

Perceptions and Misconceptions: Islam in Nineteenth Century Art and Literature

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There is no better way to start this presentation than by making a reference to the Lebanese-American poet, novelist, philosopher, and political thinker Ameen Rihani, Kahlil Gibran's closest friend and inspirer. In a presentation entitled, "Where East and West Meet," at the University of Illinois, Urbana, March 1930, Rihani asserts that the higher ideal of prophets and poets is "supremely human":

Before it every mark of birth disappears; customs and traditions are held in abeyance, and the differences in nationality and language cease to be a hindrance to understanding. **The soul seeking expression, the soul reaching out for truth, is one everywhere.** Confucius might be American in his ideal, even as he is Chinese; and Emerson might be Chinese, even as he is American. Gotama Buddha made manifest in London might be mistaken for Carlyle; and Carlyle revisiting the glimpses of the moon in Japan might be mistaken for Gotama. Jalauddin Rumi, were he born in Assisi, would have been a St. Francis; and St. Francis, were he born in Shiraz, would have been a Jalaluddin (19).

There is a lot of wisdom in the above quotation, the kind of wisdom which only genuine artists and literary figures get pleasure from. This kind of wisdom sets the mind free from national confines and egoistic interests and gives it the advantage and privilege to perceive the other as a reflection of the self. Rihani's agent of proper perception is a soul seeking the truth; and accordingly, the souls seeking truth everywhere, in the East and the West, must meet on common grounds. Thus proper perception is a binding agent, while misconception¹ and misrepresentation are agents of division, agents that unfortunately nourish limited political and economic interests and destroy the highest human ideals. In this respect, misconceptions and misrepresentations of Islam and the Muslims by some Western artists and literary figures, who lacked higher human ideals in their expressions, were and still are agents of conflict and division between the East and the West. And unfortunately, several Eastern and Western scholars like Edward Said and his disciples² studied the 19th century misrepresentation of Islam and the Muslims in artistic and literary works; and they, directly or indirectly, contributed to more division between both worlds when they overlooked the genuine and positive perceptions and presentations of Islam and the Muslims by some other Western artists and writers, who in their search for truth disregarded all limited interests.

It was only natural for nineteenth century Western writers and artists to see Islam and the East with their Western eye and to compare them to their own religions and regions; however, their interest in Islam and the Muslims was an interest in a seemingly different dogma and people; better, it was a nineteenth century interest in expanding perspectives of the human mind. Nineteenth century writers were quite aware of the significance of building up an artistic identity that trespasses their traditional native confines. By enriching their artistic pronouncements with acumen

beyond and, in some points, *above* native traditions, they hoped to traverse distant realms of knowledge, which would enable them to better understand themselves and their own world. And although prejudice against Islam and the Muslims was prevalent in England and the West, the East provided several nineteenth century artists and writers with this acumen, which Sir William Jones had predicted two centuries before.³ In this paper, I argue that the discourse of the nineteenth century perceptions and/or misconceptions of Islam cannot be studied in isolation from the positive and genuine interest in an admirable other and that not all perceptions and representations of Islam and the Muslims should be placed within the aura of propagandist and imperialist activities.

But first it is necessary to diffuse a Western and sometimes an Eastern misconception of two terms: East and Islam. Ever since the spread of Islam in the 7th century, East has become synonymous with Islam and Eastern, with Islamic. This misconception was recently pushed forward by the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and before by the Crusaders and the Western travelers and by writers who lacked first hand experience or those prompted by religious and war propaganda. Before World War I, all countries now coined as part of the Middle East were called the East, the Orient, or the Levant. Those countries were and still are inhabited by a majority of Muslims and a minority of Christians and Jews, who had lived during and before the nineteenth century in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and other Arab countries and who mixed and mingled with the Muslims and shared common festivities and traditions (Mattar 28–29). One must not forget that the region coined as Islamic had been the birthplace of Judaism and Christianity and of several ancient civilizations and cultures. References to what nowadays is known as the Middle East as a purely Islamic region indicate that only Muslims had lived and still live in this region; however, these deny historic and religious facts. Christian rulers had for centuries ruled Lebanon and different Eastern regions; and even today Lebanon has a Christian president. Besides, what have been referred to by some critics as Islamic culture and traditions are not always Islamic for they do not necessarily always relate to or even express the faith and teachings of Islam; rather, they relate to the Eastern culture, which stems from several religions and civilizations. The adjective “Islamic” modifies beliefs and elements immediately related to the Islamic faith and teachings. However, the reference to an Eastern carpet as Islamic demeans Islam unless verses from the Qur’an are written on it; and in this case, it is no longer a carpet but an Islamic hanging. Thus, one can justly say that not all Eastern traditions and practices are purely Islamic, the least of which are the evil eye and the wearing of veils, cloaks, gowns, shawls, etc., which were and in some Arab countries are Eastern traditions first practiced by the Eastern Christians and Jews. Also, what Western scholars refer to as Islamic literature is not necessarily Islamic but Eastern. For instance, James Kritzeck calls his edition of translated Eastern literature, *Anthology of Islamic Literature*. The fact that most works in this anthology were written by Muslim literary figures does not render the works Islamic as most of these have nothing to do with the Islamic faith, except those that were written by Sufi poets.

The other misconception I must diffuse is the belief that all Oriental Art including paintings and literary works by Western Orientalists are propagandist and lack genuine interest in Islam and the Muslims. There is no denying of the fact that some Orientalists were motivated by political and religious prejudice, but one cannot overlook those Orientalists who confirmed that Islam was a genuine faith and that the

Muslims were devoted to their faith. The development of empirical observation as the main source of knowledge during the eighteenth century defied subjective prejudiced views. Accurate observations of familiar and unfamiliar lands and peoples were called for to foster the study of Man, and the closest unfamiliar world was the East, thus contacts with the Eastern world were encouraged on the basis of transmitting to the West a culture remote but wealthy. Some artists and literary figures visited the East and North African countries to study Islam and the Eastern allure at first hand and not only from books; others satisfied their desire by perceiving difference through books. A few became addicted to the Eastern world: they visited several times, and some stayed for long periods.

Among the Western artists, Léon-Adolphe-Auguste Belly made three trips to the East; Auguste Renoir visited Algeria twice; Henri Matisse made three trips to Morocco; Horace-Emile-Jean Vernet had five trips to Egypt, Palestine and other Eastern regions; Gustave Guillaumet made as many as 10 trips to Algeria and Morocco; Jean Léon Gérôme, who was the most interested in Islamic themes, made seven visits to most Eastern regions between 1856 and 1875; John Fredrick Lewis lived in Cairo for ten years; Arthur Melville resided in Cairo for two years; Gustav Bauernfeind visited the East twice and ended his life in Jerusalem. Even American artists made trips to the East: John Singer Sargent, who was influenced by Gérôme, traveled twice to the Orient, the later journey of which provided him with material to decorate the Boston Public Library (Stevens 16). The notable frequency of nineteenth century artists' visits to Eastern regions confirms their sincerity in dealing with Eastern and Islamic matter.

And among the literary figures, Edward Lane lived among the Muslims long enough to describe their manners with accuracy. Alphonse de Lamartine resided in Lebanon and visited several Eastern regions; and Lord Byron had two long visits to the East; he ended his life in Greece. However, it is worth noting here that some Western writers not only mingled with the Muslims but also went as far as visiting Muslim sacred lands. For instance, the Spanish Domingo Badia y Leblich was among the very few Western writers who visited Mecca and drank from the sacred water of Zemzem. He claimed to be a descendant of the Abbasids and called himself "Ali Bey" so he may be granted permission to enter the holy city of Islam. Ali Bey was overwhelmed when seeing Muslims from all over the East praying side by side. "There is not any religion that presents to the senses a spectacle more simple, affecting, and majestic"; Badia goes on saying: there is "no intermediary between man and the Divinity; all individuals are equal before their creator; ... What an encouragement to virtue" (67). John Lewis Burckhardt, a Swiss scholar, who wrote *Travels in Arabia* (1829), was also able to enter Mecca and Medina and visit Muslim sacred shrines in 1814. He was considered by the Muslims he met in Arabia as an authority on Islam, which he admired and held in high esteem. And Richard Burton, (Show Painting) the famous British travel writer who wrote *Personal Narratives of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Mecca* (1855-1856), knew Arabic well enough to dress as an Arab sheik and to set on the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1853. In another work, he praised Islam as a religion that exalts and teaches respect for man.⁴

Remarkable, indeed, is the number of nineteenth century artists and writers whose perceptions of Islam and the Muslims were prompted by a genuine interest. However,

the subject is wider than the scope of this paper, the reason why I will make a reference to the most representative.

The European artists, who visited the East during the nineteenth century and made positive statements about Islam and the Muslims, were fascinated by the Muslims' devotion, the manner of their prayer, their pilgrimage to Mecca, their mosques, and especially by their accurate representations of biblical characters. About this Warner Malcolm says:

If biblical subjects authentically treated, is the first contribution of Orientalism to religious art, the second is the scene of worship, occasionally Jewish but in the vast majority of the cases Muslim: the call for prayer, the prayer in the mosque, at the tomb, on the rooftop and in the desert, and the pilgrim caravan bound to Mecca" (35-36).

For instance, Belly's *Pilgrims Going to Mecca* (Show the Painting) and Gérôme's *Mu'adhin's Call for Prayer* (Show the Painting) exhibit the great reverence of the artists towards Islam and the Muslims. Horace-Emile-Jean Vernet confirmed in the early nineteenth century that the Muslim Arabs are accurate representations of the biblical characters. When Horace Vernet saw Muslims at prayer, in a mosque, he commented:

A holy respect comes over the spectator in the presence of this silent gathering. ... The expression of humility and veneration imprinted on every face, which no distraction can alter, gives their features a stately grandeur that seems to harmonize with the building itself. Prayer makes all men equal: the half-naked *fellâh* next to the rich man in his silk *quftân* and gold-embroidered turban, his ornate weapons removed for the moment, both believing in the same God, both come to Worship with the same fervour (99).

Along the same lines, Gérôme made a favorable comment of Islam and their worship place when he said: (Show painting)

The thing that strikes you most when you visit mosques is their exclusively religious, almost poetic, atmosphere. These are not our pretty-pretty Parisian cathedrals, nor our phoney-Greek temples, which are just theatres where the performance is the Mass. Seeing quiet, serious Arabs prostrate themselves without affection before the wall of the mihrâb, I could not help thinking of my good old Madeleine, where the one-o'clock service is just like the opening night show (167-168).

Western painters, who were influenced by Islam and the Muslims, not only lived among Muslims but also studied the Qur'an with interest; among those, only one painter was known to have converted to Islam and to have lived in Algeria and made the pilgrimage to Mecca as Hadj Nasr Ed Dine Dini; this was the French Alphonse-Etienne Dinet.

On the other hand, Western scholars and literary figures who professed their admiration of Islam and the Muslims sought the Eastern culture not to become part of it but to learn from it. They were quite aware of the fact that other cultures and religions have new things to offer to their own culture. Their perceptions of Islam and the Muslims go beyond the popular misconceptions of nineteenth century Europe

because they were not only capable of separating politics from dogma but also of perceiving, accepting, and appreciating difference. Thus, their engagements in Eastern cultures were prompted by a sense of respect and admiration.

Among the nineteenth century writers who did not set foot on Eastern soil but had a deep understanding of Islam were Goethe and Robert Southey. Goethe was exceptionally interested in Islam when he wrote his *West-Oestlicher Divan* in 1814-1815. In it, he tried to imitate the verses of the Qur'an, which he read in German and even studied its different translations into other European languages. Goethe, however, felt the shortcomings of all translations, because during that time in Jena he had been learning to read and write Arabic; consequently, he could read verses of the Qur'an in its original language. In his *Divan*, he writes:

“Whether the Koran is of eternity?”
I don't question that!
That it is the book of books
I believe out of the muslim's duty.”

Much more than his interest in the Qur'an as a holy text with supreme beauty and sublimity of language was his concern with its religious teachings. About the Prophet and the Qur'an, Goethe has so much to say; but his best defense is projected in the following statement: “*He is a prophet and not a poet and therefore his Koran is to be seen as a divine law and not as a book of a human being, made for education or entertainment.*” In another section of his *Divan*, Goethe writes his celebrated verses, which Carlyle refers to in his *Hero and Hero Worship*: “If Islam means submission to God, We all live and die in Islam.” On February 2nd, 1816, Goethe went as far as indicating that he would not refuse others suspicions that he was a Muslim. Goethe's positive perceptions of Islam drove Shaykh 'Abdalqadir Al-Murabit to claim that Goethe “should be known among the muslims as Muhammad Johann Wolfgang Goethe.”⁵

Robert Southey, who knew George Sale's English translation of the Qur'an very well, believed that Islam is an extension of Christianity and that Muhammad is a biblical prophet. Mohammed Saharafuddin discusses this theme in detail; he confirms Southey's view that “In *Thalaba* the beliefs and customs of the Islamic Orient are a survival of the ancient life and faith of the Bible”; he goes on to say that “Islam is used as a model for the regeneration of European civilization,” and that Southey believed that “Islam in itself could play an effective part in the understanding of man and human consciousness” (124, 105 and 106 respectively).⁶ In his notes to *Thalaba*, Southey makes several allusions to the Prophet's knowledge and dependence on the Bible. For instance explaining the Muslim belief that destiny marks man's actions, he writes “Most probably the idea was taken up by Mohummed from the sealing of the Elect, mentioned in the Revelations (*Thalaba* I, 211). In *Thalaba*, Southey not only recreates an Islamic “Pilgrim's Progress” but also succeeds in presenting Islam as an authentic religion and the Muslims as virtuous and faithful in their worship of Allah. Unfortunately, however, a few years after the publication of *Thalaba* (1800), Southey, who did not study Islam at first hand, yields to popular misconceptions when he presents contradicting views of Islam in his prose work, *Chronicle of the Cid* (1808).

Lord Byron, like Lamartine, was wise enough to separate Eastern politics from Islam. While he severely criticized some Eastern traditions and several political practices of

some Muslim Pashas and rulers, he expressed genuine views of Islam in his correspondence and Oriental tales. In one of his letters, he writes, "...allow me to depart from this cursed country [England], and I promise to turn *Mussulman* rather than return to it" (*L.&J.*, I, 202). Byron was frustrated and agonized by his personal affairs in England when he made this statement; however, I believe it must be taken as an indication of his genuine interest in Islam and the Muslims, whom he had met and mingled with in Albania and Turkey. In another letter, Byron writes: "I will bring you ten Mussulmans shall shame you in all good-will towards men, prayer to God, and duty to their neighbours" (*L.&J.*, II, 86). Even his wife professed that he needed to go back to the East, where he "was very near becoming a Mussulman" (Elwin 270–271). He writes in a letter to Lady Melbourne: "—I have no attachment— within these two thousand miles—but I feel some old ones reviving—& I hope I shall yet pray for your prosperity with my face towards Mecca" (*L.&J.*, III, p. 53). Byron read Sale's translation of the Qur'an and became quite familiar with Sufism and Sufi poetry.⁷ In his Oriental tales, he describes Muslim traditions with the liveliness and accuracy of a first hand observer.⁸ He hoped to visit Muslim sacred places but was deterred during his first visit to the East by financial problems and during his second visit, by his sudden death in Greece.

While condemning the barbarity of some Muslim rulers, Alphonse de Lamartine praises the Muslims for their religious devotion and loyalty, for their charity and hospitality, and for their tolerance and sense of justice; he claims that the teachings of Islam are sensationally no different than those of Christianity (II, 85–86). In his *Historire de la Turquie* (1854), Lamartine exhibits his perception of the Prophet Mohammad:

If greatness of purpose, smallness of means and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislation, empires, peoples and dynasties, but millions of men in one-third of the then inhabited world, --and more than that, he moved altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and souls. ... As regards all the standards by which Human Greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he (II, 276–277).

Lamartine, who was also interested in Arabic literature, spent more than a year in Lebanon and Palestine and translated an Italian version of Antara's heroic poems into French. Another French scholar, Henri de Castries makes an impressive description of the prayer of the Muslim soldiers in Algeria; he says:

I heard the innovation "Allah akbar!" ring out loud and clear. God is supreme! That simple concept of divinity took on a meaning in my soul beyond anything theology or metaphysics had taught me. I was struck down by an inexpressible malaise, a mixture of shame and anger. I felt that, in this moment of prayer, these Arab cavalymen, so subordinate just a short time ago, were asserting their superiority over me. How I wished I could have cried out to them that I too believed, that I too knew how to worship my God! (4)

Another French writer, Theophile Gautier, criticizes eighteenth century writers for distorting images of the Muslims when he remarks:

If one becomes aware of the dignity and even the chastity which exist between a Muslim and his wives, one would renounce all this voluptuous mirage which our writers of the eighteenth century have created, the idea of these harems described by the author of the *Letters persanes* (164-165).

Godfrey Higgins, a member of the Royal Asiatic Society, left a lasting impression on Carlyle, who used logic to prove the authenticity of the Prophet and Islam in his *Heroes and Hero Worship*. Higgins blames scholars for their prejudiced judgments of Islam; he defends Mohammed against charges of lust, ambition and falsehood and confirms that Islam and Christianity have the same original foundations and principles. In his "Preface," Higgins writes:

The object of the following essay is to abate the mischievous spirit of intolerance which has hitherto existed between the followers of Jesus and those of Mohamed, by shewing that the religions of both . . . are the same in their original foundation and principles (10).

Higgins defends the Prophet against charges of ambition and lust, and Islam against charges of sensuality and brutality (16, 26, 37, and 44). He has so much to say about the sincerity of the Prophet, but he sums up his views as follows: "In a word, he may justly be said to have lived as a hero and to have died like a philosopher" (16). Later in the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle endorses the above views in a lecture entitled, "The Hero as a Prophet, Mohamet, Islam." The lecture was delivered in London on the 8th of May 1840, to a large audience, among whom were literary men and bishops. After giving a brief biography of the Prophet and praising him for his sincerity, honesty, and authenticity, Carlyle compares Christianity and Islam to prove that their principles and teachings are basically the same and ends this part by making a reference to Goethe, who asserts: "If this be *Islam*, do we not all live in Islam?" (qtd. 74). Interesting is his description of Islam as a confused form of Christianity (74), and his assertion that in the self denial and annihilation of Islam lies "the highest Wisdom that Heaven has revealed to our Earth" (75). Of Mohammed's use of the sword, Carlyle argues, "Charlemagne's conversion of the Saxons was not by preaching" (80). About the Qur'an, Carlyle had much to say; however, his most powerful defense is obvious in his assertion that it is a message sent down from Heaven (84). Carlyle ends his lecture by criticizing Prideaux and others for their misconceptions and misrepresentations of Islam and the Muslims (89).

The above views laid the basis for a better and deeper Western understanding of Islam. They motivated other nineteenth century Western artists, writers and scholars to disregard popular misconceptions of Islam and the Muslims. Later in the twentieth century, perceptions of Islam and the Muslims became more genuine and objective than ever before, however, only among artists, writers, scholars and enlightened people who sought the highest ideals of human beings. Ironically enough, those who led or lead the peoples of the world were and are aware of the remarkable peculiarity and communality of world confessions and cultures, but they abused and continue to abuse religious and cultural differences in their belligerent drive after political and economic power. Our modern world is getting smaller and smaller everyday. We must correct our data banks and make good use of cyberspace and electronic communication to foster genuine understanding and respect among peoples of different cultures. Samuel Huntington's prediction, that "In this new world the most

pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities” (28), is telling and fear-provoking, at the same time. This prediction will come true unless we scholars tell the truth about other religions and cultures—much like the above nineteenth century artists and scholars did. And unless **“we go deep enough or high enough”** when teaching our fellow countrymen and citizens of the world to objectively perceive, genuinely appreciate, and honestly respect not only what is common but also what is different in the other, we will never meet. “In the Orient and in the Occident,” Rihani verifies, “the deep thinkers are kin, the poets are cousins, the pioneers of the spirit are the messengers of peace and good will to the world. Their works are the open highways between nations, and they themselves are the ever-living guardians and guides. ... [only] when we go deep enough or high enough, we meet” (20).

Notes

¹ I use the terms “misconception” and “perception” in their denotative sense; i.e., “misconception” implies a misunderstanding of an idea or a concept; this leads to misinterpretation. In most cases, a misconception is unintentional as it stems out of ignorance; in this sense, it is different than misrepresentation, which is an intentional act of distorting truth or facts. On the other hand, “perception” is here used to refer to understanding based on knowledge or first hand experience and observation.

² Edward Said asserts that almost all Orientalists activities were propagandist and directed to serve Western ideological and imperialistic desires; see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). See also Eric Meyer, “‘I Know Thee not, I loathe thy Race’: Romantic Orientalism in the Eye of the Other,” in *ELH*, 63:3 (Fall 1991), pp. 657–99 and Fehmida Sultana, “Romantic Orientalism and Islam: Southey Shelley, Moore, and Byron.” Diss. Tufts University, 1989.

³ Sir William Jones, the pioneer of serious Eastern scholarship, had already predicted this change when he declared in the second half of the eighteenth century: “If the languages of the Eastern nations were studied in our great seminaries of learning, where every other branch of useful knowledge is taught to perfection, a new and ample field would be opened for speculation; we should have a more extensive insight into the history of the human mind, we should be furnished with a new set of images and similitudes; and a number of excellent compositions would be brought to light, which future scholars might explain, and future poets might imitate”; see William Jones, *Works*, vol. IV (London, 1799), p. 547.

⁴ For a full discussion of Islam and the Muslims, see Richard Burton’s “El Islam, or Rank of Muhammedanism among the Religions of the World,” *The Jew, the Gypsy and El Islam* (London: n.p., 1898).

⁵ All quotations by Goethe are taken from “Was Goethe a Muslim?” by Shaykh ‘Abdalqadir Al-Murabit. Available online on: www.themodernreligion.com/converts/converts_gorthe.html.

⁶ The topic is discussed in details by Mohammed Sharafuddin in *Islam and Romantic Orientalism* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1994), 43–133.

⁷ See a note to “The Giaour” in *Complete Works*, III, p. 420.

⁸ See for instance Byron’s description of the Muslim burial in *The Giaour*, ll. 723–746, and *The Bride of Abydos*, II, ll. 621–631; see also his description of Muslim prayer during Ramadan in *The Siege of Corinth*, ll. 221–225.

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