Travel as Imperial Strategy: George Nathaniel Curzon Goes East, 1887-1894

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Sometimes a travel theory is enunciated with such transparency as to seem almost a caricature. A key aspect of the debate surrounding Edward Said’s Orientalism has been the argument, adduced by such writers as Reina Lewis (1996), Lisa Lowe (1991), Billy Melman (1992), Dennis Porter (1991) et al., that Said’s construct disallows a space for multivalent positionings within the discourse of Orientalism. In this essay it is not my intention to rescue Said’s thesis from these critics, or to attempt a revision of his correlation of Orientalism with imperialism. My subject can be seen to justify Eurzon’s inclusion, alongside contemporaries like Balfour and Cromer, within that bloc of imperial patronage that sought to inscribe the East within the construct of Western knowledge/power which Said termed Orientalism. As enunciations of an aesthetic of travel, or codifications of imperial administration, Curzon’s writings rarely digress from Foucault’s equation of knowledge and power. But I intend also to problematise the confidence of imperial mastery in Curzon’s Orientalism by articulating the interior anxieties it seeks to cover by its political/racial logocentrism.

No one could, more premeditatedly, and with greater application, have set out to adopt the East as a career. Harold Nicholson argued that ‘most of Curzon’s basic convictions, the articles of his faith, were absorbed before he left Eton in 1878’, and that it was as president of the literary society that he heard Sir James Stephen proclaim: ‘There is . . . in the Asian Continent an empire more populous, more amazing, and more beneficent than that of Rome. The rulers of that great domain are drawn from the men of our own people’ (Nicholson 1934:12).
Five years later, Curzon embarked on his first journey East. His main purpose was to research the Emperor Justinian for one of Oxford’s most glittering essay prizes as a salve to his amour propre, grievously injured by his failure to secure a Balliol first. After doing the sites of Italy and Greece, he went on to Egypt, of which he wrote:

Here are the same men of the same build and stature, plying the same business as did their ancestors of five thousand years ago . . . civilisation is foiled by a country which refuses to be civilised, which cannot be civilised, which will remain uncivilised to the end (Earl of Ronaldshay 1928: vol. 1, 81).

And then to Palestine where, according to his biographer, he suffered disappointment – ‘disillusionment almost’ – at what he called the ‘deformities of the modern surroundings’ as opposed to the ‘original features’ recorded in the Bible (ibid.: vol. 1, 87).

Coming from a young man in his twenties, these assessments bear the stylistic hallmarks, as well as the Orientalist ideology, which characterises Curzon’s pronouncements and political practice thereafter. He carried them with him on his more extensive travels East, between 1887 and 1894 – and throughout a political career, the valedictory to which he sketched out himself on 10 Downing Street notepaper ‘in the course [as Nicholson put it] of some dull session of Cabinet’:

A faithful servant of the Empire, he explored the secrets and loved the peoples, of the East. A ruler of his country in the Great War, he strove to add honour to an ancient name (Nicholson 1934: 6–7)

How exactly did this love for the peoples of the East present itself? Strikingly good-looking, of statuesque feature and build, Curzon’s other loves were restoring ancient buildings, and women. Just as he enjoyed attractive women without any wish to waste time in consultation and discussion with them, Curzon was enchanted by an Eastern landscape or engaged by a loyal Oriental retainer. A man of prodigious administrative thoroughness and scholarly diligence – before composing a travel narrative he read literally everything that had been written before on the
target location – Curzon’s main preoccupation appeared to his contemporaries to be his own ego:

Never did his energy become more dynamic than when it was seasoned by the competitive [...] never did his enjoyment of foreign travel become so acute as when it enabled him to correct the imperfect information or the erroneous hypotheses of previous travellers (ibid.:19).

In spite of his noble ancestry, there seemed, as Nicholson reflects, to be something of the self-righteous high Victorian bourgeois in Curzon’s attitude towards Empire.

Travel as Aesthetic Pursuit

At the height of his political career, as foreign secretary, Curzon encapsulated the motivation behind his journeys to the East:

In my case the purpose was twofold: to see the beautiful and the romantic and above all, the ancient things of the earth – a taste which I probably share with most travellers, but which took me preferably to distant Oriental lands; and, secondly, to see how far the study of these places and peoples would help me to form an opinion of the Eastern responsibilities and destinies of Great Britain (Curzon, Marquess of Kedleston: 1923: 3).1

The passage proposes a distinction – which I shall interrogate in due course – between travel as a pursuit of ‘the romantic and the beautiful’, and travel as a means of establishing a knowledge of ‘those places and peoples’ that would give the traveller an expertise in governing them in the future (in exercising ‘the Eastern responsibilities and destinies’ of the British Empire). Curzon appears to be arguing for a simple bifurcation between the aesthetic value of travel and the political uses to which practical observation of Eastern lands and peoples might be put. Indeed, he goes on to subordinate the second proposition altogether when he claims:
it gave me greater pleasure to be awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal
Geographic Society for exploration and research than it did to become
a Minister of the Crown; and every moment that I could snatch from
politics - before they finally captured and tied me down - I devoted to
the pursuit of my old love. (Travel: 4)

This may be disingenuous, or it may be that Curzon genuinely believed in
the aesthetic as a discrete category in his travel project. His travel writings
certainly exemplify his aesthetic Orientalism, even if this is ultimately
integral to his political programme in the East. It comprehended
enjoyment of the East as a scene, as an inspiring spectacle, and its
presentation of itself as a mystery and a riddle. As diversion and
enchantment, the East afforded opportunities for philosophic reflection
on such topics as the racial origins of the European, wonderment at
natural landscapes, and contrastive meditations on evidences of ancient
civilisations and present decay. Indeed, it could be argued, though I do
not wish to do so here, that Curzon’s Eastern scene differed from that of
the European explorers of Africa and the Americas, discussed by Mary
Louise Pratt, precisely in so far as that scene was ancient and ripe for
reconstruction, rather than virgin and newly to-be-reported on. The
imperial eye in this context is versed in the knowledge of the ages, and
the ‘monarch of all I survey’ feeling contains within it both racial pride of
origin, and the empowerment provided by the sense of ultimate
placement at the fountainhead of the human civilisation project:

Travelling . . . Eastward, . . . arrested at each forward step by some relic
of a dead civilisation . . . the imagination of the European cannot but
be impressed with the thought that he is mounting the stream of ages,
and tracing towards its remote source the ancestry from which his own
race sprung. His feet are treading in an inverse direction the long route
of humanity. (Curzon: 1967: 138–9)2

The implications of setting the schema of human progress into reverse in
this way are not hard to tease out. The East is simultaneously the site of
European origin and Europe’s primitive Other by virtue of the arrestation
in its development caused by its unchanging essence. To support this
idea, which is embedded in the passage on Egypt quoted earlier, Curzon quotes his favourite commentator on the Oriental scene, the seventeenth-century traveller, Chardin. According to him, the Orient is ‘constant in all things’:

The habits are of this day in the same manner as in the precedent ages; so that one may reasonably believe that in that part of the world the exterior forms of things (as in their manners and customs) are the same now as they were 2,000 years since . . . (Curzon 1966: vol. 1, 12).

Ample material for reflective contrast with the nineteenth century is implied in such a proposition:

... is it that in the East, and amid scenes where life and its environment have not varied for thousands of years, where nomad Abrahams still wander with their flocks and herds, where Rebecca dips her water skin at the well, where savage forays perpetuate the homeless miseries of Job, western man casts off the slough of an artificial civilisation, and feels that he is mixing again with his ancestral stock, and breathing the atmosphere that nurtured his kind? (Persia: vol.1, 13).

The corollary, however, of making the East all past, aesthetically satisfying as this might be as a refuge from an artificial nineteenth century, was to imprison it within a riddle, which could only be read by the trained eye of the Western aesthete and man of knowledge, who saw everywhere the juxtaposition of ancient ruin and present desolation and decay: ‘It is a constant equally visible in the inanimate and in the human world . . . Majestic ruins that tell of a populous and mighty past rear their heads amidst desert wastes and vagabond tents’ (ibid.: vol.1, 14). Looked at in this context, the unchanging character of the East can be brandished as a stick to berate the lethargy and fatalism of the Easterner, and exalt the energy of the European.

The ‘poetry of contrast’ between Britain and the East could be viewed in their respective modes of travel: ‘Here all is movement and bustle, flux and speed; there, everything is imperturbable, immemorial, immutable,
slow’ (Persia, vol.1.175) But stasis meant retrogression: it was not surprising that the traveller passed through towns in Persia that were ‘entirely abandoned’, with a melancholy confusion of ‘tottering walls and fallen towers’; saw citadels and fortified posts ‘fallen into irretrievable decay’, now ‘shapeless heaps of mud’, or entered cities whose walls were in ruins or had yawning gaps, and whose cemeteries were dirty and desecrated. The miserable and chaotic conditions of Persia in the north around the Caspian Sea (an area potentially important as a trading centre) reveal Persia’s ‘congenital inability to help herself’ (ibid.: vol.1, 255, 386).

The decaying Oriental scene is thus engaged in painful dialectic with its past, but cannot be allowed to do so alone; without, that is, registering the impact of spreading European hegemony, both cultural and political. Castigated for their backwardness, when the Persians do adopt a Western veneer in their capital, this is condemned as ‘a city . . . born and nurtured in the East, but . . . beginning to clothe itself at a West-End tailors’, and is compared to ‘the insufferable and debauched districts of Galata and Pera’ (Persia, vol.1, 306). In Korea, the ‘incurable laziness of the people’ is only challenged by the arrival of ‘the plenipotentiaries of great Powers in its ports to solicit or to demand reciprocal treaties’ (Curzon 1896: 86). Aesthetic Orientalism dissolves into a political taxonomy of the East, the embedded concern of all of Curzon’s travel writings.

Travel as Imperial Strategy

Drawing on his speeches and addresses postdating his period as Viceroy of India, Edward Said sees in Curzon’s emphasis on study of the Orient that Foucaultian equation of knowledge and power that he considers central to the Orientalist project: ‘From the days of Sir William Jones the Orient had been both what Britain ruled and what Britain knew about: the coincidence between geography, knowledge and power, with Britain always in the master’s place, was complete’ (Said 1978: 215). Curzon’s travel writings, composed by an aspiring politician in his thirties, exemplify the imperial uses to which knowledge acquired through travel could be put. They establish a geography often so nakedly political as largely to deconstruct Curzon’s disingenuous claim that he engaged in
travel literature as a form of relaxation and escape from the grind of political life. (No sooner had he surveyed the source of the Oxus and explored the Pamirs – for which he was awarded the Royal Geographic Society’s Gold Medal – than he was proceeding to Kabul, where he achieved the coup of being the first private traveller to be invited to visit the Amir of Afghanistan.) (See Gilmore 1995: 95 and Ronaldshay 1928: vol.1: 211–3.) The expertise and publicity (he was a writer of copious letters and articles on Asian issues for The Times) derived from his journeys in the East helped Curzon gain his first government post as Under-Secretary for India in 1892, and in 1898 enabled him to secure his appointment as Viceroy of India. The recrimination surrounding his resignation from the last post helped sour his career for many years to come. But Curzon never relinquished his political love affair with the East. ‘Asia was his speciality, and he inclined to regard all extra-Asian matters as questions well-suited to the capacities of Mr. Lloyd George or Mr. Bonar Law.’ This ‘was to prove both a useful and a destructive element in his . . . career’ (Nicolson 1934: 12).

According to John Seeley, two schools of English opinion existed on the Empire. Curzon’s writings and speeches situate him definitively in the ‘bombastic’ camp – those ‘lost in wonder and ecstasy at its immense dimensions, and at the energy and heroism which presumably have gone to the making of it; this school advocates the maintenance of it as a point of honour or sentiment’ (Seeley 1911: 340–41).\(^5\) Landing at Hong Kong, Curzon registered ‘a thrill of pride for his nationality’. ‘The sight [he wrote] . . . of the successive metropolises of England and the British Empire in foreign parts is one of the proudest experiences of travel.’ This was ‘a responsibility [which] . . . with its associated virtues of duty, sacrifice and justice, dominated his conscience . . . He believed profoundly that God had selected the British Empire as an instrument of Divine purpose’ (Nicolson: 1934: 13–14).

At the centre of Curzon’s imperial geography, and embedded in his travel writings on Central Asia, Persia or the Far East, was India. ‘Even the fortunes of remote Korea are in a manner bound with the politics of Hindustan . . . Towards her, or into her orbit, the centripetal force, which none appears able to resist, draws every wandering star. Just as it may be said that the Eastern Question in Europe turns upon the dismemberment
of Turkey, so the Eastern Question in Asia turns upon the continued solidarity of Hindustan' (Problems: 9). His first published exercise in the genre of travel writing, Russia in Central Asia in 1889, is a political essay on the expansion of Russia towards the borders of Persia and Afghanistan, her military consolidation of the mainly Turkoman territories, and the strategic response her forward possessions should or should not excite in London and Calcutta. Curzon’s text skirts around a fascination with Russian methods of conquest and colonisation, which are explicitly compared with British rule in India. In contrast with Oriental cities that mimicked Europe, Bokhara in Central Asia remained ‘at the present juncture the most interesting and intact city in the East’. Ten miles away the Russians had established a station on their Trans-Caspian Railway, around which a new city, certain to eclipse the old, was being built. Bokhara under the Russians was theoretically an autonomous khanate, indirect rule meaning avoidance of the expense of annexation. But Curzon had been there and seen it with his own eyes; he knew very well what was afoot: ‘by a seeming concession to native sentiment, the Russians are in reality playing their own game . . . tolerating a semi-independent Amir with as much complacency as we do a Khan of Khelat or a Maharaja of Kashmir’ (Russia: 155–56). Beneath their imperial cunning the Russians adopt a ruthless policy in Central Asia, expressive of a power that Curzon affects to dismiss as efficient if crude. By its vigour Russia resitutates the staid imperial provenance of Great Britain. Of the Russian massacre of Turkomans at Geok Tepe in 1881, he observes: ‘A greater contrast than this can scarcely be imagined to the British method which is to strike gingerly a series of taps, rather than a downright blow . . . But there can be no doubt that the Russian tactics, however deficient they be from the moral, are exceedingly effective from the practical point of view.’ The Oriental was apt to see ‘in the heavy hand of the conqueror the all-powerful will of God’, which made his subsequent pacification an easier task (ibid.: 86). Submerged beneath the surface Orientalism, with its gratification of Curzon’s racial pride and its imperial logocentricism, is a destabilising anxiety that derives from his awareness of that project’s vulnerability to an alien, more vigorous imperial, challenge. He affects to dismiss the Russian threat by disclaiming any British interest in the conquered territory, even proffering the hand of friendship as from one imperial
power to another. But he also includes belligerent statements by Russian generals on Britain’s tyrannical hold over India which are hardly reciprocal, and even quotes an article from the French press which announces Russia’s inevitable ejection of the English from India. Curzon’s response is to berate the Russians for their lack of finesse, ‘altogether lacking the moral impulse which induces unselfish or Christian exertion on behalf of a subject people’ (ibid.: 401). He doubted if the Russians, ‘though they may have the ability to conquer and the strength to keep, have the genius to build a new fabric out of old materials’ (ibid.: 402). So troubling is the Russian spectre, however, that Curzon accomplishes the rhetorical feat of doubling his Orientalist critique, that is, by stripping Russia of her European race and branding her an Oriental power: ‘The conquest of Central Asia is a conquest of Orientals by Orientals ... Civilised Europe has not marched forth to vanquish barbarian Asia ... but barbarian Asia, after a sojourn in civilised Europe, returns upon its former footsteps to reclaim its own kith and kin’ (ibid.: 392).

In Persia and the Persian Question, Curzon repeats his assessment that Russia is in that early stage of imperialism in which ‘the lust for new possessions is in excess of every other sentiment’ (Persia: vol.1, 216). The inconsistencies in Persia’s discourse – now accommodating to Russia’s motives in her expansion into Central Asia, now condemnatory of her designs on Persia – may incorporate Curzon’s personal anxieties and ambivalence, and, equally, his politically inspired manoeuvres as a self-appointed expert on the East, setting himself up both to solace and to warn. Seistan, an impoverished, unattractive province of eastern Persia, merits an entire chapter because here Russian and British strategic interests appeared to converge, if not collide. Curzon’s advocacy of an Anglo-Indian railway across Indian Baluchistan to the borders of Seistan is a mimicry of Russia’s Trans-Caspian Railway that affects to eschew belligerence even as it acknowledges strategic fact. Curzon is coy about the strategic details and floats the railway as a commercial scheme, even broaching the idea of a link-up with Russia’s. Personally, he claims not to foresee the transportation of troops along its length, but ‘the map ... will assist the reader to form his own judgement’ (ibid.: vol.1, 238). Conversely, Curzon openly declares that Russia ‘regards the future partition of Persia as a prospect scarcely less certain of fulfilment than the
achieved partition of Poland’ (ibid.: vol.2, 592). (Ironically this prophecy would be ‘achieved’ in Curzon’s lifetime. Persia was effectively partitioned by Russia in collusion with the British Liberal Government by the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.) Russia’s occupation of Khiva, Merv, Bokhara and Samarkand presaged annexation of the provinces of North Persia ‘from West to East’ (ibid.: vol.2, 594). The scattered warnings of Russia’s intent are encapsulated in the final chapter of volume 2 in a statement Curzon attributes to Peter the Great: ‘Hasten the decadence of Persia, penetrate to the Persian Gulf, re-establish the ancient commerce of the Levant, and advance to the Indies, which are the treasure-house of the world’ (Persia.: vol.2, 601).

This consciousness spoiled any prolonged state of detached aesthetic pleasure the traveller might have enjoyed in Persia. Instead, Curzon is the British imperial surveyor, scrutinising a corrupt and despotic Oriental state bordering Northern India and the warm waters of the Gulf – clinically reporting the precariousness of its fabric and the points most likely to cave in the ramshackle edifice, as Russia looks covetously across from the newly conquered wastes of Central Asia ‘like a man camping in a desolate and strong field divided only by a thick hedge from a spacious pasture, where he sees food for himself and fodder for his beasts . . . What a temptation to break through the hedge and poach on the hidden preserves’ (ibid.: vol.1, 217). In Khorasan, Curzon sees ‘a succession of points at which Russian interference, influence or intrigue is being actively pushed forward’ (ibid.: vol.1, 201). Ever the prospective imperial manager, he desiderates that a ‘cardinal axiom of Russian politics in the East [is] that the commercial must precede political control’ and meticulously checks the bazaar in Meshed for evidence of Russian goods (ibid.: vol.1, 205). The decay he sees all around him possesses connotations beyond philosophic meditation on Asia’s proverbial ageless decline. Kashan: ‘a more funereal a place I had not yet seen. Scarcely a building was in repair, barely a wall in tact’ (ibid.: vol. 2, 14). Isfahan: ‘fallen from its high estate, and now in perpetual sackcloth and ashes . . . In itself an epitome of modern Iran’ (ibid.: vol.2, 39). In Nishapur, home of the poet Omar Khayyam, the city walls are broken down – why the desultory workmen – who would wish to repair them? ‘An enemy could march into Nishapur as easily as he could march down Brompton Road,
and would find about as much to reward him as if he occupied in force Brompton Cemetery’ (ibid.: vol.1, 261). The irony is directed at Persia, but the English reference suggests that, worthless though the Persian scene might appear to a casual observer, occupation of Persian soil is no remote eventuality, and any loss of national sovereignty would constitute a grave setback for Great Britain. The lesson is spelled out in the book’s last chapter: ‘I can see no reason why a Russian army of 10,000 men should not be in bloodless occupation of Meshed within three weeks of the commencement of hostilities’ (ibid.: vol. 2, 593). The landscape acquires a strategic focus, as the traveller probes Persia’s woefully exposed northern defences. Mounted on a donkey, a solitary Curzon almost succeeds in penetrating the mountain fort of Kelat-i-Nadiri, only to be halted a few metres from the entrance by the shouts of a ragbag soldiery. They claim if he was a Russian they would have shot him – ‘though how they could have guessed my nationality when they never saw me, or have shot at all when they were fast asleep, I did not needlessly vex them by asking’ (ibid.: vol.1, 130). Oriental unchangeability, decay and European encroachment are here fixed ineluctably within the bounds of Britain’s imperial interests.

Alone of all the Eastern peoples whose acquaintance Curzon made on his travels, the Japanese appeared to subvert the theses of Orientalism; and this sets up a further anxiety in Curzon’s narrative. Not only did the outward evidences of Westernisation/modernisation testify to Japan’s exception to the Oriental rule, but Curzon also noted in the armed forces a strain of discipline that was native and potentially disquieting to the European powers. Scrutinising Japan’s attitude towards foreigners decides him that ‘the more she has assimilated European excellences the more critical she had become of European defects’ (Problems: 47). The Japanese temperament displayed an ‘impetuous Chauvinism’ and readiness for war; however, this puerile patriotism might be tempered by the nation achieving international recognition and the maturity that came from ‘conscious strength’ (ibid.: 48–49). As with Russia, Curzon recognises in Japan a potential antagonist which might not play the game in the mature and sedate manner adopted by Great Britain in her great domain in the East. In her demands for a revision of treaties with foreign powers, Japan had been met, on Britain’s part, by a ‘conciliatory and
generous spirit' born by a 'desire to welcome [Japan] into the comity of
countries'. As 'a power with whom we share so many common
relationships', Japan might be seen as a worthy recipient of Britain's
magnanimous sponsorship of reform in the East. In revising their treaty,
'England assisted Japan to strike-off from herself the shackles of a past to
which she had proved herself superior, and which is every day fading into
a more rapid oblivion'(ibid.: 68–69). But within Curzon's imperialist
discourse, such phraseology carries split significations: it attempts both to
underwrite Britain's imperial primacy as the 'pivot of the situation - no
slight proof of her commanding influence on the destinies of distant Asia,'
at the same time as it betrays a submerged anxiety and fear of a new, more
vigorous and threatening challenger (ibid.: 68–69)

Fixing the Oriental Subject

On his travels in the East, Curzon never lost an opportunity to make
himself known to the local political elite. In his representations of
Oriental plenipotentiaries, he draws on a long-established tradition of
Western discourse on Oriental rulers and ruled that goes back as far as
Herodotus. According to Said, the eighteenth-century move towards
classification of nature and man into types, associated preeminently with
Linnaeus and Buffon, aided descriptions of the Oriental. 'When an
Oriental was referred to, it was in terms of such genetic universals as his
“primitive” state, his primary characteristics, his particular spiritual
background.' In the discourse of Curzon's contemporaries, Balfour and
Cromer, Said argues that the Oriental is represented as 'irrational,
depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”; ... the European is rational,
virtuous, mature, “normal.”' (Said 1978: 120, 40).

As ever, the political ramifications of dealing with the Oriental polity,
nominally independent, but in reality enmeshed in the system of imperial
realpolitik, is what exercises Curzon chiefly in his representations of
Orientals. His portrait of the Persian monarch, Nasir-ud-Din Shah, needed
to be toned down owing to his entry into Salisbury's short-lived
Conservative Ministry of 1892, while the coup of gaining access to the
Amir of Afghanistan gained Curzon added political capital because it
resulted in the establishment of closer diplomatic links with a recalcitrant but, in Britain’s imperial geography, strategically crucial player. ‘Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia - to many these names breathe only a sense of utter remoteness or a memory of strange vicissitudes and of moribund romance. To me, I confess, they are the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world’ (Persia: vol.1, 3–4).

In a key passage in his introduction to Persia and The Persian Question, Curzon fixes the Oriental subject in the same dualistic terms as the environment of grandeur and decay:

Splendide mendax might be taken as the motto of Persian character. The finest domestic virtues co-exist with barbarity and supreme indifference to suffering. Elegance of deportment is compatible with a coarseness amounting to bestiality. The same individual is at different moments haughty and cringing. A creditable acquaintance with the standards of civilisation does not prevent gross fanaticism and superstition. Accomplished manners and a more than Parisian polish cover a truly superb faculty for lying and almost scientific imposture. The most scandalous corruption is combined with a scrupulous regard for specific precepts of the moral law. Religion is alternately stringent and lax, inspiring at one moment the bigot’s rage, at the next the agnostic’s indifference. Government is both patriarchal and Machiavellian – patriarchal in its simplicity of structure, Machiavellian in its finished ingenuity of wrong doing. Life is both magnificent and squalid: the people at once despicable and noble, the panorama at the same time an enchantment and a fraud. (ibid.: vol.1, 15)

Again, the tone of the last sentence should not mislead us into regarding Curzon’s attitude towards the Persians as one of mere aesthetic detachment. As in his portrayal of the Persian landscape, Curzon’s Orientalism inscribes an ambivalence that vacillates between confirmed racial superiority and an unease that in competition for power over the Oriental subject control could be wrested from Anglo-Saxon hands.

If within the threatened boundaries of Persia there could have but preponderated men like Curzon’s servant, an Afghan of Persian extraction
‘a fine specimen of the Asiatic. Courageous and resourceful, a good horseman, with the manners of a perfect gentleman [who] entertained a profound conviction there was no people in the world like the English’ (Persia: vol.1, 117–8). Or even the drunken Khan of Kuchan, who had met English travellers before and asked them the same suspicious questions, but whose ancestors, owing to their rebellious character, had been moved from their Kurdish area by Shah Abbas to protect the northern border. (Curzon approved of the strategic transference of whole tribes to defend imperial borders.) Admittedly, compared to the Persians, the Turkomans, Afghans and Kurds were known to be warlike people. But the Turkoman tribesmen, a people who once terrorised Khorasan, had already been incorporated into the Russian empire with worrying success. Turkomans were to be encountered wearing Russian uniforms in Baku: ‘only eight years ago [Russia’s] bitter and determined enemies . . . crossing into Europe in order to salute as their sovereign the Great White Czar’ (Russia: 133).

The problem with the Persian – ‘a coward at the best of times’ – was that he lacked the mettle required to resist any invader. ‘There is not one in a hundred who would pull his sword from the scabbard to vindicate [his country’s] independence’ (Persia: vol.1, 277; vol.2, 628). The Shah, diplomatically presented, was the establisher of as strong, secure and centralised a regime as could be expected given recent Persia’s history. He was ‘the best existing specimen of a moderate despot’, disposed towards reform, if given to adopting fads which were just as soon dropped, and ruler over a people hostile or inimical to reform (ibid.: vol.1., 396, 401, 391). Deferring the myth of the Persians’ Aryan race (attractive to other European writers on the country) Curzon accounts for the monarch’s ‘manliness, amounting almost to a brusqueness of bearing’ by contrasting his Turkish blood to the ‘smooth and polished Persian’ (ibid.: vol.1, 395). But though he was ‘extremely affable and well-disposed towards Europeans’ (and Britain in particular after his reception by Queen Victoria), the Shah was unfortunately situated between the rivalry of Britain and Russia.8 Curzon’s instinct was to buttress the authority of the Shah, and the pro-British politicians around him (though he is often suspicious of the reputed Anglophil sentiments of some of these). But the odds were stacked against Nasir-ud-Din committing himself to a British alliance:
Whenever Russia desires to enforce with peculiar emphasis some diplomatic demand at Teheran, a mere enumeration of the Russian garrisons within a few hundred miles of the Persian capital is enough to set the Council of Ministers quaking, and to make the sovereign himself think twice. (ibid.: vol. 2, 593)

In the north of Persia, British power could barely strut as ostentatiously as Russia's (hence Curzon's concern to make the British embassy building in Meshed more prepossessing). But in Afghanistan, Curzon could celebrate one victorious episode in the game: his own successful wooing of its Amir. A case study of the civilised barbarian, which inscribes the Orient as 'both magnificent and squalid; the people at once despicable and noble', Curzon’s essay on the Amir of Afghanistan is a bizarre traveller’s tale that revels in paradox, fixing the Oriental despot according to a recognisable Oriental type, at the same time as it enhances its author's political kudos as self-appointed intermediary between an outré tyrant and the British Government. ('In my numerous interviews I flatter myself I succeeded in winning the Amir's confidence', Tales: 83.)

The Amir exercised his tyrannical power for the good of his country, even as he violated all the codes of humanity.

This man of blood loved scents and colours and gardens and singing birds and flowers . . . In this strange and almost incredible amalgam of the jester and the cynic, the statesman and the savage, I think that a passion for cruelty was one of his most inveterate instincts . . . He confided to an Englishman at Kabul that he had put to death 120,000 of his own people . . . Nevertheless, this monarch, at once a patriot and a monster, a great man and almost a fiend, laboured hard and unceasingly for the good of his country . . . He and he alone was the Government of Afghanistan . . . [In his] colossal but childish vanity . . . he cherished the delusion . . . that he had a monopoly of all the talents and was the universal genius of Afghanistan, particularly in all matters of mechanics and arts. (ibid.: 52–54, 65).

This man, whose lengthy epistles are quoted in order to establish a rambling Oriental prolixity, and who rehearses to his English guest his
imagined behaviour when presented to Queen Victoria at the Parliament of Westminster, filled Curzon to overflowing with the gratification of being able to deliver his acceptance of an invitation to visit London. In his celebration of the archetypal Oriental tyrant, Curzon can even indulge a criticism of his own country as he half-endorses the Amir’s exercise of a random Oriental terror to limit crimes of murder, comparing this to the unpunished murders of English cities. Curzon’s account exudes the confident assurance that the country over which the Amir ruled would one day become the Anglo-Afghanistan protectorate.

**Great Britain and the Politics of Islam**

The ambivalence between indulgent aesthetic delight, and cold assessment of imperial strategy, structures Curzon’s attitude towards Islam. ‘Western Asia [was] in the unyielding and pitiless clutch of Islam, which oppose[d] a Cyclopean wall of resistance to innovation or reform’ (Problems: 7–8). In Samarkand, he conflates a funeral, a sunset and the decay of Islam, in one piece of self-referential purple prose.

Below and all around, a waste of grey sand-hills was encumbered with half-fallen tombstones and mouldering graves. Here and there a horsehair plume, floating from the end of a rickety pole, betrayed the last resting-place of a forgotten sheikh or saint. The only existence of life was supplied by the horses of the mourners, which were picketed amid the waste of graves. Presently round the corner of the mosque emerged the long line of turbaned orientals, grave and silent. Each mounted his beast without speaking a word and rode away.

Against ‘the turquoise blue’ that ‘seemed to encircle the horizon,’ and the ‘glory’ of the sunset, quickly replaced by dusk, ‘a long cry trembled through the breathless void. It was the muezzin from a neighbouring minaret, summoning the faithful to evening prayer’ (Russia: 275). Inscribed by tropes of neglect, decay and death, its devotees persisting in haunting rituals from a once glorious past, Islam, Curzon implies, presents no danger to the Western imperial project, but is an obstacle only to those who profess it.
Particularly galling was the success with which Russia had pacified her own Muslim subjects. The Muslims of Transcaspasia had benefited by their interface with European imperial power. The once brutally courageous, barbarian Turkomans had been subdued and incorporated into Russia’s imperial war machine as loyal auxiliaries. The people had tasted the uses of western technology too. In Bokhara the railway, originally denounced as satanic by the clergy, afforded the spectacle of ‘Mussulman passengers crammed to suffocation, just as in India, the infantile mind of the Oriental deriving endless delight from an excitement which he makes not the slightest effort to analyse or solve’ (Russia: 155).

Curzon’s image of Islam is a simple one. The religion is a cause of atrophy, an enemy of progress. Allied with the ‘infantile Oriental mind’, Islam created a problem of no mean magnitude for Britain. In as strategically sensitive a state as Persia, Britain’s interests were hardly served by the country’s backwardness, for it encouraged Russia’s aggression, and this in turn endangered Britain’s hold on India. Any rejection of Western modernisation is therefore dismissed as mere fanaticism. The would-be innovator, Nasir-ud-Din Shah, was hampered by ‘a sense of powerlessness against the petrified ideas and prejudices of an Oriental people,’ but had also shown ‘commendable independence of the fanatical element among the mullas and mujtahids of Islam’ (Persia: vol.1, 401,405). Ominously, in Meshed, Curzon found the local population resigned and respectful towards their encroaching northern neighbour. Russia’s contract with Muslim backwardness in Persia was that it consistently blocked all attempts at reform. In contrast, Britain – which did ‘not covert one square foot of Persian soil’ (ibid.: vol.2, 621) – despite past vacillations, would need to establish a future policy that guided Persia along the pathway of ‘material expansion and internal reform’ (ibid.: vol.2, 618). The British had established the telegraph system there in an act which Curzon presents as one of entirely benevolent disinterest. (He himself had – less disinterestedly – invested in exploration of Persian oil, a move he prematurely pronounced a net loss and failure (Gilmore 1995: 76).

Curzon’s assessment of the reform issue looks forward to the early years of the next century, in which Britain’s interests in Persia led her to sponsor reform – until the Anglo-Russian Convention (which Curzon bitterly opposed) caused her withdrawal of this support.
But Curzon’s more profound-long term failure was perhaps his misreading of Persian resistance to Western encroachment, which he dubbed solely reactionary and fanatical, and unrelated to popular patriotism. For example, he saw the signs of popular anger against foreign commercial monopolies in Persia and opposition to the Shah, but dismissed them as led by the ‘retrograde and priestly party’. The tobacco protest of 1891 was led by the mullahs and evidenced to ‘the manacles of Mohammedan prejudice and superstition’ resulting in ‘recrudescence of bigotry at the admission of the foreign element upon so large a scale’ (Persia: vol.2, 629). It is noteworthy that Curzon makes no mention of Persian oppositional thought; in particular, of the revolutionary Pan-Islamist thinker, Jamal-ud-Din al-Afghani, substantial English accounts on whom later appeared in Wilfrid Scawen Blunt’s Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt (1908) and Edward Granville Browne’s Persian Revolution (1910).

It is significant that Curzon chose not to devote a section to Islamic beliefs in Persia, but instead gave coverage to religious minorities. The Babi movement, in particular, had been noticed by European diplomats (an account of it was included in her Persian memoirs by Lady Sheil, the British diplomat’s wife), and interpreted to Britain by the Cambridge professor of Oriental languages, E.G. Browne. Curzon does not seem to have met any Babis while in Persia, but his account of them is highly sympathetic, and he goes to some lengths to ‘correct’ misreporting of the sect’s aims and doctrines. Discounting political or revolutionary motives, Curzon defines Babism as ‘a religious movement whose primary object is a revolt against the tyranny and fanaticism of the Koran, and against the growing laxity of Muslim practice.’ He foregrounds its reformist tenets, such as the emancipation of women (which he takes as Christian-inspired), the disuse of the veil, and the abolition of polygamy (Persia: vol.1, 502). In fact, Curzon reads Babism as a challenge to the religious status quo in Persia, doubling the probable number of its acolytes, and opining ‘a time may conceivably come when it will oust Mohammedanism from the field in Persia’ (ibid.: vol.1, 503). While Curzon’s account may be located in a Western desire to see Islam reformed, a counter-reading might see it as a further exercise in European Orientalism. Additionally, Curzon may have seen the benefits for Europe,
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and Great Britain in particular, in a diminution of the role of Islam, and its superseding by a movement he took to be sympathetic to ‘Europeanisation’, and which he may have thought would strengthen the ramshackle Persian state, in the process offering a stronger resistance to Russian penetration.

Curzon returned from his second round-the-world trip in 1893 to tell his constituents at Southport: ‘“Rightly or wrongly . . . it appears to me that the continued existence of this country is bound up in the maintenance—aye I will go further and say even the extension of the British Empire . . . The strength and the greatness of England [made] you feel that every nerve a man may strain, every energy he may put forward, cannot be devoted to a nobler purpose than keeping tight the cords that hold India to ourselves”’, (Ronaldshay 1928: vol. 1, 192–93). This was typically the rhetoric of high imperialism. We might say that Curzon’s travels had provided him with the rationale for his forthcoming stint as Viceroy of India; but it could equally be argued that they had merely confirmed him in his allegiance to the rule of Englishmen proclaimed by Sir James Stephen in his Eton speech fifteen years before. In fact, the travel writings belong with a body of work that stretched over a lifetime, and found him attempting, as foreign secretary in 1920, to implement a policy towards Persia already implicit in his two volumes on that country published in 1892. By then, however, though Czarist Russia was no more and its Bolshevik successor lay in quarantine, Britain was too weak to make of Persia another protectorate, as she had Egypt in 1914. And Curzon’s claim to be writing not ‘a work of travel . . . but an authoritative work (I trust) of permanent value, which will be read and referred to, twenty, fifty, and perhaps more years hence,’ reads as a statement replete with all the ironies of the imperial project itself (ibid.: vol.1, 157).

Notes

1 Hereafter cited in the text as Travel.
2 Hereafter cited in the text as Russia.
3 Hereafter cited in the text as Persia.
4 Hereafter cited in the text as Problems.
The other school in Seeley’s schema, ‘the pessimists’, is readily identifiable with the ‘Little Englander’ tradition.

6. Cf. Seeley (1911: 222): ‘Every moment in Turkey, every new symptom in Egypt, any stirring in Persia or Transoxania or Burmah or Afghanistan, we were obliged to watch with vigilance. The reason is that we have possession of India.’

7 ‘By far the most important element is the Greek view of the Persian Empire was its symbolization of the abjectness of the individual under autocracy; for when a Greek wished to take stock of the values inherent in his own civilization he could always assess them by their opposites as revealed in the lot of the subject peoples in the Persian Empire’ (Arberry 1953: 327). Curzon quotes Herodotus on the ‘great continuity in [Persian] natural character’ (Persia: vol.2, 628, ftn. 1).

8 On the Shah’s reception in England, see Wright (1985).


10 Lady Sheil (1856); E.G. Browne (1889). A more recent study is: Abbas Amanat (1989).

References


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Sheil, Lady, (1856) Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia. London: