society* (1790); Herder wrote his *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–85); and this same work inspired Emmanuel Kant to write his *Conjectural Origin of the History of Man* (1785).

² Byron's interest in Oriental antiquity is more related to the ancient sites of Greece; however, he makes several references to ancient antique sites in Arabia. For instance in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, he refers to the historical city, Tyre, which was besieged by Alexander the Great early 332 BC. In his apostrophe to Venice, Byron compares Venice's glory to that of Tyre. And in *Don Juan*, Canto VII, Byron considers Tyre amongst the great ancient cities of Rome, Babylon, Carthage, and Nineveh. He also makes several references to the antique Cedars of Lebanon: the most impressive one is in *The Prophecy of Dante*. To the Phoenician glorious god Baal, after whom the antique city, Baalbek, was called, Byron makes 12 references, 11 of which in *Sardanapalus*.

³ I use the term 'antiquity' in the same sense as Hans Dieter Betz () uses the term, 'A notion encompassing ancient historical, cultural, and religious phenomena generally, [and] relates these to 'Christianity' as a special entity'; see 'Antiquity and Christianity,' p. 6. The term also embraces distant characters, settings, and sites associated in one way or another with past civilizations and cultures.

⁴ All quotations from the works of the British Romantics are taken from David Perkins's edition unless otherwise mentioned.

⁵ All quotations from this poem are taken from Johnson and Grant (eds.), *Blake's Works and Designs*.

