

Culture of the Turnip Humour in the Travel Writing of Alexander Kinglake (1844) and Wilfred Gifford Palgrave (1865)

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'humour', which is something else
Jacques Lacan¹

Laughter in colonial travel writing is often seen by postcolonial critics as a sign of assumed cultural superiority or mockery. Less often, it is seen as volatile and elusive in effect, not so easily categorisable. This paper explores the possibilities in this second approach, focusing on the seemingly intractable ethnocentric humour of Alexander Kingslake and William Gifford Palgrave as they traverse nineteenth-century Middle Eastern and Arabian settings. One aim is to problematise the assumption that travel humour is always hostile or divisive, shoring up the civilizational values of domestic cultures at the expense of foreign ones. Another is to tread thorny metaphysical paths that laughter and humour can open up, even as they lead away from conventional political conclusions.

Travellers laugh a lot, often in relief. Many use humour to gauge an obstacle or to play down a difficulty and convert it into an occasion to gain pleasure² - humour as reflex, immediate, anguished, belied forth. The traveller-as-writer, frowning over the desk of forgetting, shapes the muddled history of earlier responses (memory, notes) into droll contrasts, ironic mis-recognitions, sedate carnival - humour as reflection, mediated, civil, artful. As far as nineteenth-century English travel writing goes, this kind of humour, which is the only kind available to the reader, can be read as an index of Western cultural assumptions (superiority, degradation of the other), or another entry in the ledger-book of anti-colonial accounting, or as both celebration of one social order and affirmation of another. It can also be read as a mode of solicitation, a communicable ecstasy, almost diabolic in its indifference to hierarchy and the moral imagination.

Humour is too quick, too volatile, to work, consistently and unproblematically, as a register of imperial hauteur and colonized wretchedness; nor can it invariably chart the anxiety and unravelling of the sovereign Western subject as he sweats it out in a rowtee under an alien sun or bullies a subaltern - providing another pre-text for post-imperial retrospective admiration, or remorse and hand-wringing. If it is, as Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson suggested, 'rebellious' within a psychic and social economy of expression, then it may rebel in ways in which neither dominant discourse nor resistant ones can easily contain, co-opt, or re-direct.³ Ambiguous in its effects, humour may be neither entirely gratifying (for the humorist) nor entirely degrading (for his subject), neither entirely humiliating (for the post-colonial reader) nor entirely consolidating (for her other). There are always two subjects, as well as two senses, to the term 'funny foreigners'.

An example of this ambiguity can be found in even so famously ethnocentric a text as Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen: Traces of Travel Brought Home from the East* (1844). After Edward Said's shirty dismissal in *Orientalism* (1979),⁴ it might seem politically naive or retrograde to separate that book's ideological ciphering from its poses. Yet if the latter can undo or displace the former, and promise a type of response unconstrained by nationalist determinants, a case can be made for recruiting even Kinglake for what Said elsewhere calls 'a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world' (1993, 277) and 'a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness' (278).

At a formal level much can be made of Kinglake's genre-bending. Take the moment when he questions other European travel writers' habit of relating conversations between themselves and 'Orientals' as if these had been uncomplicated, mutually intelligible exchanges. Where such writers might

represent a conversation between themselves and a Turkish pasha as a series of compliments given by the latter - on English progress, say, or character - the truth, says Kinglake, is that both sides of any original dialogue are embedded in distinct socio-cultural processes; and what both travelling subject and travelled-to subject hear is always mediated by a third party, the 'dragoman' or interpreter. Three wrappings enfold the communicative gift to the reader. The comic possibilities of coding and re-coding are self-evident. What actually might have been said can be rendered in 'some such talking', Kinglake says, 'as this':

Pasha. The Englishman is welcome; most blessed among hours is this, the hour of his coming.

Traveller. Give him my best compliments in return, and say I'm delighted to have the honour of seeing him.

Dragoman (to the Pasha). His Lordship, this Englishman, Lord of London, Scornor of Ireland, Suppressor of France, has quitted his governments, and left his enemies to breathe for a moment, and has crossed the broad waters in strict disguise, with a small but eternally faithful retinue of followers, in order that he might look upon the bright countenance of the Pasha among Pashas - the Pasha of the everlasting Pashalik of Karagholookoldour.

Traveller (to his Dragoman). What on earth have you been saying about London? The Pasha will be taking me for a mere cockney. Have I not told you *always* to say, that I am from a branch of the family of Mudcombe Park, and that I am to be a magistrate for the county of Bedfordshire, only I've not qualified, and that I should have been a Deputy-Lieutenant, if it had not been for the extraordinary conduct of Lord Mountpromise, and that I was a candidate for Boughton-Soldborough at the last election, and that I should have won easy if my committee had not been bribed. I wish to heaven that if you *do* say any thing about me, you'd tell the simple truth.

Dragoman - [is silent].

Pasha. What says the friendly Lord of London? Is there ought that I can grant him within the Pashalik of Karagholookoldour?

Dragoman (Growing sulky and literal). This friendly Englishman - this branch of Mudcombe - this head purveyor of Boughton - Soldborough - this possible policeman of Bedfordshire is recounting his achievements and the number of his titles (14-15).

Kinglake imagines the encounter between the Englishman and the Turk as a *coq à l'âne*, with speakers speaking past each other, part of a tradition of

literary squibbing. The dialogue from recalls burlesque - the punning (Bought-on-Soldborough), the play with place-names ('Pashalik of Karaghohookoldour').⁵ As such, the scene vulgarises what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'ennobled' or 'respectable' discourse (1996, 427)⁶ - which, in this case, would include early nineteenth-century travel discourse. For Bakhtin, the respectability of such discourse can be a 'pose', the 'world view of a man whose movements are made not in order to see better - he moves so that he may turn away from, *not* notice, be distracted' (385). Kinglake's pose collapses the moment he is distracted by other travel narratives' approximations. The Traveller and the Pasha may be parts of the same Self (Kinglake's prattling projections), licensed by fellow English gentlemen, but what they say or the way they say it - drawing attention to discursive inattention, as it were - drags everything down, as Bakhtin might say, to an 'everyday gross reality' (385).⁷

The Dragoman, taciturn, under orders, yet always cunning - much like the civil but always sly servants of contemporary comedies of manners - is the mediating agent. His silence considers the Traveller's extravagant claims, grimly mulling the matter of his 'simple truth', keying this slight revolt, this humour on the surface of English social life. English gentry's titular pretensions (Lord of London, Deputy-Lieutenant, etc), along with English aristocratic conduct and corrupt electoral practices, become as much a target for ridicule as the Pasha's hyperbole. Ottoman pomp is more than balanced by English pomposity. Indeed, the latter becomes so ridiculous, so barmy in its indifference to moral and civil logics of sense, that Reason turns turtle: the seriousness with which the Traveller takes his own excuses for not becoming what he claims he could have become in England is suddenly the simple truth of imperial travel discourse.

Kinglake's attempt to expose the travel writer's pose of knowingness, and to replace it with his own, necessarily carries with it a supplementary effect of unknowingness and unreliability; he has already conceded his ignorance of Turkish, and depends for his effect of superior knowledge only on what *might* have been said ('some such talking as this'), a wished-for, always belated recovery. For the reader, that 'gap' is enough to generate suspicion about the rest of the narrative's 'knowledge', an incredulity or truth-fatigue in relation to its discursive entitlement. On his own terms, or as the reader reads him, Kinglake simply does not know, and no amount of writerly craft will rid him (and the reader) of that ignorance. 'Traces' is always the prime qualifier in his book's title. Travel discourse is no longer ennobled, no longer sublime; it is dragged down; it has become, as Lacan might say, 'stupid' (1999, 13).⁸ The question, 'Who was that Dragoman?' or 'What did the Pasha *really* say?' or, more generally, 'Who are Kinglake's "Orientals"?' is also

stupid. That joke, for what it's worth, is not on the Traveller, alone; it will also be 'brought home' to Kinglake's readers. If, finally, this humour must come down on the side of the status quo (the colonial order), as indeed Freud and Bergson might argue, it is also, in Freud's words 'liberating and elevating' - though we, as he adds, reasonably enough, do not know exactly why (1990, 432).⁹

When a travel writer condescends that the Turks he spoke to admired English military might, shipping and railroads, and were surprisingly knowledgeable about English imperial possessions, what he was actually told may have been less than self-aggrandising, illustrating not so much the *force majeure* of the English, as the impossibility of transaction altogether:¹⁰

Traveller (to his Dragoman). I wish to have the opinion of an unprejudiced Ottoman gentleman as to the prospects of our English commerce and manufactures; just ask the Pasha to give me his views on the subject.

Pasha (after having received the communication of the Dragoman). The ships of the English swarm like flies; their printed calicoes cover the whole earth, and by the side of their swords the blades of Damascus are blades of grass. All India is but an item in the Ledger-books of the Merchants whose lumber-rooms are filled with ancient thrones! - whirr! whirr! all by wheels! - whiz! whiz! all by steam!

Dragoman. The pasha compliments the cutlery of England, and also the East India Company.

Traveller. The Pasha's right about the cutlery: I tried my scimitar with the common officer's swords belonging to our fellows at Malta, and they cut it like the leaf of a Novel. Well (to the Dragoman), tell the Pasha I am exceedingly gratified to find that he entertains such a high opinion of our manufacturing energy, but I should like him to know, though, that we have got something in England besides that... even within the last two hundred years there has been an evident improvement in the culture of the turnip (16-17).

Absence of intimacy generates a series of mis-recognitions orchestrated by the Dragoman's simple truth - a telling comment, perhaps, on the 'mis-taking' of colonial encounter. Mis-recognition generates another logic - that of the absurd - not immediately assimilable to the power/knowledge structure of imperial discourse, or its resistant counter-discourses. It does not help much to refer to material determinants of Ottoman decline and British dominance. While the Pasha may be praising the commercial successes of English manufacture and the East India Company, suggesting some compatibility of

class interests and an occluded strata of (internal and external) colonized labour - in turn suggesting a conversation of Powers, competing empires and civilizing missions articulated over/out of the silence of massed labour - what the Traveller commends is: the culture of the turnip.

In the 'vulgarity' of such enthusiasms, there is a kind of standing aside from sense (ecstasy) or what Jean-Jacques Lecerle refers to as the 'dark side' to language - that 'remainder' which emerges most obviously in 'non-sensical and poetic texts' (1990, 6). Lecerle relates this 'remainder' to Lacanian 'lalangue', rather than to Saussurian 'langue', thereby infusing it with the undecidability of unconscious motivations (33). Within this frame, even the Derridean 'trace', which (in the context of discovery narratives) Peter Hulme defines as a survival of an intention or meaning that subverts the overt narrative or discursive practice (1992, 87), can suggest that 'something else' is indeed emerging from within, or skimming through, Kinglake's comic displacements. That turnip is not just a silly joke, or a jibe at the otiosity of the Pasha's sentiments; it is also the sign of an indeterminate discursive remainder, both within and beyond complementary scales of cultural value. If it is this indeterminacy which rescues Kinglake's subject - the (English) Traveller - from the withering parsimony of a certain kind of post-colonial judgement, the scene also moves out, or 'down' (in anti-transcendental terms), from the composed and homely (satire) into the decomposed and exorbitant, into that which is finally a non-sensical move - 'whirr! whirr! all by wheels! - whiz! whiz! all by steam!' - into an abrupt suspension of all the gains of not only English progress but of all progress: everything suddenly sounds vacuous, non-sensical, beyond idealization.

The moment when Kinglake encounters another English traveller - a British Indian Government officer, as it turns out - in the deserts of Sinai can push sense and seriousness into an even more stupefying impasse. Rather than stop to exchange greetings and news, as their Arab servants and guides immediately do, the two Englishmen pass one another by, only saluting distantly, as though they 'had passed in Pall Mall' (179). In an attempt at explanation (or extenuation), within the realm of necessary sense, Kinglake gives his own motives as shyness and not having anything in particular to say; to his fellow countryman he attributes a dislike of 'mere sociability' and 'vain talk' (179). The joke is on the English gentry's reserve and high seriousness, which can still rigidly operate even a thousand miles beyond Pall Mall - in a place, that is, where such idealizations of feeling and conduct have already been marked as out-of-place.¹¹ The English actions become re-coded as culturally limited, foreign and funny. Mastery of the gaze is turned back on itself, and a certain self-directed 'corrective laughter' (in Bergson's early

twentieth-century sense) is found, not in the external world, but in this discursive production of English manners.

On the other hand, Kinglake says he 'felt the absurdity of the situation' (179). The situation is too strong, too strange, for logical redress; only laughter and physical action can overcome it. He breaks with Pall Mall convention and accosts the other Englishman. Perhaps the 'absurdity' of the situation is not only because it has revealed the cultural specificity of his and his countryman's actions but also because the Bedouin guides - by their own actions - have made him do what should not be done. Yet it is also an effect of accident, misadventure, the aleatory. Kinglake has no choice, even, it seems, in the retrospective of writing; his reader must confront the comic (or tragic) rigidity, not to say 'constructedness', of his (and his fellow countryman's) behaviour, a sudden distraction in the constant turning away of the pose. Something else is noticed in this desert. Quite simply, the situation does not make sense.

In a sense, it entails what Kierkegaard, writing at around the same time (1841), might have called 'infinite absolute negativity' (1989, 254). Kinglake, as Kierkegaard's ironical subject, writes the situation out of its specificity, its reality, thereby preserving himself (and us) in 'negative independence of everything' (257). If this is an example of the 'sovereign Western ego' busy 'remaking' itself and the Orient, at the expense of the latter, or the indirect expression of 'a public and national will over the Orient' (said, 1991, 193-194), it is also an example of the travelling-subject directing its humour not at this or that case but at the whole of actuality at that time and that place. Kinglake is not only the Imperial Subject, glorying in possession; he is also the comic subject possessed by glory.¹² In this sense, it is not so much Kinglake who 'takes hold' of himself for something (as Said says), as laughter which takes hold of him of nothing.¹³ This joke, too, is not on Kinglake, or the English officer, alone; it will always be brought home to his readers.

So far as the post-colonial critic is concerned, there are at least two sensibilities - two eminently ennobled passions - involved in reading such humour. First, it is not easy to smile at what is by implication, if one is marginalised or marked by discourses of class/race, gender or colonialism, a damaging and lowering of self-esteem. Second, for even the most unmarked, 'colourless', or 'enlightened' subject, there is always the suspicion that to laugh along with this humour is to collude with the magisterial oppressor/oppressed topos; and, in principle, even to recognise a statement as humorous is already to take pleasure in it, and so enjoy at least a deferred sense of gratification at the humiliation of another. Representation, in Marx's sense,

requires a certain inflexible solemnity. Better to work upwards, towards the light of a transcendent gesture.

The seductions of humour (and pleasure generally), however, are not easily resisted or blocked. Humour has a way of sneaking back and picking even the tightest of moral locks. 'A certain "seriousness",' Lacan notes, 'cannot help to raise a smile' (1977, 147). Gallows humour is enjoyed by death-row prisoners, and high theory will always have its Sokals. We laugh in spite of our opinions. Nor is humour always reducible to an I-you exchange (such as occurs between one person and a second sympathetic one in Freud's scheme¹⁴) creating a powerless third person - that butt whose sole function, it seems, is to reinforce the moral and social co-ordinates of the humorist and his auditor.

Post-colonial resistance to such laughter has Western antecedents. In nineteenth-century European celebrations, the comic is hierarchically organised: there is low comedy and high comedy; from the smile of the ironist to the belly laugh of the buffoon, a range of moral and social issues is invoked, with the leading emphasis on restraint. Only the lunatic or socially backward laughed raucously or uncontrollably, as Charles Baudelaire, in his 'On the Essence of Laughter' (1860), pointed out - and such pathic excess could provide the ridiculous edge against which Reason could be measured.¹⁵

There was nothing new in this. Ever since Plato banished excessive laughter, as exemplified by the figure of the *bomolochoi*, for its violence and divisiveness, from his ideal state, laughter had been circumscribed, its noisier manifestations confined to the mad-houses, prisons and attics of religious, social and familial embarrassment.

In 'An Essay on Comedy' (1877), Meredith speaks of the 'flourishing' of the comic idea as an 'excellent test of the civilization of a country' (1980, 47); sensitivity to its laughter is 'a step in civilization' (50). What he calls 'thoughtful' laughter, which he finds in the comedies of Molière, and which is characterized by the smile and 'silvery laughter' (48), is a civilizing agent, a moral guide towards the light of illumination, unlike the 'joyful roar' (50) the rustic elements of Aristophanes' plays inspire. The latter type of comedy, which Meredith also enjoys, is not illuminating; while it is not bad in itself, it belongs to 'good fellowship' and 'benefits only the lungs' (50); it does not make you think. Indeed, its laughter can descend into uncongenial, unGreek animalistic fun (the word 'roar'); 'the scornful and brutal sorts' are a 'perversion', which - Meredith allows, with parsonical gravitas - can happen to all good things (50).

In Meredith's understanding, humour and other types of comedy are ruled by a benevolent comic spirit. Meredith likens all such types to a 'loving' family, as overlooked by the light of that spirit, and has this organizing

principle frame his distinctions. Humour, for example, differs from irony in that it is affectionate and empathetic, giving comfort to loved ones, even as it teases, and always granting a likeness to them (42). Irony, very much the dysfunctional member of the family, is harsher, and more devious; it leaves other members unsure whether they have been harmed by its stings (42). The overarching comic spirit (source of 'true comedy') is not content with such limited homely play; it aims to raise peoples and nations, bringing them into the light of civilization.

Meredith's gratified sense of the comic spirit's uplift finds its negative counterpart in Baudelaire's half-admiring, half-horrified reaction to 'the Satanic in man'. For Baudelaire, the comic partakes of the Fall, and has a contradictory double signification: its laughter signifies 'superiority' over 'the beasts' and 'misery' at the apprehension of humanity's distance from the divine (1986, 154). In its moral implication, it reveals (to the laugher) the failings or weaknesses of others. The higher the laugher ascends, towards the light, the more ridiculous others and, since he too is fallen, the laugher become - which means that the diabolism of laughter is underpinned by both yearning for an Edenic return (and a wish to keep some distance from brutishness) and the impossibility of getting back. As both Meredith and Freud would later do, Baudelaire gives this movement a civilizational value, implying a kind of superiority in European states - especially as 'savage' laughter appears to be his limit-case (158).

Where Meredith makes the wittiest, and least embodied, forms of comedy civilizing according to abstract spiritual laws, Baudelaire, focusing on the physical distortions - the 'grimace', 'a nervous convulsion, and involuntary spasm, leaping facial muscles' (152) - of the laugher as indices of moral despair, grounds the comic in regulatory social codes, and draws attention to the hazards of de-regulated (satanic) laughter. His paradigmatic case is Melmoth the wanderer whose 'contradictory double nature' is 'infinitely great in relation to man, and infinitely vile and base in relation to absolute Truth and Justice' (153). When Melmoth laughs he crows at the 'caterpillars' of mankind, but as he laughs he 'lacerates and scorches' his own lips (153). This character is worth keeping in mind.

In the early 1860s, Wilfred Gifford Palgrave (1826 - 1888) alias Brother Michael Cohen of the Society of Jesus, alias Salim abu Mahmud al-Ays of Damascus, made the first journey by a European to the capital of the Najd region of Central Arabia. Whether he went as an emissary of the Emperor Louis Napoleon, was missionising for the Jesuits, or simply wanted to make a name for himself, the result of his travels was the immensely popular *Personal Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia* (1862 - 63)

(1865).¹⁶ Palgrave treats this journey as an awfully big adventure, a sort of Quixotic quest - he travels disguised not as a knight but as a Christian Arab doctor from Damascus, wielding Galen and bromides rather than Castiglione and a lance, and has a practical companion, also in disguise, called Barakat. His *Personal Narrative* is replete with perilous encounters and fearsome opponents, whose dangers are always tempered by stylistic elegance and a knowing writerly distance. Secure in the resource of a European Christian calling, Palgrave as travelling-subject is merely patronising to his Central Arabian others, finding the men of the northern regions 'manly and vigorous', calling for and 'an outlet' by which to bring their 'good' into 'fruitful contact with that of other more advanced nations' (124).

Palgrave's humour works at several levels. One, like Kinglake's, is formal. Another, verbally-based and ironical, concerns the fun its author has in contrasting different versions of knowledge, one kind staged as the ludicrously severe downside of the other's lighter, more reasonable moral sense. In the 1860s, Central Arabia, or the Najd, was something of a *bête-noir* in the European travel-imagination, at once a seduction ('the spell of far Arabia'¹⁷) and a repellent fastness. It was seen as the most inhospitable region of the Arabian peninsular, ruled by a tyrant and guarded by Wahhabis, who were, at least in the European diplomatic imagination, fanatical and intolerant of outsiders.¹⁸ For the gentlemen-adventurers of empire, it also had deserts and fierce heat, against which they might test (or advertise) their courage and endurance; and it had the added attraction that no European had ever been there. In imperial quest terms, it was the ultimate opponent.

At the beginning of his journey, Palgrave speaks of 'a vast sea of fire' and of a sun so powerful it burns clothes and saddles (62-63); near the end, he tells of mountainous seas and shipwreck, from which he escapes with only his life (408-411). In Riyadh, setting for the climactic stage of the journey, he overcomes the murderous designs of the Emir Feysal's son, Abdulla, not through a feat of arms, but through his wits and what, from this distance, seems amazing daring or effrontery. Yet all such scenes of adventure and adversity are shot through with droll asides - consider only the one about 'must-be Wahhabees' (294) ('wannabe Wahhabis', as today's reader might say) - and Shandyeian digressions - such as the memorable one on coffee (257-259) - distancing strategies, restorations of grace. As always in Palgrave's supremely polished accomplishment, his journey is not so much a pretext for generating fear and trembling as a pose soliciting silvery laughter, chuckles of acclamation.¹⁹

Arrived in Riyadh with a party of Persians and other heterodox companions, Palgrave imagines the impact the caravan has upon the orthodox:

The sacred centre of Nejdean orthodoxy profaned in one and the same moment by the threefold abomination of Persians, Meccans, and Syrians, Shiya'ees, Sonnees, and Christians, heretics, polytheists, and infidels, was surely enough to call down fire from heaven, or awake an earthquake from beneath. An invasion of cholera was the very least that could be anticipated (239).

He casts the Wahhabis as so suspicious and xenophobic that they are unwilling to entertain even fellow Sunni Muslims or Shi'i Muslims within their city. In a Bergsonian comic rigidity, they must stare fearfully at the heavens or at the ground, so earning the rebuke of Palgrave's cultural capital. In measured enlightenment fashion, Palgrave uses irony, not to castigate, but 'to sting', as Meredith would put it, 'under a semi-caress' - as if to leave the object of his ridicule 'dubious whether anything has hurt him' (42).

Irony can heap blame or praise under cover of an opposite or different effect. Literary irony requires as many as three parties, the ironiser, identified with the author, or with a character, the 'object of irony' or butt (a person, group or institution), and the 'victim of irony' (the person who may be taken in by what he hears or reads) (Stringfellow, 1994, 20-21). Palgrave says that fire from heaven or an earthquake from beneath, or at the very least an invasion of cholera, will follow on his and his companions' arrival, but means, the reader knows (from earlier signals), that nothing of that sort will occur; it is the Wahhabis of Riyadh who believe this, not he (or his wisened-up reader), and who are to be ridiculed for their superstition. With a small lapse in readerly attention - or because the ironist adopts a naïve or credulous attitude to the object of irony, as if there is no implicit meaning, and what he says is to be taken at face value - some doubt in this reading may creep in, and not only the reader but also the ironist can become 'victim'. This is the ambiguity or doubleness of irony, its uncertain attachment. In so far as Palgrave puts himself into the Wahhabi mindset, adopting its perspective to make his point, the illusion is granted. And it happens that, in a perhaps unconscious later irony (an irony of fate), visitations, if not yet of cholera, then certainly of 'choler', coincide with his stay.

In a meeting of officials at Feysul's palace, Abdul-Hameed, an Afghan convert to Wahhabism, jealous of the praise heaped on Palgrave's presumed origins (Damascus), gives vent to 'choler' (289). The first reference to 'cholera', as such, appears shortly before Abdul-Hameed enters the narrative (240). Other instances of 'choler' soon follow, each connected with Palgrave's presumptions, most conclusively the one involving Abdulla, and Palgrave and companions have to leave Riyadh in haste. Towards the end of his narrative, Palgrave is shipwrecked and loses everything, including his travel notes,

though, ultimately, of course, he will find sanctuary and gain much more from English Society and its Letters. The ironic significance of all this is that Palgrave wants to expose Abdul-Hameed as a 'spy' (240) and 'master of dissimulation' (241) - he is not Sunni, as he claims, he is Shi'i; he was not the rich government official he claimed to have been, who had lost everything in a shipwreck, when he threw himself on the mercy of Feysul, and was given safe haven (241); he is not a pious believer: he is (Palgrave claims) a murderer exiled to Riyadh, where he can practise 'on Nejdean gullibility by assuming the disguise he now bore' (242). This layered 'disguise' finds its match in Palgrave's deviously multiple poses.²⁰

In his study of irony, Frank Stringfellow Jnr makes the point that analyses of literary irony usually ignore the surface meaning in favour of the concealed one. The literal meaning, however, is capable of yielding insights into the complex, even solicitous, relation the ironist has with the figural object of his humour. Freud's Vienna colleague Theodor Reik even suggested that the ironist momentarily 'submits' to the illusion (1994, 34). In the spirit of Homi Bhabha's use of Freudian ambivalence, this sort of reading might be extended to include not just the ironist's internalised love-hate relations with the 'other' (of infancy) but also the ambivalence of all relations within impersonal social matrices of power and authority. That is, Palgrave may actually be agreeing with the possibility of fire from heaven, an earthquake from below, or an invasion of choler(a), for what is, in effect, a transgressive (Sunni/Shi'i/Christian) entry into the Wahhabi sacred centre - just as, by analogy, he might likely prognosticate the same sorts of supernatural intervention in the case of Wahhabis invading Rome.

As an active member of a Jesuit order (or as a soon-to-be Anglican re-convert), Palgrave must feel the moral force of such an act of transgression, at least in so far as it raises awkward questions about the motives for his own religious u-turns. In this sense, he lays blame not only on the Wahhabis but also on himself and all the other transgressors, and even joins with his Wahhabis in invoking supernatural retaliation; indeed, the liturgical frame of his statements can widen out to include all those who dispute with heavenly commandment and authority, or, as in his case, switch divine allegiances. Within the psychoanalytic frame, irony can be a way of getting an uncomfortable truth out of the system - an expulsive gesture relieving an earlier visceral irritation (Stringfellow, 33). In this sense, the humour of the scene implicates Palgrave's moral health as much as it mocks the superstitions of the people of the Najd. This personal implication can take on a larger social meaning, when the reverse-effect of the judgement (that the Wahhabis are comically superstitious) is taken into consideration.

Laughter raises and lowers. If Palgrave's words are taken literally, fire from heaven is especially apt as a choice of punishment, given the Classical account of laughter's origins,²¹ In Baudelaire's terms, fire from heaven can be read as the return of the transcendent (in superior laughter), that will to bring the weak and infirm up to speed - which would entail a further irony designed not to doubly chastise the Wahhabis, but to expose and reproach the author's own transgression within the lofty dispersals of ethical or social integrity. An earthquake from beneath can also be read differentially, as the intestinal rumble of post-colonial reason - that will to correct from below (the hell of unreason) and then install a more sweeping, less partisan style of human judgement. It can also be read as, again in Baudelaire's sense, laughter's satanic judgement - a discreetly hellish put-down. Both such alternatives presuppose a vertical movement, the wish to be better, superior to one's self.

In another scene, Palgrave once again plays on Europe's construction of the rigidity of the citizens' mode of Islamic belief, producing an account of the complex turns of speech such literalism can enforce:

We then begged to know, if possible, the king's good will and pleasure regarding our stay and our business in the town. For on our first introduction we had duly stated, in the most correct Wahabee phraseology, that we had come to Ri'ad "desiring the favour of God, and secondly of Feysul; and that we begged of God, and secondly of Feysul, permission to exercise in the town our medical profession, under the protection of God, and in the next place of Feysul". For Dogberry's advice to "set God first, for God defend but God should go before such villains", is here observed to the letter; whatever is desired, purported, or asked, the deity must take the lead. Nor this only, but even the subsequent mention of the creature must nowise be coupled with that of the Creator by the ordinary conjunction "w", that is, "and", since that would imply equality between the two - flat blasphemy in word or thought. Hence the disjunctive "thumma", or "next after", "at a distance", must take the place of "w", under penalty of prosecution under the statute. "Unlucky the man who visits Nejed without being previously versed in the niceties of grammar", said Barakat; "under these school-masters a mistake might cost the scholar his head" (238).

As in the Kinglake example, one reading would simply see this as a general ridiculing of all Arab and 'Oriental' casts of mind, under cover of a particular onslaught on Wahhabi literalism, in contrast to the superior, more civilized reasonableness of European thinking. But if Palgrave ridicules Wahhabi dogmatism for confusing the letter with the meaning, his words also say something else

- about the letter generally, about the relation, as post-structuralist readers might say, between the signifier and signified. If the literal meaning is taken into account, and not seen as simply standing for the concealed meaning, another reading suggests that Palgrave's attitude towards this type of linguistic policing is, consciously or not, ambivalent. (His own book was suspect, his own letter under erasure, as it were.²²) As a Jesuit, he works with the letter; the Word is its literal summa. Perhaps the Deity really must take the lead. Perhaps the grammatically inept scholar really should lose his head. In his *Personal Narrative*, as in his life, Palgrave puts 'God' first,²³ and takes pains to ensure the singular literariness, the grammatical nicety, of his own word.

Bergson might have had Palgrave in mind when he wrote: 'A man in disguise is comic. A man we regard as disguised is also comic' (1980, 87). For Bergson, the European responds to 'a black face' with the 'logic of the imagination', not the 'logic of reason', seeing a face painted over with 'soot or ink'. He goes on to extend this argument, analogically, to 'any disguise' - 'not only that of any man but that of society also, and even that of nature' (87). Palgrave travels disguised as a Syrian doctor; in a sense, he is in Bergsonian 'black-face'. In another sense, he is disguised as a Jesuit missionary or a spy. He is also (to prolong the analogy, rather longer than it may deserve) disguised (or posing) as a travel-writer, a gentleman-adventurer, a white man - all historically limited or fixed social categories overlaying what Bergson's logic of the imagination sees as 'the inner suppleness of life', polymorphous being (or 'becoming', in Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's later re-formulation), as yet unencrusted with title, habit, ink or chroma. In this broader sense, the humour of Palgrave's *Personal Narrative* expands beyond its record of encounters with fanatical Wahhabism - itself a procrustean formation (always ready, of course, to be dusted over in the seemingly evergreen discourse of liberal Western civilization) - to include the social orders the travelling-subject negotiates on its way to and from home. The transcendent direction of ironic critique is reversed, brought low and democratised by laughter - which Baudelaire half-feared for its levelling social impulse and yet understood, half-admiringly, as diabolically indifferent - Melmoth's mockery and self-laceration becoming something else.

Logic is used to produce absurdity, and sense generates non-sense. Classically, the logic of irony (Socratic irony) assumes a higher truth, a Platonic Ideal, available to reason and good sense; absurdity (literalism, the degradation of common speech) catches at the surface behaviour of language as it is generated in discourse, playing with it, turning, for example, 'w' into 'thumma', and (if only in the suddenness of that play) dragging it down, detaching signification from its socially and morally exalted effects. In the section 'Nineteenth Series of Humor', in *The Logic of Sense* (1990), Deleuze

gives the example of Diogenes the Cynic who 'answers Plato's definition of man as a biped and featherless animal by bringing forth a plucked fowl' (135). Humour reverses reason's ascent (to, for another example, Palgrave's 'heaven'), hurling meaning, quite suddenly, into a descent, into bathos, profundity (Palgrave's 'beneath'). For Deleuze, the 'adventure of humor' does not stop there: 'By the same movement with which language falls from the heights and then plunges below, we must be led back to the surface, where there is no longer anything to denote or even to signify, but where pure sense is produced' (136). In this 'adventure of humor' we arrive at the 'non-sense of the surface' - meaning skipping always just before the grasp of signification resisting judgement, the grave of response.

ENDNOTES

- 1 - *Écrits: A Selection* (1977, 177).
- 2 - Sigmund Freud (1990, 429).
- 3 - Freud: 'Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious': 'It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances' (429). Bergson sees the laughter of comedy in general as indicating 'a slight revolt on the surface of social life' (1980, 190). 'The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absent-mindedness in men and in events' (Bergson, 117). Although it is a social corrective, aimed at what is no longer elastic or sociable, it is not moral. In 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905), *The Penguin Freud Library*, Volume 6, edited by Angela Richards, translated by James Strachey. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books (1991), Freud reconciles Bergson's argument with his own, finding that 'divergence of the living from the inanimate', as condition for laughter, is the same as his saying 'degradation of the living to the inanimate' (271). Where Bergson's laughter revolts for the benefit of social well being, Freud's rebels for the benefit of individual psychical health. In both arguments, there are moments of hesitation or bafflement. Laughter's freedom from morality or internal supervision does not seem to fit within its corrective or ameliorating mandate; only its cause, mechanism, operation and effect seem open to explanation.
- 4 - 'Kinglake's undeservedly famous and popular work is a pathetic catalogue of pompous ethnocentrism and tiringly nondescript accounts of the Englishman's East... For all their vaunted individuality Kinglake's view express a public and national will over the Orient; his ego is the instrument of this will's expression, not by any means its master' (1991, 193-194). See also Rana Kabbani's comments in *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient*, London, Pandora (1994), p. 9.
- 5 - At the time Kinglake was writing, burlesque was enjoying a vogue among those hostile to 'high culture'. See Richard W. Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (2002). Kinglake also plays off the Orientalist convention of Oriental exaggeration (hyperbole) against its implicit opposite, English understatement (litotes). In Aristotelian

terms, the dialogue is funny through the interactive staging of an *eiron* (straight man) and *bomolochoi* (buffoon) pairing, a double-act (and double-voice) central to the internal dynamics of comedy since Aristophanes, and infinitely reversible as any fan of Cox and Box, Laurel and Hardie, Vladimir and Estragon, Beavis and Butthead, or - among Arabic and Turkish speakers - Joha and his donkey knows. The relation becomes loaded with ideological implication, when this dynamic is forgotten, and a necessarily fluid or reciprocal interaction is quick-frozen and hierarchicized into European Self and Oriental Other.

- 6 - Bakhtin uses the term to describe that discourse which 'presumes some privilege and exercises some social control' (427).
- 7 - In many instances, ennobled discourse is riddled with 'vulgar' language, which has the effect of 'dragging what is being compared down to the dregs of an everyday gross reality' (386). Bakhtin also notes the levelling effect of popular laughter, which can destroy 'hierarchical... distance' and demolish 'fear and piety' before an object and a world (23).
- 8 - Lacan's term (*la bêtise*), 'Discourses always aim at the least stupidity, at sublime stupidity, for "sublime" means the highest point of what lies below' (13).
- 9 - In 'Humour', Freud's argument is as follows: The humorist (as superego) ridicules the object of contemplation (as ego). In so doing, he (as superego) grants himself (as ego) a yield of pleasure, which is 'surprising in such a severe master' (432). The superego (which usually serves reality) appears to 'repudiate[s] reality and serve[s] an illusion' (432). Freud cannot resolve this aporia; instead he says: 'But (without knowing exactly why) we regard this less intense pleasure [than that of jokes or the comic] as having a character of very high value; we feel it to be especially liberating and elevating' (432).
- 10 - Although Kinglake's 'translation' is imaginary, it is always knowingly shadowed by encounter (those other travel writers) and failed transaction. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London, Routledge (1993), for conditions for 'intimacy' in successful translation (179-200).
- 11 - A nice complement to this scene, also calling to mind the parochialism and absurdity of imperial (and post-imperial) tourism, is provided by Gustave Flaubert who visited the same region a few years after Kinglake. Flaubert and Maxime du Camp have just explored the interior of the Great Pyramid at Giza: 'As we emerge on hands and knees from one of the corridors, we meet a party of Englishmen who are coming in; they are in the same position as we; exchange of civilities; each party proceeds on its way' See *Flaubert in Egypt*, translated and edited Francis Steegmuller, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books (1972) p. 53.
- 12 - Hobbes (1651) defined laughter as the sudden glory by which men knew themselves superior to others or, which is not often noticed, to themselves: 'Men experience the passion of a sudden glory by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves' See *Leviathan; Or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*, London, Routledge (1970), p. 33.
- 13 - Kant speaks of laughter as the result of a 'a trained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing'. See *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), translated by James Creed Meredith, Oxford, Clarendon Press (1988) p. 199. Herbert Spencer (1860) describes laughter as the indication of an effort that suddenly encounters a void (cited in Bergson, 116). Georges Bataille refers to the loss of self and the ego's vanishing into the act: '[When I laugh,] I am in fact nothing more than the laughter which takes hold of me'. See Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Laughter of being', *Modern Language Notes*, 102, 4, 734-760 (1987) p. 744.

- 14 - *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (294). The later essay 'Humour' modifies this to include the third party - the butt - who makes no contribution to the humour, and may not even know that it has occurred (427).
- 15 - See Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated Richard Howard, London, Tavistock Productions (1977), pps. 85-116.
- 16 - Like those of other European travellers to Arabia, Palgrave's motives were mysterious. See Peter Brent, *Far Arabia: Explorers of the Myth*, Quartet Books, London (1979), for an engaging round up of the prisoners, spies, patriot-adventurers, lunatics and ascetics who made up Europe's travellers to Arabia in the Age of Empire.
- 17 - Brent (96-98).
- 18 - Sources of this were the earlier published travels of such as the Anglo-Swiss Johann Ludwig (John Lewis) Burckhardt (1829), James Wellsted (1838), the Finn George August Wallin (1845) and Richard Burton (1853). Their accounts may have been supplemented, at a further remove, by the ongoing history of religion-based Wahhabi/Ottoman conflicts and the cantankerous stories of hajj pilgrims returning to Cairo and Damascus. See also Lewis Pelly's later *Report on a Journey to the Wahabee Capital of Riyadh in Central Arabia* (1866), for a vitriolic account of Wahhabi 'perfidiousness'.
- 19 - For more on Palgrave's 'solicitations', see Piers Smith, 'Solid Rock: Landscape and Word-Painting in the Arabias of Palgrave (1986), Pelly (1866) and Burton (1855); *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing*, vol. 2, issue 2, (2001), pps. 1-28.
- 20 - Palgrave used his father's Jewish name when, as Brother Michael Cohen, he entered the Jesuit order in 1849. At various times, he was an Anglican, a Catholic Jesuit, and an Anglican again. - In Berlin, in 1865, he re-converted to Anglicanism, shortly before the *Personal Narrative* was published (*The Times*, 16th June, 1865, p. 10, col. f). In Riyadh, of course, he is disguised as a Christian Arab. In 1879, Burton, incensed by aspersions upon his own moral probity in Palgrave's original 2-volume publication, countered with the following: 'This comes admirably *à propos* from a traveller who, born a Protestant, of Jewish descent, placed himself "in connection with", in plain words took the vows of, "the order of the Jesuits", an order "well-known in the annals of philanthropic daring"; a popular preacher who declaimed openly at Bayrut and elsewhere against his own nation, till the proceedings of a certain Father Michael Cohen were made the subject of an official report by Mr. Consul-General Moore (Bayrut, November 11, 1857); an Englishman by birth who accepted French protection, a secret mission, and the "liberality of the present Emperor of the French"; a military officer travelling in the garb of what he calls a native (Syrian) "quack" with a comrade who "by a slight but necessary fiction passed for his brother-in-law"; a gentleman whose return to Protestantism violated his vows, and a traveller who was proved by the experiment of Colonel (now Sir Lewis) Pelly to have brought upon himself all the perils and adventures that have caused his charming work to be considered so little worthy of trust. Truly such attack argues sublime daring. It is the principle of "vielle coquette, nouvelle dévote"; it is Satan preaching against Sin'. See *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madina & Mecca*, New York, Dover Editions (1964), pps. xxi-xxii. Neither the truth of the sneers, nor the extent to which contestants for fame in imperial travel-exploration could stoop, but testimony to what such shape-shifting meant to Empire - its threat to social integrity, to the representative cause of English gentlemanliness, to fixed standards - is the point here.
- 21 - Homeric laughter 'remembers' the laughter of the gods at the stumbling of the crippled Haephestos, god of fire. See Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* Boston, Beacon Press (1995) pps. 65-67.

- 22 - Its claims were questioned by the 'experts' - Burton (see note 20), Wilfred Scawen Blunt and Harry St. John Philby. See Brent (130).
- 23 - Literally. The epigraph at the beginning, attributed to the Muslim cleric Ibn al-Farid, mentions only one goal.

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