

THE LITERARY ACHIEVEMENT  
OF WILFRID SCAWEN BLUNT

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Thesis submitted in part fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.

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## THE LITERARY ACHIEVEMENT OF WILFRID SCAWEN BLUNT

### SUMMARY

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840-1922) was one of the most interesting, colourful writers of Victorian England. As an independent man of means, he led the tempestuous life of an aristocratic, Byronic rebel. His writing was intensely personal; a series of emotional experiences influenced his thinking on religion, politics and literature. He was a diplomat, a poet, a traveller, a diarist, a religious doubter, an amonist, a cultured artist of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic tastes, a fashionable squire of the Elizabethan type, an amateur Orientalist with unconventional sympathies, a traditionalist promoting Mediaeval values, a modernist who championed several lost causes, playing many roles with a deep sense of mission. His paradoxical character reflects the noblest ideals and the most glaring weaknesses of his age.

This thesis is an appreciative study of his creative works in prose and verse, and an attempt to assess his stature as a pioneer and a prophet. The method adopted is that of a close study of the texts. A comparative approach is developed in the analysis of Blunt's work as a poet and a translator. Historical events and biographical elements are used wherever they shed light on his writings. A brief survey of the Victorian interest in the Arab world and the Eastern question, with reference to the writings and attitudes of travellers, shows that the East came to mean different things to different people at the height of Britain's imperialist expansion. A comparison of these attitudes and their backgrounds in Chapter I concludes that Blunt's understanding of the East was unique in its accuracy. The impact of the East and its culture on Blunt's character and attitudes was permanent. These are

studied in the writings of Blunt as a man of action, particularly in his Secret History series. Blunt's rendering of Arabic texts is studied in Chapter IV, in comparison to the translations of professional Orientalists like Edward Lane, William Jones, and A.J. Arberry. Blunt's success, seen against the failure of a number of other English poets to reproduce Arabic poetry, makes his Moallakat a unique contribution to English literature.

Although Blunt belongs to the Romantic tradition, he has assimilated other traditions, Elizabethan as well as Pre-Raphaelite, neo-classical as well as modern, Tennysonian as well as Arabic. Yet he remained independent and highly individual. His experiments in the field of the sonnet and his assonance in rhyme are analysed and their sources traced in both Arabic and English precedents and traditions in Chapter II.

For the first time, Chapter III offers a detailed contextual study of Blunt's three dramatic works, the anti-imperialist Extravaganza, The Bride of the Nile, the "social problem" play of Ideas, The Little Left Hand and the drama of passion, Fand. The influences of Shakespeare, Arabic and Islamic history, Shavian and Ibsenesque elements are traced. The plays are seen as an attempt by Blunt to propagate his own opinions in the fields of love, marriage, religious, social and political reform.

Blunt's voluminous Diaries record his attitudes to the major issues of his time, his intimate knowledge of the key figures in both Europe and the East, his deep insight into their characters, and his now vindicated interpretation of events. Chapter V stresses the importance of this work as a mine of information, of perennial value to the student of Victorian and Edwardian times. Blunt's opinions and indiscretions are shown to be relevant in his capacity as a man of letters, a man of the world, or a political observer.

Blunt's interest in Islam made him write a book which influenced both Muslim reformers and English policy-makers. The development of his religious thought is charted in Chapter VI, where his beliefs are analysed in the light of his attitudes to culture, evolution and political revival, together with his streak of superstition. His agnostic materialism and his attack on religious hypocrisy are analysed; and Blunt, as an honest doubter, is shown to be the product of his age.

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TO MY MOTHER AND THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER

وَقَدْ تَرَبَّتْ مِنْ رَحْمَتِهِمَا كَمَا رَبَّيْتَنِي فِي صَغِيرَتِي

## CHAPTER 1 : BLUNT AND THE LURE OF THE EAST

In the preface to his Poetical Works (London, 1914) W.S. Blunt wrote:

No life is perfect that has not been lived; youth in feeling, manhood in battle, and old age in meditation.

His eventful life was the concrete embodiment of this precept.

Blunt had a multi-sided personality which cut across all the boundaries of convention in an age full of conventions in the social, political and religious fields. He was a diplomat who served in most European countries for over ten years and yet became one of the most outspoken critics of the foreign policy of his own country. He was an amateur bull-fighter in Spain and a champion of lost causes in Egypt, the Sudan, India and Ireland. During his extensive travels in the East he became a sworn blood-brother of Arab Bedouin Sheikhs, then a famous breeder of Arab horses. He was a friend of the leaders of religious reform in the Islamic world and the promoters of Modernism in the Catholic Church. Yet he was a man of the world with many amorous adventures in many countries. He was a maverick aristocrat, a country gentleman leading a comfortable life as a Sussex squire with a large estate, an Arab Sheikh among the fellahin in his Egyptian home, a poet with a romantic nature and a volatile temperament not unlike Byron's, an amateur Orientalist and translator of Arabic verse.

This chapter will trace Blunt's long association with the East, particularly with the Arabs and the Muslim world. This close association, which lasted till the end of his life, had a profound influence on him as a poet, a traveller, a political activist, a social historian and a religious protagonist. It gave him a positive sense of purpose in life at a crucial moment when everything around him looked bleak and lost.

At the age of 33, Blunt found himself a rich man of independent means as the sole owner of his large family estate. His brother Francis and his sister Alice both died in the same year (1872). He also lost his first son (and heir). Consumption nearly killed him and he needed a better climate. Having seen most of Europe in the previous years, he decided to go East. He spent six weeks with his wife in Turkey during the summer of 1873. Early in 1874 they spent some three months in the Algerian Sahara. This was the beginning of his deep love for the desert and its inhabitants. Despite the language barrier he found himself in sympathy with the Muslims who were suffering under the yoke of French suppression. In 1876, the Blunts landed in Suez, whence they travelled on camels with the Bedouins to Cairo - a tough four-day journey during which they began to learn Arabic. They crossed the newly-opened Suez Canal to Sinai, Jerusalem and Gaza.<sup>1</sup> Underneath the primitive roughness of the Bedouins, and in spite of their human weaknesses, the Blunts were able to perceive their genuine honesty and generosity.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt's curiosity was aroused by reading travellers' accounts of their journeys to the East. His imagination seems to have been kindled by his personal contact with one of the greatest Victorian travellers, the eccentric Richard Francis Burton, in Argentina, as early as 1868. Blunt recalls in his Diaries:

Eastern travel interested me from the day I had read Palgrave's "Journeys in Arabia" [Narrative of a year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia], and Burton was fond of reciting his Arabian adventures.<sup>3</sup>

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1. W.S. Blunt, The Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt (1907), p.9. Henceforth cited as Secret History.
  2. W.S. Blunt, "The Egyptian Revolution" NC, 12 (Sept. 1882), pp. 324-46 (p. 325).
  3. W.S. Blunt, My Diaries (1932; first published in two volumes in 1919 and 1920), p. 544. Henceforth cited as My Diaries.

0 All the previous travellers to Arabia in particular, and to the Near East in general, had strong motives which seem to have attracted them to this part of the world, despite the risks and dangers. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the area became more accessible to Europeans and was gradually included in the "Grand Tour" which had been confined to the European continent. However, most travellers always found it necessary to give excuses and reasons for their journeys to these inhospitable wastelands. Richard Burton, for example, was driven by an overwhelming passion to eliminate "that opprobrium to modern adventure, the huge white blot which in our maps still notes the Eastern and central regions of Arabia [marked Terra Incognita on a map of the 1850s]".<sup>1</sup> Its vast wastelands, which appeared to him as a "scalped, flayed" skeleton, filled Charles M. Doughty with awe and made him realize the insignificance of man before the "elemental" greatness of the universe. Yet Doughty went there to satisfy his archaeological, geological, and anthropological curiosity. To W.G. Palgrave, a Jesuit of Jewish ancestry, the desert was a bleak land of death where even the faces of the enemy "were almost a relief" from the "utter solitude"; yet he went there, probably on a secret mission for France, giving an expressly political motive, to bring "the stagnant waters of Eastern life into contact with the quickening stream of European progress" and to learn something about the peoples "of whose future destinies we [European Powers] seem likely to be in no small measure ... the arbitrators".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Sir R.F. Burton, Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Medinah and Meccah, 2 Vols. (1898. first pub. 1855), I, p.1; II, p.131.
  2. W.G. Palgrave, Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia, 2 Vols. (1865), I, pp.vii, 3.

The exotic East enchanted some Europeans, such as Lady Hester Stanhope, Lady Ellenborough (Jane Digby) and Lucy Duff-Gordon; it repelled others such as E. Warburton, Robert Curzon and James Morier. The various motives and pretexts of the majority of travellers come under T.E. Lawrence's sharp ridicule in his foreword to Bertram Thomas's Arabia Felix.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the Blunts stand apart as "Arabians for Arabia's sake".<sup>2</sup> Lady Anne Blunt's description of northern Arabia as a land "less hospitable than any sea" tallies with Lawrence's words, "a terrible land", forty years later.<sup>3</sup> (Water was Lady Anne's only phobia.) Blunt, who had no such fears or inhibitions, had considerable experience of travel behind him, from the days of his dashing youth. In addition to the grand tour (in the traditional sense), he had made a daring expedition across "the great Pampas", which "rolled out like the sea" in South America - an experience later recorded in his poem "Across the Pampas".<sup>4</sup>

The Blunts' first visit to Egypt, conceived as nothing more than "another pleasant travelling adventure in Eastern lands",<sup>5</sup> established their first contacts with the desert tribes of Arabia "which were afterwards to become so pleasant ... and so intimate". It served as a foretaste, whetting their romantic appetites and arousing an immense interest in the East, lasting till the end of their lives and exerting a direct influence on both of them. Thus they decided to make another journey in the following winter (1877-8) to Syria, and yet another in 1878-9 to Nejd in Central Arabia. In his love of travel, Blunt

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1. Bertram Thomas, Arabia Felix (1932), p. xvi.

2. Ibid., p. xv.

3. Lady Anne Blunt, A pilgrimage to Nejd, 2 vols. (1881), I, p. x; cf: T.E. Lawrence's introduction to the second edition of C.M. Doughty's Travels in Arabia Deserta, 2 vols. (1921), I, p. 19.

4. W.S. Blunt, "Across the Pampas", A New Pilgrimage (1889), pp. 76-83.

5. Secret History, p. 7.

was a latter-day Sindbad. He had at his disposal everything, or almost everything, that life could offer: youth, social rank, a loving wife, and a literary talent which Lord Lytton had encouraged him to cultivate, yet he did not feel happy or fully content. It was not the "lure" of the East as much as Blunt's own temperament and inner restlessness that stimulated him to travel. He was often in the mood "to loathe old things and pine for new."<sup>1</sup> After his religious crisis in the early 1860s (discussed in Chapter 6) he continued to suffer from a spiritual void which made him look for a worthy purpose, some sort of mission or noble achievement to make his life meaningful.

Having read extensively about the history and background of Arabia, which came to haunt his romantic imagination, he embarked on these adventures, not as "a surveyor, nor a capitalist, nor a party politician".<sup>2</sup> Although desolate, remote and forlorn like a sea of endless sand, Arabia had a glorious past, and a literature rich in fascinating tales, full of chivalrous ideals. Blunt liked the stories of Hatim el-Tai and his legendary generosity, and the feats of the desert's black knight, Antar, who performed the "labours of Hercules".<sup>3</sup> The journey to Nejd was called a "Pilgrimage" because the Blunts considered central Arabia a holy land worthy of "a religious feeling, such as might prompt the visit to a shrine". He thus records that "the religion in whose name we travelled was only one of romance".<sup>4</sup> Travel to such remote regions was extremely difficult in those days. They were little frequented by Europeans, and no reliable information was available. Blunt was also warned against various hazards such as inter-tribal feuds, the marauding

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1. My Diaries, p. 170
  2. W.S. Blunt, "An Indo-Mediterranean Railway: Fiction and Fact," FR, 26 (Nov., 1879) pp. 702-15 (p. 703).
  3. A Pilgrimage to Nejd, vol. I, p. ix.
  4. Ibid., pp. ix, x.

gangs of bandits roaming the Syrian desert in the absence of Turkish forces, due to the Russo-Turkish war.<sup>1</sup> But Blunt did not only discount such dangers; he welcomed them, as they appealed to his adventurous mood. Thus we read that the Euphrates journey was started with "a sense of expectation ... and that mysterious promise of adventure". These words are recurrent, showing the high spirits of the couple and the thrilling sense of exhilaration at the prospect of facing strange people, events and places.<sup>2</sup> Lady Anne explains:

The interest of the moment and the bare pleasure of living absorbed all our fancy. A vivid present shut out past and future, and even in moments of danger we had not time for the thought of death.<sup>3</sup>

They even wished that the strange sounds of the night near their camps be those of raiding robbers; and in the daytime they "watched for spears on the horizon with any feelings but anxiety."<sup>4</sup> There was nothing more exciting than the feeling that they were wandering in spots untrodden by European feet before, although this claim was not always true.<sup>5</sup> In the journey to Nejd, they were sometimes deliberately courting danger. As they came to the great Nefud desert in central Arabia, for example, Blunt stubbornly decided to avoid the easier way and to follow the less beaten track in order to "see the Nefud at its worst". Lady Anne asserts.

The Nefud has been the object of our dreams all through this journey, as the ne plus ultra of desert in the world. We hear wonderful accounts of it here, and of the people who have been lost in it.<sup>6</sup>

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1. Lady Anne Blunt, Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates, 2 vols. (1979), I, pp.3-4, 29, 113.
  2. Ibid., I, pp. 12, 27, 28, 79, 152; II, pp. 33, 40, 171.
  3. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 222.
  4. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 33.
  5. Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 218, 244; cf: A Pilgrimage to Nejd, I, pp. 42,68.
  6. A Pilgrimage to Nejd, Vol. I, p. 148.



Thus, despite the hazards, the sand storms, the attacks of brigands and the disappointments, the experience was so rewarding that Lady Anne reports happily at the end of this journey that "hardly a day of the eighty-four we had spent in Arabia had been uninteresting or unromantic."<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the high ideals of chivalry, romance and adventure, the thoroughbred Arabian horse was one of the strongest attractions that lured the Blunts in these extensive wanderings. They were thrilled by Palgrave's description of this graceful creature, which made its rider feel as if he were "the man-half of a centaur, not a distinct being."<sup>2</sup> Many years later, Blunt recalled, with satisfaction, his success in "the purchase and bringing safely home of the Arab mares which were to form the nucleus of my now well known stud at Crabbet."<sup>3</sup> For the same reason, Blunt revisited his Bedouin friends, from the Anazeh tribe in the valley of the Euphrates, and bought another number of Arabian horses in the summer of 1881.<sup>4</sup> There are many detailed descriptions of the beauties of the horse in both accounts of these two major journeys.<sup>5</sup> The two books, Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates (1879) and A Pilgrimage to Nejd (1881), are interesting narratives, written in the form of a journal, with kindly humour and vivid descriptions of people and places, interspersed with a variety of anecdotes and exciting events to attract the attention of the reader. Although they appeared in the name of Lady Anne, they were, according to Blunt himself, "in reality a joint work".<sup>6</sup>

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1. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 106-7.
  2. W.G. Palgrave, op.cit., Vol. II, p. 97.
  3. Secret History, p. 38.
  4. Ibid., p. 119.
  5. Bedouin Tribes ... Vol. II, pp. 103, 247-9; A Pilgrimage to Nejd, Vol. II, pp. 6-13.
  6. W.S. Blunt, Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt (1907), p. 27.

Contrary to other Europeans, the Blunts did not travel in disguise or under an assumed identity. They did not shield themselves behind "a horrid, a most scandalous imposture, an unpardonable cheat"<sup>1</sup> like Palgrave, who passed as Saleem Abu Mahmood El-Eys. They did not profess Islam like J.L. Burckhardt, who called himself Sheykh Ibrahim, nor did they assume the guise of Darawysh like Burton, alias Sheykh Abdulla. C.M. Doughty was the only undisguised European "Nasrani", or Christian, who had preceded them in penetrating to the deep interior of Arabia. At the time, they did not know that he had been at Hail, capital of Ibn Rashid's Nejd, only a few months before their arrival; so, they paid no attention to the vague rumours about this "Christian stranger", and were to learn of his story only when his Travels in Arabia Deserta appeared in 1888. Blunt came to respect Doughty and to admire his book as "certainly the best prose written in the last two centuries".<sup>2</sup> One of Blunt's works, The Stealing of the Mare (1892), was dedicated to Doughty for "his knowledge, the most complete among Englishmen, of Arabian things". Yet, Blunt rightly remarks elsewhere that Doughty is "less sympathetic with Arabian ideas than I expected. He sees the worse rather than the better nature of the people."<sup>3</sup> Herein lies the key to one of the important aspects of Blunt's character and temperament: his great capacity for sympathy. It is this capacity which made his accounts of Arabia differ so much from those of other European travellers in the nineteenth century. In fact, a comparison of these attitudes and opinions can make a very interesting contrastive study. D.G. Hogarth, who considers the Blunts great explorers and observers of Arabian life, makes the following comments:

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1. W.G. Palgrave, op.cit., Vol. I, p. 143.
  2. My Diaries, p. 273.
  3. W.S. Blunt, The Land War in Ireland, (1912), p. 418.

Romantic as were the conception and accomplishment of this adventure, and unscientific as may have been the pretensions of the adventurers, their actual narrative will bear comparison with any other, concerned with the same ground, for sobriety and accuracy, as well as for observation and sympathy. Both the journal written by Lady Anne Blunt, and the notes added by her husband, are much more valuable contributions to the geographical science than they claim to be.<sup>1</sup>

What is more important than the Blunts' geographical contribution, however, is their attitude, which is broad-minded, with a conspicuous absence of the traditional European prejudices and pre-conceived ideas. These deep-rooted prejudices had created in the Western mind a centuries-old stereotyped image of the Arab as a savage inferior; and most of the other European travellers or writers about the East were always hunting for examples to corroborate such a ready-made image, which unfortunately continued to thrive in the nineteenth century. We find it in the writings of Anthony Trollope, Mark Twain, E. Warburton, A.W. Kinglake, Richard F. Burton, C.M. Doughty and many others. In fact, Lady Lucy Duff-Gordon is the only predecessor of Blunt whose image of the Arabs is without the usual derogatory attributes. Like any other human being, the desert Bedouin has his weaknesses, and the Blunts are not blind to such weaknesses,<sup>2</sup> but they do not issue judgements full of sweeping generalizations such as the following, put in the mouth of George Walker by Trollope,

Whether they be Arabs, or Turks, or Copts, it is always the same. They are a mean, false, cowardly race, I believe. They will bear blows, and respect the man who gives them. Fear goes further with them than love, ... they are immeasurably inferior to us who have had Christian teaching. But in one thing they beat us. They always know how to maintain their personal dignity.<sup>3</sup>

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1. D.G. Hogarth, The Penetration of Arabia (1904), p. 254.
  2. Bedouin Tribes ..., Vol. II, pp. 93, 124-5, 202-3, 209, 212; cf: A Pilgrimage to Nejd, Vol. I, pp. 107-8, 150-1, Vol. II, pp. 70, 150, 231.
  3. A. Trollope, "George Walker at Suez" in Tales of All Countries, second series (1863), p. 137.

This was among the most widely read pictures of "the Oriental" in the mid-nineteenth century; and it was typical of the baffled Western disdain that would become almost universal in later years. Cromer believed it, and treated the Egyptians accordingly for nearly 25 years. There are echoes of it in his Modern Egypt (1908). In fact, such images, containing a little "praise" conceded in the middle of a heap of scorn and contempt, reflect emotional antipathy, rather than objective observation, in the narratives of Warburton, Palgrave, Burton and Doughty.<sup>1</sup> The strange combination of attraction and repulsion in the West's approach to the Arab world continued to develop and to influence large segments of British public opinion; but the attitudes were almost always negative and scornful, as the Crusader spirit was kept alive. It is against such a background that the attitude of the Blunts becomes so conspicuously different and, in spite of their indulgent sympathies, more accurate and perceptive. The dreamer in Blunt was thinking of a brave new world, full of heroes still fighting with spears, and picturesque outlaws off the beaten track, some of whom he managed to visit, despite the watchful eyes of the suspicious Turkish ruler of Deyr el-Zour in Eastern Syria. The Blunts had no planned routes in their wanderings, leaving things to Circumstances and the spur of the moment. Blunt took the solemn oath of fraternity with the leaders of both tribes in the Euphrates valley, Faris of Shammer and Jadaan of Anazeh.<sup>2</sup> The description of Faris's horsemanship reminds us of the heroes of Beni Hilal; Faris was considered a perfect "gentleman of the desert".<sup>3</sup> The spell of the desert left

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1. E. Warburton, The Crescent and the Cross (1852), pp. 56, 81, 186; Palgrave, Vol. I, pp. vii, 23-5, 34, 69-70, 179; Burton, Vol. I, pp. 37-40, 189; Vol. II, pp. 86-91, 109-110; Doughty, Passages from Arabia Deserts, selected by Edward Garnett (1931), pp. 40, 173, 222.
  2. Bedouin Tribes ..., Vol. I, pp. 328-9; Vol. II, pp. 218, 220.
  3. Ibid., I, pp. 315, 324.

deep impressions on Blunt, who recorded some of these impressions in a number of his poems later, particularly in the long poem entitled "Quatrains of Life".

But apart from romantic dreams, there is a realistic description, based on direct observation, of the manners and customs of the people, of the flora and fauna, of the natural and geographical features of the land, the poverty of the arid soil through which the Euphrates seems to pass as indifferently as if it were a railway passing through an arable area in England.<sup>1</sup> A more lively scene is the Southern part of el-Hamad valley, nimble with life and greenery in the spring, becoming one of the most beautiful views in the world.<sup>2</sup> As an accomplished sportsman, Blunt indulged in his hobby of shooting. The Blunts enjoyed meals of Kema (a desert trifle) and boiled locusts, which they considered "a delicacy". They give lively descriptions of the songs and folklore arts, and express their deep admiration of the silence of the desert, whose tranquility is a relief from the boisterous life of big cities in the civilized world. They also liked the atmosphere of complete freedom in "the clean comfort of the tent", away from all sorts of worry or any intrusions from official authorities, or the soul-stifling complications and hypocrisies in the social life of the highly sophisticated, modern Europe.<sup>3</sup> The Blunts became so attuned to the soul of the desert that they began to feel at home there, as able to find their way as if they were in their own Sussex Weald. Blunt's love of the desert never diminished. While he was in prison in Ireland in 1888, he dwelt lovingly on the memory of those days, imagining himself back in the East, sitting peacefully in his own tent.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., II, pp. 163, 169.

2. Ibid., II, p. 167.

3. Ibid., I, pp. 177, 228-9, 287; II, p. 17: A pilgrimage to Nejd, I, pp. 35, 81, 254-5.

4. The Land war in Ireland, pp. 374, 377, 387.

However, not all their experiences in those two major journeys were happy. There were shocks, anxieties, frustrations and moments of real danger, particularly in the second journey, the "Pilgrimage to Nejd" in the winter of 1878-9. A desert storm pulled down their tents at night and continued to rage in the morning, when their camels looked like "antediluvian creatures overwhelmed in a flood".<sup>1</sup> Their trusted guide, Mohammed ibn Aruk, whom they befriended the year before, stood aside when they were suddenly attacked by a gang of robbers at the edge of Wadi Sirhan.<sup>2</sup> After ten days of plodding through waves of sand for two hundred miles across the formidable Nefud, they ran short of water and nearly perished, to add "another chapter" to the endless horror stories which Radi, one of their companions, continued to relate to them.<sup>3</sup> In Hail, the boastful Ibn Aruk caused them no little embarrassment at the Emir's palace, where, behind their backs, he gave the false impression that they were his followers, rather than benefactors. From Baghdad to Bushire - a distance of more than 500 miles - their new, untried companions were much worse than Ibn Aruk. The "Cavas", Hajji Mohammed, was useless, while the one-eyed rascal, Saadun, and Ghafil, the one with "the most abominable squint" were evil, greedy and as "capricious as the wind".<sup>4</sup> With these, they really felt that their lives were in danger. The terrible exhaustion of this useless part of the journey was so apparent on them at Bushire that the neatly-uniformed "sepoys" at the British Residency refused to believe that they were "honest people of any sort".<sup>5</sup>

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1. A Pilgrimage to Nejd, I, p. 80.
  2. Ibid., I, pp. 107-8.
  3. Ibid., I, p. 183.
  4. Ibid., II, pp. 147, 149, 150.
  5. Ibid., II, pp. 232.

The two books give the general impression that the Blunts were travelling in a more friendly Arabia than that described by Doughty. Their description of the Bedouin life contains nothing of Doughty's grim irony, or Kinglake's biting epigrams. The Blunts were tactful rather than provocative, genuinely friendly rather than arrogantly cold and condescending. They respected the ideas and beliefs of their hosts and adapted themselves to the conditions of desert life without complaint. This respect and affection became mutual. Some Arabs even offered to make Blunt their Sheykh and wanted him to settle with them.<sup>1</sup> Another example of these friendly relations is Blunt's success in finding a wife for his "sworn brother", Ibn Aruk, among the branch of the latter's tribe in a remote oasis, 400 miles south of Damascus. Blunt presided over a family meeting in his tent and brought the marriage negotiations to a happy conclusion.<sup>2</sup> Lady Anne was equally successful with the Arab women. Thus there were no grounds for hostility, friction or suspicion between the travellers and the natives.

Despite the physical hardships and insecurities of the Bedouins' life, their simple faith precludes any spiritual or mental torture, as they do not indulge in metaphysical reasoning or self-analysis. Blunt envied this contentment, contrasting it to the inner ordeal of the more sophisticated Europeans, who suffer "quite as much in consequence of ... idle habits as from an excess of intelligence".<sup>3</sup>

Blunt contributed the last seven chapters to the Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates. These include the description of Arabian thoroughbreds and their pedigrees (Ch. xxviii), a quick historical survey of Iraq and Arabia under Turkish rule (Ch. xxiv) and the political situation

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1. Ibid., II p. 80; Bedouin Tribes ..., I, pp. 154, 329, 339.
  2. A Pilgrimage to Nejd, I, pp. 136-9.
  3. Bedouin Tribes ..., II, p. 221.

in the Syrian desert (Ch. xxvii). In A Pilgrimage to Nejd, he contributed the study of the political system in Hail (Ch. xi) and the brief historical survey of the rise and suppression of the Wahhabi reform movement in Nejd (Appendix II). He scrutinizes the relationship between the ruling Sheikh and the ruled tribe in the Bedouin political system, concluding that here is "the purest example of democracy to be found in the world".<sup>1</sup> In spite of the existence of social privileges based on noble birth within the Arab tribes, freedom and equality remain the cornerstone of the Bedouin social systems. The chief who runs the tribe's affairs and administers justice represents the patriarchal traditions. He has no power; but his authority rests on the universal respect for his judgement and the popular support for his rule.<sup>2</sup> The public opinion and the revered social traditions, Blunt observes, assert themselves in all affairs concerning the general well-being of the community in a way that prevents any autocratic tyrant from receiving the blind, unquestioning obedience of his subjects.<sup>3</sup> Blunt saw for himself the application of these principles in the daily lives of the Bedouins both in the Euphrates valley and in Nejd, finding in both regions that justice is achieved without the need of large forces, complicated procedure and expensive systems of litigation. Blunt also observes with admiration how the Bedouins sit at the coffee-hearth of their Sheikh, talking freely about public affairs; the individual thus participating in the communal life. The Bedouin obeys the rules and traditions of his people, but he remains free, owing no allegiance to king or state and is not disturbed by a policeman or a tax collector. Blunt sees that a Bedouin's tent is his castle; but what distinguishes him from the Englishman is his freedom to pitch this tent wherever he wants.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., II, p. 229.

2. Ibid., II, pp. 232, 233.

3. Ibid., II, pp. 206, 230-3, 236.

4. Ibid., II, p. 231.



There is no doubt that Blunt exaggerates the virtues of this desert life, idealizing Hail as a beautiful Utopia where people live by the word of honour, achieving in practice the principles to which Europe only paid lip-service: Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood. However, some of his remarks are in line with the sober observations of less enthusiastic writers, such as Burckhardt and Palgrave.<sup>1</sup> Blunt prefers the Bedouins of Nejd to both the Turks and the Persians, and admires the desert way of life for the conspicuous lack of the "rowdyism and violence of European towns".<sup>2</sup> He considers it "a free native civilization" compatible with the purest traditions of a happy community living content despite its poverty, with no police, tax officials or any form of coercion, where order is maintained more successfully than in the regions ruled by the Turks with their forts and armies.<sup>3</sup> Later, he could not resist the temptation of contrasting the politics of the "golden East" with the English system when he was electioneering as a Parliamentary candidate for Cumberwell, addressing "deranged audiences" whom he described as "frowsy fellows in a stuffy schoolroom talking nonsense to each other."<sup>4</sup> Although both Burckhardt and Palgrave praise the benevolent, patriarchal system of the Bedouins' life, one suspects that Blunt seems to attribute to them nearly all the virtues that were sung in the poetry of their forefathers, and

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1. Ibid., II, pp. 210-13, 224-5, 226-7; A Pilgrimage to Nejd, I, pp. 270-1; II, pp. 25-6, 37-8. Cf: Palgrave, I, 24-5, 70; J.L. Burckhardt, Notes on the Bedouins and the Wahabys, 2 Vols. (1831), I, pp. 284-5, 358-60.
  2. A Pilgrimage to Nejd, I, p. 226. Cf: Bedouin Tribes ..., II, p. 158.
  3. A Pilgrimage to Nejd, I, pp. 265-7, 270; Bedouin Tribes ..., II, p. 205, Cf: W.S. Blunt, "The Egyptian Revolution", NC, Vol. 12, (Sep., 1882), pp. 324-46 (p. 326).
  4. W.S. Blunt, Gordon at Khartoum (1912), pp. 471, 472, 493. Henceforth cited as Gordon.

to minimize the obvious drawbacks of this way of life. But, having said that, it would do the Blunts a grave injustice to dismiss their accounts of these travels as superficial or too-romanticized. They may have been luckier than their predecessors in cultivating the friendship of their hosts; but their understanding of the Arab mentality, deep interest in Arab affairs and the astonishing accuracy of their judgements, which remain relevant even today, stand second to none in the annals of English travel and travel literature.

It would be difficult to overemphasise the impact of these travels on Blunt's life. They gave him new interests, tastes, attitudes, habits and convictions. His political ideas, religious speculations, literary output and social outlook were all influenced for the rest of his life by these experiences. His love for the Arabian way of life was as powerful as his most passionate love affairs. His admiration of Arabian horses, for example, made him plunge into researches and studies about the origin of this graceful creature in an attempt to prove that it was first tamed by man in the Arabian East. He wrote the entry on the Arabian thoroughbreds in the Encyclopaedia of Sport (1897) and other interesting articles in The Nineteenth Century (1880, 1884, 1900, 1906) and The New Review (1896). His Arabian stud at Crabbet (established jointly with Lady Anne and her brother Ralph Wentworth) created quite a stir in England and won great fame abroad. It began to export sires to various parts of the world, including Russia and America. Its annual sales become celebrated social occasions like the Derby. The stud continued to thrive for more than half a century. Even the Saudi Royal family sent a delegation to buy some of its horses in 1933.

Blunt's interest in the East was not that of a dreamer shrouded in remote, insular mystery, as was the case of Lady Hester Stanhope.

Nor was he under the spell of an ephemeral whim whose novelty evaporates at the end of a holiday season, as was the case of Kinglake when he approached the "splendour and havoc of the East" as a temporary relief from "the weariness of that poor, dear, middle-aged, accomplished and painstaking governess, Europe".<sup>1</sup> No other traveller thought seriously of acclimatising himself for the Eastern way of life; but Blunt voluntarily adopted it and imported it to his own estate in Sussex. This gave his social life some peculiar glamour. George Wyndham gives a vivid description of Crabbet forest with its desert plants and Arabian horses,<sup>2</sup> while Desmond MacCarthy describes the oriental furniture and paraphernalia at New Buildings Place some thirty years later.<sup>3</sup> Blunt even clothed his guests (including Winston S. Churchill and his wife) with his Arabian dresses sometimes.<sup>4</sup> When Frederic Harrison visited Blunt in his house near Cairo, he found him surrounded with a scene taken from Genesis "in real life" and likened him to the "Sultan of Morocco", and saw his daughter, Judith, as "the Queen of Sheba".<sup>5</sup> Other prominent Victorians laughed at him, such as Margot Asquith and Lord Rosebery. The latter described him to Queen Victoria as "an invaluable subject of your Majesty [who] spends his time in masquerading like an Oriental in a circus".<sup>6</sup> From 1887 to 1905 he used to spend the winter months in Egypt, where he undertook several major expeditions in the desert. He wanted to live "far from European intrusion" - an attitude recurrently expressed

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1. A.W. Kinglake, Eothen (1954; first pub. 1844), pp. 1, 98; cf: Warburton, op.cit., p.81.
  2. J.W. Mackail and Guy Wyndham, The Life and Letters of George Wyndham, 2 Vols. (1925), I, p. 248.
  3. Desmond MacCarthy, Portraits I (1931), p. 30.
  4. My Diaries, p. 812.
  5. F. Harrison, Autobiographic Memoirs, 2 Vols. (1911), II, pp. 174-5, 177.
  6. Shane Leslie, Men Were Different (1937), pp. 231, 232.

in his writings over a period of nearly thirty years.<sup>1</sup> Shane Leslie rightly observes that "For him, Sussex Squiredom alternated with Sheikhdom in Egypt"; this "Sheikhdom" was real, not nominal, since Harrison testifies that he found Blunt's name "a passport everywhere".<sup>2</sup>

Very few Europeans felt "at home" in the East as the Blunts did. These few are the exception rather than the rule. They include Lady Hester Stanhope, Lady Lucy Duff-Gordon and Lady Ellenborough (Jane Digby). Of those who came later, there were only Gertrude Bell and T.E. Lawrence. Each one of these few had his or her own reasons and motives, all of which were of a personal nature, pertaining to their own eccentricities. In the case of the latter two there were also political motives concerned with the propagation of British interests in that part of the world. By contrast, Blunt was the first European to adopt the idea of rejuvenating the Arab world and achieving Islamic revival without any ulterior motives, selfish or "patriotic". He was the first Englishman who refused to view the Orient through English binoculars; on the contrary, he viewed his own countrymen through the Eastern perspective and found their political intrigues and social hypocrisies revolting when compared to the honest, simple dignity of the East. He was repelled by the ascendancy of the greedy love of materialistic gain of "this graceless nineteenth century", and preferred what he called "the tradition of a wiser happiness than ours in Christendom".<sup>3</sup> Other aspects which contributed to this disenchantment include the intellectual unrest, the "malady" of the spirit and the

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1. My Diaries, pp. 11, 125, "Worth Forest", A New Pilgrimage (1889), pp. 124-5; "Quatrains of Life", Blunt's Poetical Works, 2 Vols. (1914), I, p. 438.
  2. Men Were Different, op.cit., p. 231; Autobiographic Memoirs, op.cit., II, p. 175.
  3. My Diaries, pp. 50, 78-9, 217, 374; cf: Samuel C. Chew, "Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: An Intimate View", North American Review, Vol. 217 (May, 1923), pp. 664-75 (p. 665).

commercial vulgarity and urban squalor of industrialized Europe.

These ideas are recurrent in Blunt's writings. The opening page of A Pilgrimage to Nejd contains some remarks which illustrate this mood:

It is strange how gloomy thoughts vanish as one sets foot in Asia. Only yesterday [5 December 1878] we were tossing on the sea of European thought, with its political anxieties, its social miseries and its restless aspirations....

As the Arabs became Blunt's "first political love", his interest in their destiny became a passionate obsession; he began to follow the developments of events in the East very closely, becoming involved in the political, social and religious affairs of the region. This personal involvement was to continue throughout his life, enhancing itself to a wider circle including the world of Islam on the one hand, and the problems of liberty, justice and home rule in Ireland on the other. In this respect, the period between 1879 and 1887 proved to be one of the most fertile episodes in Blunt's active life, which seemed to thrive on a series of controversial entanglements. With Byronic enthusiasm, he began a long, arduous struggle to achieve for the Arabs what Byron tried to achieve for Greece. The spirit with which he waged his successive campaigns for freedom, progress and reform in Egypt, the Sudan, India and Ireland was that of an "inverted Crusader", to use Shane Leslie's words.<sup>1</sup> Blunt explains :

Up to that date [1879] ..., I had not only taken no public part in politics, but I had never so much as made a speech to an audience or written an article for a review, or a letter to a newspaper ... Now, however, having persuaded myself that I had a mission in the Oriental world, however vague and ill defined, I began to talk and write, and even overcome my timidity to the extent of appearing ... upon a platform.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Shane Leslie, Men were Different, p. 237.

2. Secret History, p. 67

The first occasion was a speech given at the Geographical section of the British Association, sitting at the High School for Girls, Surrey Street, Sheffield, on Friday, August 22, 1879, in which he opposed the project advocated by the explorer V.L. Cameron, known as the "Euphrates Valley Railway". Blunt's paper was entitled "Baghdad to Bushire by Land", and was only briefly mentioned in the two local papers, which gave extensive coverage to Cameron's lecture.<sup>1</sup> Blunt also came out of the anonymity of his pseudonym, Proteus, and began to appear in print, writing a series of letters and articles to the Spectator and The Fortnightly Review between 1879 and 1881. Sympathizing with the poor, oppressed Arabs under the corrupt Ottoman Empire, whose government ruled through "force and fraud", he was convinced that the well-being of the people of Asiatic Turkey was the first thing that these rulers ignored. Compared to the happy independence enjoyed in Nejd, the rest of the Arabs were deprived of freedom, security, dignity and self-respect, and were crushed under heavy tax burdens. "The Ottoman Government", Blunt wrote, "like the ichneumon grub in the body of the caterpillar, has exhausted the fatness of its prey; it is now feeding on the vitals".<sup>2</sup> Even the Turkish peasants in the rural areas of Asia Minor were seen by Blunt as "a race demoralized, impoverished and brutalized by Ottoman rule".<sup>3</sup> He was depressed by the sight of Syrian and Iraqi fellahin driven in chains as recruits in the final stages of the Russo-Turkish war, while the fat Turkish Pashas enjoyed a life of idle luxury, kindling internal feuds among the Arab tribes to remain masters of all.

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1. The Sheffield Daily Telegraph and The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent Telegraph, Saturday, August 23, 1879, pp. 3 and 2 respectively.
  2. W.S. Blunt, "The Sultan's Heirs in Asia" FR, Vol. 28 (July 1 1880), pp. 16-30 (p. 23).
  3. Secret History, p. 59.

The terrible conditions of the Arabs under the Ottoman yoke contradicted the glory of their past history; and this moved Blunt to their assistance, just as the Greeks' conditions motivated Byron before him.<sup>1</sup> He began to talk seriously about this subject with some prominent English politicians, such as Lord Salisbury, then Foreign minister, his old friend, Lord Lytton, then Viceroy in India, John Morley, then editor of the Fortnightly Review, Sir Charles W. Dilke and Gladstone himself, trying to "indoctrinate" them with his ideas of Arabia and the prospects of Arab independence.<sup>2</sup> He believed that if he could introduce a pure Arabian breed of horses into England and help to see Arabia free of the Turks, "I shall not have quite lived in vain". He certainly achieved the first aim. As for the second, his ideas included the establishment of small Arab states similar to the Emirate of Hail, under Mohammed Ibn Rashid, the extension of whose rule, Blunt maintained, "should appeal to all our sympathies".<sup>3</sup> He considered the Ottoman Empire "an effete state" past all remedy; and when the Liberals came to power in 1880, he called on them to be true to their principles by adopting the cause of Arab liberty:

Let them abandon that old labour of the damned - the regeneration of the Ottoman Empire - and prepare a new way for the new life which shall succeed it. Let them treat their guardianship of Western Asia not as a burden, but as a trust.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 7.
  2. Ibid., pp. 80-2, 88-9.
  3. W.S. Blunt, "The Coming Man in Arabia", The Spectator, Vol. 53 (June 26, 1880), pp. 813-14 (p. 814).
  4. "The Sultan's Heirs in Asia", op. cit., p. 30.

In the larger field of Islamic revival, Blunt's idea was that the Caliphate should be returned to the Arabs; and one of his favourite candidates for this high office was the exiled Algerian warrior, Emir Abdel Kader, whom he had met in Damascus. It is both prophetic and ironic that Blunt's ideas, dismissed at the time, should be used more than thirty-five years later (in 1915-16) in a way and for a purpose which he never intended. Meanwhile, another journey to Jeddah, Egypt, Palestine and North Arabia in the winter of 1880-1881 left him on good, even cordial, terms with almost every Arab Sheykh of any consequence between the Nile and the Tigris.

On his way to Hijaz, intending to meet the Hashimites in the autumn of 1881, his ship ran aground in the Suez Canal. He was thus destined to spend that fateful winter in Egypt, where the crisis known as the Arabi Revolution had come to a head. It was a liberal movement of reform against a corrupt regime which led Egypt to bankruptcy. This nationalist upsurge was spear-headed by the Egyptian army against a variety of iniquities inflicted on the people by the Circassian clique of Turkish Pashas and officers who enjoyed all sorts of privileges at the expense of the poor, neglected and over-taxed fellahin. The Egyptian officers were left without salaries for several months at a time, or suddenly forced to retire without pensions. The organized movement of Egyptian officers, led by Colonel Ahmed Arabi, was able to get rid of the Circassian War minister, Osman Rifqi. When the Prime Minister, Riaz Pasha, began to plot to get rid of the leaders of the movement, the whole army rallied around Arabi. Meeting the Khedive face to face at the Palace of Abdin, on September 9, 1881, they succeeded in overthrowing Riaz's corrupt Government, and got a promise of a constitution. The movement thus became a political Nationalist Party with overwhelming popular support.



At first, Blunt was suspicious that it might be an attempt to impose a military dictatorship. But when he personally met Arabi and the other civilian and military leaders, he became convinced of the justice of their cause, and saw in them the nucleus of a progressive revival along the lines which he had imagined for the Muslim world. Having had first-hand knowledge (since 1876) of the sufferings which these "rebels" were sincerely seeking to alleviate, Blunt found himself in full sympathy with Arabi.<sup>1</sup> It was Ismail's extravagance and huge borrowings from Europe's greedy financiers which ruined the country's economy and brought its budget under the joint British-French control. The taxes which Ismail imposed on the impoverished fellahin were unbearable. His personal debts became the burden of all Egypt and were thus considered as the National Debt. Many despatches to the Foreign office in London give depressing details of the sad situation of Egypt towards the end of Ismail's reign in 1879,<sup>2</sup> when the Sultan was forced by the European creditors to depose him and appoint his son, Tewfik, as Khedive in his place.

The Dual Control had gradually led to increasing political intervention in the internal affairs of Egypt by the British and French Consuls and financial Comptrollers under the pretext of protecting the interests of the European bondholders. On more than one occasion Blunt was able to mediate between the British Consul, Sir Edward Malet, and the Arabists. The "Blue Books" contain several

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1. Secret History, pp. 19-23; cf: W.S. Blunt, "The Egyptian Revolution" NC, Vol 12 (Sept. 1882), pp. 324-46, (327).
  2. Egypt: Accounts and Papers (Blue Books), No. 2 (1879), Item No. 238, Vivian to Salisbury, August 30, 1878; Egypt, No. 5 (1879), No. 156 and its Inclosure, Lascelles to Salisbury, April 26, 1879; Egypt, No. 1 (1880), No. 31 and its inclosure, Lascelles to Salisbury, July 15, 1879; Ibid., No. 161 and its inclosure, Lascelles to Salisbury, Oct. 25, 1879.

dispatches recording Malet's gratitude for Blunt's good offices, which dispelled some misunderstandings. Blunt was at first praised for rendering "essential service to the cause of moderation", then because he "relieved our anxiety and made our path clear". Again, on December 28, 1881, Malet wrote to Granville:

"I am bound to record that I consider myself under serious obligation for him for the manner in which he has dispelled misunderstandings which might have led to difficulties."<sup>1</sup>

In fact Malet, wrongly believing that Blunt "wielded the utmost power with the Nationalist Party", wanted to use Blunt as the velvet glove through which he thought he could manipulate the movement and tame it to accept the European supervision of Egypt's public affairs. Although Malet had the Khedive's ear, it was evident to him that real power and public support were on the side of Arabi and the new Government. Things came to a head as the new Chamber of Deputies tried to assert its right to supervise the budget and to control the public purse in order to prevent any extravagance and to improve Egypt's financial position. No compromise was possible between a Parliament insisting on practising its authority in accordance with the new constitution, and the wishes of the Consuls and financial comptrollers, who saw in this a serious threat to their privileges and a violation of what they called "recognized international arrangements". The British financial Controller, A. Colvin, whose sole concern was the interests of the bondholders, angrily recorded that these interests were too weighty to be placed "at the mercy of Egyptian soldiery, or an inexperienced native administration". He said he did not believe that these Egyptian reformers were "Washingtons or Hampdens,

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1. Egypt (Blue Books), No. 13 (1882), No. 3, Malet to Granville, Dec. 28, 1881. Cf: E. Malet, Egypt 1879-1883 (1909), pp. 208, 210, 211.

or that the hour of Egyptian emancipation has struck."<sup>1</sup> Thus, a Joint Note was sent to Egypt on January 8, 1882, declaring the support of the British and French Governments to the Khedive, and containing an implicit threat to use force against the Nationalists. Blunt, who had sent an English version of the Nationalist Programme to both Gladstone and the Times, with letters explaining the liberal nature of the movement as a genuine attempt to achieve the intellectual and moral regeneration of the country, not a threat to Europe's interests, was expecting a message of peace and sympathy, not this "thunderbolt in a clear sky".<sup>2</sup> Malet, who had previously described Blunt as "a person of education and knowledge of the institutions of the world" by whom the Nationalists could "in some sense [be] guided", suddenly began to attack Blunt, telling both his wife and Granville that Blunt's assessment of people and affairs was "shallow and prejudiced".<sup>3</sup> He also attacked Sir William Gregory for his sympathy with Arabi. Both Malet and Colvin began to agitate for direct military intervention, and to give the press a distorted image of the situation, sending reports full of sensational accounts of "smouldering fires", "instability", "chaos", "danger", "dictatorship", "anti-European" and "anti-Christian" feelings running high and "uncontrollable mob agitations".<sup>4</sup> Appalled by this devious manipulation of the press

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1. A. Colvin, The Making of Modern Egypt (1909), pp. 25, 27.
  2. Secret History, p. 181; cf: "The Egyptian Revolution", op.cit., p. 335. See also Blunt's letter to the Times of Feb. 3, 1882, entitled "Egypt and the Control".
  3. Egypt, No. 13 (1882), No. 1, Malet to Granville, Dec. 26, 1881; cf: E. Malet, Egypt: 1879-1883, op.cit., pp. 273, 283.
  4. Secret History, pp. 175, 211, 214, 220, 225, cf: Egypt, No. 7 (1882), No. 120, Malet to Granville, April 22, 1882; Egypt, No. 16 (1882), No. 3, Granville to Malet, August 17, 1882.

at the hands of two dull officials who were doing "all Granville's dirty work", Blunt decided to go back to England.<sup>1</sup> He hoped to counter their mud-slinging campaigns and to win the misled public opinion in Britain on behalf of his Egyptian friends. He began to write a series of letters to the Times, whose editor, Thomas Chenery, was an Orientalist.<sup>2</sup> He sent other letters to Gladstone through his private secretary, Edward Hamilton, a close friend of Blunt's. He talked to a number of prominent Liberals, including Dilke, Lord Northbrook and John Bright, and won the sympathy of the broad-minded Frederic Harrison. He seems to have clung to a vain hope that the Liberals, whose declared principles and policies were very similar to those of the Egyptian Nationalists, might yet reverse the tide of hostility and extend a hand of peace and friendship to the aspirations of Arabi and his colleagues, to get rid of the very same abominable Turks whom Gladstone had attacked on several occasions. In this he was grossly mistaken. He did not only overestimate his personal influence with the Liberals, but he also underestimated the blind hatred for Arabi, which prevailed in all the official circles, fed by the influential bond-holders who were determined to undermine any tendency towards peace and goodwill. These bond-holders believed that the Arābists were "a set of fanatical incendiaries":

Rumours of all kinds were afloat about him [Arabi], ludicrous tales which portrayed him as a Frenchman or a Spaniard in Egyptian guise; as a paid agent in turn of the ex-Khedive Ismail, of the pretender Halim, and of the Sultan - as everything in fact but what he really was.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Gordon, p. 286; cf: "The Egyptian Revolution", op.cit., p. 341.
  2. Secret History, pp. 197, 204, 205, 215, 272, 349.
  3. Ibid., p. 216.

Thus, Blunt was already fighting a losing battle in a feverish atmosphere, poisoned by these rumours throughout the hectic, hot summer of 1882. Neither his eloquent letters, speeches, pleadings and explanations, nor the personal letter which he carried from Arabi to Gladstone, could be of any use in precluding the approaching nemesis.

There is no need to go into the details of the English occupation of Egypt; but it is necessary to stress the importance of Blunt's book about it, which was the first in a series of volumes of personal narrative of events in Egypt, Sudan, India and Ireland, based on his recorded diaries. The narratives written by Colvin, Malet, Cromer, Milner, C.F.M. Bell and many others should always be compared to Blunt's version of what actually happened, because these narratives usually give one half of the picture, and it is not necessarily the accurate half. History has vindicated Blunt, although his contemporaries considered him a traitor, a persona non grata in Egypt. There are many parallels between the official falsehoods of 1882 and the pretexts of Eden's Government for military intervention in Egypt in 1956. This makes Blunt's narrative relevant today. Anthony Nutting's resignation in 1956 was reminiscent of John Bright's resignation in 1882. Echoes of the anti-Blunt campaign of hatred can be traced in the confidential dispatches to the Foreign Office throughout the years 1882 - 1885,<sup>1</sup>

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1. Egypt, No. 13 (1882), No. 5, Malet to Granville, June 2, 1882; Ibid. No. 8, Malet to Granville, July 16, 1882; Egypt, No. 27, (1884), Inclosure in No. 3, Cherif Pasha to Baring, October 8, 1883; Ibid., Inclosure 3 in No. 6, Nubar Pasha to Baring, February 25, 1884; Ibid., No. 3, Baring to Granville, October 13, 1883; Ibid., No. 4 Granville to Baring, December 26, 1883; Ibid., No. 10, Baring to Granville, May 9, 1884; Ibid., No. 13, Baring to Granville, July 28, 1884. Cf: Secret History, pp. 442-3.

the public debates in Parliament,<sup>1</sup> and the writings and biographies of the principal participants in this Egyptian Drama, which has all the characteristics of a horrible Greek tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

The deteriorating situation in Ireland, particularly after the Phoenix Park Murders, may have contributed to the British Government's hostility to the cause of the Egyptian Nationalists, whose assertive nature was associated with the increasingly violent turn of events in Ireland. For their part, the Egyptian Nationalists were suspicious of the Anglo-French co-operation, fearing a destiny similar to that of Tunis, which was grabbed by France only less than a year before (1881). These fears, set against the background of the Muslim world's general alarm at the speed of Europe's establishment of inroads of intervention in one Muslim country after another, were justified.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, we can pinpoint the Berlin Congress of 1878 as the first spark which heralded what was to become virtually a "scramble" for the domains of the declining Ottoman Empire. In addition to England, France and Russia, new European Powers were getting ready to enter this race. Austria, Germany and Italy were rapidly whetting their appetites to get a share of the fragments. The growing interests and rivalries of these powers dominated the two decades that preceded the First World War. Blunt's

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1. Hansard (Parliamentary Debates), Third Series, Vol. 269 (June, 1, 1882), p. 1786; Ibid., Vol. 273 (July 31, 1882), p. 216; Ibid., (August 4, 1882), p. 729; Ibid., (August 10, 1882), p. 1395; Ibid., Vol. 271, (June 26, 1882), pp. 372-3; Ibid., Vol. 275, (Nov. 28, 1882), p. 226.
  2. E. Malet, Egypt 1879-1883, op.cit., pp. 273, 281, 460-1; S. Gwynn and Gertrude Tuckwell, The Life of Sir Charles W. Dilke, 2 Vols. (1918), I, pp. 455, 460, 470; Sir F. Maurice and Sir G. Arthur, The Life of Lord Wolsley (1924), p. 198; The Marquess of Zetland, Lord Cromer (1932), pp. 164-5; Bernard Holland, The Life of Spencer Compton, Eighth Duke of Devonshire, 2 Vols. (1911), II, p. 21; W.S. Blunt, Mr. Blunt and the Times (1907), pp. 15, 20.
  3. Secret History, p. 189; Gordon, pp. 79-80; The Land War..., p. 209.

assessment of the general situation, and the particular case of Egypt, shows remarkable perception and foresight. His analysis of men and events and motives is anything but superficial. For example, his judgement of Nubar Pasha, Riad Pasha, Cherif Pasha and their ilk as a clique of corrupt, arrogant Turks, was borne out by history, whereas Cromer and Colvin sang the praises of such officials simply because they were docile opportunists who allowed themselves to be used as tools in exchange for certain selfish privileges bestowed on them by the condescending British Consuls.<sup>1</sup> Blunt's contention that Ismail's debts should not become the collective responsibility of all the Egyptian people was morally correct; and so was his suggestion that a neutral Commission of inquiry be sent to investigate.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, his suggestion that the safety of shipping across the Suez Canal can best be guaranteed by cultivating the friendship of the Egyptians, rather than by military suppression, remains valid and relevant to this day. His support for the Egyptians' complaint against the large numbers of European officials, with huge salaries, in the Egyptian administration was well founded.<sup>3</sup> Even Malet conceded that.<sup>4</sup> The difference was that Blunt suggested their replacement by native Egyptians, while Malet-- and Cromer after Malet - considered the Egyptians incompetent and inferior.

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1. A. Colvin, The Making of Modern Egypt, op.cit., pp. 39, 61, 62; the Earl of Cromer, Abbas II (1915), p. 62; E. Malet, Egypt 1879-1883, op.cit., p. 471. Cf: Secret History, pp. 19, 45, 46, 196, 459; "The Egyptian Revolution", p. 345.
  2. Secret History, pp. 229 - 232.
  3. W.S. Blunt, Letters to the Times entitled "Egypt and the Control" and "The Crisis in Egypt" published on February 3, and February 7, 1882. See also his article, "The Release of Arabi", NC., Vol.32(September 1892), pp. 370-9. (pp. 372,373).
  4. Malet, op.cit., p. 207.

But Blunt was alone in the field, trying, even at the eleventh hour, to avert an armed conflict on which the Government was bent. Gladstone and Granville had wrongly convinced themselves that the Khedive was an honest, silent, powerless, ideal hero besieged by a dangerous armed mob of demagogues and insurrectionists headed by a power-thirsty fellah (Arabi).<sup>1</sup> They also believed that their representatives in Egypt were "efficient, honest eye-witnesses". They even began to fear that Egypt's "instability" might encourage "other Powers" to step in.<sup>2</sup> Such ideas were also promoted by other Liberal leaders, especially Dilke and Chamberlain.<sup>3</sup>

After the occupation, Blunt's sense of honour prompted him to stand by his friends. He led a great campaign of publicity in which he succeeded, almost single-handed, (against the chorus of "vengeance" cries in which even Queen Victoria participated in England, and against the intrigues of the Khedive and his Pashas in Egypt), in securing a fair trial and saving the lives of Arabi and his colleagues. He sent two efficient lawyers, Mark Napier and A.M. Broadley, and paid more than £3,000 pounds in the process. His efforts were encouraged by such prominent Victorians as George Meredith, General Gordon,

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1. Hansard, Third Series, Vol. 269, June 1, 1882, pp. 1772, 1781; Ibid., May 15, p. 650; Vol. 270, June 19, 1882, pp. 1553; Ibid., June 20, 1882, p. 1762; Vol. 271, July 4, 1882, p. 1389; Vol. 272, July 12, 1882, p. 177; Ibid., July 24, pp. 1487-8, 1547; Vol. 273, August 10, 1882, p. 1392; Ibid., August 16, 1882, pp. 1942-4.
  2. Hansard, Vol. 276, February 15, 1883, p. 41.
  3. The Life of Sir Charles W. Dilke, op.cit., I, pp. 461-5; J.L. Garvin, The Life of Joseph Chamberlain 4 Vols.(1932), I, pp. 446-452; My Diaries, p. 749.



Frederic Harrison and Sir William Harcourt. Gordon condemned the "mess" which resulted from "all Dilke's, Colvin's and Malet's secretiveness".<sup>1</sup> To Queen Victoria's anger against some of her subjects who sympathized with the "Arch rebel and traitor" Arabi, actuated by what she called a "morbid sentimentality", Harcourt replied that "the death of Marshal Ney had not redounded to the credit of the Duke of Wellington."<sup>2</sup>

It was not only discovered that Arabi was innocent of all the charges made against him, but there was evidence implicating the Khedive of deliberately contriving, in collusion with Omar Lutfi, Governor of Alexandria, the tragic riots of June 11, 1882, in which some fifty Europeans lost their lives. They plotted it to discredit Arabi, who was responsible for public peace and security, and to precipitate the English occupation. Lord Dufferin, the English Envoy who was sent to Egypt after the occupation, saw through the Khedive and immediately decided to effect a compromise outside the courts, hushing things up, ending the trial with exile to Arabi and three of his colleagues in exchange for their "admission" that they "disobeyed" the Khedive. This was a face-saving formula to prevent an embarrassing admission of this "tragedy of errors" on the part of Lord Granville. Blunt later cynically commented:

The fiction of [Khedive] Tewfik's loyalty and of Arabi's rebellion had therefore to be persisted in and upheld. It could not be contemplated that a Minister should admit an error which had been accompanied by the slaughter of thousands of peasants, and the expenditure of millions, and a war which had been boasted of as "duty of honour".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Secret History, pp. 427-8.
  2. P. Guedalla, The Queen and Mr. Gladstone, 2 Vols. (1933), II, p. 215, cf: A.G. Gardiner, The Life of Sir William Harcourt 2 Vols. (1923), I, p. 459.
  3. Gordon, pp. 17-18; 551-61.

However, the political repercussions of the occupation continued to reverberate. Blunt continued to collect and sift information from a variety of sources, including Arabi himself and some reliable eye-witnesses who were well placed, such as Aidern Beaman, the official interpreter of Malet, in addition to scores of official documents, reports, testimonies, accounts and correspondence.<sup>1</sup> He supplied Lord Randolph Churchill with a great deal of ammunition and attracted to his publicity campaign a number of M.P.'s (such as Sir John Gorst, Sir Henry Drummond-Wolff, H. Labouchere, Lord Wentworth, William John Evelyn, Robert Bourke and Sir Wilfrid Lawson). Thus, the House of Commons continued to resound with attacks on the Khedive and Gladstone's Egyptian policy from February to June 1883.<sup>2</sup> In 1884, he got more evidence from other Egyptian exiles in Istanbul and called on Gladstone to reopen the Egyptian question, to redress the injustices, and considered him personally responsible.<sup>3</sup> During his electioneering as a Tory Home Ruler in the 1885 elections, Blunt challenged Gladstone to a public debate on Egypt; and when the Grand Old Man declined, Blunt published an open letter to him in the Times of October 2, 1885, in which he asserted: "I do not fear that honest men will hold me in any way your debtor." Indeed, when Blunt

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1. Secret History, pp. 459, 466, 494, 515-16, 528-34.

2. State Papers: ("Papers Relating to Lord Randolph Churchill's Charges against His Highness the Khedive"), Egypt, No. 4 (1884). See also Hansard, 3rd Series, Vol. 276, February 15, 1883, p. 141; February 16, pp. 180, 215-16; February 22, p. 590; Vol. 278, May 4, pp. 1872-4; Vol. 279, May 22, p. 701; Vol. 280, June 8, pp. 35-37; June 11, pp. 245-7, 264; June 12, p. 382; June 18, p. 794.

3. Gordon, pp. 555-61, 594-5.

published his Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt in 1907, he received a letter from Lord Eversley, who was a member of Gladstone's Government in 1882, confirming his account, and describing Gladstone as the victim of a plot, who was "fed with lies from the Foreign Office and other quarters." Two of the "plotters" were Dilke and Chamberlain who boasted that "they had cornered 'the old man'."<sup>1</sup> Another corroboration for Blunt's account came from a prominent eye-witness, Elbert Farman, who had been Consul General for America in Egypt. Farman sent Blunt a copy of his Egypt and Its Betrayal, which appeared shortly after Blunt's book, in the summer of 1908.<sup>2</sup>

This experience opened Blunt's eyes to the evils of imperialism, and was a turning point in his life. The duplicity, deceit and secrecy practised by politicians disgusted him and made him always suspicious of the characters and motives of the British Officials both at home and abroad. He met Cromer in Cairo in September 1883, and found him adamant in his support of the Khedive as a docile puppet in his hands. Blunt thus continued his journey to India, like a lonely Don Quixote, "on the track of abuses further East".<sup>3</sup> He wanted to meet his exiled Egyptian Nationalist friends; and also to study the conditions of the sub-continent for himself, to know the hopes and aspirations of the Indian Muslims. He travelled extensively from Ceylon to the large cities, Madras, Hyderabad, Calcutta, Patna, Lucknow and Bombay, from October 1883, to March 1884. He began to scrutinize everything with the keen eyes of an observer awakened by the great shock of the Egyptian episode, ignoring the misleading reports of official sources. His first impressions were recorded in a series of articles contributed to

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1. My Diaries, pp. 604-605.

2. Ibid., p. 618.

3. W.S. Blunt, Ideas About India (1885), p. xiv.

The Fortnightly Review in the autumn of 1884, and published in a small volume entitled Ideas About India (1885). This was incorporated in his large book India Under Ripon (1909). Blunt's movements were very closely watched by the Anglo-Indian officials of the Covenanted Civil Service. He was subjected to venomous attacks in the Press, reflecting the arrogance and prejudice of these officials. They suspected him of plotting with the Muslims to undermine British supremacy in India this time, particularly since his arrival co-incided with the agitation occasioned by the Ilbert Bill, which was meant to curtail the privileges of the British Raj. The depth of their hatred of Blunt can be gauged from these lines in The Civil and Military Gazette of Lahore:

And now, he has set himself the gigantic task of discovering what the natives of India think of British rule. His equipment for this undertaking is but slight and meagre ... [consisting of] vague sympathy with disaffection in a general way...

The writer, whom Blunt suspected to be Colvin, then proceeds with patronizing sarcasm:

We have not yet been told how many years are to be devoted to his present enquiry; but scarcely less than twenty would give a right to speak with authority. ... but we shall be surprised if, after less than so many months, another Sir Oracle is not added to the number of gentlemen "who have studied India on the spot."<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's reputation had preceded him. He was well known in India.

His The Future of Islam had a wide circulation there and was translated to Urdu and Hindustani.<sup>2</sup> Blunt was warmly received by the "natives", both Muslim and Hindu. He was able to mix freely with them because he had no racial prejudices. This enabled him to hear complaints that

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1. The Civil and Military Gazette of Saturday, September 29, 1883, p. 1.
  2. Ideas About India, pp. 5, 98; India Under Ripon, p. 14.

seldom reached the ears of the rulers; and he noted the ever-widening gap between the races and the mounting tension which was complacently ignored by the ruling Anglo-Indian officials.<sup>1</sup> He also noticed that the arrogance and narrow-mindedness of the British "memsahibs" was responsible for over half the bitterness and ill-will between the races.<sup>2</sup> This idea was taken up by E.M. Forster in A Passage to India (1924). Blunt was told about a tax collector who forced the natives passing by his house to walk barefoot and fold their umbrellas.<sup>3</sup> People were forbidden to visit the houses of Anglo-Indian officials in their national dress.<sup>4</sup> Mixed parties failed to bridge this social gap. Again, this is an idea which Forster took from Blunt. The ill treatment included even the highly educated natives, who were denied access to any influential posts in the Administration.<sup>5</sup> Blunt contended that the English officials, despite their technical efficiency, lacked the qualifications which would make them respectable in the eyes of the Easterners, such as honesty, courage, altruism, simplicity, goodwill and, above all, a solid basis of religious faith to inculcate such virtues.<sup>6</sup> They usually came from relatively low social classes in England; power intoxicated them once they were installed in positions which enabled them to enjoy a standard of living higher than anything they could have attained had they remained at home.<sup>7</sup> This criticism foreshadows - and may well have influenced - the treatment of the same subject in

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1. India Under Ripon, pp. 39, 95, 121, 171, 231, 276-7.
  2. Ibid., pp. 261-3.
  3. Ibid., p. 44.
  4. Ibid., p. 99.
  5. Ibid., pp. 314-15.
  6. Ibid., p. 269.
  7. Ibid., pp. 74, 248.

Edward Thompson's An Indian Day (1927) and George Orwell's Burmese Days (1934). Their analyses of the relationship between the ruled and their alien rulers echo in fiction what Blunt wrote in 1909. Blunt's understanding of the feelings and emotions of the Muslims in India was deeper and more accurate than Kipling's. Kipling understood the feelings and emotions of the simple British conscripts in remote outposts.

Blunt was shocked by the abject poverty of the Indian peasants, whose conditions reminded him of the Egyptian fellahin; and he accused the Anglo-Indian officials of ruling the whole sub-continent to further their own interests rather than those of the indigenous population. When he was in Simla in 1879, he had observed:

There is just the same heavy taxation, government by foreign officials, and waste of money one sees in Turkey, only, let us hope the officials are fools instead of knaves ... I don't see much difference between making the starving Hindoos pay for a Cathedral at Calcutta and taxing the Bulgarians for a palace on the Bosphorus.<sup>1</sup>

Another letter to his friend, Harry Brand, reflects the same sense of shock at the first glimpse of India under the rule of another friend of Blunt's, Lord Lytton:

The natives, as they call them, are a nation of slaves, frightened, unhappy and terribly thin... [They] will have, sooner or later, to resort to cannibalism, for there will be nothing but each other left to eat. I do not clearly understand why we English take their money from these starving Hindoos to make railroads for them, which they don't want, and turnpike roads and jails and lunatic asylums and memorial buildings ... and why we insist upon their feeding out of their wretched handfulls (sic) of rice immense armies of policemen, magistrates and engineers ... and they want their rice very badly ...<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ideas About India, pp. xv-xvi; cf: Secret History, p. 62.
  2. Ideas About India, pp. xvi-xvii. cf: Secret History, pp. 62-3.

The economic system as a whole came under severe criticism. Blunt found that the laws of forestry and the salt tax oppressed the Hindu "ryot" (peasant) under an "Egyptian bondage", while a great deal of expenditure was squandered on the civil and military establishment.<sup>1</sup> The one-sided application of the principle of free-trade, he complained, has led to the destruction of India's small local industries. He favoured the abolition of the entire Indian Civil Service, whose officials resisted any sort of reform which threatened their selfish monopoly of power.<sup>2</sup> He felt that these Bureaucrats were a barrier preventing truth from filtering through to the ministers, who were, in turn, content in their ivory towers, depending for information on the reports of these corrupt, arrogant administrators. The Central Government in London, thus kept in the dark, was bound to make mistakes that would further alienate the oppressed people of the British colonies.<sup>3</sup> Blunt suggested that notable natives who were closely in touch with the population and knew the local conditions should occupy high government positions and have a say in policy-making. Each province should manage its own internal affairs through local councils elected by the people, with some legislative and financial authority. These councils would be a stage leading to larger Parliaments for the regions.<sup>4</sup> Blunt had a firm belief that liberal institutions could work and flourish in the East as in the West. He expounded his ideas in a speech in the Indian National

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1. Ideas About India, pp. 18-22, 28-31, 169. India Under Ripon, pp. 6-7.
  2. Ideas About India, p. 94.
  3. Ibid., 9-10, 12, 51-3. India Under Ripon, pp. 33, 47.
  4. Ideas About India, pp. 69, 157, 160, 162-5.

Conference in Calcutta, dismissing the myth that the Eastern nations cannot rule themselves. He said that the Greeks, when they started to learn to rule themselves were "a conglomeration of robber chieftains, piratical seafarers and an absolutely uneducated peasant population."<sup>1</sup>

Despite all his criticisms, Blunt's assessment of the British rule in India is neither extreme nor totally negative. He recognizes the positive aspects which were recorded by J.R. Seeley in The Expansion of England (1883).<sup>2</sup> He finds that this rule, for example, has put an end to the state of chaos, sectarian feuds, court conspiracies of poison and murder, the burning of widows ... etc. An atmosphere of stability, security and relative freedom has led to the invigoration of intellectual life and a better standard of morality. Child marriage became unacceptable. The unquestionable power and excesses of the rich princes were curtailed. The new generation began to feel that freedom of expression was a natural human right. The urban people were writing books, founding newspapers, thinking, reasoning and arguing <sup>u</sup> courageously. Blunt praises these achievements; but he puts in the other side of the scale the great losses which India suffered under the British rule. He asserts that no system, however enlightened, can be good if imposed by a foreign power, because it cannot understand the real needs of the people, and because its cost is too high. These ideas were endorsed by G.P. Gooch, who wrote that the best Government was the one

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1. India Under Ripon, p. 116. Blunt was applauded when he said: "All nations are fit for self-government, and a few more so than the Indians". He saw this Conference as the first session of the Indian Parliament. His concluding words "May it be memorable in history", proved prophetic. It became memorable as precursor of the Indian National Congress.
  2. J.R. Seeley, The Expansion of England (1883, Reptd. 1909), p. 305.



which teaches the people how to rule themselves and manage their own affairs, and that only such tendencies of liberal reform can peacefully disperse the dangerous clouds of tension and racial hatred.<sup>1</sup> However, Gooch's praise of India's British administrators, as men of the highest "character and ability", is a sweeping generalization. According to Blunt, only Lord Ripon enjoyed such qualities; but Ripon's attempts to introduce reforms were subtly thwarted by these wily officials, who have "emasculated" the Ilbert Bill. General Gordon, for example, could not put up with their devious methods, and resigned his post as Ripon's Secretary in 1880, because "There was no one who cared to look forward and have a policy, only to let things drift".<sup>2</sup> Blunt rightly observed:

Where the mass of the population is prosperous, no growth of knowledge need be feared. But it is at the point where education and starvation meet that the flame breaks forth. This is a truism. Yet there are few who recognise how absolutely true it is in India.<sup>3</sup>

He felt that such a danger was imminent. His passionate nature made him blame the weak-hearted Muslims for their apathy and indifference, for sitting content "thanking Providence for the favours which were denied them".<sup>4</sup> He called upon them to forget their differences with the Hindoos and to wage a vigorous campaign to "coerce the English people into giving them their rights", asserting that "India needed martyrs" and that "reforms were only granted to the importunate".<sup>5</sup> He believed that forcing England to introduce reforms was a better alternative than a bloody explosion; and he felt it his duty to

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1. G.P. Gooch, "Imperialism" in The Heart of Empire, ed. C.F.G. Masterman (1901; Reprtd. Brighton, 1973), pp. 350-56.
  2. Gordon, pp. 133-134, 509-511. cf: Secret History, p. 77.
  3. Ideas About India, p. 11.
  4. India Under Ripon, p. 104.
  5. Ibid., pp. 122, 94.

bring these facts to the attention of his countrymen as a timely warning against the lurking ghost of revolutionary eruption.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he was convinced that the special relationship between Britain and India should be maintained for the benefit of the Indian people in the fields of education and administration.

One of the most important social problems which caught Blunt's attention was the Muslims' negligence of education. He dwelt on this problem extensively in a series of lectures, the most important of which was that delivered at Lucknow on January 18, 1884.<sup>2</sup> It is very interesting to note that this religious sceptic gave the subject of religious education priority over all the secular and scientific subjects or worldly "European" disciplines. He believed that the Islamic regeneration, which had failed on the Nile, might prosper at the hands of the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent. He thus waged a vigorous campaign for the establishment of a religious university in Hyderabad under the auspices of the rich Nizam, similar to the Egyptian University of Al-Azhar. This university would be independent, with its own regulations, and financially self-supporting so as not to fall under any official influence.<sup>3</sup> He hoped that such an institution would not only check the evils of communal life among the Muslims by stopping the social and religious decline, but could also act as the "fountainhead of orthodox opinion" and, in the long run, enable India to lead a movement of intellectual rejuvenation and cultural revival in the Islamic world at large.<sup>4</sup> He was so enthusiastic in propagating these ideas that he offered, in another

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1. Ibid., pp. 95, 121, 133. Ideas About India, pp. 42-44, 71-72, 148.
  2. Ideas About India, p. 189.
  3. India Under Ripon, pp. 98, 117, 133-4, 179.
  4. Ibid., pp. 98-101, 329.

general meeting in Calcutta, to finance a professorship for the subject of religious history, as a donation to the proposed university, and appealed to the audience to take up the project and give it the support it deserved. But they were startled; many of them panicked, "especially an old fellow, with his feet tucked up on his chair, who is said to be the possessor of millions."<sup>1</sup> This negative response killed the positive idea which was "imagined, planned, preached and accepted [in theory only] ... in six weeks".<sup>2</sup> Nor was this the only disappointment to Blunt during his travels in India. The hostility of British officialdom continued to harass him in various ways. The new viceroy, Lord Ripon, was warned against Blunt's "unpatriotic" attitudes, and "disruptive" influence; and so, contrary to the days of Lord Lytton (Viceroy from 1876 to 1880), Blunt was no longer travelling as a "viceregal guest ... under official patronage".<sup>3</sup> He also received a letter from Cromer telling him that he was persona non grata in Egypt, according to an official resolution taken by Sherif's government. He was travelling in India "with a decree of exile from Egypt in my pocket, no more nor less than if I was a proclaimed rebel".<sup>4</sup> Lord Cromer, of course, "did not object to any despotism" against such a rebel.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, the Anglo-Indian press began to spread sinister rumours that this same rebel was a "spy" for the Government of India among the Muslims.<sup>6</sup> However, the "Patna incident" illustrates the extent to which the official circles were ready to go in order to defame Blunt and discredit him in the eyes of his Muslim friends, to whom he had brought letters of introduction from one of the greatest leaders of reform, Jamaluddin el-Afghani.

1. Ibid., p. 128.

2. Ibid., p. 198.

3. Ibid., pp. 7, 143.

4. Ibid., p. 184.

5. The Marquess of Zetland, Lord Cromer (1932), p. 79.

6. Ideas About India, pp. xx-xxi. India Under Ripon, pp. 149, 153.



Some thirty Muslims had come to see Blunt off at the railway station of Patna on January 8, 1884, headed by a venerable old man, Nawab Villayet Ali Khan. Suddenly a white man (who turned out to be Brigadier-Surgeon B.C. Kerr, Chief Medical Officer of the Punjab) began to insult them, shouting frantically and brandishing his cane to make them "clear off". Blunt jumped from his compartment and faced Kerr, demanding an explanation to such behaviour. Kerr continued to shout, claiming that these people were in his way. They were not. Blunt defended his friends, calling Kerr a "blackguard"; and had him arrested for his arrogance.<sup>1</sup> The incident created a sensation; it was the first time an Englishman stood by the wronged natives against one of his own countrymen. Blunt refused to let the case drop, until a "tardy, lame" apology was received several months later.<sup>2</sup> The case was brought to the attention of Ripon himself; and there are many letters addressed from both Blunt and his friends to Ripon, complaining against many such insults and abuses. Blunt wrote:

And I venture to warn your Lordship from a considerable knowledge of their feelings, that the resentment [this incident] causes pervades all classes of the native community with a bitterness which if allowed to continue will one day show itself in retributive action.<sup>3</sup>

The Civil and Military Gazette saw in this yet another occasion to attack Blunt. Its comments were a mixture of patronizing sarcasm and strange prejudice, twisting facts in a sinister way; and, because these comments reflect a typical, unjust view of Blunt by most

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1. India Under Ripon, pp. 140-3, 264-6.
  2. Ibid., p. 266.
  3. The Ripon Papers: B.M. Add, MSS. (No. 43634).

of his contemporaries, they deserve to be quoted at length:

It is the fate of Great Souls ever to be misunderstood by their contemporaries. Mr. Wilfrid Blunt, in the course of his wanderings after "Mahomedan opinion" recently visited Patna - and Patna would have none of him. ... the inhabitants of Patna set him down as a paid spy of the Government; employed to feel the pulse of Islam, and report thereon to his masters ... "Proteus", the sonneteer, sometimes saw more clearly than Wilfrid Blunt, the politician ... Wilfrid Blunt, as an authority on Arab horses and the more complex emotions of the human mind, is charming. As a political agitator, the Patna episode shows us that he is liable to be misunderstood.<sup>1</sup>

This sort of cheap innuendo was repeated by other Anglo-Indian papers, such as the Statesman and the Pioneer. The attacks of the latter (edited by Auckland Colvin) were so libellous that Blunt forced the sub-editor to apologise. That Blunt was not "misunderstood" by the Indians, but by the Anglo-Indian press, was proved forty years later, when Blunt's courage in exposing all forms of injustice was still remembered, E.M. Forster testified, with great affection in the bazaars of Patna.<sup>2</sup> This vindicates Blunt's low opinion of the Anglo-Indian officials, whose arrogance made them blind to the facts, unable to realize anything "until the fire breaks out".<sup>3</sup> At the time, the attacks of these papers, far from tarnishing Blunt's name, acted as free, inadvertent advertisement for his travels, and brought crowds of "natives" to see him wherever he went.

It is only now, in retrospect, that Blunt's motives can be appreciated as having been sincerely and consistently patriotic in the noblest, magnanimous sense of the word. He may have been an enfant terrible but he was not the evil, plotting agent provocateur portrayed by his political detractors. He wanted to serve England

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1. The Civil and Military Gazette of Thursday, January 17, 1884, p. 1.
  2. E.M. Forster, Abinger Harvest (1936; Penguin 1974), p. 302.
  3. India Under Ripon, p. 133.

by showing her how to do justice in the East in order to win friends and generate goodwill in the hearts of men. He saw in the meeting of East and West great potential good for both; and believed that the literature, art, science and technical expertise of developed Europe were indispensable for the prospects of progress in the underdeveloped, traditional East. These ideas seem to anticipate the declared principles of today's British Commonwealth. Blunt objected to the introduction of the evils of European civilization, such as "firearms, drink and syphilis" and the suppression of independence and national dignity of the Eastern nations under any pretext.<sup>1</sup>

While Blunt was still in India, another Eastern problem was rapidly developing into a major crisis which claimed his attention: the Revolt of the Mahdi in the Sudan, which led to the tragic death of General Gordon. Blunt sent Gordon an urgent appeal, warning him not to go to Khartoum, since he, too, was a supporter of freedom in the East. Blunt knew Gordon very well, and knew that his mission to evacuate the country could involve him in bloodshed; so, he wrote to him:

Also consider what your death will mean: the certainty of a cry for vengeance in England and an excuse with those who ask no better than a war of conquest.<sup>2</sup>

These words proved to be a terrible prophecy. Gordon was killed exactly one year after they were written. Blunt wrote a detailed study entitled Gordon at Khartoum (1911), adding another volume to his Secret History Series. His reconstruction of this episode is brilliant and shows a deep understanding of the eccentric aspects of Gordon's

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1. Ibid., p. 17; The Land War in Ireland, p. 217; Gordon, p. 98.
  2. India Under Ripon, pp. 168-9. Gordon, p. 534.

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character, his shifts of mood and his religious zeal and visionary dreams. Gordon, as a "bundle of contradictions", was capable of any insubordination because he had little regard for his superiors, and even less for his own life. Yet he was appointed for this task by the same group of Gladstone's ministers who had imposed the military intervention in Egypt. They were the expansionist imperialists: Dilke, Granville, Northbrook and Hartington. Blunt's analysis of "the cloudy atmosphere of muddle and intrigue"<sup>1</sup> which surrounded this episode is not only correct and plausible, but gives a theory which is very difficult to refute. Gordon was the victim of his own illusions as much as the plotting of the four leaders of the Whig faction in the Liberal Party. Gordon believed that God had chosen him for this mission, and Blunt does not doubt his sincerity:

Yet, what a self delusion! What a blindness! He did not perceive that those who were sending him on this last great adventure of his life were no angels of the Lord, but four wily statesmen doing the work mainly of the Stock Exchange and interested far more in perpetuating England's robber hold on Egypt than in any humanitarian scheme which might be imagined for the Soudan - he himself a useful pawn in their not very noble game, and some of them ready enough already to sacrifice and betray him.<sup>2</sup>

Having succeeded in using the pressure of the press and the misguided public zeal in favour of military intervention in Egypt, the plotters, led by Hartington, resorted to the same method of sensational statements in the Pall Mall Gazette, the chief paper read by Gladstone. The editor, William Stead, was secretly prompted by the Whigs to thrust Gordon into the glare of publicity and suggest him as the "miracle man".<sup>3</sup> At the time, Gordon was hired by King Leopold to go

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1. H.E. Wortham; Gordon, an Intimate Portrait (1933) p. 277.
  2. Gordon, p. 185.
  3. Ibid., pp. 168-171.

to the Congo; but had to abandon this when the Whigs succeeded in extracting Gladstone's approval to dispatch him to Khartoum. Gordon's instructions were so vague and contradictory that they were capable of the widest possible interpretations. Blunt describes them as "a model of how to conceal an intention".<sup>1</sup> Hartington and his colleagues know in advance that Gordon was more than likely to opt for a military confrontation; and that was what they really wanted, because the occupation of the Soudan would give them pretext to perpetuate the British occupation of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, once in Khartoum, Gordon convinced himself that Providence had chosen him to fulfil the will of the Almighty, i.e. to destroy the Mahdi militarily.<sup>3</sup> He thought that it would be very easy to do so with a small expeditionary force, and decided to stay put even when Khartoum was completely surrounded. This angered Gladstone, who refused to send such an expedition, and attacked Gordon for claiming "the hero's privilege by turning upside down and inside out every idea and intention with which he had left England, and for which he had obtained our approval."<sup>4</sup> A popular outcry against Gladstone was covertly instigated in the press by Lord Hartington, while Blunt led a counter campaign calling for non-intervention and for the recall of both Gordon and Wolesley.<sup>5</sup> He brought his friend, Mohammed Abdu, from Paris to London, and introduced him to a number of politicians at the House of Commons, in an attempt to give weight to his arguments against

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1. Ibid., p. 182.

2. Ibid., pp. 176-7.

3. Ibid., pp. 108-112, 176, 177.

4. P. Guedalla, The Queen and Mr. Gladstone, 2 Vols. (1933), II, pp. 52-53.

5. Gordon, pp. 369, 370, 374, 382, 408, 420, 431.



sending any troops to the Soudan. He wrote several letters to Downing Street, and several others to the Times.<sup>1</sup> He contacted Jamaluddin el-Afghani, who was trusted by the Mahdists. Then he offered to mediate, to go to the Soudan, preceded by one of his Oriental friends and equipped with a letter from Jamaluddin, in order to get Gordon out safely. Blunt stipulated that he should go as an official envoy of the British Government, that any agreement resulting from this mission should become binding to Britain, that he and/or his friends should be allowed to land in Egypt without the risk of being waylaid by the Khedive's men, that all military action should stop during the period of negotiation, and, finally, that no campaign of "relief" or "revenge" should be sent if he were to be captured or killed.<sup>2</sup> This project, which could have succeeded, was rejected; and Blunt was told not to send any more letters to Downing Street or the Foreign Office concerning Egypt or the Soudan.<sup>3</sup> He failed in his last desperate attempt to see Gladstone in the latter's house at Hawarden, Chester, with a "Peace Deputation" on Christmas Eve, 1884. These attempts made General Wolseley describe Blunt as "that pestilential combination between a fool and a madman".<sup>4</sup> In fact, the British Government had no faith in Blunt and his Oriental friends in these matters, since his attitude was contrary to the intentions of Hartington, who wrote to Gladstone that it was inadvisable to send "a man of whom we know nothing [Jamaluddin el-Afghani]" with a safe conduct, perhaps to carry information and messages of encouragement to the Mahdi.<sup>5</sup>

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1. "The Situation in the Soudan", The Times of April 10, 1884; "Mr. Blunt and the Soudan", The Times of December 28, 1884; Gordon, pp. 583-4, 596, 599-600, 601-2.
  2. Gordon, pp. 444-45, 224, 228, 542-6.
  3. Ibid., pp. 436, 597-8, 585, 601, 603.
  4. Ibid., pp. 356-7, cf: Adrian Preston (ed.) In Relief of Gordon: Wolseley's Campaign Journal (1967), p. 120.
  5. Bernard Holland, The Life of Spencer Compton, Eighth Duke of Devonshire, 2 Vols. (1911), II, p. 21.

When Gladstone finally agreed to send a relief column in January 1885, it was already too late; and the British troops were halted, after a bloody battle with the forces of the Mahdi, at Abu Klea. Blunt burst out:

These English soldiers are mere murderers ... I would rather see them all at perdition than that a single Arab more should die. What are they? A mongrel scum of thieves ... commanded by young fellows whose ideal is the green room of the Gaiety — without beliefs, without traditions, without other principle of action than just to get their promotion and have a little fun. On the other side men with the memory of a thousand years of freedom ... worshipping God and serving him in arms like the heroes of the ancient world they are. It is over the death of these that we rejoice ... Gladstone! Great God, is there no vengeance for this pitiful man of blood, who has not even the courage to be ... a man of iron? What is he that he should have cost the world a single life? A pedant, a babbler, an impotent old fool.<sup>1</sup>

These feelings were shared by William Morris, who called Gladstone "the new Attila, the new Genghis Khan, the modern scourge of God". However, the popular outcry soon gave the Grand Old Man another name: M.O.G. (Murderer of Gordon).

Of all Lytton Strachey's sources for his portrait of General Gordon in Eminent Victorians (1918; 1922), Blunt's book is the one most extensively used, to the degree that Strachey sometimes only just stops short of direct plagiarism. This becomes evident when we compare, for example, Blunt's description of Gordon's feelings as he accepted the mission (p. 184) to Strachey's account of the same in Eminent Victorians (1922, p. 256), or Gordon's question to Dr. Temple, Bishop of Exeter, about allowing the Sudanese converts to keep three wives and the Bishop's answer that it would be uncanonical (Gordon, p. 243; Eminent Victorians, p. 246). Blunt's account of Gordon's resignation as Secretary to Ripon (pp. 134, 537-8)

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1. Gordon, pp. 362-3, cf: May Morris, William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist, 2 Vols. (Oxford, 1936), II, p. 196.

was the only published version when Strachey wrote his book, in which this issue is mentioned (p. 230). Strachey also adopts Blunt's theory of the plot by the Whig ministers to appoint Gordon.<sup>1</sup> As for Gordon's "intemperate letter" to Lord Lyons, which stamped the general as "a madman", Strachey's account of it (pp. 229-30) is borrowed directly from Blunt's Secret History (pp. 70-1). Blunt's influence can also be discerned in Strachey's portraits of other characters such as Hartington, Cromer and, to a lesser extent, Gladstone. Yet, Blunt's books achieved nothing like the popularity of Strachey's; and they continue to be underestimated and neglected till today. It was only after the War of 1914-1918 that one of Blunt's books (My Diaries) became a big success in his lifetime, when people suddenly realized how sincere he was in his bold criticism of the hypocrisies of his age.

Blunt was not daunted by his failure in the East; he continued, like a mediaeval knight-errant, to look for new causes to adopt and new injustices to resist. From the spring of 1886 to the winter of 1887 he became deeply involved in the Irish Question, which had many parallels with the Eastern causes, particularly in the fields of political freedom and land reform. His action in this field resulted in another volume, The Land War in Ireland (1912). Thus the "Home-Ruler in the East" became "a Nationalist for all countries". In his mind, the case of the overtaxed Egyptian peasants was associated with that of the Irish tenants; both were victims of "the same unscrupulous gang of financiers, property holders, mortgage companies and speculators".<sup>2</sup> He described the Irish countryside in a series of

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1. Gordon, p. 170. India Under Ripon, p. 7.  
2. The Land War, p. 22.

touching images of human tragedy, declaring that "No one can understand what the Irish land question is till he has seen an eviction".<sup>1</sup> He deplored the violence which accompanied the eviction scenes, carried out on behalf of the landlords, "the petted and privileged class which lived by the sweat of other men's brows".<sup>2</sup> The deserted villages, the once-prosperous farms left to become grasslands, and the general decline and poverty, depressed him:

It is absurd to argue that the landlord, who destroys a hundred families by evicting them, is guiltless because his act is legal, and that the peasant who resists or retaliates is a murderer because his blows are illegal. There must be a principle of justice underlying the law, or the law itself is a crime.<sup>3</sup> (Blunt's stresses).

Blunt, who considered himself at this stage of his life "as much Mohammedan as a Christian", saw in the Irish Nationalists "a standing miracle of God's grace ... an almost complete army of virtuous and pious men, including three or four real saints".<sup>4</sup> By contrast, he described the English as "too rich and strong and prosperous to have any cause left us worth dying for".<sup>5</sup>

Blunt visited Ireland five times, established very cordial relationships with most of the clergy and Nationalist leaders, including the Bishops of Dublin and Clonfert, Davitt, Dillon, O'Brien, Parnell and, later, Redmond and O'Connor. He attended many meetings and gave a series of speeches in defence of Home Rule at Hyde Park, the Oxford and Cambridge Unions and in Ireland itself. He was elected member of Davitt's Land League, became a founding member of an Irish paper called The Star and of the Home Rule Union.<sup>6</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 73.

2. Ibid., p. 115.

3. Ibid., p. 103.

4. Ibid., p. 447.

5. Ibid., p. 449.

6. Ibid., p. 28, 35, 50, 174, 276, 301-302.

Nocturnal secret meetings to commemorate the anniversary of the Plan of Campaign appealed to his love of excitement and adventure. One such meeting he attended at Woodford, surrounded with peasant torch-bearers, lasted from midnight till after 3.a.m.<sup>1</sup> This "flare of triumph" whetted his appetite for more. He wanted to encourage the poor evicted tenants to resist the cruelties of Lord Clanricarde, "an absentee and extremist in his assertion of landlord rights".<sup>2</sup> Since Woodford was full of violence and tension, the meeting was proclaimed prohibited; but Blunt defied the authorities and was arrested in a noisy scene of quarrels with the police and violent disorder. Blunt received a two-months sentence, becoming the first Englishman to go to prison for the sake of Irish Home Rule. When he was forced to give up his overcoat in prison, his mischievous self-dramatization instinct reacted in a way that created a big sensation in the press. He was sentenced according to the newly enacted Crimes Act; and when the news of the arrest of William O'Brien reached him, he decided to hit Balfour below the belt. Balfour was Chief Secretary for Ireland. Blunt remembered that Balfour had told him, in a private talk while they were both guests at the Wyndham country-house, that the Irish Nationalists would be harshly dealt with and maltreated in prison till some of them, particularly John Dillon, died in jail.<sup>3</sup> This conversation Blunt made public in a written complaint to the Visiting Justices. He considered his deprivation of his coat as the beginning of Balfour's threatened brutality. Balfour denied the accusation. The Saturday Review attacked Blunt as "an atrocious slanderer".<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 339. Cf: M. MacDonagh, The Life of William O'Brien, the Irish Nationalist (1928), pp. 86-7.
  2. The Land War, p. 386.
  3. Ibid., pp. 303-304.
  4. "Mr. Blunt and Others", The Saturday Review, vol. 65 (January 21, 1888), p. 66. Cf: B.E.C. Dugdale, The Life of Arthur James Balfour, 2 Vols. (1936), I, p. 149.

Judge Henn accused him of "notoriety" and of "allowing his judgement to give way to his political enthusiasm".<sup>1</sup> The social elite, whose cardinal rule was "thou shalt not be found out", were indignant, not over the nature of the scandal, but because Blunt broke one of their sacred canons by divulging a private talk which, according to their norms, should have been kept confidential.<sup>2</sup> Even Blunt's cousin, George Wyndham, who was Balfour's secretary, thought that Blunt was deranged.<sup>3</sup> When he came out of Galway Gaol in March, 1888, he found himself socially ostracized because of this breach of "the gentleman's code". Only Gladstone found Blunt justified and wanted to make political capital of this episode.<sup>4</sup> Blunt's imprisonment lost him the last chance to enter Parliament, and put a stop to further involvement in English and Irish politics by him.

Lord Salisbury, then Prime minister, had warned Blunt that any meddling with Egyptian affairs could exclude him of that country again. From 1887 to 1905, he used to spend the winter in Egypt. He maintained his silence, as he found Egypt "prostrate and dumb", while Cromer exercised unquestioned power, deliberately and conveniently ignoring the official British pledge, given by Lord Dufferin, to create a "constitutional government" and "withdraw the British troops". Blunt's silence was not indifference. With the death of Khedive Tewfik and the accession of his son, Abbas Hilmi, in 1892, this artificial truce imposed on Blunt came to an end. The young Khedive was ambitious

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1. The Land War, p. 366.

2. Neville Lytton, The English Country Gentleman (1925), p. 211; Shane Leslie, Men Were Different (1937), p. 236.

3. J.W. Mackail and Guy Wyndham, The Life and Letters of George Wyndham, 2 Vols. (1925), I, pp. 211-12, 216-17.

4. The Land War, pp. 305, 413.

and anxious to assert his power. The first three years of his reign were full of friction with Cromer, who was technically no more than a Consul, but had become virtually the real ruler of Egypt. He considered the Egyptians little more than children to be taken care of, without even conceding that children grow up. The collision with Abbas made Cromer assert his "authority" with a heavy-handed style of arrogant provocation and swaggering autocracy. It is difficult to find a more complete antithesis to Cromer and his policies than Blunt. Some politicians had nothing but total admiration for Cromer and his officials, who were described by A. Milner as "the only effective Arabists Egypt has ever known".<sup>1</sup> R. Storrs sees Cromer as the greatest Proconsul in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Blunt, on the other hand, while admitting Cromer's administrative and financial abilities, sees him as an example of the arrogant, crafty bureaucrat who knows how to gloss over any inconvenient facts, who gives the deceptive impression of frankness by revealing a small blunder in order to cover up a larger, more damaging one. His yearly reports, Blunt asserts, were "models of insincerity" written "with a view to publicity", containing "praise of his subordinates, to praise, without seeming it, himself".

Reading them, they always remind me of those first chapters of the Book of Genesis, in which at the end of each day of Creation "The Lord saw all the work that he [sic] had done, and found it very good".<sup>3</sup>

In a series of articles, letters and pamphlets, Blunt continued to criticize Cromer and the British administration and to agitate for

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1. A. Milner, England in Egypt (1892), p. 21
  2. R. Storrs, Orientalisms (1939), p. 48.
  3. Gordon, pp. 60-61.

the evacuation of both Egypt and the Soudan for more than twenty years after 1892. He believed that it was his duty to publicize the injustices of imperialism, which were conveniently ignored in the Press. Such cover-up processes made the press "an engine for the concealment of historic truth, the most complete ever invented".<sup>1</sup> He felt, with varying degrees of certainty, that Britain's rule in the East could be improved, and that "the people at home would insist on its being improved if they only knew".<sup>2</sup> He saw most of Cromer's measures as "false money" presented as "reforms".<sup>3</sup> He attacked Cromer's negligence of education - a drawback which was also emphasized by Lord Lloyd in his Egypt Since Cromer.<sup>4</sup> He attacked Cromer's autocratic power, which was intolerant to any form of opposition, setting a precedent in Egypt as a "Veiled Protectorate", using a gang of reactionary Turkish Pashas as docile tools, with huge salaries and nothing much to do, since real power lay in the hands of British or "Anglicised" officials brought up in "the narrow school of dictatorial arrogance".<sup>5</sup> Blunt also attacked the moral degradation in Egypt:

Drink, prostitution and usury, the three gifts of European civilization to the "less enlightened" races of mankind were being forced upon the old-fashioned morality of the East, under the sanction of law in the interest of European trade.<sup>6</sup>

Blunt's attacks on Cromer's policies in Egypt reached a new climax in

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1. My Diaries, p. 128.
  2. Secret History, p. 63.
  3. W.S. Blunt, "Lord Cromer and the Khedive", NC, Vol. 33 (April, 1893), pp. 571-85 (p. 578).
  4. *Ibid.*, cf: Lord Lloyd, Egypt Since Cromer, 2 Vols. (1933), I, pp. 162-3.
  5. W.S. Blunt, "The Khedive and Lord Cromer", NC, Vol. 35 (February, 1894), pp. 177-188 (p. 182); My Diaries, pp. 62, 84, 138, 347; W.S. Blunt, "A New Regime in Egypt", The Manchester Guardian, April 23, 1907.
  6. W.S. Blunt, "The Release of Arabi", NC, 32(September, 1892), pp. 370-379 (pp. 372-3).



the summer of 1906, after the notorious Denshawai Case, in which four Egyptian villagers were hanged, four sentenced to penal servitude for life, three to fifteen years' imprisonment, six to seven years, three to one year with fifty lashes and five to fifty lashes. They had clashed with a hunting party of British Officers who began to shoot the tame pigeons of the village. An officer who ran to get support lost his way and died of sun stroke; but these villagers were found guilty of murder in cold blood with pre-meditation, in a special court formed at the orders of the British military authorities. The harsh sentences led to a great popular uproar in both countries. Embarrassing questions were raised in Parliament. John Dillon, for example, called Cromer's rule "the most ... unqualified despotism the world has ever seen".<sup>1</sup> Blunt wrote an explosive pamphlet, entitled: Atrocities of Justice Under British Rule in Egypt, in which he accused Cromer of interfering in the independence of law procedure to ensure the conviction of the Egyptians in a case which had political dimensions stemming from its concern with the British armed forces.<sup>2</sup> He described the punishments as "Congo atrocities", and considered the executions as murder contrived in the name of the law to terrorize the Egyptians. Even Lord Cromer, who at first defended "the promptitude and severity of the punishments", had to admit, some nine years later, that they were "unduly severe".<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Blunt received "several threatening letters from English jingos menacing me with death if there should be a rising at Cairo".<sup>4</sup> He was attacked in other letters to the Times.

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1. Hansard, Fourth Series, Vol. 160, July 5, 1906, p. 310.
  2. W.S. Blunt, Atrocities of Justice under British Rule in Egypt (1906), pp. 7-8, 10, 17, 27.
  3. "Memorandum by the Earl of Cromer" Egypt, No. 3 (1906), No. 15, July 12, 1906; Lord Cromer, Abbas II (1915), p. x.
  4. My Diaries, p. 569.

His pamphlet was described as "reprehensible and ... abominable", an attempt to defame the British Administration.<sup>1</sup> Blunt was accused of looking for material to write a sequel to The Wind and the Whirlwind.<sup>2</sup> When his Secret History appeared, the Times again accused him of suffering from "acute megalomania".<sup>3</sup> The Times refused to publish his replies to these attacks, which were encouraged by Moberly Bell, one of his old adversaries in Egypt. Blunt severed his relations with the paper and published his replies in another pamphlet entitled Mr. Blunt and the Times (1907). Hoping that Denshawai would "break up the legend of Cromer's paternal rule", he was shocked at the news that Cromer was given the "Order of Merit", and bitterly commented that the ageing Consul should be "raised to the dignity of Duke of Denshawai".<sup>4</sup> The newly awakened Egyptian Nationalism utilized this case to agitate for the evacuation of the country. Blunt became the supporter and friend of a new generation of nationalists, led by Mustapha Kamel. Shortly after Denshawai, Cromer retired. Blunt felt so happy at the news that he described himself as "a huntsman at the end of his day's sport with Cromer's brush in my pocket, and the mask of that ancient red fox dangling from my saddle".<sup>5</sup>

But his eyes remained fixed on Cromer's successors, Eldon Gorst and, later, Kitchener, who began to rule with heavy-handed suppression during a turbulent period of political and sectarian troubles. Blunt

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1. "The Situation in Egypt", The Times, September 13, 1906.
  2. "Mr. Wilfrid Blunt and Egypt", The Times, September 20, 1906.
  3. "The English Occupation of Egypt", The Times, October 19, 1907.
  4. My Diaries, pp. 561, 582.
  5. Ibid., p. 581.

issued yet another pamphlet entitled The Fiasco in Egypt, in which he attacked the British policy of "divide to rule", and of introducing "draconian press laws" to strangle the opposition".<sup>1</sup> As a gesture of appreciation, the Egyptian National Congress, held in Paris in September 1910, elected Blunt as its honorary President. Blunt, who was 70, was unable to attend, but he sent the Congress a letter of support, written in French. His continued interest in the Egyptian Question made him speculate and use his imagination to find possible solutions. He discussed the idea of internationalizing the Canal, and neutralizing Egypt under joint guarantees from the Powers. He rejected the idea, as it would be beneficial only to the greedy speculators of the European Stock Exchanges; Egypt would be exchanging one wolf for a whole pack of wolves.<sup>2</sup> Other measures were discussed in his later political articles, especially those published in the Manchester Guardian in April 1907 and August 1908. His main concern was the necessity of establishing a legislative body with real power and true Egyptian institutions leading to a stable democracy, instead of deliberately neglecting this goal, letting things "drift" indefinitely, and continuing to believe that the Egyptians will remain almost forever inferior children incapable of self-government, totally dependent on perpetual British occupation. He called for a binding pledge to withdraw at a fixed date.<sup>3</sup>

His voice, however, continued to fall on deaf ears for three long decades. In despair, he began to think that Egypt's only road

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1. Ibid., pp. 729, 773; cf: W.S. Blunt, The Fiasco in Egypt (1910), pp. 2-4.
  2. My Diaries, pp. 347, 213, 215.
  3. W.S. Blunt "A New Regime in Egypt", The Manchester Guardian, April 23, 1907; "The New Situation in Egypt", The Manchester Guardian August, 23, 24 and 25, 1908. See also Blunt's article on "The New Egyptian Nationalism", The Independent Review, Vol. II, (October, 1906), pp. 23-35.

to salvation was to go back to the Ottoman fold of Pan-Islamism, although he used to attack the incurable corruption of Ottoman rule throughout the declining Empire.<sup>1</sup> His hopes of reform at the hands of the Young Turks after the coup of 1908 proved short-lived. The new rulers proved more despotic than the old Abdul-Hamid. There can be no doubt of the sincerity of Blunt's motives or his deep feelings about the necessity of finding some solution for the Egyptian Question in particular, and the Eastern Question in general. He was hoping against hope that the Eastern peoples would unite against the tide of hungry European expansion; but "the cause of human dealing with weaker nationalities ... was a lost cause in the world".<sup>2</sup>

No foreigner had struggled for the freedom of Egypt with such single-mindedness and devotion as Blunt did. He persisted in this course for over thirty years, as if he were a son of Egypt, deeply rooted in her soil. His writings about it are frank documents, explaining every aspect of the problem to his countrymen. He directed his friends, such as Randolph Churchill, John Dillon, Hilaire Belloc and others to criticize the policies and question the motives of successive British Governments in the House of Commons.<sup>3</sup> He never let any opportunity pass without attempting to influence cabinet ministers in favour of Egypt. In 1910, he helped a young Russian journalist, Theodore Rothstein, to publish a book entitled Egypt's Ruin, wrote an introduction to the book, and sent copies of it to Asquith and John Morley, appealing to them to find a speedy solution to the problem.<sup>4</sup>

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1. My Diaries, pp. 718, 725, 787, 796.
  2. The Land War in Ireland, p. 143.
  3. My Diaries, pp. 637, 725, 727, 729, 751, 768.
  4. Ibid., p. 739.

He established an "Egyptian Committee", which issued a monthly magazine called Egypt from March 1911 to February 1913, in order to give the English public opinion "reliable facts about the near East, especially facts about Egypt".<sup>1</sup> The public opinion was inclined to glorify imperialism at a time when Blunt was attacking it passionately. Egypt was forbidden to circulate in Egypt because of its inflammatory tone against the occupation.<sup>2</sup> The ageing Blunt had to resign the presidency of the Egyptian Committee, and Egypt ceased to publish two months later.

Blunt was not destined to see the independence of Egypt for which he had fought so bitterly and with a keen sense of justice; but he was very happy to hear, towards the sunset of his life, the news of the revolution of 1919, which he considered as Egypt's first firm footsteps on the path of freedom. His writings now do not only sound like inspired prophecies reflecting greater foresight than Churchill's in the thirties, but they should also be revalued and considered as the result of the noble, patriotic feelings of a man more jealous for the good name of his country than most of the professional politicians of his day; and as such, these writings are more relevant and reliable than his critics would concede. Today's politicians can still learn a great deal from them.

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1. Ibid., pp. 743, 749, 760.
  2. Ibid., pp. 801, 802, 818, 819.
  3. Samuel C. Chew, "Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: An Intimate View The North American Review, 216 (May, 1923), pp. 664-675 (p. 665). See also Blunt's letter to the Times of December 22, 1919, entitled: "Our Position in Egypt".

## CHAPTER II : BLUNT'S POETRY

### (i) The Early Works

This chapter is a study of Blunt's poetical works, taken in chronological order, with the exception of Satan Absolved (1899), his translation of The Stealing of the Mare (1892) and the Moallakat (1903). It is also an attempt to see him in perspective against the background of his age, in order to assess his stature as a poet. Although his temperament belongs to the Romantic tradition in general, his poetry shows other affinities: Elizabethan as well as Pre-Raphaelite, neo-Classical as well as modern. His verse also reflects the independent character of a highly individual poet who experimented vigorously in various forms, especially the sonnet. This chapter will trace the critical reactions to such experiments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; his poetry will also be compared to the works of his contemporaries and predecessors. The bulk of his verse was published during the transitional period that witnessed the gradual decline of Victorian conventions and the rise of modern trends in poetry.

Blunt was preoccupied with a variety of interests and activities that relegated poetry to a comparatively unimportant position in the priorities of his busy life. Yet he was able to write a considerable quantity of verse at irregular intervals over a period of more than fifty years. These intervals can be roughly divided into three phases. The first runs from about 1860 to the early eighties. In this period he produced his first two volumes, Sonnets and Songs by Proteus (1875), and The Love Sonnets of Proteus (1881), in addition to his first long political poem, entitled The Wind and the Whirlwind (1883). The second, and most fertile phase, covers the period from 1889 till the end of the nineteenth century, when he published In Vinculis (1889),

A New Pilgrimage and Other Poems (1889), Esther, Love Lyrics and Nalatia's Resurrection (1892), The Celebrated Romance of the Stealing of the Mare ... (1892), Griselda, A Society Novel in Rhymed Verse (1893), and Satan Absolved, A Victorian Mystery (1899). This period also witnessed the publication of some of these poems in other editions. For example, in 1892, William Morris published the Kelmscott volume with the cumbersome title: The Love Lyrics and Songs of Proteus by Wilfrid Scawen Blunt with the Love-Sonnets of Proteus by the Same Author Now Reprinted in Their Full Text with Many Sonnets Omitted from the Earlier Editions. Another volume entitled Love Poems of W.S. Blunt, edited by F. Chapman, appeared in 1902. W.E. Henley and George Wyndham, Blunt's cousin, published a carefully bowdlerized selection entitled The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt (1898). Other selections appeared (with an introduction by Richard Le Gallienne) in the sixth volume of The Poets and the Poetry of the Century, edited by Alfred H. Miles (1891-97). The Kegan Paul edition of The Love Sonnets of Proteus (1881) was reprinted by Thomas B. Mosher (Portland, Maine 1904). Blunt's presence in America was furthered by the volume Esther: A Young Man's Tragedy; Together with the Love Sonnets of Proteus (Copeland and Day, Boston, 1895).

The third and final phase of Blunt's poetic career extends from 1903 until his death in 1922. During this period he published The Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia, Known also as the Moallakat (1903), Fand of the Fair Cheek: A Three-Act Tragedy in Rhymed Verse (1904), The Bride of the Nile: A Poetical Extravaganza in Three Acts of Rhymed Verse (1907), and finally, he made a complete Edition of his Poetical Works in two volumes (1914), including another drama (The Little Left Hand), two longer poems: "Quatrains of Life" and "The Wisdom of Merlyn",

in addition to a number of later sonnets and lyrics. Miscellaneous pieces were contributed to the Catholic monthly magazine Merry England, notably in 1892 and 1893; and when Lady Margeret Sackville was planning to produce a magazine called The Celt, Blunt gave her some verse contributions in advance.<sup>1</sup> Yet another volume of selections was edited by Floyd Dell and published (with Blunt's consent, given shortly before his death) by Macmillan in London and Alfred A. Knopf of New York (1923). A number of Blunt's poems appeared in various anthologies, such as The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250 - 1900 (1902), Poetry of the Victorian Period ... (Ed. George Benjamin Woods, New York (1932), The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, Ed. W.B. Yeats (1936), Modern British Poetry (ed. Louis Untermeyer, New York, 1942) and Poems of Today (a standard anthology for use in schools, issued by the English Association and reprinted many times between August 1915 and May 1942). Other, smaller anthologies in which Blunt is represented include A. Methuen's An Anthology of Modern Verse (1921); The Faber Book of 20th Century Verse (ed. John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright, 1953); English Love Poems (ed. John Betjeman and Geoffrey Tylor, 1957); and The Faber Book of Sonnets (ed. Robert Nye, Faber and Faber, 1976). Some sonnets appeared in Hall Caine's Sonnets of Three Centuries (1882); the earliest of the anthologies through which Blunt became widely known to his Victorian contemporaries as a sonneteer was William Sharp's Sonnets of This Century (1886).

Blunt's poetry was intensely personal in all its phases. His early work reflected the crisis of adoration and defeat over his affair with Catherine Walters in Paris in 1863. By the end of 1865, Blunt, exhausted, was in his "most poetical phase - very unhappy and very desirous of being happy".<sup>2</sup> In that year, he was

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1. My Diaries, p. 469.

2. Quoted by Edith Finch, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1939), p. 47.



transferred to Portugal, where he made the acquaintance of Robert Lytton (Owen Meredith), who discovered the value of Blunt's poetry and encouraged him when he stood

just at that parting of the ways in youth where a little sympathy, more or less, of a certain kind means a whole world of difference in the choice of a road - on this side to salvation, on that to perdition.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's depression over this love affair reminded Lytton of his own experience in Italy in the early 1850s. The sympathy which Lytton gave to Blunt was similar to the "word from a person of genius",<sup>2</sup> which he had received from the Brownings at Florence and Lucca, more than ten years earlier. Blunt was to record his gratitude to Lytton in similar terms, after the twenty-six years of friendship that sprang from their "intellectual honeymoon".<sup>3</sup> During their service at the British Legation, they spent their mornings "writing poetry", their afternoons "wandering in the cork woods" and their evenings "in reading and recitation". Blunt was deeply impressed by Lytton's "interpretation of subtleties of that master of riddles", Robert Browning.<sup>4</sup> Lytton told his wife, in a letter, about his pleasure in discovering that Blunt was a "genuine poet". He told Blunt that he had "great gifts to keep or cast away"; and advised him to "go on writing, and also reading and thinking for the sake of writing."<sup>5</sup>

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1. W.S. Blunt, "Lord Lytton's Rank in Literature", NC, 31 (April 1982), pp. 566-76 (p. 568).
  2. Lady Betty Balfour (ed.), Personal and Literary Letters of Robert, First Earl of Lytton, 2 vols. (1906), I, p. 44.
  3. W.S. Blunt, "Lord Lytton's Rank in Literature", p. 570.
  4. Ibid., p. 569.
  5. Personal and Literary Letters ..., I, p. 195.

Blunt followed his friend's advice. In 1867, he sent a volume of prose and verse to Chapman and Hall. Their reader, George Meredith, rejected it. Blunt bore him no grudge. He wrote later: "He was entirely right, for the volume, except for some of the sonnets, was worthless ... it was a fortunate refusal".<sup>1</sup> However, this may have made him cautious. His Sonnets and Songs by Proteus, published in 1875 by John Murray, was pseudonymous. Robert Lytton wrote a laudatory review of it in the September issue of the Fortnightly Review, but apart from this, the book appears to have gone unnoticed. However, when his second volume, containing the sonnets of the first, was published in the autumn of 1880 (under the title of The Love Sonnets of Proteus), Blunt reported with satisfaction that it had such considerable success that it went through many editions:

It gave me almost at once a certain rank in the literary world which was not altogether without its influence on my subsequent relations with my political friends.<sup>2</sup>

But on the whole, he continued to treat poetry as something of secondary importance, a pastime, an emotional safety valve in a life full of other activities and interests. He preferred to be a man of action rather than a dabbler in "the tales of poets" which are "but scholar's themes":

I would not, if I could, be called a poet.  
I have no natural love of the "chaste muse".  
If aught be worth the doing I would do it; <sup>3</sup>  
And others, if they will, may tell the news.

He cared little for technical accomplishment in the composition of his poetry, and this set him apart from the general trend of searching

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1. My Diaries, p. 662.

2. W.S. Blunt, Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt (1907), p. 95. Blunt dedicated the 1881 edition of The Love Sonnets to Lytton.

3. W.S. Blunt, "He is not a Poet" (Sonnet No. XCV in "Vita Nova"), Poetical Works, 2 vols. (1914), I, p. 86.

for "pretty sweetness" of diction, which prevailed in the works of most of the late Victorians. In the words of Professor Vivian de Sola Pinto, Blunt was

a gentleman of rank and fashion whose poetry is part of his life and who can write in a completely unaffected way about his loves, his delights of nature, partridge shooting, dinners at the Maison D'Or in Paris, and debates in the House of Commons.<sup>1</sup>

For Blunt, writing poetry was only "a starry incident in an active life": yet he remains "Exceptionally interesting among the lesser non-decadent poets of the age".<sup>2</sup> This life of action, travel, enjoyment and political agitation prevented him from devoting more time and thought to his poetry.<sup>3</sup> The result, B. Ifor Evans observed, is that

This undress in style gives him an air of modernity and an individuality in the verse of his time.<sup>4</sup>

In his love poems, Blunt was looking into his heart and describing the experiences of youth in simple, straight-forward terms. His expression is marked by ease and casualness. In the words of Desmond MacCarthy:

... he wrote poetry like a ring on his finger. That is part of the charm of his verse.<sup>5</sup>

In his sincerity, Blunt wants the reader to recapture the turbulence of the poet's passion as it is recorded in a naturalistic style.

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1. Vivian de Sola Pinto, Crisis in English Poetry, 1880 - 1940 (1951; 2nd ed., 1955), p. 24.
  2. R.L. Megroz, Modern English Poetry (1933), p. 69.
  3. A.H. Miles, The Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century, 11 vols. (1905; first published in 1891-97), VI, p. 428.
  4. B. Ifor Evans, English Poetry in the Late Nineteenth Century (1933; 2nd ed., 1966), p. 347.
  5. Desmond MacCarthy, "Shooting with Wilfrid Blunt", The London Mercury, 36 (May, 1937), pp. 21-25 (p. 25).

Lytton observes that the Sonnets and Songs "seem to have been written with the fist rather than with the finger."<sup>1</sup>

The "sonnets" of the first volume (1875) were incorporated in the second volume, The Love Sonnets of Proteus (1881), whose subsequent editions carried Blunt's name, while the "songs" re-appeared as "Love Lyrics" in Ester ... (1892). The Love Sonnets of Proteus is conceived and arranged as a unified sonnet sequence, divided into four parts under the separate titles of "To Manon", "Juliet", "Gods and False Gods" and "Vita Nova". The title of the volume is misleading, as Lytton observes, since "it contains not only love poems that are not sonnets, but also sonnets that are not love poems".<sup>2</sup> Love is by no means the only unifying theme. It is predominant in the first two parts, which have an autobiographical character as a record of Blunt's passionate affairs with Catherine Walters (Manon) and Mrs. Ella Baird (Juliet). In the last two parts, however, love is overtaken by several other themes: impressions of travel, elegiac pieces, philosophical reflections and meditations on the joys and sorrows of life, time, old age and the cruelty of death.

In "Manon", the central theme is not love, but rather the character of his beloved, which is subjected to a relentless and probing analysis. She is cruel and capricious:

Brave as a falcon and as merciless,  
With bright eyes watching still the world, thy prey,  
I saw thee pass in thy lone majesty,  
Untamed, unmated, high above the press.<sup>3</sup>

He ends this sonnet by asserting that he will not be deceived by a woman who has such volatile moods:

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1. Lord Lytton, "Critical Notice", FR, 18 n.s. (Sept. 1, 1875), pp. 429-436 (p. 429).
  2. Lord Lytton, "A New Love Poet", NC 10 (Nov., 1881), pp. 763-784 (p. 766)
  3. Sonnet II, "To Manon: Comparing Her to a Falcon", Works, I, p. 37.

I would fain beguile  
My foolish heart to think thou lovest me. See,  
I dare not love thee quite. A little while  
And thou shalt sail back heavenwards.<sup>1</sup>

She is cheap and treacherous, and the poet's wounded pride expresses itself rather bitterly in the exposition of her treachery:

Ah, Manon, you have sold  
The keys of heaven at a vulgar rate,  
A sum of money for wealth untold  
Of a just anger and the right to hate.  
- Well. It is done and the price paid. Now make  
Haste to betray them as you me betrayed.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, he describes her vanity, waywardness, superficiality and attachment to trivial things; and although he praises his fortune for leading him to her, it is obvious that he would never think of throwing in his lot with hers, since she lacks the qualifications of his prospective wife. Their relationship is ephemeral. In these sonnets he also admits the power of her beauty in cosmic or metaphysical terms reminiscent of Donne and Elizabethan poetic extravagance. Here is a sample of his exaggeration:

Sublime magician! Well may Earth and Heaven  
Change at thy bidding, and the hearts of men.  
Didst thou but know the power that beauty hath,  
The sea should leave his bed, the rocks be riven,  
And Wise men, deeming chaos come again,  
Should kneel before thee and conjure thy wrath.<sup>3</sup>

Blunt's Biblical imagery appears in a paradoxical combination with reference to his indulgence in physical pleasures in Paris. This influence echoes his religious education. During his crisis of faith (1861-2), Blunt carried a black note-book, whose pages, Edith Finch tells us, "were covered with metaphysical verse ... such as the verses at first called 'ravings' and later 'Faith's Apostasy'..."<sup>4</sup> The first ten sonnets of "To Manon" contain a great deal of imagery that is

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1. Ibid.

2. Sonnet X, "On Her Forgiveness of a Wrong", Works, I, p. 41.

3. Sonnet V, "On the Power of Her Beauty", Works, I, p. 39.

4. Finch, p. 39. This notebook is now in the possession of Mr. C. E. Blunt. It also contains a collection of butterflies.

borrowed directly from the Bible. Love

... raised an altar and inscribed it in fire  
Its dedication: "To the unknown god".<sup>1</sup>

- a reference to St. Paul's address to the Athenians (Acts, 17: 23).

In another sonnet, Proteus addresses Manon with utter contempt, crying like a Hebrew Prophet:

"Be these your gods, O Israel!"<sup>2</sup> He wishes to regain peace "Like David with washed face who ceased to weep."<sup>3</sup>

In general, the twenty one sonnets under the title "To Manon" show Elizabethan influences in tone, spirit and atmosphere. The choice of a fictitious name for his beloved is a well known Elizabethan convention. This has also been an established tradition in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, which Blunt later admired and translated. However, the difference between Blunt and his Elizabethan predecessors is that he remains in control of the situation and does not allow his adoration of his beloved to sweep him away. He does not wither or pine, waiting for a small gesture from her to revive him; and when he is overcome by her attraction he soon renounces her inconstancy instead of asking for her mercy or allowing her to rule over him. He rather hates himself for succumbing to her influence and vows to liberate his heart from the bondage of this temporary infatuation. On the other hand, he fully realises that his beloved is a courtesan and, unlike the Elizabethans, he never attempts to portray her as a symbol of virtue. In short, he remains independent even when he adopts the Elizabethan style. In this case, the name he chose for his mistress was that of the heroine of Prevost's novel and Proteus became the Chevalier des Grioux. Like Shakespeare's Proteus in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, the new Proteus

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1. Sonnet III, "On His Fortune in Loving Her", Works I, p. 38.

2. Sonnet VI, "Depreciating Her Beauty", Works, I, p. 39.

3. Sonnet XI, "On Her Lightheartedness", Works, I, p. 42.

sees his beloved as "an earthly paragon" rather than "a heavenly saint". His sonnets describe the effect of her beauty on the fascinated poet, who has been attracted to her, with other victims; then comes the revulsion, which almost develops to hatred, as he breaks the spell, and seeks another life, devoid of tears and sorrow.

From this day forth I seek another life,  
Another life! A life without a tear!

\* \* \*

I have loved too much, too loyally, too long.  
Today I am a pirate at sea.  
Let others suffer. I have suffered wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Under the general theme of love, several moods and feelings are explored in this first part; they include pleasure, anger, contempt, self-reproach, physical satiety and estrangement. The force with which these emotions are expressed lends support to Edith Finch's remarks that 'Skittles' (Catherine Walters)

... set his passion so full ablaze that it burnt out once for all. No other woman after her could do more than stir the embers.<sup>2</sup>

These 'embers', however, remained alive and continued to glow for a very long time.

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There is a conspicuous change of tone in the second part, entitled "Juliet". The complaints, lamenting love's treachery, love's death or love's ill effects upon body and soul, are replaced by the picture of a lover who is happier, more secure and content. Sweet memories of his beloved are recaptured in a natural, easy-flowing style that yields vivid images:

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1. Sonnet XXI, "His Bondage to Manon Broken", Works, I, p. 47.

2. Finch, p. 44.

I see you, Juliet, still, with your straw hat  
Loaded with vines, and with your dear pale face,  
On which those thirty years so lightly sat,  
And the white outline of your muslin dress.  
You wore a little fichu trimmed with lace  
And crossed in front, as was the fashion then,  
Bound at your waist with a broad band or sash,  
All white and fresh and virginally plain.<sup>1</sup>

This lightly portrayed picture is true to nature, yet there is more to it than directly meets the eye. A Pre-Raphaelite influence can be detected in the careful design of the details. The tender serenity of tone imparts a dreamy atmosphere to the picture, while the woman in these clothes is given an almost ethereal nature. The secret is, perhaps, in the mood of the poet; because these same, or very similar, clothes make him dismiss Manon as a trivial woman whose major concern in life is what to wear.<sup>2</sup>

But there is another aspect in Blunt's love poetry. He was a down-to-earth realist. B. Ifor Evans observes:

Blunt never writes merely because he has learnt how to write; his work has always a suggestion of urgency.<sup>3</sup>

The four sonnets entitled "Asking for her Heart" give an excellent illustration of this point:

Give me thy kiss, Juliet, give me thy kiss!  
I with my body worship thee and vow  
Such service to thy needs as man can do:  
I ask no nobler servitude than this.<sup>4</sup>

The extravagance of this section is reminiscent of Ben Jonson and Andrew Marvell. Blunt's philosophy of love is Epicurean, with physical pleasure at the centre of it, depicting the power and fascination - one is tempted to say 'infatuation'-of sensual attraction.

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1. Sonnet XLVII in "Juliet", Works I, p. 60. This sonnet was chosen by Philip Larkin to represent Blunt in The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse (Oxford, 1973), p. 1.
  2. Sonnet XI in "To Manon", Works, I, p. 42.
  3. B. Ifor Evans, Op. cit., pp. 347-8.
  4. "Juliet", Sonnet XXV, Works, I, p. 49.



He continues to use Biblical imagery in "Juliet" as it has been used in "Manon". In a sonnet entitled "The Religion of Love", for example, he declares that his Bible will be her eyes; his beads, her lips; his prayers her constancy and his heaven, her arms. Her kiss will be "eternity".<sup>1</sup>

At times he finds nothing shameful in this sort of love, which he likens to the blissful state of Adam and Eve:

And why should either blush that we have been  
One day in Eden, in our nakedness?  
- Tis conscience makes us sinners, not our sin.<sup>2</sup>

Then, realizing the short span of man's life in this world, he calls upon his beloved to enjoy the passing moments of temporary happiness in the present while they are together. Sonnet XXXII is representative of Blunt's philosophy of love and his stoic acceptance of his fate. This theme is recurrent in his poetry; the poem is given here in full;

#### Exhorting Her to Patience

Why do we fret at the inconstancy  
Of our frail hearts, which cannot always love?  
Time rushes onward, and we mortals move  
Like waifs upon a river, neither free  
To halt nor hurry. Sweet, if destiny  
Throws us together for an hour, a day,  
In the backwater of this quiet bay,  
Let us rejoice. Before us lies the sea,  
Where we must all be lost in spite of love.  
We dare not stop to question. Happiness  
Lies in our hand unsought, a treasure trove.  
Time has short patience of man's vain distress;  
And fate grows angry at too long delay;  
And floods rise fast, and we are swept away.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, he cannot give himself altogether to a life of pleasure; and, in spite of his ostensible apostasy, his indulgence soon produces pangs of remorse, with strong religious connotations. His conscience lashes him and he begins to cry in despair in "Fear has Cast out Love":

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1. "Juliet", Sonnet XXX, *ibid.*, p. 51.
  2. "Juliet", Sonnet XXVIII, *ibid.*, p. 50.
  3. "Juliet", Sonnet XXXII, *ibid.*, p. 52.

The fire of Heaven has touched us, and we pass  
From pleasure's chastenings to a fiercer rod;  
And fear has cast out love, for flesh is grass  
And we are withered with the wrath of God.<sup>1</sup>

His burden of guilt is very heavy indeed, as we can see from these lines:

We are shut out from Heaven  
And never more shall look upon Love's face,  
Being with those who perish unforgiven.  
Never to see Love's face! Ah, pain in pain,  
Which we do well to weep and weep again!<sup>2</sup>

But this weeping cannot atone for the lovers' sins, which amount to unforgivable sacrilege. Hence:

Oh, Juliet, we  
Sinned in a temple, and our tears today  
Appeal in vain to Heaven which dares not hear.  
God is not always mocked. And thus we pay  
Our uttermost debt unheaded, tear on tear  
And scoff on scoff and sin heaped up on sin,  
While there is justice on Earth to men.<sup>3</sup>

Still, there are moments of scepticism felt by both Blunt and his "Juliet", moments that lead to an expression of nihilistic tendencies when the poet thinks that there is nothing worthwhile in this world or the next "if next there be". Paradoxically, the comfort which he tries to give to his beloved in these moments is also a Biblical expression. When she looks at him questioningly, he gives her

A pledge as plain and as distinct a token  
As that of Peter at his master's knees,  
"Thou knowst that I love thee more than these".<sup>4</sup>

In his more pessimistic moods concerning religious doubts, Blunt was the product of an age which questioned the certainties of faith. This theme is developed in the serious, meditative poems that appear in the third part of The Love Sonnets of Proteus. Blunt becomes

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1. "Juliet", Sonnet XXXVI, ibid., p. 54.
  2. "Juliet", Sonnet XLIII, ibid., p. 58.
  3. "Juliet", Sonnet I, ibid., p. 61.
  4. "Juliet", Sonnet XLVI, ibid., p. 59.

preoccupied with a subject matter wider and larger than love. He writes of things that have general human concern as he begins to think of man's life, the mystery of the creation, the destiny of the human race, Time and Death. This is the general background that unifies the sonnets of "Gods and False Gods", although each individual sonnet is a separate unit, each expressing a certain mood. When the idea of death obsesses him, it becomes a torture that breeds morbid melancholy. The three connected sonnets entitled "The Mockery of Life" show the effects of great tension in Blunt's feelings as the riddle of life and death torments him. The emotional turmoil is exacerbated by the lack of warmth and inner comfort which can only come from religious belief. From the womb to the grave, life is a tragic suffering. We begin it:

Cast forth in blood and pain from our mother's womb,  
Most like an excrement, and weeping showers  
Of senseless tears: unreasoning, naked, dumb,  
The symbol of all weakness and the sum:  
Our very life a sufferance.<sup>1</sup>

Youth is but a brief period in which "We conquer fate and half forget our tears"; but fate soon strikes us and everything withers away. The second of these three sonnets ends with a rhetorical question, uttered with acute pain:

But for the foolish, those who cannot pray,  
What else remains of their dark horoscope  
But a tall tree and courage and a rope?<sup>2</sup>

The third sonnet completes the cycle with sombre images of the agonies of death, the physical suffering in

The search for a womb where we may creep  
Back from the world, to hide, - perhaps to sleep.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Gods and False Gods", Sonnet LXXIV, ibid., p. 74.
  2. Ibid., Sonnet LXXV.
  3. Ibid., Sonnet LXXVI, p. 75.

Life seen in this perspective is the result of Blunt's belief in the theory of evolution, a belief that impaired his religious faith. These three sonnets are representative in this respect. They were published in his earlier volume Sonnets & Songs by Proteus (1875) under the title "A Triple Sonnet" (pp. 108-110); and he continued to hold these pessimistic views in his old age. In one of his "Later Sonnets", he mumbles plaintively:

Some tears must be  
Even in the herald hour of your sunrise.  
And in the night? Ah, child, what misery,  
Think you awaits us when life's flood-gates strain  
To the full deluge of the descending rain?<sup>1</sup>

Blunt reiterates these ideas, elaborating them in a variety of ways, resorting to the most curious fantasies. He tells us, for example, that, in the natural world, only man knows that he must die, and only man knows how to laugh. To Blunt, who links the two things together, this is no co-incidence, but an irony that has symbolic significance:

Nature has symbols for her nobler joys,  
Her nobler sorrows. Who dared foretell  
That only man, by some sad mockery,  
Should learn to laugh who learns that he must die?<sup>2</sup>

This reasoning can come only from one who is haunted by death. As a result of his doubts concerning the life of the hereafter, he clings desperately to this life and considers both time and death as his arch-enemies. He portrays them in a variety of ways. In one sonnet he considers them as "The two Highwaymen":

Everyday of life  
Was wrested from me after a bitter strife,  
I never yet could see the sun go down  
But I was angry in my heart, nor hear  
The leaves fall in the wind without a tear  
Over the dying summer ...<sup>3</sup>

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1. "To One in a Garden", Works, I, p. 338.
  2. "Vita Nova", Sonnet XCI, "Laughter and Death", Works, I. p. 84.
  3. "Gods and False Gods", Sonnet LXXI, Works, I, p. 72.

These lines echo the tone of Robert Herrick's "Fair daffodils we weep to see/You haste away so soon"; but Blunt's more serious mood is rather akin to that of Horace, although the latter utilizes the idea of death to propogate moral or philosophical points, as in his Odes I:3, 28; II:14; and III:2; and Epistles I:16 and II:2.

Images from nature are sometimes used by Blunt as a vehicle to convey a certain mood or state of mind. In one of his best sonnets, entitled "St. Valentine's Day", all nature throbs with nimble life and shares in the poet's ecstatic joy:

Today, all day, I rode upon the Down,  
With hounds and horsemen, a brave company.  
On this side in its glory lay the sea,  
On that the Sussex Weald, a sea of brown.  
The wind was light, and brightly the sun shone,  
And still we galloped on from gorse to gorse.  
And once, when checked, a thrush sang, and my horse  
Pricked his quick ears as to a sound unknown.  
I knew the spring was come. I knew it even  
Better than all by this, that through my chase  
In bush and stone and hill and sea and heaven  
I seemed to see and follow still your face.  
Your face my quarry was. For it I rode,  
My horse a thing of wings, myself a god.<sup>1</sup>

In this sonnet, the language rises, through the mood of the poet, to a high level of graceful beauty. He captures the picture of nature in moments of overflowing happiness. He is also able to convey a vivid impression of its elemental grandeur, its savage power, and the vastness of its expanses, as we can see in "The Sublime" (Sonnets CVI-CVII) in the fourth part of his Love Sonnets - the part entitled "Vita Nova".

Such impressions are rare in Blunt's nature poetry. His attachment to nature, though genuine, is somewhat superficial, in the sense that it is confined to his enjoyment of the landscape around him.

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1. Ibid., Sonnet LV, p. 64.

He does not have the powerful sweep of Shelley, nor the impressionability, vision and melody of Tennyson. His love of natural scenery is hardly ever used for a philosophical or moral purpose. Although he has seen a great deal of beautiful scenery in four continents, it does not seem to have given him much more than passing moments of exuberance. Somehow we get the impression that Blunt is a detached, uninvolved observer of nature, vigilant - but a disinterested outsider who rarely identifies himself with the beauties of nature. These beauties may give him great happiness, but he is too independent and his personality is too assertive to let the influences of nature filter through to his soul while he is in a trance or a state of passive receptivity. Despite his romantic temperament, he is too much of a mundane realist to have the mysticism of his Romantic predecessors in their attitude to nature. This point becomes immediately apparent if Blunt's portrayal of nature in such sonnets as "The Sublime", "A Day in Sussex" and "Chanclebury Ring" is compared to Tennyson's in "Oenone", "The Dying Swan" and "The Lady of Shalott", or Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and "To a Skylark", for example. Although Blunt's poetry reflects influences from both Tennyson and Shelley, it is clear that he lacks their capacity to create the evocative, absorbing atmosphere; his muse lacks the colourful wings of their inspired imagination, and thus falls short of the heights to which they can soar.

This variety of themes in "Gods and False Gods" continues in the fourth part, whose title, "Vita Nova", recalls Dante's Vita Nuova. Like the Vita Nuova, Blunt's "Vita Nova" is made up of thirty-one sonnets; and if it is argued that Dante's work contains prose as well as other types of verse, it will be well to remember that Blunt's first volume (which was rejected for Chapman and Hall by Meredith in 1867) was of the same nature. Blunt later argued that

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The sonnet, with the Italian writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was the vehicle of their daily thoughts about their daily affairs, as well as that of their profoundest utterances in religion, love and politics ...<sup>1</sup>

His "New Life", which is heralded by the last song in the previous part - declaring that he "would lead a better life", starts with "A Day In Sussex". This sonnet is characterized by its simplicity and easy-flowing phrases. It succeeds in capturing the freshness of a Sussex scene, satisfying the senses by conveying the spirit of rural sounds and sights. A mood of pastoral serenity is conveyed in the last lines, as the poet's memory relives the experience:

And still the birds sang, and I could not grieve.  
Oh what a blessed thing that evening was!  
Peace, music, twilight, all that could deceive  
A soul to joy or lull a heart to peace.  
It glimmers yet across whole years like these.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt's love for the Sussex Weald is expressed in many ways in other poems which overflow with this emotion:

Dear checker - work of woods, the Sussex Weald!  
If a name thrills me yet of things of earth,  
That name is thine. How often I have fled  
To thy deep hedgerows and embraced each field,  
Each lag, each pasture, - fields which gave me birth  
And saw my youth, and which must hold me dead.<sup>3</sup>

This love enhanced in another sonnet to become a patriotic love of England. Passing through the strait between "Spain and Barbary", the poet exclaims:

Ay, this is the famed rock, which Hercules  
And Goth and Moor bequeathed us. At this door  
England stands sentry. God! to hear the shrill  
Sweet treble of her fifes upon the breeze  
And at the summons of the rock gun's roar  
To see her red coats marching from the hill.<sup>4</sup>

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1. W.S. Blunt, A New Pilgrimage and Other Poems (1899), p. IX. Hence referred to as N.P.
  2. "Vita Nova", Sonnet LXXXIII, Works, I, p. 80.
  3. "Vita Nova", Sonnet XCVII entitled: "Chanclebury Ring", Works, I, p. 87. These lines adorn the monument of Blunt's grave.
  4. Sonnet CXII, "Gibraltar", Works, I, p. 95. cf: "Recent Poetry", The Nation, 51 (July, 24 1890), pp. 73-75 (p. 75).

This sonnet is better than both sonnets entitled "At Gibraltar" by the American poet George E. Woodberry, quoted from his volume, The North Shore Watch, by a reviewer in The Nation, who describes them as having "but few equals in recent American or English literature, and are of themselves sufficient to make a reputation". The movement in Blunt's sonnet is more graceful and, unlike Woodberry's, his tone is neither spasmodic nor assertive.

There were two paradoxical moods in Blunt's attitude to the life of his age, which witnessed rapid changes. On the one hand, he shared with the Pre-Raphaelites their feelings of aversion towards the uncongenial nature of the modern, industrialised world with its squalor, vulgarity and lack of human sympathy and good taste. He was not a believer in the cult of "progress", and he saw material prosperity as an encroachment on the original freshness and beauty of nature. Consequently, the dreamer in him wanted to withdraw into another, more sympathetic world. E.M. Forster saw him thus:

Partly by achievement and wholly by temperament Blunt is a poet for whom gracefulness and beauty are the supreme good, and squalor the supreme evil, and who yearns, like his dead allies the pre-Raphaelites, for a world that shall be small and fruitful and clean.<sup>1</sup>

He longs to live in another age, the age of chivalry, even as "A ruffian in the camps of Mazarin", and asks himself a painful question: "Why was I born in this degenerate age?"<sup>2</sup> This attitude echoes the words of Burne-Jones, who exclaims:

A pity it is I was not born in the Middle Ages. People would then have known how to use me - now they don't know what on earth to do with me.<sup>3</sup>

This theme is recurrent in Blunt's poetry, reflecting some affinity with his friend, William Morris, who was "a dreamer witched away by

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1. E.M. Forster, Abinger Harvest, (1936; Penguin, 1974), p. 304.
  2. Sonnet LXX "On Reading the Memoirs of M. D'Artagnan", Works, I, p. 72; cf: My Diaries, p. 285.
  3. Georgiana Burne-Jones, Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, 2 vols. (1904), II, p. 318.



the glamour of fairyland beyond space and time".<sup>1</sup> In fact, Morris's escape to the world of the Icelandic Sagas has its parallel in Blunt's escape to the Eastern world of pre-Islamic Arabia; and, whether indulging in Arabic poetry, political agitation or the search for a nobler strain of life in a more tranquil and wholesome environment, Blunt was, in his own individual way, obeying the lure of romance. In this respect, Blunt was following Byron's advice to Thomas Moore, to "Stick to the East".<sup>2</sup>

Yet, it must be borne in mind that this aesthetic reaction and withdrawal into other worlds and atmospheres is by no means confined to the pre-Raphaelite school. Other Victorian poets used it to take refuge from the harsh realities of their ugly surroundings. Tennyson invoked the world of ancient Greece in "The Lotos Eaters"; the Baghdad of Haroun el-Rachid, and the world of King Arthur and his knights, form the background of other poems. Matthew Arnold borrowed the legend of Sohrab and Rustum from the legacy of ancient Persia. The East was also the source of inspiration for Brownings "The Return of the Druses".

Flights of imagination, however, represent only one aspect of Blunt's poetry. The stronger trend is that of the man of action who faces the problems of his age with daring and courage. Vivian de Sola Pinto classifies him with W.E. Henley and Rudyard Kipling in their "determined effort to renew the pact between Action and Dream".<sup>3</sup>

Concluding The Love Sonnets of Proteus, Blunt addresses his reader:

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1. F.L. Lucas, Eight Victorian Poets (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 95-6; cf. Blunt, My Diaries, p. 229.
  2. Wallace Cable Brown, "Thomas Moore and English Interest in the East", Studies in Philology, XXXIV (Jan. 1937), pp. 576-588, (p. 576).
  3. Vivian de Sola Pinto, op. cit., p. 22.

This is the book. For evil and for good,  
What my life was in it is written plain.  
These are no dreams, but things of flesh and blood,  
The past that lived and shall not live again.<sup>1</sup>

This, as Anthony Clyne saw it, "is no vain boast or self-deception", since Blunt has the great desire and also the keen sight for reality".<sup>2</sup>

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Critical appreciation of these sonnets varied widely, but in spite of their different reactions, the critics were almost unanimous in finding Blunt interesting as a poet, and in admiring the natural ease with which he wrote his sonnets. In his lengthy article in The Nineteenth Century, Robert Lytton commends Blunt's sincere tone and likens him to Byron in the sense that his love poetry is "the spontaneous utterance of a powerful emotion, rather than the studied product of art".<sup>3</sup> He rightly describes Blunt as a man who "has passionately pursued pleasure and found it pain",<sup>4</sup> and he thinks that by committing his experience to verse, Proteus has "rid his bosom of its perilous stuff" - an act whose cathartic effect resembles that experienced by Goethe after writing his Sorrows of Werther.<sup>5</sup>

Explaining his criterion for a successful love poem, Lytton observes:

What I expect to find in a love poem is a product of active feeling, not an exhibition of passive sensation.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, what appealed to Lytton in The Love Sonnets of Proteus was, precisely, the thing that he himself lacked: independent originality. He had already made a confession to this effect in the

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1. "Vita Nova", Sonnet CXIII, Works, I, p. 95.
  2. Anthony Clyne, "The Poetry of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt", The Bookman (June, 1921), pp. 130-132 (pp. 131-132).
  3. Lord Lytton, "A New Love Poet", op. cit., p. 774.
  4. Ibid.
  5. Ibid., p. 784.
  6. Ibid., p. 765.

context of defending the sonnets as they appeared in the first volume, entitled Sonnets and Songs by Proteus (1875). John Morley, the editor of The Fortnightly Review, in which Lytton reviewed that volume, had a poor opinion of it: "It neither teaches, nor inspires, nor charms", he said. Against this charge Lytton replied that Blunt's poetry was "free from the slipshod [sic] and redundancy which defaces so much of my own verse" and free from the "intolerable affectation of Swinburne, Morris, Rossetti, as well as the ingrained vulgarity of Browning".<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps affection caused Lytton to exaggerate; but in a letter to Blunt, written shortly before the appearance of his review of the second volume of the Sonnets in The Nineteenth Century, he affirmed his admiration

If I know anything of poetry, or have any true feeling for it, they are the most genuine poetry I have read since Tennyson's early poems, and a few bits of Browning's best work ...

From the first line to the last there flows with singular sweetness and sustained strength and fulness, a deep strain of sad dignity and quiet ...

But in reading these poems, welled up as they are by storm and stress from a turbid deep, I feel that ... all the agitations of their origin are transmuted at that point where expression and impression unite.<sup>2</sup>

Other critical opinions appeared several years later, when Blunt became known as the author of the sonnets. Comparing him to Shelley, William Watson considered that

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1. Lady Betty Balfour, op cit., (Lytton's letter to John Morley, Aug. 27, 1875), I, p. 333.
  2. Ibid., Letter to W.S. Blunt in September, 1881, II, p. 237.

... in virtue alike of his excellences and his defects, he may be said to have the specific temperament of genius. In this temperament ... some "mortal mixture of the earth's mould" is necessary; and, indeed, without it we should have something quite too mercurial and volatile. Shelley, with whom Mr. Blunt betrays some affinities, had certainly too little of it.<sup>1</sup>

Watson noticed the mixture of the dreamer and the man of action in Blunt's nature:

[He] is not precisely a pure artist, and assuredly not a pure worldling; for the one he has too much enthusiasm, for the other, too little restraint. But he has led the dual existence - the life empirical, the life ideal; and this twofold personality gives to his verse a breadth and range which mark it off sharply and unmistakably from the work of the mere professional verse-makers, the writers who seem poets by choice and men by accident.<sup>2</sup>

This highly individual quality was also noticed by Percy Addleshaw, who wrote a general review of Blunt's poetry in The National Review of October 1895. After expressing his belief in Blunt's indebtedness to others, such as Tennyson and Browning, Addleshaw adds, "His style is his own, as is his matter" and "whether completely or partially successful he is always interesting".<sup>3</sup> Part of this "interest" comes from the tremendous passion that pervades the "Proteus" sequence where "love, joy, hatred, folly are all denoted with a restless, nervous certainty of touch that is now and then almost brutal."<sup>4</sup> This makes Addleshaw conclude that Blunt "is a better, and an English De Musset, the singer of the dead dear days".<sup>5</sup>

Not all opinions were favourable, however. A hostile review appeared in The Saturday Review of 17 September, 1898, when selections of Blunt's poetry were edited by George Wyndham and

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1. William Watson, "Poetry by Men of the World", The National Review, 14 (Dec. 1889), pp. 520-29 (pp. 524-5).
  2. Ibid., p. 525.
  3. Percy Addleshaw, "Mr. Wilfred [Sic] Blunt's Poetry", The National Review, 26 (Oct. 1895), pp. 202-211 (p. 203).
  4. Ibid., p. 207.
  5. Ibid., p. 208.

William Ernest Henley. The reviewer suggested that the volume of 1875, "bound in cloth of a startling gamboge-yellow colour, with a flaring sun stamped in gold on the side", deserved the indifference with which it was received; and that, without Lord Lytton's patronage, the new poet would have remained unknown. The reviewer claimed that this lack of attention had continued in subsequent years, since Blunt was a man who "took his pleasures madly" and was "tactless" in his attitude to the public. The editors were commended for drawing Blunt "out of obscurity" by redeeming him from "this maladroitness", which had prevented him from enjoying "far greater success". Even the suitability of the pseudonym "Proteus" was questioned:

No one is less Protean, no one shows less adaptability to circumstance, less power of pretending to be other than he is.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, this "power of pretending" was asserted later; Blunt's indifference to poetic fame was cynically described by the reviewer as "proud pretence of flouting the poetic laurels". However, he recognized Blunt's "manly lucidity of speech", "picturesque exactitude of vision" and "primitive attractiveness". The censure that Blunt "has no art, and he exercises no intellect" was too severe; in a final judgement, Blunt was described as "no more than the most delightful of amateurs", whose verse was "scarcely ever poetry", despite the "vividness", "glow" and "vibration" in "The Idler's Calendar" and "The Love Sonnets of Proteus". Blunt's verse, the reviewer concluded, was rather "literature of a very stimulating, refreshing and virile order", representing what he called "the newest type of wholesome British Barbarian more indulgently than has ever been done before".<sup>2</sup>

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1. "Mr. Wilfrid Blunt's Poems", The Saturday Review, 86 (17 Sept. 1898), pp. 384-5 (p. 384).
  2. Ibid., p. 385.

Although such observations contain a great deal of truth, one cannot help feeling that they lack depth of analysis. Even the defects of form and the various flaws in the structure of some of Blunt's sonnets do not warrant the verdict of "scarcely ever poetry". The reviewer of The Academy, who does not ignore these faults, gives a different judgement of the Love Sonnets:

Emphatically, whatever shortcomings his verse may possess, it breathes. Its material has been wrought for, suffered for, lived for; it has pulse and blood ... [In the Love Sonnets], he moves masterfully, and proves what the greatest poets have proved before him - that the sonnet ... is an altogether strong and masculine form, the very medium for pregnant force ... [He] contrives to attain more of the dignified Shakesporean ring than any writer we know.<sup>1</sup>

The Academy reviewer thus concludes that Blunt is "a true poet, a very personal poet, but an unequal poet", because "he lacks art"; "passion does often bring him right", and thus there is no need to "complain of defective form".<sup>2</sup> But The Saturday Review was hostile; evidently this was largely for political motives. Blunt's unpopularity had reached a new peak at the time, due to his attacks on Kitchener during his Sudan campaign. Yet the reviewer challenged:

Now is the time to decide, without prejudice, what is the nature of Mr. Blunt's contribution to literature.

And again:

There is no chance of injustice now ... Now, or never, he ought to secure admirers.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Of Raleigh's Breed", The Academy, 54 (Sept. 10, 1898), pp. 237-8 (p. 237), cf: William Sharp, Sonnets of This Century, (1887), p. 276.
  2. "Of Raleigh's Breed", loc. cit., p. 238.
  3. "Mr. Wilfrid Blunt's Poems", The Saturday Review, loc. cit., p. 384. Note here that the word "never" is so strong that it has dangerous overtones. The reviewer gives himself the right to speak for posterity, thus extending his judgement infinitely into the future. Blunt's poetic career was far from finished in 1898.

He then proceeded to urge that no self-respecting Victorian would find much to admire. Nevertheless, the same day (Sept. 17, 1898) witnessed another reviewer (using the initials W.M.) not only venturing to admire Blunt, but also giving him the title of "A Minor Prophet".<sup>1</sup>

Later critical opinion was generally favourable. A. Nairne thought that there was "soul and beauty quite beyond the usual run of modern poetry" in some of Blunt's lyrical poems. He saw in The Love Sonnets of Proteus "a tale of passion, waste and havoc" in which "Imagination has deepened reality". Thus, a reader unfamiliar with the events of Blunt's life

will dream the imitative dream from within, judging, condemning, pitying, admiring, hoping and rejoicing with his creative companion; and he will be always eager to go on.<sup>2</sup>

Another reviewer was Richard Le Gallienne, who described The Sonnets as "the confided documents of a lover" which have "many fine qualities, particularly that of emotional sincerity" and are also "rich in fine feelings of vehement utterance". Le Gallienne observed that

... for the most part it is the lover rather than the poet who interests us. The poetry is too diffused, the workmanship is often careless; we feel that ... the love energy is not equalled by the poetic energy.<sup>3</sup>

Blunt's wide variety of energies, pursuits and sympathies which prevented him from devoting more attentive care to his verse, invited the following remarks from F.L. Lucas:

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1. W.M. "A Minor Prophet", The Academy, 54 (Sept. 17, 1898) pp. 276-8 (p. 276).
  2. A. Nairne, "The Poetry of Mr. Wilfrid Blunt", The Church Quarterly Review, 82 (April, 1916), pp. 172-8 (p. 172).
  3. Richard Le Gallienne, "Verses of an Emotional Epicurean", The New York Times Book Review, (Feb. 11, 1923), p. 7.

Such a poet was not made to be an amorist; his love sonnets are the measured turnings and returnings of a half-tamed leopard in an incongruous cage.<sup>1</sup>

Lucas's conclusion, that "Blunt's personality is always more striking than his poetry",<sup>2</sup> is in keeping with the opinions of Percy Addleshaw, A. Nairne, Richard Le Gallienne and Lord Lytton. The prominent personal tone in Blunt's poetry was persistently noted. It was seen as a major drawback by The Saturday Review, where the reviewer rejected the expression of Blunt's emotions in poetry and his "preference for life over literature" as one of the "worst" aspects of his poetry - an aspect which will prevent it from being "perennial"; and he sardonically asserted that "the Muse of Mr. Blunt has but one theme - himself ...". Richard Le Gallienne welcomed the personal tone as a positive quality yielding something interesting because "There are some few people we like to hear talk of themselves, and Mr. Blunt is one".<sup>3</sup> This view was shared by Ouida<sup>4</sup> and G.N. Schuster.<sup>5</sup> W.E. Henley, a "lover of life and an imperfect artist" like Blunt, pronounced a similarly favourable judgement in his prefatory note to the selected edition of 1898. Under his pseudonym "Affable Hawk", Desmond MacCarthy, who speaks for a generation of critics, observed:

The poetry is not the kind which those who love most the poetry of Art will ever rate very high; it is easy and diffuse, not tightly knit. It is graceful, vivid, seldom magical; the charm of it lies in its close relation to spontaneous emotion, and the ease with which that moment of emotion finds expression in fluent, dignified English ...

Those who value poetry as a medium for the expression of life will not forget the poems of Wilfrid Blunt.<sup>6</sup>

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1. F.L. Lucas, "Three Ages", The New Statesman, 22 (Dec. 22, 1923), pp. 340-41 (p. 341).
  2. Ibid., cf: Lucas's Authors Dead and Living, (1926) pp. 222-3.
  3. Alfred H. Miles (ed.) The Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 429.
  4. Ouida, Critical Studies (1900), p. 143.
  5. G.N. Schuster, Catholic Spirit in Modern English Literature, (New York, 1922), p. 152.
  6. "Affable Hawk" (i.e.: Desmond MacCarthy), "Current Literature: Books in General", The New Statesman, 19 (Sept. 23, 1922), p. 662.



(ii) The 1880s : Political involvement

In 1883, Blunt published The Wind and the Whirlwind, a polemical poem directed against the English occupation of Egypt in 1882. This poem, written in quatrains, remains one of Blunt's most powerful indictments of imperialism. Its value as an indictment and as a prophecy can be appreciated in retrospect. During the heyday of Britain's imperial sway the poem and its composer were held in contempt. The Athenaeum objected:

[The readers] will feel a sincere compassion for a man who wastes so much of what is noblest in human nature upon a fantasy of his own brain.

... that he adopted throughout a theory which has extremely little foundation in fact is notorious. This poem is an embodiment of its author's peculiar views.

On the other hand its invective is unmeasured and fanatical ... England is denounced as no Englishman should dare to denounce her.<sup>1</sup>

But the strength of Blunt's case was understood in Ireland. Lady Gregory gave a perceptive appreciation of the poem as "the real monument of that time", which "still stands as an indictment and a prophecy".<sup>2</sup> The poem must be read as a whole in order to be appreciated, but it is useful to quote some representative samples.

Blunt wonders how to plead his cause and where:

How shall I speak of justice to the aggressors, -  
Of right to Kings whose rights include all wrong, -  
Of truth to statecraft, true but in deceiving, -  
Of peace to prelates, pity to the strong?

Where shall I find a hearing? In high places?  
The voice of havoc drowns the voice of good.  
On the throne's steps? The elders of the nation  
Rise in their ranks and call aloud for blood.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Our Library Table", The Athenaeum, No: 2926 (Nov. 24, 1883), p. 668.
  2. My Diaries, p. xi. cf: Finch, p. 171.
  3. Blunt, "The Wind and the Whirlwind", Works, II, p. 221.

His support for the vanquished, though chivalrous, is a difficult task:

Unthanked, unhonoured, - yet a task of glory  
Not in this day, but in an age more wise,  
When those poor chancellors have found their portion  
And lie forgotten in their dust of lies.<sup>1</sup>

The poet is sustained by his strong faith in the justice of the cause he is defending. He foresees a time when his belief will be vindicated. Like a Hebrew prophet he imagines a day of reckoning:

Therefore I fear not. Rather let this record  
Stand of the past, ere God's revenge shall chase  
From place to punishment His Sad vicegerents<sup>2</sup>  
Of power on Earth, - I fling it in their face!

After describing Egypt's happiness with Arabi's movement, which he saw as the start of a new era of liberty, reform and progress, he expresses his sympathy with the Egyptians, whose uprising had been crushed by the invaders. He gives a new conception of courage, in which he would rather be a coward on the side of right and justice than a victor in an army fighting for injustice:

Oh I would rather fly with the first craven  
Who flung his arms away in your good cause,  
Than head the hottest charge by England vaunted  
In all the record of her unjust wars!<sup>3</sup>

His indignation reaches an explosive crescendo as he foresees the liquidation of the British Empire. He addresses England:

The Empire thou didst build shall be divided.  
Thou shalt be weighed in thy own balances  
Of usury to peoples and to princes,  
And be found wanting by the world and these.

They shall possess the lands by thee foresaken  
And not regret thee. On their seas no more  
Thy ships shall bear destruction to the nations  
Or thy guns thunder on a fenceless shore.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 222.
  2. Ibid., p. 223.
  3. Ibid., p. 231.
  4. Ibid., pp. 233-4.

The prophecy was dismissed as the rhetoric of a dreamer. Ouida observed that Blunt's political poems "will be little appreciated by the lovers of ballads of blood and fury, and odes of war which scream like a steam-hooter".<sup>1</sup> Samuel C. Chew held that this particular poem contained a "poet's gift of vision" enabling Blunt to make "an extraordinary prophecy of the rising of the Mahdi and the death of Gordon "in 1884."<sup>2</sup> In fact, a similar view had been expressed by the contributor to The Academy of an article signed 'W.M.', while the English press was hailing Kitchener's victory at Um Durman in 1898. The writer, who makes extensive quotations from the poem to prove its importance at that time, calls Blunt "a minor prophet" who has been "ignored", if not "stoned" like the prophets of old. He describes the prophecies as "a leaf from the larger script of Ezekiel", whose fulfillment should lend "an added solemnity to the stanzas of terror".<sup>3</sup> The political involvement of the poem had consequences for Blunt's further writing on a theological issue. The article in The Academy prompted Herbert Spencer to write a long letter to Blunt suggesting the theme of what became Blunt's most powerful politico-religious poem, Satan Absolved. Blunt's role as a prophet was best seen by R.B. Cunninghame Graham, who wrote in the English Review:

Certain it is that almost all that he foretold thirty or forty years ago in regard to the East has become justified by events.

His was a voice of a Cassandra prophesying in the wilderness ...<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ouida, op. cit., p. 144.
  2. Samuel C. Chew, "Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: An Intimate View", The North American Review, 217 (May, 1923), pp. 664-675 (p. 670).
  3. "A Minor Prophet", The Academy, op. cit., p. 277.
  4. R.B. Cunninghame Graham, "Wilfrid Scawen Blunt", The English Review, 35 (Dec. 1922), pp. 486-492 (p. 490).

Thus, The Wind and the Whirlwind attracted a following. In November 1883, Frederick York Powell wrote in a letter to Blunt that

"... the ideas which your last poem speaks have grown very strongly upon me, so there is at all events one link between us."<sup>1</sup>

Sir Thomas Henry Hall Caine wrote to him more than twenty-five years later, in 1909:

I recall the fact that you kindly sent me The Wind and the Whirlwind at the time of its publication [1883]. I read your poem again while writing The White Prophet, and it may possibly occur that certain of my own passages are coloured by yours, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Another admirer of The Wind and the Whirlwind was W.S. Adams, who discussed the poem in Edwardian Portraits (1957). He thought that Blunt "adds to English Literature one of the most moving poems on a political theme, writing from a sincere patriotism in plain words which all can understand". Adams considered the poem remarkable "not only for its sorrowful judgement of the English people ... but for its political percipience ... and for its prophetic note".<sup>3</sup>

Vivian de Sola Pinto thought this poem comparable to Swinburne's Songs Before Sunrise, which advocated the liberty of another downtrodden country (Italy) and paid homage to another nationalist "hero" (Mazzini).<sup>4</sup> The poems are equally full of passionate enthusiasm for liberty; yet Blunt's adherence to his cause is more genuine than Swinburne's and his mood is less contrived or affected.

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1. Oliver Elton, Frederick York Powell: A Life and a Selection from His Letters, and Occasional Writings, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1906), I, p. 76. Another "splendid letter" worth "many rude articles in The Times", came from Madame Juliette Adam in 1906. See My Diaries, p. 572.
  2. My Diaries, p. 687. Passages and episodes in Hall Caine's book show Blunt's influence in both the outlook and treatment of his subject. Cf.: The White Prophet, 2 vols. (1909), I, pp. 25, 73, 74, 143, 144, 149.
  3. W.S. Adams, Edwardian Portraits (1938), p. 27.
  4. V. de Sola Pinto, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

Blunt's interest (and deep involvement) in Egypt was based on close and impassioned experience; many of Swinburne's poems on Italy, however, lacked close contact with the events and were at times lost in generalities. Blunt does not have Swinburne's musical capacities, his prosodic virtuosity, or his expressiveness, glowing colours and resourcefulness in imagery. Although Blunt claims that his cause is worthy of Milton and Dante, it is Swinburne who tries to develop his theme towards epic proportions; but his enthusiasm goes too far. Unlike Blunt, he takes atheistic, anti-Christian attitudes, idolizing liberty and glorifying those whom he considers to be its heroes, such as Walt Whitman, Victor Hugo and Shelley.

If The Wind and the Whirlwind harks back to the Swinburne of 1871, it also foreshadows "much of that bitter poetry of national indignation and inquiry of which Siegfried Sassoon was to become the chosen prophet",<sup>1</sup> when the "trench poets" of the First World War brought home the horrors of its battles. Many of Sassoon's war poems reflect a mood akin to Blunt's, but his mode of expression is different. His apparent wistfulness and melancholy cover an undercurrent of deep, bitter cynicism that can hurt much more than Blunt's "torrent of Saeva indignatio [which] is kept at the boiling point from the first to the last line."<sup>2</sup> Both poets were writing from actual experience, attacking the same sort of hypocrisy, self-complacency and indifference to human suffering in the "higher circles" of their society. Blunt could not command a hearing among the "imperialistic Victorians" by whose arrogance he was "unduly cold-shouldered" as "too passionate" a poet.<sup>3</sup> Sassoon's war poems did not suffer a similar

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1. Herbert Palmer, Post Victorian Poetry, (1938), p. 27.

2. "Our Library Table", The Athenaeum, op. cit., p. 668.

3. H. Palmer, op. cit., p. 27.

neglect: they were addressed to the more modest and doubting Georgians; and they were touchingly human, less thunderous, simpler and nearer home, charged with subtle conceits. Sassoon's criticism of his generation creeps in from the sides, while Blunt, foaming, faces his society with a direct, frontal attack.

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Blunt's involvement in politics led him to India (1883-1884), to Constantinople (1885) and to adventures in Ireland which landed him in prison in 1888. The result of his imprisonment was a thin volume (In Vinculis), published 1889, containing a sequence of 16 sonnets and three longer poems. The story of this episode was later given in full in his book The Land War in Ireland (1912), describing the ordeal of physical and mental torture, when "Each day passed with the leaden length of a hundred days",<sup>1</sup> and the nights were "a torment all but intolerable".<sup>2</sup> He resorted to poetry in an attempt "to turn ... imprisonment to real spiritual benefit".<sup>3</sup> He began to write "sonnets thought out, most of them, in the dark of long nights with the roar of the Shannon falls in my ears", as well as "anagrams of the names of those I hated".<sup>4</sup> He read the Bible, "the finest reading in the world for prison", which brought him sweet memories of "our travels in 'Biblical lands'"; and he managed to jot down some sonnets "in the end leaves of my prayer book".<sup>5</sup> The memory of those hours of soul-searching made him observe, in the Preface to this volume that

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1. W.S. Blunt, The Land War in Ireland (1912), p. 408.
  2. Ibid., p. 379.
  3. Ibid., p. 372.
  4. Ibid., pp. 394, 408.
  5. Ibid., p. 388.

Inprisonment is in reality a discipline most useful to the modern soul, lapped as it is in the physical sloth and self-indulgence. Like a sickness or a spiritual retreat it purifies and ennobles; and the soul emerges from it stronger and more self-contained.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of this experience, which inaugurated the second (and most prolific) phase in Blunt's poetic career, lies in the fact that it introduced into his poetry an element of melancholy that sometimes deepens into dark gloom. His political agitations, his travels, his suffering for the causes of others and his sense of frustration combined to enhance his outlook on life. His knowledge of life and human nature deepened his thought. Love was no longer the prominent topic of his poetry. His hatred of repression and injustice broadened the scope of his interests to include larger human affairs; the years of struggle imbued his poetry with a deep sense of the brotherhood of mankind, a genuine, passionate love for justice and freedom for all people. From the very first sonnet, he likens his situation to that of Christ, whose principles made him the victim of evil forces:

From Caiaphas to Pilate I was sent,  
Who judged with unwashed hands a crime to me.  
Next came the sentence, and the soldiery  
Claimed me their prey.

(In Vinculis, p. 1.)

Then comes the humiliation of being sent to prison:

Here at the gate I lay down my life's treasure  
My pride, my garments and my name with men.

(In Vinculis, p. 2.)

He is sad to find liberty so elusive, despite his search for it and the yearning of his soul to see it embracing the whole world:

Long have I searched the earth for liberty,  
In desert places and lands far abroad

...

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1. W.S. Blunt, In Vinculis, (1889), pp. vii-viii.

Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood,  
These were my quarries, which eternally  
Fled my footsteps as I pursued,  
Sad phantoms of desire by land and sea.  
(In Vinculis, p. 7.)

This cry is recurrent in Blunt's poetry. On the centenary of the French Revolution, one of the best sonnets in A New Pilgrimage calls on France to reassert her noble principles:

Therefore do thou at least arise and warn,  
Not folded in thy mantle, a blind seer,  
But naked in thy anger, and new born,  
As in the hour when thy voice sounded clear  
To the world's slaves, and the tyrants quaked for fear.<sup>1</sup>

One of the sonnets of Esther, Sonnet XVIII, which serves as a flashback into the memory of his youthful zeal, contains a similar assertion, proudly made:

... Beauty, truth,  
Justice, compassion, peace with God and man  
These were my laws, the instincts of my youth,  
And hold me still ...

(Esther ..., p. 20.)

It was for these principles that he sacrificed his personal comfort in order to wage a campaign against the dark forces of tyranny. He did it spontaneously, in accordance with a natural urge to redress all wrong:

God knows it was not with a fore-reasoned plan  
I left the easeful dwelling of my peace,  
And sought this combat with ungodly Man,  
And ceaseless still through years that do not cease  
Have warred with Powers and Principalities.

(In Vinculis, p. 11.)

"Ungodly Man" here betrays a misanthropic hint, also recurrent in Blunt,

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1. N.P., Sonnet XVIII, p. 20.

(It is most interesting to notice that the first two lines of this sonnet are almost a literal translation of the first two verses of Chapter LXXIV of the Koran, which was one of the earliest Revelations to Prophet Mohammed:

O thou wrapped up (In a mantle)  
Arise and deliver thy warning!)



who came to believe that man was the spoiler of beauty in the world at large. He expresses this idea frankly in one of the sonnets of Esther (XXI):

I saw mankind a tribe, my natural foe  
Which I must one day battle with ...  
(Esther, p. 23.)

His chivalrous nature, and the call of duty, as he saw it, led him to take his attitude in support of the cause of liberty in Ireland. He saw Ireland as "A nation, suppliant in its agony / Calling on justice ...", and so he wanted to shoulder his human responsibility with courageous determination, because

Only the coward heart which did not guess,  
The dreamer of brave deeds that might have been,  
Shall cureless ache with wounds for ever green.  
(In Vinculis, p. 12.)

Herein lies an important key to the character of Blunt as a man of action who preferred to battle with the problems of life rather than dream in an ivory tower. This idea is recurrent in his poetry. He repeatedly asserts that life without action, noble motives and hope is worthless.<sup>1</sup> Sonnet XIII in In Vinculis expresses this view of life. The poet wants action

To endow the world's grief with some counter-scheme  
Of logical hope which through all times should lighten  
The burden of men's sorrow and redeem  
Their faces' paleness from tears that whiten;

and so, in a world darkened by the tyranny of power, he identifies himself with the suffering majority. He modestly aspires

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1. See "Sed Nos Qui Vivimus", XL and XLI in N.P., pp. 163-4; and "In Memoriam: W.M. & E.B.J.", especially the sestet, beginning: "What is Life's worth? To do ...", Works, I, p. 360.

To take my place in the World's brotherhood  
As one prepared to suffer all its fate;  
To do and be undone for sake of good,  
And conquer rage by giving love for hate;  
That were a noble dream, and so to cease,  
Scorned by the proud but with the poor at peace.

(In Vinculis, p. 13.)

As a knight-errant in search of heroic adventures, he chooses "Liberty"  
as the noble Lady in whose name his deeds are to be accomplished:

I thought to do a deed of chivalry,  
An act of worth, which haply in her sight  
Who was my mistress should recorded be  
And of the nations.

(In Vinculis, p. 14.)

The Irish episode, however, left a bitter taste in his mouth  
and put him in a sombre mood of depression. It was a culmination of  
a long series of frustrating failures in other lands, in Egypt, India,  
and the Sudan. He came out of prison with the cry:

No, I shall smile no more. Love's touch of pleasure  
Shall be as tears to me, fair words as gall,  
The sun as blackness, friends as a false measure,  
And Spring's blithe pageant on this earthly ball,  
If it should brag, shall earn from me no praise,  
But silence only to my end of days.

(In Vinculis, p. 16.)

"Poor Erin" strikes a similar tune, whose quiet sadness recalls the  
Lamentations of Jeremiah:

Oh Poor Erin! Alas poor Erin!  
What have you done that men hate you so?  
You have clung to your God while the rest despairing  
Bowed their souls in the house of woe.

In contrast to this melancholy, "Remember O'Brien!" is written in a  
style that harks back to the heated anger of The Wind and the  
Whirlwind. Written to instigate action on behalf of the imprisoned  
leader, this poem sounds like a marching song, to be chanted by the  
crowds in demonstrations. Its trochaic measure reflects quick  
movement in an atmosphere of tense agitation:

Wave your banners, march in chorus,  
Loud with passion, fierce with pain.  
Let your trumpets ring sonorous  
With the tramp of angry men.  
Meet your judges face to face.  
In each street and market place;

(In Vinculis, pp. 19-20.)

The eighteen-eighties represent a particularly turbulent phase in the history of the Irish question. The period saw the intensification of nationalistic agitations throughout Europe. In fact, this was the seed-time of totalitarian nationalism, as witness the establishment of such organizations as Britain's Primrose League (1883), France's League of Patriots (1882), Germany's Colonial Society (1882), in addition to the various Pan-Slavic movements that mushroomed after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-8. In Ireland, the Home Rule movement flourished with the emergence of a Nationalist Party under Parnell. This decade witnessed a series of controversial measures by successive governments to deal with the Irish Question: the Coercion Laws of 1880, the Land Act of 1881, the Kilmainham Treaty of 1882, the Crimes Act of 1887, etc. The most important aspect of this problem was the question of the land. The financial burden became too heavy on the Irish tenants at a time when the agricultural product was deteriorating under competition from abroad; in turn, the English landlords refused to reduce their rents. The Irish resistance to the subsequent evictions was organized by Davitt's Land League. This problem gave one of Blunt's books its name, The Land War in Ireland.

"The Canon of Aghrim", at the end of In Vinculis, is a long poem made up of seventy seven quatrains; and it is largely a versification of the views expressed by Dr. Duggan, Bishop of Clonfert, in conversation with Blunt when they visited the site of Aghrim, "the last battle fought by the Irish against William of Orange". It is a panoramic survey of the history of the Irish problem, describing the wrongs inflicted on the Irish peasants both in the battlefield and



making a few English landlords rich". Hence,

Seek them where I have found them, in New York, Liverpool,  
London,  
Cursing and cursed of all, a pustulous human growth,  
These same Irish children God made for his glory, undone  
Aye, and undoing your law, while black Hell gapes for you both.  
(In Vinculis, p. 58; cf: Ireland, p. 66.)

These hexameters (a measure rarely used by English poets), combining the dignity of the Iambic and the slow, heavy movement of the Anapaestic meters, are suitable to the serious mood of the occasion. The tone is conversational, and the effect is not achieved through any elaborate imagery or colourful description. It rather comes through the strong but quiet emotional undercurrent which is fully sustained throughout, sometimes recalling scenes from Oliver Goldsmith's "Deserted Village".

Towards the end of the poem, the canon warns "England's fat, full-bellied lion" that Irish violence may cross into England in revenge. Yet, in one of his later sonnets Blunt tells Ireland that her vengeance can be effected by other means: through love, not violence.

- What shall thy vengeance be? In that long night  
Thou hast essayed thy wrath in many ways,  
Slaughter and havoc and hell's deathless spite.  
They taught thee vengeance who thus schooled thy days,  
Taught all they know, but not this one divine  
Vengeance, to love them. Be that vengeance thine!<sup>1</sup>

The critical reception of In Vinculis was not unfavourable. The Athenaeum noted with some approval that the tone of these "prison musings" was "calmly self-restrained", and asserted that "He certainly writes much better in jail than out of it, to judge from the work in this volume."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand Percy Addleshaw, writing in The National Review several years later, considered the book "full of hysterical screaming, and some of us would forget it gladly". He

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1. "Ireland's Vengeance", Works, I, p. 363.

2. "In Vinculis. By Wilfrid Scawen Blunt", The Athenaeum, No. 3202, (March 9, 1889), pp. 303-4 (p. 304).

accused Blunt of lacking "self abnegation" so that "The calamities of a nation appear insignificant when matched against the amazing egoism of the man".<sup>1</sup> However, Lady Gregory<sup>2</sup> and George Wyndham<sup>3</sup> both gave a warm welcome to the volume, and saw no excessive self-assertion in it.

At the same time, In Vinculis is not as great as Oscar Wilde saw it to be. He seems to have been carried away by enthusiasm in his review in The Pall Mall Gazette. He proclaimed:

In Vinculis ... is a book that stirs one by its fine sincerity of purpose, its lofty and impassioned thought, its depth and ardour of intense feeling.<sup>4</sup>

and:

Literature is not much indebted to Mr. Balfour ... but it must be admitted that by sending Mr. Blunt to goal, he converted a clever rhymers into an earnest and deep thinking poet.<sup>5</sup>

In Vinculis is a forerunner of a more widely known work by Wilde, who probably recalled the work in Reading *Gaol*. His apologia from prison, which is known by Robert Ross's title, De Profundis, was originally sent to Lord Alfred Douglas with the title: Epistola : In Carcere et Vinculis.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps Blunt was his own severest critic. In a letter smuggled out of Galway Goal he stated:

I have written a few sonnets, but not very good ones, for one's brain is too ill-fed to work well. I have written those in my prayer-book, and they will be curious to look at some day, if nothing more.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Percy Addleshaw, op. cit., p. 203.
  2. Finch, pp. 224, 246.
  3. J.W. Mackail and Guy Wyndham, Life and Letters of George Wyndham, 2 vols. (1925), I, p. 230. Letter to W.S. Blunt dated 22-12-1888.
  4. Unsigned Review entitled "Poetry and Prison ...", The Pall Mall Gazette (3 Jan. 1889), p. 3. Reprinted in The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde, Edited by Richard Ellmann (1970), p. 116.
  5. Ibid., p. 118.
  6. Ibid., p. xxiv.
  7. W.S. Blunt, Ireland, p. 392.

An important outcome of his experience in prison, where political detainees were "placed on the same level of treatment with the most brutal wife-beater and the lowest pickpocket,"<sup>1</sup> was his Memorandum on Prison Reform: Especially as to the Treatment of Political Prisoners. Winston Churchill's first act as Home Secretary in Asquith's Cabinet was to ask for this work, and Blunt sent it to him on February 25, 1910. It was subsequently published in the September issue of The English Review. It seems that Churchill, who knew prison life in Pretoria during the Boer War, was anxious to improve the conditions for political prisoners. Indeed, Blunt records with pleasure, in My Diaries, that Churchill was putting the programme of his memorandum into practice.<sup>2</sup> Nothing could have been more timely, since these reforms came at the height of the suffragette troubles.

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Blunt's next volume, A New Pilgrimage and Other Poems (1889), is a record of a variety of experiences in life, contemplative and descriptive, rural and urban, serious and humorous, taking place in England and abroad. It has kaleidoscopic lights and shades. In most of these poems, Blunt shows a buoyant, upsurging spirit not unlike Browning's<sup>n</sup> gusto of optimism. In the words of The Saturday Review,

The manifold vitality which pulses in him finds an echo in his verse.<sup>3</sup>

It is in this volume that this remark is fully justified. These poems demand attention to their content rather than their form, for the latter has many imperfections. Victorian critics differ from their twentieth century counterparts in evaluating Blunt's versification. Except in his

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1. Ibid., p. 371.

2. My Diaries, pp. 706, 709, 710, 711, 729, 735, 736.

3. "Mr. Wilfrid Blunt's Poems", The Saturday Review, op. cit., p. 384.

unpublished first draft of Esther, which remained unpublished, Blunt did not make much use of blank verse. This is a principle to which he adhered till the end. He kept up this practice throughout his poetic career and disagreed with Yeats's use of the form:

I must say with all respect to Mr. Yeats that I do not like blank verse. To me it is quite a black beast - a thing I quarrel with.<sup>1</sup>

According to Frank Harris, Blunt was thus "proud of using a rhyming dictionary constantly, declaring that all good poets needed mechanical assistance".<sup>2</sup> In some poems, he used an iambic quatrain with the rhyme-schemes used by Fitzgerald in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (1859). The best example of this type is his long poem entitled "Quatrains of Life". Another metre which he favoured was the Alexandrine; Satan Absolved and his three plays, The Bride of the Nile, Fand of the Fair Cheek and The Little Left Hand are in rhyming Alexandrines. This was a neglected measure; and Blunt, handling it competently, called the attention of his Victorian contemporaries to its capacities.

The sonnet, however, remained his favourite vehicle of poetic expression. He wrote three hundred and thirty sonnets; in these he introduced individual, experimental innovations. "As freedom is everywhere his theme ...", Richard Le Gallienne observes, "so it was natural for him to express that general liberty which is the inspiration of his work in an unfettered freedom of utterance ...".<sup>3</sup> The changes ventured by Blunt involve nearly every aspect of the sonnet, the form, the rhyme arrangement, the structural construction, the length and the theme. In some sonnets, the octave and the sestet

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1. Richard Aldington, "Presentation to Mr. W.S. Blunt", The Egoist, I, (Feb. 2nd, 1914), pp. 56-57 (p. 57).
  2. Frank Harris, Contemporary Portraits, Fourth Series, (1924), p. 25.
  3. R. Le Gallienne, "Verses of an Emotional Epicurean", op. cit., p. 7.



are welded together so that no division can be discerned. Sonnets X and XXIV of "A New Pilgrimage" are examples of this defect. In revising Esther he adhered to the Shakespearean rhyme scheme; and in a number of other sonnets he tried different arrangements. This can be noticed in the sonnets of both In Vinculis and A New Pilgrimage. Brevity and precision are not always important to him; a number of his sonnets overflow into fifteen, sixteen or even twenty lines.

In most of these "innovations", however, Blunt was by no means the first. He had been preceded by a series of English masters who had tried their hands at modifications of this Italian form since the days of Wyatt. But Blunt was exceptionally rebellious. He refers to his early experience in writing sonnets with Robert Lytton:

Youth is all valiant. He and I together,  
Conscious of strength, and unreprieved of wrong,  
Strained at the world's conventions as a tether  
Too weak to bind us, and burst forth in song.

(Sonnet XXVI, N.P., p. 28).

Indeed, as early as 1881, in his review of The Love Sonnets of Proteus Lord Lytton defended Blunt's irregularities. "But if measured by the Italian standard, his [Shakespeare's] Sonnets are more irregular than those of Proteus".<sup>1</sup> Then he illustrated his point with the case of Petrarch's inability to produce one of his sonnets except after nearly six months of effort and repeated revisions, although he was "a consummate master" of this art.

When Blunt was preparing A New Pilgrimage for publication, he wrote a preface outlining his view of the English sonnet. His claims were bold. George Wyndham, while noticing that this preface "will give useful encouragement to the victims of critics", advised

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1. Lord Lytton, "A New Love Poet", op. cit., p. 768.

Blunt to modify his tone so as to sound less arrogant.<sup>1</sup> Blunt condemned the critics of his age, for whom "no sonnet is admissible in English other than the Petrarchan ..." and contended that, beyond the works of Milton, Wordsworth, Mrs. Browning and Rossetti

... there are probably not a hundred English sonnets in the strict Petrarchan measure which are not intolerably dull ... Tennyson, the greatest of our living poets, ... gives us hardly a specimen on contemporary subjects of his skill.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt does not see any reason, "beyond the trammels of convention" and the dictates of critics, " ... the Scribes and Pharisees of the New Testament", to restrict the choice of themes that can be treated in the sonnet form.<sup>3</sup> To him, this vehicle is suitable for every subject and every mood of feeling; and he finds it justifiable to exceed the fourteen-line limit so as to allow himself "sufficient elbow-room". He stresses the importance of the final couplet as "the most precious inheritance from the greatest of all our sonneteers and poets [Shakespeare]".<sup>4</sup>

Blunt's departures from convention were deliberate, but they gave his adversaries ample room for attack. The reviews that appeared in The Athenaeum and The Saturday Review, for example, dwelt only on Blunt's alleged ignorance of the form. The Athenaeum reviewer does not examine the contents, but merely hammers at the point that these poems are not sonnets and should not be called sonnets.<sup>5</sup> The Saturday Review scolded similarly:

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1. Life and Letters of George Wyndham, op. cit., I, Letter to Blunt, 5-9-1889, p. 234.
  2. W.S. Blunt, N.P., p. viii. For Tennyson's opinion of "the perfect sonnet", see: William Allingham, A Diary, ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford (1907), p. 302.
  3. N.P., p. ix.
  4. Ibid., p. xii.
  5. "A New Pilgrimage and Other Poems. By Wilfrid Scawen Blunt", The Athenaeum, No. 3253 (March 1, 1890), pp. 271-2 (p. 272).

Like a painter who patches his canvass, if Mr. Blunt cannot say what he wishes in a quarterzain, he extends the piece to fifteen, sixteen, or more lines ... There is no real excuse for this. Nobody compels Mr. Blunt to write sonnets, but if he chooses to do so, he ought to play the game.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt drew another scoff from A.E. Housman, who is reported to have pencilled on the half-title of a copy of The Love Sonnets of Proteus:

If boots were bonnets  
These might be sonnets  
But boots are not;<sup>2</sup>  
So don't talk rot.

Blunt's defective rhymes (sun, come; arena, demeanour; hands, France; loose, woes; is, vice; hymn, dream ... etc.) were also noted with regret, even by more sympathetic critics, such as Ouida,<sup>3</sup> The Spectator<sup>4</sup>, and Samuel C. Chew.<sup>5</sup>

Critical opinions became more tolerant, even appreciative, after the turn of the century. Representative samples of such evaluation of the positive qualities of Blunt's sonnets can be found in the writings of David Morton,<sup>6</sup> Richard Le Gallienne,<sup>7</sup> R.L. Megroz<sup>8</sup> and B. Ifor Evans.<sup>9</sup> In this diversity of opinion, perhaps the best assessment is that of Le Gallienne:

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1. "Mr. Wilfrid Blunt's Poems", The Saturday Review, op. cit., p. 384.
  2. William White, "A.E. Housman on Blunt and Kipling", Notes and Queries, 181 (Nov. 29, 1941), p. 301.
  3. Ouida, op. cit., p. 147.
  4. "Proteus Unbound", The Spectator, 63 (Nov. 30, 1889), pp. 758-760 (p. 759).
  5. Samuel C. Chew, "Wilfrid Scawen Blunt : An Intimate View", The North American Review, 217, (May, 1923), pp. 664-675 (p. 673).
  6. David Morton, "Poems Old and New", The Bookman, 47, pp. 459-462 (p. 460).
  7. Richard Le Gallienne, op. cit., p. 7.
  8. R.L. Megroz, op. cit., p. 259.
  9. B. Ifor Evans, op. cit., p. 347.

But though his work ... is tantalizingly imperfect, there is such a spirit of life through it all that is of greater human value than the more perfect work of men less vitally inspired. If we care more for what he says than for how he says it, at least he has something to say which very much needed saying, and cannot be said too often.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, only a few of the sonnets illustrate Blunt's irregularities. As he continued to write in this form, he adhered more closely to the customary fourteen lines. Of the 114 sonnets of The Love Sonnets of Proteus, only 29 have more or fewer than 14 lines: four have 13 lines, seven have 15 lines, twelve have 16 lines, one has 17 lines, three have 18 lines, one has 19 lines and one has 20 lines. Although these 114 sonnets have a great variety of rhyme patterns, the majority of the octaves follow the Spenserian pattern (abbaacca, or: ababbaba), while the majority of the sestets follow either the Petrarchan or Shakespearean rhyme patterns. Blunt's "astonishing crudities", Anthony Clyne observes, "are not the result of ignorance or defective musical sense"; Blunt, he suggests, has rather "of set purpose rough-hewn his sonnets either for the sake of a theory or with the insouciance of a gifted amateur."<sup>2</sup> The only principle that he upholds is the sonnet's unity of thought, or what he calls "intellectual measure"; and in this respect he seems to be "anticipating the modern impatience with the fetters of traditional verse".<sup>3</sup>

The poems of A New Pilgrimage, which are mostly descriptive and meditative, raise an important aspect, namely the Byronic element in Blunt - a strain most conspicuous in this particular volume. In

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1. R. Le Gallienne, op. cit., p. 7. Cf: Anthony Clyne, "The Poetry of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt", The Bookman, (June 1921), pp. 130-132 (p. 131).
  2. Anthony Clyne, op. cit., p. 130.
  3. B. Ifor Evans, op. cit., p. 347.

general, Blunt's poetry shows influences of other masters, such as Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth and the early Tennyson. Sometimes, there are even touches of earlier, eighteenth century poets, such as Goldsmith and Pope. But most critics are unanimous in stressing his Byronic qualities, with various degrees of emphasis. Apart from his kinship to Byron through his marriage to Byron's grand-daughter, what is it exactly that is Byronic in Blunt?

The two poets had a great deal in common. Although not titled, Blunt, like Byron, had wealth and independence, and belonged to a family with a long history. His liberal principles made him a rebel in the ranks of the aristocracy. He had a desire for action and travel. He had an assertive ego and a love of self-dramatization. Like Byron, he was a promiscuous lover of many women, although he was more discreet. He shared Byron's anger against the hypocrisies of his society and enjoyed flouting them. Like Byron, he also had a paradoxical love of loneliness and indulgence in the busy world around him; but in his social behaviour he showed more decorum than Byron. However, he was too pessimistic to share Byron's broad, ecstatic and healthy laugh. Byron's sense of humour and satirical spirit were more successfully channelled through his poetry than Blunt's. Blunt also had ambitions to help liberate down-trodden nations, and, like Byron, took practical steps and made personal sacrifices to promote their causes. In his youth, he became an admirer of Byron.<sup>1</sup> During his travels in the East he came to believe that "to champion the cause of Arabian liberty would be as worthy an endeavour as had been that for which Byron had died in 1827."<sup>2</sup> Even when he was imprisoned in Ireland

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1. Finch, p. 34.

2. W.S. Blunt, Secret History, p. 6. (Byron died in 1824, not 1827).

for defending a similar cause, Byron's shadow must have loomed large in his mind; because, like Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon", his suffering was mitigated by little "pleasures" in the company of birds, spiders and mice.<sup>1</sup> Different writers view this close similarity between the two poets from different angles, and so they differ in assessing the influence of Byron on Blunt. Shane Leslie, writing in 1916, considered that "he is not far removed from the Byronic tradition which has made English gentlemen the symbol of madness and generosity abroad".<sup>2</sup> Again in 1934, he lamented the absence of Englishmen of such calibre in modern times:

The Victorian male has gone with his keenness and heartiness ... Byron had lived again in Wilfred [Sic] Blunt, but no reincarnation followed the War. Childe Harold lay in a French Cemetery with a white stone at his head.<sup>3</sup>

Anthony Clyne sees the Byronic elements in Blunt as "romantic fervour ... versatility of pursuits ... Championship of national freedom ... vitality ... worldly insouciance".<sup>4</sup> These are vague, general terms; indeed the Byronic element in Blunt's verse is not easily defined, and has yielded little useful discussion. Percy Addleshaw rightly argues that Blunt's work is suggestive of "the Byronic atmosphere, yet strangely enough not a single line or expression of the elder poet is recalled".<sup>5</sup> Samuel C. Chew, who asserts that "The Byronic tradition,

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1. In Vinculis, X, p. 10, and Ireland, pp. 379-80. Cf: "The Prisoner of Chillon", X and XIV, Poetical Works of Lord Byron, Collected and Arranged with Notes by Sir Walter Scott et. al. (1883), pp. 141-2.
  2. Shane Leslie, The End of a Chapter, (1916), p. 162.
  3. Shane Leslie, The Passing Chapter, (1934), p. 36.
  4. Anthony Clyne, op. cit., p. 131. Cf: "The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt", The Spectator, (July 1, 1899), pp. 20-21 (p. 20). Similar terms are used by Edward Thomas in a short review, "The Poetical Works of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt", in the Christmas supplement of The Bookman, 47 (Dec. 1914), pp. 34-36 (p. 36).
  5. Percy Addleshaw, op. cit., p. 203.

a scanty stream in later English verse, flows at its clearest in his poetry", does not elaborate, although he points out the "Byronic force and passion" of The Wind and the Whirlwind. W.E. Henley, joint editor of The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt, sees the Byronic quality in the fact that Blunt,

... who has read his Shakespeare and his Bible and his "Juan", ... has learned - what some greater poets but worse masters of English have not - that any word is good enough so long as it is the one word wanted.<sup>1</sup>

This testimony is endorsed by the co-editor, George Wyndham. "I am sure" he declares in a letter to the poet, "I prefer your vocabulary to that of all the other contemporary writers" (Wyndham's stress).<sup>2</sup>

Among the warring opinions of reviewers, the discernment of Yeats suggests a positive view. In a letter to Grierson dated Feb. 21, 1926, Yeats held that Byron was the only English poet to pursue, continuously and indefatigably, the "natural momentum in the syntax"; and Yeats found that Blunt had this quality "here and there in some Elizabethan sounding sonnet and [he] is then very great".<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Yeats associates Blunt with Blake, Keats and Browning as having "a deep masculine resonance" coming from "a perfect accord between intellect and blood, lacking ... since the death of Cowley", thus producing rhythms that "combine the bull and the nightingale". A modern writer, John Heath-Stubbs, compares Yeats himself to Blunt in the context of discussing the Byronic virility, athletic movement and "muscular vigour" of Blunt's style: Blunt's "masculinity", "engaging frankness" and "passionate, unreasoned feeling of revolt" entitle him to be "almost the only legitimate heir of Byron among English poets".<sup>4</sup>

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1. The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt, edited by W.E. Henley and George Wyndham, (1898), p. vi.
  2. Letter to Blunt, May 18, 1889, Life and Letters of George Wyndham, op. cit., I, p. 233.
  3. Allan Wade (ed.) The Letters of W.B. Yeats (1954), p. 710; cf: Yeat's essay on "Louis Lambert", Essays by W.B. Yeats, 1931-1936 (The Cuala Press, Dublin, 1937), pp. 72-73.
  4. John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain (1950), pp. 202-3.

In A New Pilgrimage (1889), the poem that gives its title to the volume is a sequence of thirty nine sonnets of the descriptive and meditative type found in Wordsworth's Yarrow Revisited.<sup>1</sup> Blunt sees himself as another Childe Harold travelling through Europe, a world-weary pilgrim giving an account of his feelings and memories. He leaves England and the turbulent days of his adventurous youth behind him, and proceeds through the continent, like Goldsmith's Traveller, to survey the lands of France, Switzerland and Italy. The poem is full of the elements of struggle, suffering and conflict, both external and internal, on more than one level, including religious doubts, soul-searching questions about life, death and human destiny, the contradictions between the past and the present, and the great gap between the ideal dreams and actual realities in the world. Unlike Childe Harold, A New Pilgrimage lacks the powerful sweep of the Byronic grand style; but it also succeeds in avoiding Childe Harold's tedious, sprawling length. After describing the cares that eat away at his soul, Blunt thinks that travel is the cure; hence,

I will break through my bondage. Let me be  
Homeless once more, a wanderer on the earth  
Marked with my soul's care for company ...  
(N.P., III, p. 5.)

Having done that, he becomes "a pilgrim of new days / On the high road of life", leaving behind him his "Griefs fog-born of Father Thames". His impressions of Paris and France are given in fifteen sonnets (VI - XX), six of which (VIII - XIII) represent a flash-back

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1. In his Poetical Works (1914), Blunt added another sonnet, bringing the number to 40, perhaps because The Spectator wondered whether the number coincided with the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England. See "Proteus Unbound", op. cit., p. 759.



recalling scenes and feelings of former visits. His descriptions alternate between the Paris of love, beauty and temptation on the one hand, and the Paris of revolutions, political ideas and rich history, on the other. Paris seems to welcome him like a carefree courtesan:

How lovely her streets smile on me - how bright  
Her shops, her houses, fair sepulchral things,  
Stored with the sins of men forgotten quite,  
The love of mountebanks, the lust of kings!

(N.P., VII, p. 9.)

The sonnets describing Paris are among his best poetry. His account of the virtues and vices of this city, and of France in general, strike a note of high lyricism, especially in sonnets XIV, XV and XVI. In sonnet XVII he makes a violent attack on the greed of imperial powers; here Blunt probably refers to the French occupation of Tunisia in 1881 and the English occupation of Egypt in 1882. In the next sonnet, he sees hope for a better age through the revival of the principles of liberty that France gave to the world exactly a hundred years before. So, he calls on France to

... leave to England her sad creed of gold;  
Plead thou man's rights, clean-handed as of old.

(N.P., XVIII, p. 20.)

Of the nine sonnets devoted to Switzerland, (XXI-XXIX), six are recollections of past experiences. A strain of melancholy steals into sonnet XXII, which expresses a mood of doubt reminiscent of In Memoria or Arnold's darkling plain in "Dover Beach":

But when faith faltered, when the hope grew dim,  
And heaven was hid with phantoms of despair,  
And man stood trembling on destruction's brim,  
Then turned he to the earth, and found her fair;  
His home, his refuge, which no doubt could rob,  
A beauty throbbing to his heart's throb.

(N.P., XXII, p. 24.)

These doubts recur in other songs and sonnets; and the lack of faith even curtails his enjoyment of the beauties of nature (Sonnet XXIV).

So, he reaches to friendship for reassurance, making Biblical references as he likens himself and Lytton to David and Jonathan (Sonnet XXVII). Again, descending from the Alps to Rome, he likens himself to Moses, stepping down "from Horeb to the plain", in Sonnet XXX. Sombre meditations continue to dominate the religious atmosphere of Italy. The influence of Shelley's "Adonais" appears in Blunt's contempt for the glories of imperial Rome. This similarity becomes obvious when Blunt's Sonnet XXXVI is compared to stanzas XLVIII and XLIX in Shelley's poem:

The majesty of Rome to me is nought;  
The imperial story of her conquering car  
Touches me only with compassionate thought  
For the doomed nations faded by her star.

(Blunt: N.P., XXXVI, p. 38).

Or go to Rome, which is the sepulchre,  
O, not of him, but of our joy: 'tis nought  
That ages, empires and religions there  
Lie buried in the ravage they have wrought;

(Shelley: "Adonais", XLVII).

Rome does not give satisfactory assurance to this latter-day Childe Harold; and in Rome his pilgrimage "breaks off unfinished like its great prototype, with tantalizing abruptness".<sup>1</sup>

(iii) Form in the poetry

The poems of Blunt form an integrated whole telling the story of his life, describing his experience and summarizing his philosophy. This autobiographical element can be traced from the prose works, which describe the events treated in his verse. Through this process, Blunt reveals his Protean character; each poem reveals one of its many aspects, facets or episodes. The sequence entitled "The Idler's Calendar" illuminates the various reflections of a poet not

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1. William Watson, "Poetry by Men of the World", op. cit., p. 528.

troubled by stress or anxiety. This poem is a series of twelve "sonnets", divided according to the months of the year, like Spenser's Shepherd's Calendar; describing the poet's seasonal pleasures. Here Blunt tries his hand at lighter themes. The poet is in a sportive mood, indulging in pleasures available to a rich man of the world, plunging into them with the same enthusiasm that is characteristic of his more serious activities. Blunt's life typifies the way in which the higher classes of society of the 1880s - and 1890s - began to shed inhibitions in order to enjoy their affluence despite the general economic depression. Blunt here seems to be pursuing pleasure for pleasure's sake, describing it "with masterly skill and ... gusto".<sup>1</sup> Like Byron, he saw the world as a stage for the pursuit of pleasures, not alone, but in the company of some of the most prominent men of his time. For example, the sonnet for April (Trout Fishing), refers to his excursions with William Morris;<sup>2</sup> the one for June, entitled "A Day at Hampton Court" refers to games of lawn tennis with, among others, George Wyndham and Arthur J. Balfour;<sup>3</sup> the sonnet for July, "Greenswood", refers to the races he used to attend with people like Lord Esmé Howard.<sup>4</sup> Partridge shooting, described in the sonnet for September, was the sport he used to enjoy with Prince Wagram and other French royalists;<sup>5</sup> and so on.

"The Idler's Calendar" is written in an easy-flowing, almost conversational style that brings it very near to modern prose. It is "as pleasant as it is unpretentious". Sometimes there are touches

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1. A Nairne, "The Poetry of Mr. Wilfrid Blunt", op. cit., p. 175.
  2. N.P., p. 49; cf: My Diaries, pp. 23-24.
  3. N.P., p. 51; cf: Ireland, p. 304.
  4. N.P., p. 52; cf: Esmé Howard, Theatre of Life (1935), p. 75.
  5. N.P., p. 54; cf: My Diaries, pp. 54, 55, 77.

of humour that recall Pope, as in the case of the "mighty trout" which is likened to Samson,

Upon the grass he lies, and gasps the air,  
Four silver pounds, sublimely fat and fair.

(N.P., p. 49.)

In addition to such outdoor sports, Blunt enjoyed the indoor town entertainments in the busy London season. He invokes the warm, glamorous atmosphere of fashionable London, with

The flowers, the incense, and the pageantry  
Of generations which still ask a sign  
Of that dear god, whose votary am I.  
I love "the greetings in the market place,"  
The jargon of the clubs. I love to view  
The "gilded youth" who at the window pass,  
Forever smiling smiles forever new.

(N.P., p. 50.)

These trivialities, described in simple yet evocative strokes in the style of Pope's Rape of the Lock, also recall the woodland scene of Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn". It says a great deal of Blunt's talent that he combines such divergent influences as the neo-classical and the romantic, without producing second-rate or derivative poetry here. In this technique of allusion he anticipates the later work of Pound and T.S. Eliot.

The individual units of "The Idler's Calendar" are sixteen-line pieces; yet Blunt insists on calling them sonnets. This claim can be accepted only if the rules are stretched. We can consider them as "caudated" sonnets, particularly since the last two lines usually form a couplet which neatly rounds off each poem with a touch of finality. If this sort of licence is allowed, then we must credit Blunt for his success in enhancing the use of the sonnet as a mould for his vers de société. In fact, one of the principal promoters of this genre of light verse, Frederick Locker-Lampson, "who was the chief inspirer and influencer of Austin Dobson",<sup>1</sup> was Blunt's friend,

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1. Herbert Palmer, op. cit., p. 11.

neighbour and fellow-member of the Crabbet Club, where this type of non-serious composition was promoted by Blunt in his small circle. One of Blunt's numerous "acrostic" sonnets contains the name of Frederick Locker.<sup>1</sup> Other names are scattered in his later sonnets and lyrics, most of which are casual trifles of topical interest as verses of occasion. These can be found on pp. 151, 335-7, 345-6, 359-361, 367-372 and 382-6. of the first volume of his Poetical Works. Even in his playful mood, Blunt's virtuosity is reflected in his mastery of the technicalities of poetic composition. The great variety of length in his lines and rhyme arrangements can be appreciated if we look at the poems on pp. 108, 115, 117-120, 139, 142, 143, 148-9, 151, 162, 369, 372, 382 and 388 of the same volume. The overall impression of this portion of his poetry is that it "is healthy, normal, for it throbs with the pulse of life; coarse sometimes, maybe, but always honest and powerful".<sup>2</sup> In addition to his ability to control the length of his lines, Blunt shows his prosodic capacities in choosing the number of lines in his stanzas. One can find examples of almost every conceivable form, and even some formless, unconventional, loosely-knit poems. He moulds his verses in couplets,<sup>3</sup> triplets,<sup>4</sup> quatrains,<sup>5</sup> quintains,<sup>6</sup> sestets,<sup>7</sup> 'Rhymes-royals',<sup>8</sup> Ottava-Rima,<sup>9</sup> etc. He is at his best

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1. W.S. Blunt, "The Rowfant Catalogue", Works, I, p. 361.
  2. Percy Addleshaw, op. cit., p. 205.
  3. "Worth Forest", N.P., pp. 111-143; "Griselda", Works, I, pp. 207-278.
  4. "The Stricken Hart", "To Nimue", "Written at Sea", Works, I, pp. 120, 388-390 and 151-154 respectively.
  5. "Quatrains of Life", ibid., pp. 413-456.
  6. "Oh Fly Not, Pleasure", "Wilt Thou Take Me for a Slave", "If I Forget Thee" and "Death in a Ball-Room", ibid., pp. 108, 117, 388, and 400-403 respectively.
  7. "Oh for a Day of Spring", "A Summer in Tuscany", "Butterflies", "A Ballad of the Heather", "On the Way to Church", and "Don Juan's Good Night", ibid., pp. 100, 136-9, 141-2, 162-3, and 380-381 respectively.
  8. "Lilac and Gold and Green", "Dead Joys", "To Hester on the Stair", "Not a Word" and "Love is Master Still", ibid., pp. 121, 123-4, 135-6, 142 and 369 respectively.
  9. "Love me a Little", "Song of the Desert Lark", "Glad Bird, I do Bewail Thee", "They shall not know", "The Soul's Mutiny", "Think No More of Me", "Love in the Summer Hill" and "The Desert Wind", ibid., pp. 99-100, 115, 116-7, 139-140, 146-8, 148-9, 372 and 398-400 respectively.



up to his fate with rare courage, and welcomes death as a gate to another, greater and richer life. George Wyndham considered this poem "an addition to the wealth of English literature":

It is like a strong wine of the country, ... It is meat and drink after the kickshaws and Tockay of our "Ballade" - mongers and sonneteers. It is the Catholic South.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of life as a drama of conflict and struggle and of the world as its arena is recurrent in the poetry of Blunt; and he is never tired of repeating such a concept, whether in the context of introspective meditation as he thinks of the riddle of man's fate or when he asserts the necessity of facing life's challenges despite the great gulf between man's limitless ambitions and his limited capacities. He is propelled by a sense of mission that prevents him from yielding to the temptation of ease and dreamy indolence.<sup>2</sup>

Another innovation attempted by Blunt "in all diffidence" was the introduction of rhyming by assonance, "a form of ending which has never been seriously tried in English metres".<sup>3</sup> This experiment, carried out in the two poems "From the Arabic" and "Sed Nos Qui Vivimus" in A New Pilgrimage, as well as in The Stealing of the Mare, had its origins in Arabic tradition, which was well known to the poet. Assonance produces rich, melodious cadences in two forms of Arabic, namely the highest, majestic tone of the Koran, and, at another level, in the ballades and songs of the desert: but it is never allowed in classical Arabic poetry. Blunt heard recitations of both types in his

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1. Life and Letters of George Wyndham, op. cit., Letter to Blunt, 5-9-1889, I, p. 235.
  2. See Sonnet XCV (entitled "He is Not a Poet"), "A Vision", "Ambition", "A Woman's Sonnets, XII: The Same continued", and "Quatrains of Life", Works, I, pp. 86, 341, 342, 352 and 413-456 (Passim) respectively. See also "The Wisdom of Merlyn", Ibid., II, pp. 469-471; Sonnet XV in In Vinculis, p. 15; and "Sed Nos Qui Vivimus", stanzas XLVIII, LVII and LVIII in N.P., pp. 167 and 172 respectively.
  3. N.P., p. vi.

travels. In Egypt, wandering minstrels used to sing, among other things, parts of The Stealing of the Mare in cafés and street corners. In fact, this tradition has not yet died away in many Arab countries. Both Koranic and folklorish verses leave in the ear a lingering echo of deep, long, almost wailing tones, loaded with melancholic nostalgia. The Bedouin songs are described by Lady Anne Blunt in both her books: Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates (1879) and A Pilgrimage to Nejd (1881). An elegiac song is described as "having a caressing supplicating tone which won our attention at once". Another had a tune which "might have passed in Spain as a Malagueña". The Bedouin's rebab is described as "a curious little fiddle ... made of parchment and a bow strung with horse hair". Using this simple instrument, Ghanim (the camel-driver) produced "an alternation of chords and discords worthy of Wagner himself".<sup>1</sup> The strict rules of prosodic structure that belong to classical Arabic poetry are considerably relaxed in colloquial songs. Lady Anne transliterates one of Shammar's war songs:

Ma arid ana erkabu delul,  
Lau zeyenuli shedadeha;  
Aridu ana hamra shenuf  
Hamra seryeh aruddeha.

I would not ride a mere delul (Camel),  
Though lovely to me her shedad (Camel saddle);  
Let me be mounted on a mare  
A bay mare, swift and quick to turn.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt succeeded in capturing the spirit of these desert songs and reproducing their melodious effect through assonance. In a series of rich, evocative images, he recreates the desert atmosphere, of which he had first-hand knowledge, and many lines hark back to his travels

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1. Lady Anne Blunt, Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates, II, pp. 12-13. Lady Anne, it must be remembered, was a competent violinist. See also A Pilgrimage to Nejd, I, pp. 71, 98.
  2. A Pilgrimage to Nejd, II, p. 29.



in Arabia. The images in stanzas IX, X and XI of "The Camel Rider", for example, are recollections of the features of the Euphrates Valley. The references to the valley of Thyme, to Saba, and to hearth stones are contrived to convey suggestive associations; such references are recurrent in ancient Arabic love poetry. Here are some samples of the effect of assonance in conveying an impression of the forlorn lover and his yearnings in search of his absent beloved - a major theme in Arabic poetry, whether ancient or modern, classical or colloquial, Bedouin or urban:

The plain was dumb, as emptied of all voice;  
No bleat of herds, no camels roaring far below  
Told of their presence in the pastures void,  
Of the waste places which had been their homes.  
(N.P., p. 90.)

The summer wind has passed upon their fields;  
The rain has purged their hearth-stones, and made  
smooth their floors;  
Low in the valley lie their broken spears,  
And the white bones which are their tale forlorn.  
(Ibid., p. 92).

Sadly I rose at dawn, undid the latch of my shutters,  
Thinking to let in light, but I only let in love  
Birds in the boughs were awake; I listened to their chaunting;  
Each one sang to his love; only I was alone.  
(Ibid., p. 95.)

Love, I am sick for thee, sick with an absolute grief,  
Sick with the thought of thy eyes and lips and bosom.  
All the beauty I saw, I see to my hurt revealed.  
All that I felt I feel today for my pain and sorrow.  
(Ibid., p. 101).

These lines, it must be noted, are imitations and not translations of any Arabic text. Blunt penetrates and captures the spirit of the Arabic tradition; in contrast, Sir William Jones's "Solaima" depends for its "Arabian" qualities on various Arabic names that occur in it, and it appears stilted in comparison.<sup>1</sup> At the more distant beginning of the

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1. The Works of the English Poets, ed. by A. Chalmers, 21 vols., (1810), vol., XVIII, pp. 457-8.

vogue for oriental themes in English verse, Collins's "Oriental Eclogues" make no claim to be written in an Arabic mode, and the oriental names in them have no effect at all.<sup>1</sup> Blunt is more successful than both Shelley<sup>2</sup> and Francis Thompson<sup>3</sup> in their similar attempts, in spite of Megroz's praise of the latter.<sup>4</sup> With Blunt, only Edward FitzGerald and Laurence Hope (Adela Nicolson) succeed in imitating the oriental atmosphere. In the case of Adela Nicolson, her success was due partly to her passionate sympathy with things oriental, after her contact with a number of cultured Muslims in India, and after having actually lived in the North African Saharah.

It is difficult to analyse the elements or to trace the actual creative processes that give rise to this atmosphere. In the Arabic song, which is usually meant to be heard over long distances when chanted, the long vowels (which Blunt tries to reproduce in his English imitation) impart a plaintive echo to the song, reflecting the yearnings of the soul of the Bedouin lover. Even in modern songs today, there are at least three prominent types that stem from these ancient traditions. The Mawwal (mostly used in Egypt), the Atāba (mostly used in Syria), and the Maqām (mostly used in Iraq) have the common characteristic of containing heavy, slow and long-drawn tunes that are also reproduced by the Arabic instrument, the lute. The Arabs speak

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1. Ibid., vol. XIII, pp. 195-7.
  2. P.B. Shelley, "From the Arabic: An Imitation", The Poetical Works, The "Albion" Edition (London and New York: Frederick Warne and Co., n.d.), p. 504.
  3. Francis Thompson, "Arab Love Song", The Poems of Francis Thompson, Ed. by Wilfrid Meynell, Oxford Standard Authors Edition (1937; Reptd. 1960), p. 134.
  4. R.L. Megroz, Francis Thompson (1927), pp. 229-230.

metaphorically of a good musician as one who is able to "make the lute weep". The nearest effect to this in Western music is the sound of the oboe. Another element which Blunt captures in his Arabic imitations is the undercurrent of warm emotion, felt even by the natural objects, which do not act as a merely passive, inanimate background, but also sympathize with the singer in his suffering. The wind, the sand, the stars and the camel become active participants in the human drama, as can be seen in stanzas III, IV, V and VI of "The Camel Rider". The she-camel was

Jangling her bells aloud in wantonness,  
And sighing soft, she too, her sighs to my soul's sighs;  
Behind us the wind followed thick with scents  
Of incense blossoms and the dew of the night.

(N.P., p. 88).

Blunt's attempt to produce "the illusion of rhyme" through assonance was by no means a failure. It merely did not receive the encouragement it deserved, though it was praised by Le Gallienne and Addleshaw. W.E. Henley frowned on it; but he was hardly justified in thinking that Blunt had "wasted on his experiment much admirable emotion which he had better cast in an English rhythm".<sup>1</sup> Arabic is rich in sonorous cadences and melodious, rhyming syllables whose effect cannot be conveyed in the comparatively limited rhythms and rhyming words available in English. However, assonance was one of the means used by Blunt, adroitly and sparingly, to adhere to the spirit of musical values and delicate nuances in Arabic poetry. Words rhyming through full correspondence of sound are so readily available in Arabic that they are spontaneously used even in prose, particularly in oratory and in popular stories. A series of such stories known as

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1. W.E. Henley's Prefatory note to The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt, (1898), p. ix.

Al-Maḡamāt (The Assemblies), written by the Mediaeval Muslim author, Al-Ḥariri, were known to Blunt through the translation of his fellow Arabophile, Thomas Chenery, editor of The Times. Consonance and assonance in Arabic words are known as "saj'a", a name taken from the repeated patterns in the cooing of a pigeon. In Arabic poetry, the repetition of the same sound does not give the effect of monotony, perhaps because there are some twenty-four prosodic types of irregularity permitted in Arabic metres, giving ample room for rhythmic variety. One of the important sources of this abundance of similar sound patterns in Arabic is the flexible adaptability of the structure of the word itself. The internal mechanism of the word follows a consistent grammatical logic in the formulation of a large variety of derivatives by using the same ways of addition or omission of prefixes and suffixes in almost every word, or even by making certain changes in the middle of the word sometimes (see Appendix). Such patterns of modification give rise to rhyming or consonant derivatives whose original roots may have totally dissimilar sounds.

Blunt's assonant patterns are mostly concentrated on the positions of the vowels. Sometimes there is a vague similarity in the vowel sounds in the accented syllables, such as, tear: thee; road: warned; broke: hope; blame: day; night: life. Other types show resemblance only in the final consonant sound; for example, mire: venture; mould: blood; action: magician; reason: passion. It is only the unaccented syllables that rhyme in cases like heaven: burden; blended: kneaded; older: wonder; weather: never; patron: gurdon. Other rhymes show unlikeness in the final consonants, such as grief: piece; old: soul; smile: blind; reign: earth; us: sun. Another pattern shows unlikeness in both the unaccented vowels and consonants; bondage:

pastures; hamlets: battle; of pleasure: compassion; answered: yearning; wisdom: cymbal. There are also cases where the medial consonants are unlike, older: wonder; before: is born; pleasure: vesture; meaning: Egypt; record: and God; and, finally, cases where both medial and final consonants are unlike, such as latch: hand; prison: wisdom; fastly: answer; descended: exulting; green: speech; floor: forlorn.

Another difficulty in the process of imitation is the technical difference between English and Arabic measures. The latter are quantitative, rather like the classical Greek and Latin measures. To the four principal meters of English verse, Arabic poetry can be moulded in sixteen different prosodic measures. In his effort to reproduce its forceful rhythms, Blunt resorted to recurrent spondees in a number of lines. Here is an example:

Here came  $\bar{I}$  in the morning of  $\bar{m}y$   $\bar{j}oys$   
Before the dawn was born, through the  $\bar{d}ark$   $\bar{d}own$ s I rode  
The  $\bar{l}ow$   $\bar{s}t\bar{a}r$ s led me on as with a voice  
Stars of the scorpion's tail in the  $\bar{d}eep$   $\bar{s}ou$ th.  
(N.P., p. 88.)

Another device to achieve this effect was the use of trochaic and dactylic measures, as in Blunt's translation of the Moallakat. Similarly, Tennyson's "Locksley Hall", which was influenced by the Moallakat, was written in trochaic heptameters and octameters.

The Victorian critics seem to have felt secure in the shell of their traditional conventions. Blunt's assonance does not warrant the scathing remarks of William Watson:

We English, we kinsmen of Chaucer and Milton, shall love verse with rhyme, and shall love verse that is frankly without rhyme, but shall hold no parley with the bastard thing that is a compromise between these two.<sup>1</sup>

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1. William Watson, "Poetry by Men of the World", op. cit., p. 528.

However, this technique, which "had little established precedence to justify it as a popular intrusion" at the time, was later successfully taken up by other poets such as Austin Clarke and Frank Kendon.<sup>1</sup> In this experiment, Blunt was the forerunner of a number of modern British and American poets, such as Archibald MacLeish, W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Amy Lowell, Walter de la Mare and others.<sup>2</sup> In his preface to A New Pilgrimage ..., he expressed his belief that "his attempt will be one day considered valuable". This is another prophecy which came true; and it warrants a revision of previous judgements on his assonance. A good example illustrating the truth of his prophecy can be found in the poetry of his namesake, Wilfred Owen. He is perhaps one of the most successful modern poets in the extensive use of assonance as a "favourite device", particularly in his "Strange Meeting", whose "solemn magnificence", according to Vivian de Sola Pinto, "recalls Keats's revised version of Hyperion". Good examples of Owen's assonance can also be discerned in his "famous little elegy", entitled "Futility". Pinto, who calls this device "para-rhyme" (consonant rhyme with vowel dissonance), agrees with Edmund Blunden in admiring its "remarkable effect ... of remoteness, darkness, emptiness, shock, echo".<sup>3</sup> This is exactly the effect achieved by Blunt's precedent in both "From the Arabic" and The Stealing of the Mare. Pinto does refer, elsewhere in his book, to the "unrhymed metres" of this latter work as "Blunt's most interesting contribution to English prosody"; yet, strangely enough, he does not give Blunt's

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1. Herbert Palmer, op. cit., p. 28; cf: R.L. Megroz, Modern English Poetry, op. cit., p. 259.
  2. See Frederic Manning Smith, "Mrs. Browning's Rhymes", PMLA, 54, (Sept. 1939), pp. 829-834 (pp. 830-32). See also Louis Untermeyer, The Forms of Poetry: A Handbook of Poetic Terms (1927), pp. 4-5.
  3. V. de S. Pinto, op. cit., p. 148.

effort the credit it deserves as the pioneering attempt which foreshadowed the success of the younger Wilfred. The assonant effects in Mrs. Browning's rhymes may have been the result of necessity, and those few in Matthew Arnold's "Philomela" may have been fortuitous; but in Blunt's case, this was a conscious experiment deliberately carried out.

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B. Ifor Evans remarks that Blunt "makes comparatively little use in his poetry" of his knowledge of the Near East. This remark can be misleading, unless it is understood in the sense that one would expect more Eastern themes and influences to appear in his poetry than is actually the case. In addition to his imitations and translations, the East does figure in several poems, although not as prominently as it should have done. Many poems recall various incidents and experiences during his travels in Sinai, the Hamad, the Nefud, the Euphrates Valley, Nejd, etc; and most of these poems are not of merely casual or topical interest. They have their own intrinsic merit which gives them perennial life as beautiful poetry stemming from genuine feelings and depicting true human experience. One of his most beautiful sonnets, "The Oasis of Sidi Khaled" is a recollection of his first journey across Sinai, from Aqaba to Jerusalem in the spring of 1876, when he nearly perished of thirst. The lively description of the sun, the heat and the drastic contrast of the shade of the oasis compares favourably with the best passages of Doughty's Arabia Deserta and Adam Cast Forth, as well as with Kinglake's glorious sun and "the touch of his flaming sword".

How the earth burns! Each pebble underfoot  
Is a living thing with power to wound.  
The white sand quivers, and the footfall mute  
Of the slow camels strikes but gives no sound,  
As though they walked on flame, not solid ground.  
'Tis noon, and the beasts' shadows even have fled  
Back to their feet, and there is fire around

And fire beneath, and overhead the sun.  
Pitiful heaven! What is this we view?  
Tall trees, a river, pools, where swallows fly,  
Thickets of oleander where doves coo,  
Shades, deep as midnight, greenness for tired eyes.  
Hark, how the light winds in the palm-tops sigh.  
Oh this is rest. Oh this is paradise.<sup>1</sup>

The sun becomes a blessing in Egypt's warm winter, which is described as one of the blessings of living there. On the other hand, the barren, fearful landscape of the great Nefud, extensively and recurrently described in Lady Anne's A Pilgrimage to Nejd, is accounted for in only one small stanza (LXXI) of the poem entitled "Sed Nos Qui Vivimus". The thoroughbred Arabian horse is similarly relegated to a single stanza (LXIII) in the same poem, although this horse was the central point of attention during these journeys in the East.<sup>2</sup> Stanza LXXII of this poem is a recollection of Al-Hamad when it is revived by the spring rains to become "one of the most beautiful sights in the world".<sup>3</sup> But this season, which fills Al-Hamad with abundance, colourful beauty and nimble life, is usually very short. Blunt expressed this idea in a lament for the transience of life, as if he were trying to put into words the melancholy of a desert lark which he heard in Al-Hamad. The "Song of the Desert Lark" has the spirit and tone of an Elizabethan poem:<sup>4</sup>

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1. Sonnet No. CX "The Oasis of Sidi Khaled", Works, I, p. 94. Blunt's agony in this dangerous journey is described in his Secret History ..., pp. 24-26. Cf:
    - a) Charles Montagu Doughty, Passages from Arabia Deserta, selected by Edward Garnett, (1931), pp. 99-100.
    - b) Kinglake's Eothen, With an Introduction by D.G.Hogarth and Notes by V.H. Collins (Oxford, 1924), p. 172.
  2. Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates, op. cit., II, pp. 103, 247-9; cf: A Pilgrimage to Nejd, op. cit., II, pp. 6-13.
  3. Bedouin Tribes ..., II, p. 167, This passage is one of the best landscapes in the book. The "Cattle unnumbered" ... in Blunt's poem had been described earlier by Lady Anne, Ibid., p. 136.
  4. This mood is recurrent in Blunt. cf: "O For a Day of Spring", "The Death of the Rose" and "Glad Bird, I do Bewail Thee", Esther ..., pp. 62-63, 91-92 and 95-97 respectively.



Love, love, in vain,  
We count the days of spring.  
Lost is all love's pain,  
Lost the songs we sing.  
Sunshine and summer rain,  
Winter and Spring again  
Still the years shall bring,  
But we die.

(Esther, p. 93.)

The fusion of English and Arabic modes of expression results in a great deal of romantic beauty in another lyrical poem inspired by the desert. In "The Desert Wind", Blunt seems to capture the convivial spirit of colloquial Arab ballads of the kind sung by Arab fellahin during the harvest season. This poem tells the story of a young man who enjoyed the ephemeral love of a strange lady whom he followed to her hideaway in the desert, whence she disappeared.<sup>1</sup> The atmosphere is oriental, yet everything in the ethereal nature of this dream betrays the unmistakable breath of Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci".

In addition to the sonnet addressed "To the Bedouin Arabs" in The Love Sonnets of Proteus, there are many stanzas in his "Quatrains of Life", devoted to the East, its people, its ideals, its ancient wisdom, its simple way of life, and its Biblical associations. He was always lured by the charm of

Fair plains beyond the limits of dawn  
And desert places lawless and untrod ...,<sup>2</sup>

finding pleasure in the company of the "Children of Shem", who "taught me their strange knowledge", and who had "keen eyes" that turned "the empty waste" into "a scroll close writ with mysteries / Unknown to reason yet compelling awe".<sup>3</sup> He also followed in the footsteps of Moses

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1. "The Desert Wind", Works, I, pp. 398-400.
  2. "Quatrains of Life", Works, I, p. 438.
  3. Ibid., p. 446.

to "The rock of Horeb",

Red in the eternal sunset of the years,  
Crowned with a glory the world's evening wears,  
Where evening is with morning a first day<sup>1</sup>  
Unchanged in the mute music of the sphere.

One of the bad influences that may have come upon Blunt directly or indirectly from Arabic poetry is the theme of self-praise, which is one of the major topics of ancient Arabic poems in particular. This includes pride of noble ancestry, generosity, courage, worthy achievement, altruistic feats ... etc. These ideas dominate "Sed Nos Qui Vivimus"<sup>2</sup> and recur in other poems, such as "In Vinculis",<sup>3</sup> "A New Pilgrimage",<sup>4</sup> "Quatrains of Life"<sup>5</sup> and "The Wisdom of Merlyn",<sup>6</sup> written at various intervals that cover almost all his poetic career. Blunt had a great deal to be proud of; nevertheless, the boastful assertions are aggressive and the exaggerations are incompatible with good taste. He describes himself as a "patriot, soldier, statesman, priest",<sup>7</sup> while his forefathers may include "justice, and squire, and clerk and graduate of human letters!"<sup>8</sup> He proclaims himself as "prince and prophet .. a monarch, a giver of gifts, a lord of the open palms"<sup>9</sup> who has a

... Thrice generous hand,  
A King's in gifts, a prophet's in command,  
All potent intellect designed to guide,  
Transforming grief as with a master's wand.<sup>10</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 444.
  2. "Sed Nos Qui Vivimus", stanzas IV, XVI, XVII, XXIV, XXVIII and XXXI, N.P., pp. 145, 151, 152, 155, 157 and 159 respectively.
  3. In Vinculis, III, p. 3.
  4. Sonnet I in "A New Pilgrimage", N.P., p. 3.
  5. "Quatrains of Life", Works, I, pp. 433, 449.
  6. "The Wisdom of Merlyn", Works, II, p. 453.
  7. "Sed Nos Qui Vivimus", IV, N.P., p. 145.
  8. Ibid., p. 159.
  9. "The Wisdom of Merlyn", Works, II, p. 453.
  10. "Quatrains of Life", Works, I, p. 433.

In this way, he parades himself and dramatizes his actions before the world, trying to prove that he is made of stuff nobler and higher than that of ordinary men, and that his fall is like the martyrdom of a king, a saint or a hero. In "A Vision of Folly", where

He stood before the wondering world a god,  
A king with Freedom for his spouse and queen.  
He felt his empire was divine and trod,  
As on footstool, on the necks of men.<sup>1</sup>

he cuts a Byronic figure that is "mad, bad and dangerous to know"; and since

Ruin awhile and havoc strewed his path.  
He had his day of glory and his fall.  
He stood once upon his father's hearth,  
Sated with pride, and there in frenzy worse  
Wrought foul dishonour on that honoured hall,  
And left its walls forever with a curse.<sup>2</sup>

he reminds us of Byron's Corsair, who "left a ... name to other times/ linked with one virtue! and a thousand crimes". This is how Blunt's daughter came to see him. Again, in "Ambition", he projects himself as a Solomon seeking wisdom. Neither learning nor love seem capable of quenching his thirst;

Then the mad lust of power,  
Became my dream, to rule my fellow men;  
And I too lorded it my hour,  
And wrought for weal or woe with sword and pen,  
And wounded many, some, alas, my friends.  
Now I ask silence. My ambition ends.<sup>3</sup>

This end, however, is less impressive than the dramatization of his martyrdom in the farewell address to his Irish gael:

See, I hang  
Your image here, a glory all unsought,  
About my neck. Thus saints in symbol hold  
Their tools of death and daring manifold.  
(In Vinculis, p. 15.)

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1. "A Vision of Folly", Works, I, p. 341.
  2. Ibid.
  3. "Ambition", Works, I, p. 342.

This self-importance may sound repulsive; but it is not only his own fall that occupies his mind. His travels in the East taught him lessons in history, and kept him aware of a sense of destiny. This is best exemplified in the sonnet entitled "Roumeli Hissar", where he contemplates the fallen empires of the East. The erection of this fortress by the Turks on the European side of the Bosphorus signified the fall of Constantinople in 1453, when it was renamed "Islambul" (hence Istanbul).

Hissar many a year  
Struck terror into all who gazed thereat.

But this decaying bastion symbolized to Blunt the imminent fall of the Ottoman Empire; and the apocalyptic tone of this sonnet recalls Shelley's "Ozymandias":

These walls today,  
With Judas tree and lilac overgrown  
Move all men's hearts. For close on barbarous power  
Tread lust and indolence, and then decay.<sup>1</sup>

The last line is an exact summary of the fifth stage of imperial downfall as set out by Ibn Khaldoun in his Prolegomenon, though this resemblance may be fortuitous. Blunt's reflection on the rise of the German power is another accurate prophecy in this poem, which was written as early as 1873.

Blunt's travels in India, whose landscape is recurrently described in his prose works, are not recorded in his poetry. His impressions of the sub-continent are condensed in a single stanza in "Sed Nos Qui Vivimus" (LXXV: A New Pilgrimage, p. 181). On the other hand, a single expedition in another equatorial area, in Latin America, is recorded in a lively poem of twenty-two quatrains, entitled "Across the Pampas" (A New Pilgrimage, pp. 76-83),

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1. "Roumeli Hissar", Sonnet lxxv in "Love Sonnets of Proteus", The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt, (1898), p. 59.

recapturing the memory of one of his earliest adventures in 1868.

Pride of ancestry and the feeling of being a link in a long chain of history dominates his pastoral poems. Blunt's travels never dimmed his sense of being deeply rooted in his Sussex estate. In "The Old Squire", the weald is full of joyous life; it shares a consciousness of belonging with its owner. Nothing escapes his observant eye. The features of this countryside are given in even more accurate details in "Worth Forest". Here Blunt dwells fondly on every familiar object in a Wordsworthian way, thus making the poem "a charming homily on Sussex topography and history and legend and lore". The forest is not only inhabited by the peasants, who have bravely reclaimed it from the seas, the demons and the elves ("Sed Nos Qui Vivimus", xix, xx, xxv), or by hosts of various animals and birds; but it is also teeming with memories that go back hundreds of years. Worth Forest, he claims, has sheltered ancient "Druid priests", "The Christian Hermit Leonard, ... who / Slew the last authentic dragon", and also some fierce robbers "since the days of Knute". A deserted mining hamlet is described in a way that recalls Omar el-Khayyam:

Which of us could guess  
Each yew tree yonder marks a dwelling place  
Of living men and women? - nay, a tomb?  
Of all the secrets hidden in the Earth's womb, ...  
(N.P., p. 126.)

Unlike the city, the inanimate things of the country seem to have a memory of their own, remembering the long-departed generations:

With us they are still present, the poor dead,  
And plead with us each day of life, and cry  
"Did I not love my life, I too, even I?"  
You wonder!

(N.P., p. 127.)

His romantic sympathy with nature is within the main trend of aesthetic reaction against the vulgarity and ugliness of industrial "progress" in the latter half of the nineteenth century:

The wilderness  
May be disforested, and nature's face  
Stamped out of beauty by the heel of man,  
Who has no room for beauty in his plan.

(N.P., p. 125.)

As a pastoral, "Worth Forest", is a complex poem of more than 700 lines, written in rhyming iambic couplets. It tackles several themes that flow easily into each other. The natural setting acts as a background for various episodes of the human drama of life and death, past and present, legendary and real. Some of these themes are recurrent in Blunt's poetry. Man as the destructive creature in this universe reappears in Satan Absolved, where Blunt develops this theme. Darwinian influences acted on Blunt in a way akin to their effect on Hardy. In this world of struggle, the weak, whether man or animal, does not survive, regardless of goodness, harmlessness, or beauty. Thus, Marden, the dull, almost mute villager, who is the nearest representative of the "noble savage", and whose heart was full of love, died in the forest snow when a "pious" girl refused his affection. The blame is laid on fate rather than moral conduct:

I neither blame the boy nor blame the woman,  
Only the hardness of a fate which laid  
Its iron flail upon too weak a head.

(N.P., p. 133.)

Another blow of fate comes at the end of the poem, when somebody brings Blunt the news of the death of his son, the only hoped-for heir of his estate, four days after his birth. On the other hand, the tenacious "Master Gale", the avaricious blacksmith who owned the forest in the 17th century, survived and prospered, although he had nothing of Marden's love for the place. He saw it as "mere wood for burning". He made a fortune by selling weapons unscrupulously to the armies of both Charles I and Cromwell. Unlike Blunt's son, Gale's offspring were made of sterner stuff, and lived to inherit his estates,

following his advice of being "wary" of their neighbours, who were seen as a "vile brood of vipers". "Master Gale" is the symbol of the commercial opportunism which Blunt hated but which his age venerated. However, the poet reminds us that

Earth has a silent mockery which repels  
Our questioning. Her history is not ours,  
And overlays it with a growth of flowers.  
(N.P., p. 126.)

Blunt's love for the Sussex Weald was an instinctive passion, not unlike Hardy's feeling for Wessex. His love reached extremes, to a point where he resented "the intrusion of outside praisers of its loveliness, men who have come to it as strangers and have dared to sing it as though it were their own". These "singers" included Kipling, Belloc and Francis Thompson, with whom Blunt figured as a Sussex poet in a small volume, The Petworth Posy. His jealousy applied even to the Roman remains in Sussex: "they have no business to be here, outlandish, imperialistic".<sup>1</sup>

(iv) Esther and other sonnet sequences

The volume entitled Esther, Love Lyrics and Natalia's Resurrection (1892) represents a climatic point in Blunt's poetical career, and "Esther" remains his most important success in the field of the narrative sonnet sequence. It consists of fifty-three sonnets of the Shakespearean type. Five outspoken sonnets were omitted but were restored in the complete edition of 1914, thus making a total of fifty-eight sonnets.<sup>2</sup> The subtitle "A Young Man's Tragedy", should not be taken at face value, since the poem is rather a tragi-comedy

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1. Finch, pp. 354-5.

2. Blunt mentions this suppression in My Diaries, p. 68. The five sonnets are XVII, XVIII, XIX, XLVIII and XLIX, Works, I, pp. 11, 12 and 27. See also his preface to The Poetical Works, I, p. vi.

describing the young Blunt's seduction by Catherine Walters in 1863. The new cycle repeats the "Manon" sequence, which had appeared earlier in The Love Sonnets of Proteus, with the difference that the story is only remotely suggested in "Manon", whereas Esther is a detailed narrative sequence. Dialogue, characterization and dramatic scenes give the cumulative effect of a novella in verse. The story is narrated quietly, without Swinburne's explosive passion or Patmore's mystical idealization. The style, simplified, direct, produces an effect of naturalness. The two characters are true to life. The young man is naïve and hesitant, torn between contradicting impulses, shyness and a vague sense of guilt, and the physical attraction of a woman of the world. The setting is the French town of Lyons, and the heroine is the charming actress who was playing the role of Manon Lescaut on the stage. Unlike the "Manon" of the Love Sonnets, Esther is fully portrayed in this sequence. She is conquettish, bold, shameless and full of lively talk and playful mockery. She also has a variety of conspicuous moods that "seemed to change as if with a change of the wind". While the Love Sonnets concentrated on this woman's drawbacks, Esther emphasises her physical beauty and enchanting intimacy, giving the overall impression of a Sappho, a Semiramis or a Cleopatra. The influences which he hated so much in "Manon" are received happily as a good surprise in Esther:

Let who will be wise!  
There are things that touch us and transcend.  
The logic of all beauty is surprise  
The reason of all love the unseen end.

One thing alone  
Stood plain before me, the supreme fair chance  
Of a first fortune, glorious and unknown,  
Which beckoned me with no uncertain hand  
To touch and taste and learn and understand.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Sonnet XLVII, "Esther", Works, I, p. 26.



After "tasting", he wonders how to describe his fall, "As the poets tell / Who wrap love in a garment of vain light / Or plainly naked". He opts for the second way. His sexual experience is described in the two sonnets (XLVIII-XLIX) that were among the five suppressed in the edition of 1892. The naked Esther seemed to him

A sight sublime, a dream, a miracle,  
A little goddess from some luminous field  
Brought down unconscious on Earth to dwell,  
And in an age of innocence revealed,  
Naked but not ashamed.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of his tears, dispelled by Esther's kisses, that experience gave him an ecstatic thrill that was never repeated throughout his life, which was actually littered with similar love affairs. The mature man of the world, speaking with hindsight, declares:

But never for all time, ah, never more,  
That delicate dawn of wonder when lips move,<sup>2</sup>  
First to the love of life and love of love.

Sonnet LIII gives a vivid picture of Esther as a liberated woman who knew all the nuances of love and could manipulate men's hearts, and yet remained modest and unpretentious; while Sonnet LVIII shows how kind and sympathetic she remained, although she had been "soulless".

As a story, "Esther" can be divided into six sections. The first four sonnets form an introduction, meditating the tragic nature of man's life, which consists of small pleasures that fate soon interrupts with death and bereavement. Sonnets V-XXI give an account of the young man's meeting with the heroine, "a little woman dressed in

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1. Sonnet XLVIII, Ibid., p. 27.  
2. Sonnet XLIX, Ibid., p. 27.

black" at the fair. He is called upon by the audience to feel the thigh of a giant woman performing a farcical act. Timidly, he touches the flesh of this monstrous "Queen of Love", and flees into the night, full of rage and embarrassment.

Sonnets XXII-XXX give a flash-back to the poet's youth and how his family has brought him up under the strict discipline of a Catholic education, blissfully ignorant of sensual pleasures. In this cleverly inserted section he also recalls some of his athletic achievements, such as climbing the Alps and proudly feeling himself to be thus "a man with men".

The fourth section (Sonnets XXXI-XLII) is an account of his second meeting with Mlle. Esther outside the closed doors of the theatre. Believing that "l'ingenu" is pursuing her, she begins to toy with the idea of seducing him; and so she takes him through the dark city streets to the house of Madame Blanche, her dress-maker. Like the four introductory sonnets, the last sonnet of this section, which precedes the account of his "fall", has a different rhyme arrangement (ababbcdcdedeff) from the rest of the sonnets, which invariably follow the Shakespearean scheme, ababdcdefefgg.

Sonnets XLIII-LI give a vivid description of Madame Blanche's house and the poet's taste of carnal pleasure; and he seems to become deified with this new wisdom. The three days with Esther are recounted in the last seven sonnets, which form the final section of the sequence. These three days are described as his "term of glory", when he worshipped his beloved as her backstage Des Grieux while she was playing the role of Manon. This section leads to the sudden but inevitable end of this fiery love affair.

As a sonnet-sequence, Esther represents the highest stage in Blunt's development towards the mastery of narrative technique. Each sonnet retains its independence, yet the sequence as a whole has the cumulative effect of a closely-knit story, constructed around well-conceived scenes, and narrated with a consistent point of view. From his past experience in writing sonnets, Blunt benefited from the use of dialogue, flash-back technique and the naturalistic style in the description of character and event. The result is a mature work of art. Blunt's skill is clearly seen against the background of the growth of the sonnet sequence in his age.

The term "sonnet sequence" first appeared, in a casual way, in George Gascoigne's Posies (1575);<sup>1</sup> but it became common only in the late nineteenth century, to replace the other terms: "centurie", "series" and "cycle". When Hall Caine was preparing his anthology, D.G. Rossetti wrote him a letter suggesting the use of the term "A Sonnet Sequence" as a title;<sup>2</sup> and when Caine declined, Rossetti used it as a subtitle for his House of Life. Applied to Caine's anthology the term would have meant a merely chronological gathering of sonnets with no unity whatsoever. But since Rossetti applied it to his work, it became applicable only to a unified group of sonnets by one and the same author. After that it was used by Symonds, Swinburne, Blunt and others. Blunt does not apply the term to The Love Sonnets of Proteus, In Vinculis or "The Idler's Calendar". It seems that he thus confined it to the "narrative" genre, in the strict sense of the term. Brander Matthews finds the term "sonnet sequence" paradoxical, "since the

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1. George Gascoigne, The Posies, edited by John Cunliffe, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1907), I, pp. 388, 390, 463.

2. T. Hall Caine, Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, (1882), p. 244.

unique characteristic of the sonnet is that it must be the perfect expression of a single and simple thought or mood".<sup>1</sup> George R. Stewart asserts that sequences are "nothing more than individual beads strung along the cord of a common theme".<sup>2</sup> To T.W.H. Crosland "the average sonnet sequence is really a sonnet surfeit".<sup>3</sup> Houston Peterson's definition is more elaborate; he sees the sequence as

... a story told, step by step, in sonnet stanzas such as [William Ellery] Leonard's Two Lives or Blunt's Esther; or a poetic commentary on a story told indirectly ... as Meredith's Modern Love or even Shakespeare's sonnets ... a series of variations on a theme as Rupert Brooke's "1914", Donne's Holy Sonnets ... or ... Rossetti's House of Life ... yet again, a sonnet sequence may be an emotionally coloured description of some phase of nature or history such as Wordsworth's "River Duddon" or [Thomas S.] Jones's Christ in Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Love was the main subject of Elizabethan sonnets, the best of which appeared in the last decade of the 16th century; but other subjects were also included, such as religion, philosophy and satire. By contrast, the revival of the sonnet gave great prominence to the descriptive and meditative tradition (at the expense of the amatory tradition) in the early nineteenth century. The best representative examples are Wordsworth's several series. There was a large variety of themes, touching on every aspect of life, from nature and place to opinion and philosophy, from religion to literary criticism, from history and politics to praise and commemoration. However, it is interesting to note that Disraeli, in his popular novel, Venetia (1837),

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1. Brander Matthews, A Study of Versification, (New York, 1911), p. 142.
  2. George R. Stewart Jr., The Technique of English Verse, (New York, 1930), p. 133.
  3. T.W.H. Crosland, The English Sonnet, (1917), pp. 103-4. Crosland goes too far when he pronounces the sonnet sequence as "technically vicious and undesirable", ibid., p. 105.
  4. Houston Peterson (ed.), The Book of Sonnet Sequences, (London and New York, 1930), p. ix.

which is a highly fictionatized account of the lives of Shelley and Byron, inserts eleven artificial sonnets written by Lord Cadurcis (Byron) to the heroine.<sup>1</sup> Apart from this, Mrs. Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) stands almost alone to represent the love sonnet-sequence until then. Swinburne's Undergraduate Sonnets, although written before Meredith's Modern Love, were not published till 1918. These eight sonnets imitate the Elizabethan style in exaggerating the cruelties of the beloved. Both ends of the Victorian age saw a renewed interest in the Renaissance, first at the hands of the Pre-Raphaelites, then in the writings of Symonds and Pater. In addition to their own original sonnets, D.G. Rossetti, Andrew Lang, Austin Dobson, J.A. Symonds, Arthur O'Shaughnessy and others translated Italian and French sonnets; Edmond Gosse rendered some Scandinavian sonnets in English.<sup>2</sup> Hall Caine and William Sharp edited two important collections, entitled respectively; Sonnets of Three Centuries (1882) and Sonnets of This Century (1886). The amatory tradition became more prolific after Modern Love (1862), and was cultivated by many Victorians, such as Robert Bridges, Christina and D.G. Rossetti, Arthur Symonds, Eugene Lee Hamilton and others.

Within this tradition, however, one can discern various approaches to the concept of love and its final fulfilment. To Bridges, for example, love develops from the smile of the beloved lady to include all forms of earthly beauty, leading to the revelation of the Eternal Beauty. To Christina Rossetti, human and divine love are

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1. B. Disraeli, Venetia, with an Introduction by P. Guedalla (1927); first published 1837), pp. 288-293.
  2. In 1886, Samuel Waddington edited an anthology of these translations entitled The Sonnets of Europe.

complementary and transcendental. Mrs. Browning is content with the human love of one mortal man in exchange for her "near sweet view of heaven". D.G. Rossetti's type of love is a harmonious blend of the carnal and spiritual aspects. Symonds, disillusioned with his Stella, seeks an ideal, almost Platonic love, while Meredith's love world is full of tragic suffering presented through merciless psycho-analysis not conducive to happiness.

Blunt's technique of grouping his sonnets into sequence emerged against this background. "To Manon", for example, echoes the tradition of Sonnets from the Portuguese. "Gods and False Gods" and "Vita Nova" contain a variety of themes, loosely knit within a superficial unity of mood similar to The House of Life. The "Farewell to Juliet" sonnets are closely linked to suggest a story, narrated in a way similar to Modern Love. In putting his own love story into sonnet form, Blunt worked within the mainstream of this established tradition. He admired Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese and patterned Esther on her treatment of feelings, hopes, doubts and the final surrender to the power of love. Like Meredith in his Modern Love, Mrs. Browning concentrates on emotional moods; but she avoids Meredith's dramatic treatment of character. Unlike Blunt, she also avoids the description of scenes and actions. Her work is a record of crystallized moments of joy, fear, introspection, hesitation and rewarding fulfilment. Although her sonnets are linked by her love for her husband, the poetic effect lies in the intrinsic merits of the individual sonnets. The story itself is simple, even conventional; yet the sonnets have a cumulative effect by giving the atmosphere of a love story, where this noble human emotion gradually develops till it conquers the gloom of despair. Her love is not mundane, like Blunt's

or Meredith's. It has rather a transcendental quality; its spiritual bliss reaches purer heights than Rossetti's House of Life. Yet, this love retains a human warmth which glows as it soars to ecstatic emotional climaxes.<sup>1</sup> Her imagery and refined, figurative language is richer than Blunt's, although less colourful than Rossetti's. Blunt makes greater use of dialogue and conversational language. His flowing sentences are more naturalistic, and do not give the impression of fumbling. In contrast, Mrs. Browning makes frequent use of brackets, dashes, italicized words and abrupt shifts of stress. Her sonnets are direct expressions of an emotional state during an emotional crisis, and not recollections written in retrospect. Blunt's Esther was written nearly thirty years after his experience. In their technique, Mrs. Browning's sonnets conform more closely than Blunt's to the Petrarchan ideal. She uses only four rhymes for both the octave and sestet (a b b a a b b a. c d c d c d); and she is more conscious of the lyrical quality of her rhythm, as we can see in this example from Sonnet XXI, where she imitates the cuckoo song:

... Who can fear  
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,  
Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?  
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me ; toll  
The silver iterance! - only minding, Dear,  
To love me also in silence with thy soul.

Mrs. Browning's sonnets are more intensely personal, like private letters, but she is unselfish in her love and readily forgets her ego, content to live in her husband's shadow. The lyrical quality is also more pronounced in Rossetti's House of Life; but his technical accomplishment sometimes threatens his sincerity of tone. His heavily

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1. See, for example, Sonnets vii, xviii, xx, xxiii, and xliiii, The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barret Browning in Six Volumes, (1890), IV, pp. 41, 52, 54, 57 and 77.

perfumed atmosphere gives an impression of Baudelarian morbidity, in contrast to the natural, healthy air in which Blunt breathes. Rossetti was the leading figure in a school of art, while Blunt's major activities were concentrated in other fields. The love sonnets of both poets were mainly autobiographical, initially conceived and written during periods of emotional and spiritual crisis, developing from their original nuclei to become more enhanced wholes later. The growth of Rossetti's work, however, was more complicated, and the stages of its development need not delay us here.<sup>1</sup> Both works are so loosely organized that most of their individual sonnets can be transposed without causing any damage to the cumulative effect of the whole. Both poets indulge in self-analysis, and both seem obsessed with the mysteries of life, love and death. However, the influence of Dante's La Vita Nuova is more strongly marked in Rossetti's work than in Blunt's, especially in the tendency towards transcendental idealism. This makes the spiritual aspect more conspicuous in Rossetti's experience. In spite of Buchanan's charges of "fleshliness" against Rossetti, it is clear that Rossetti's conception of love was by no means confined to the physical side; it is often imbued with some strange metaphysical yearning as Rossetti tries to reach for his beloved in the other world beyond this life. Even the physical act of love is often endowed with a spiritual dimension that transfigures it into something nobler and purer than the mere carnal pleasure which permeates Blunt's love poems. Numerous sonnets in The House of Life bear upon

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1. This problem was investigated by several people, e.g. F.M. Tisdell, "Rossetti's House of Life", Modern Philology, 15 (Sept. 1917), pp. 257-276; Ruth C. Wallerstein, "Personal Experience in Rossetti's House of Life", P.M.L.A., 42 (June, 1927), pp. 492-504; and P.F. Baum, who published an annotated edition of The House of Life, with a long introduction (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928). The best study, with the most reliable conclusions, however, remains that of Oswald Doughty, A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, (1949, 2nd Ed. 1960), pp. 378-391.



this point.<sup>1</sup> The tone of sincerity can be discerned in the works of both poets, whose depiction of their love-life throbs with powerful emotion, but their temperaments are different; Rossetti's is more akin to that of Shelley and Keats, Blunt's is nearer to Byron's. Rossetti makes his "House of Life" a shrine in which his practice of love is transformed into an act of worship. In the words of C.M. Bowra:

For him the women whom he loved were not so much human beings as visible manifestations of ethereal beauty, embodiments of spiritual perfection, starry creatures of grace and tenderness ... It was as if the secrets of the universe were suddenly revealed to him in a flashing splendour and he was allowed to consort with beings from a celestial world.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt never views his women with this sense of mystical awe. He is not only a down-to-earth man of the world, but he is also too selfish and assertive to allow his passion to involve him in such intensive agony of soul. In fact, the contrast between the two men is made more conspicuous when we compare their attitudes to love and politics. In Blunt's life, political causes were a consuming passion, although he could have easily lived for nothing but love; whereas Rossetti, the Italian who was "brought up in an electrically political atmosphere ... never took any interest in politics".<sup>3</sup> Instead he devoted his whole life to his art, and

Through love Rossetti found the ideal beauty which gave direction to his life's work ... In [his poetry] we see him at his best and most truly himself; for it presents all that he took most seriously.<sup>4</sup>

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1. See, for example, the following sonnets (in P.F. Baum's edition): "The Love Moon" (p. 116), "Love and Hope" (p. 126), "Cloud and Wind" (p. 128), "Death in Love" (p. 135), "Her Heaven" (pp. 151-2), "The Heart of the Night" (p. 166), "Memorial Threshold" (pp. 191-2), "Death's Songsters" (p. 199) and "New Born Death" (pp. 219-220).
  2. C.M. Bowra, "The House of Life" in Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. by Austin Wright (Oxford University Press, 1961, Reprtd. 1970), p. 261.
  3. Ibid., p. 251.
  4. Ibid., p. 262.

His sonnets, as works of art, are far nearer to perfection and technical accomplishment than Blunt's. They are richer and livelier, both in form and in content. Blunt does not show Rossetti's taste and selectiveness of poetic diction, nor does he seem to be interested in rich imagery or elaborate subtlety of thought. He is a realist, less capable than Rossetti of flight to the twilight between fact and fantasy. His poems make easier reading, though they are not necessarily less entertaining, than Rossetti's. The difference between them is the difference between the amateur and the professional. Blunt is spontaneous, while Rossetti is "a rigorous technician and an exacting critic", a slow worker whose brain disciplines his passion to produce a "highly premeditated art";

He had first to extract all that he could from [his emotions], put them in order and see them in their right perspective, then relate them to his ideal of beauty and interpret their particular manifestations through some wider idea or more comprehensive visions.<sup>1</sup>

This constant endeavour to sustain the same high standard for his poems sometimes betrayed an uncertain touch or a feeling of insecurity. Blunt, the less gifted of the two, displayed more self-confidence. On the whole, Blunt's personal life, especially in love relationships, was happier and more rewarding than Rossetti's.

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It is not easy to decide with any certainty whether Blunt had read Meredith's Modern Love before writing his own Esther. The hostile reception of Modern Love in the Spectator and the Athenaeum in 1862, as well as in The Saturday Review in 1863, deterred Meredith from

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1. Ibid., p. 260.

publishing more verse for some twenty years. However, Modern Love was re-issued early in 1892; and Meredith himself asked for a copy to be sent to "Mr. Wilfrid Blunt. His place is in Sussex - I forget the name". In return, Blunt sent a copy of Esther to Meredith in November. The co-incidence of the two volumes appearing in juxtaposition may have suggested Blunt's indebtedness to Meredith, a claim first made by Arthur Symons in his review of Esther in the Athenaeum of Dec. 10, 1892 (reprinted in The Cafe Royal, and other Essays, 1923). It was repeated by Percy Addleshaw in The National Review of October 1895 and the anonymous reviewer of Blunt's Satan Absolved in the Athenaeum of Dec. 2, 1899. However, in his Meredith (1948), Sassoon, while granting that "Blunt was a profound admirer of Modern Love, adds that the admiration arose only after the appearance of Esther, which Meredith praised in a letter of "high approval" to Blunt.<sup>1</sup> This letter, mentioned by Blunt in My Diaries (p. 83), was not among Meredith's Letters, edited by his son in 1912. However, it has recently appeared in the Oxford edition of 1970, edited by C.L. Cline.<sup>2</sup> It seems that Sassoon was right in observing that Modern Love was still unknown to Blunt in 1892, that is, till Meredith had a copy sent to him. There is no internal evidence to suggest any influence. Both poems are narrative sonnet sequences (Meredith's sixteen-line stanzas have sonnet

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1. Siegfried Sassoon, Meredith (1948), p. 226. Blunt's admiration of Modern Love made him place the last couplet of sonnet XXV of this work as an epigraph on the title page of his Griselda (1893). The couplet reads:

Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:  
And life, some think, is worthy of the muse.

2. C.L. Cline (ed.), The Letters of George Meredith, 3 vols., (1970), II, p. 1110.

effects); but there is little similarity between them to support the assumption of the above-mentioned reviewers, who gave no critical analysis to corroborate their judgement. In fact, these two poems are dissimilar in structure, philosophical outlook, characterization, scene portrayal, style of expression and psychological undercurrents. In Meredith's poem, the story is more complex and has four characters instead of Blunt's two. Each stanza gives us one separate aspect, usually presenting some comments and speculations concerning an incident that has taken place outside the actual scene. Blunt, on the other hand, uses his stanzas to recreate the incidents themselves, thus giving us actual scenes directly narrated in the first person. His philosophising meditations are casual and sparsely diffused within the texture of the narration. Meredith's episodes are seen only like sudden flashes of lightening which soon pass away, leaving the whole scene in complete darkness. Modern Love is more like a drama of passion than a simple love story. Meredith is far more capable than Blunt in probing the deep psychological entanglements of a complicated set of human emotions and relationships. The husband's attitudes to his unfaithful wife and to his own mistress alike give us a labyrinthine process of fluctuations, reversals and modifications. Love, repulsion, jealousy, vengeance, lust, compassion, remorse, doubt, are all brilliantly handled with a compact dramatic subtlety that is altogether lacking in Blunt's rather straight-forward narration. Contradictory impulses torment the husband, who finds that his wife's affair with her lover has made her more attractive (Sonnets III and V in Modern Love). Emotional impulses are neither intense nor devastating when Blunt's affair with Esther is terminated. Blunt does not suffer from the wild jealousy which turns the husband into an Othello in Sonnet XV of

Meredith's poem. This jealousy gives way to an abrupt shift of feeling in Sonnet XVI, where the husband remembers his good old days and describes them with a tender, if melancholy, tone. Blunt's mood is rather similar to the mood of this particular sonnet.

The autobiographical element is very strong in both poems;<sup>1</sup> and Blunt's affair with "Esther" is not unlike the husband's affair with "My Lady" in Modern Love (Sonnets XX-XXIX). Yet, in Blunt's case love is a simple process of steady growth from friendship to intimacy, followed by carnal indulgence, emotional involvement and a separation that leaves no hard feelings on either side. Moreover, Blunt does not feel the need to make various justifications for the affair as Meredith does in Sonnets XXVII and XXVIII. The husband's affair with his Lady is a more complex account of a "game of sentiment" whose exact nature is difficult to grasp. It alternates between exultation (as the husband feels like a "God" with some "Satanic power" worshipped by "a grand sunflower" in Sonnet XXVIII) on the one hand, and outspoken sexual gratification (as "gross clay" conquers man's higher nature in Sonnet XXXIII). Again, Sonnet XXXVIII describes the relationship as one of pure companionship of minds and refined imagination, only to relapse once more into carnal lust in the very next sonnet (XXXIX). The assertive tone, which is full of self-confidence, in this latter sonnet soon gives way to another upsurge of doubts (XL), while Sonnet XLI is an attempted compromise based on self-deception as the husband and the wife try to save the decent appearances of their wrecked marriage. These

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1. The autobiographical element is one source of Blunt's admiration of Modern Love. See My Diaries, pp. 534-5, 660, 818.

fluctuations continue in Sonnets XLII, XLIII and XLV; and although the failure of their respective extra-marital affairs draws them together in despair, the reconciliation itself fails in turn and Madam (the wife) commits suicide in the end. Blunt's Esther is devoid of the complications and subtleties that made Modern Love difficult and gave rise to contradictory judgements. F.R. Leavis, for example, brands Modern Love as "the flashy product of unusual but vulgar cleverness working upon cheap emotion",<sup>1</sup> while John Lucas considers it as "a beautifully sane study of the flow and recoil in a personal relationship".<sup>2</sup> Meredith is more persistent than Blunt in exploring all the aspects of the affair and bringing out the various ironies of the situation with his sharp wit. His sonnets are more closely integrated to give a more impressive impact of the poem as a whole; and the tragic effect is delivered in a more masterly way. Only in his farewell sonnets to "Juliet" does Blunt attain Meredith's standard of complicated character portrayal. When Blunt is torn between contrasting impulses in these sonnets, his language becomes more natural, direct, and fully charged with passion. The qualities of "racy speech" and "personal idiom" won Blunt the enthusiastic praise of R.L. Megroz, who asserted that The Love Sonnets of Proteus, as a sequence, was "Surely a much more interesting addition to English poetry than Meredith's Modern Love."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Quoted by John Lucas in his essay, "Meredith as Poet", Meredith Now, Ed. by Ian Fletcher, (1971), p. 32.
  2. Ibid., p. 23.
  3. Modern English Poetry, 1882-1932, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

In Modern Love, there are frequent shifts in the setting; and events, places and other characters are alluded to in a highly compressed way in an atmosphere of mounting, dramatic tension where a cool, penetrating mind is trying to dissect love as a human passion. In response to this powerful intellect, the reader's imagination must remain vigilant to fill in the gaps in order to acquire the full picture. In Esther on the other hand, the sonnets serve as chapters in a continuous narration with no "unseen" dimensions, with no need to speculate on the reasons, implications and consequences of events. Esther contains far less shifts of setting and fluctuations of mood. In his letter to Blunt, Meredith praised his "lucid writing and mastery of exposition of a difficult subject. The sonnets 25 and 26 are admirable". It is curious that Meredith should choose these two sonnets (pp. 29-30 of the 1892 edition), which only describe the athletic adventures of Blunt's early life in a flashback. Ezra Pound showed better taste in opting for the often-anthologised sonnets XLV-XLVI (pp. 47-48), which he considered sufficient to establish Blunt's "claims upon posterity". These two sonnets contain one long sentence glorifying the eternal nature of love as compared to other sorts of ephemeral and elusive happiness. This sentence starts from the eighth line of XLV and ends with the last line of XLVI, flamboyantly carrying a series of simple yet moving images reminiscent of those lavishly strewn in the first few lines of Keats's "Sleep and Poetry". The sincerity of emotion elevates the simple language to a high level of eloquence, lending the rhythm a continuous flow like the throbs of the lover's heart. In fact, this long sentence can serve as a good illustration to Yeats's remark about the "natural momentum in the syntax".

As a sonnet sequence, Esther is an original contribution to this genre in the late nineteenth century. Blunt used the lyric medium to handle narrative material, without making the sonnet lose its virility, impressive liveliness or individual integrity.

The same cannot be said about his last sequence, "Natalia's Resurrection" (1892), which is not only derivative, but also flat, cold, far-fetched and utterly unconvincing. It is the tale of a young man's thwarted love for a lady who continues to give him only unfulfilled promises after marrying another man. Adrian thus leaves Rome when he learns of Natalia's pregnancy. She dies at childbirth and Adrian returns to open her grave; and she is resurrected and given to him in marriage, just as he saw in his dream shortly before her burial. According to Percy Addleshaw,

It is an elaborate setting of a legend that is popular in many places and under many aspects, and Mr. Hawker has treated one version of it, current in Cornwall, more winningly and more simply.<sup>1</sup>

This is a reference to Robert Stephen Hawker's ballad entitled "Annot of Benally". In fact, the direct source of Blunt's material is the Fourth Story of the Tenth Day of Boccaccio's Decameron. The subject was also treated, more successfully, by Tennyson in his early long poem entitled "The Lover's Tale". Tennyson wanted to suppress this poem, but when it was pirated he published it in 1879, adding a sequel to it entitled "The Golden Supper". Other influences can be detected in "Natalia's Resurrection". Some elements may have been borrowed from

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1. Percy Addleshaw, "Esther, Love Lyrics and Natalia's Resurrection", The Academy, XLII (Dec. 3, 1892), pp. 503-504 (p. 503). The poem referred to here, "Annot of Bennally", can be found in The Poetical Works of Robert Stephen Hawker, Ed. by Alfred Wallis, (1899), pp. 32-34.



Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, especially the scene at the tomb. On the other hand, both Adrian's dream and the lovers' escape show the fingerprints of Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes". In addition to the title of the second part of his Love Sonnets, Blunt refers to Juliet in two of The Idler's Calendar ("January" and "May"). Both Shakespeare and Tennyson give a more convincing account of the "death" and resurrection of their heroines. Blunt's version of the lovers' reunion is even less realistic or justifiable, while in the versions of Boccaccio and Tennyson the lover shows great magnanimity by returning the lady to her husband. As far as the form is concerned, the thirty one sonnets of this poem are of the regular, Shakespearean type. Yet they fail to impress because they lack the urgency, the warmth and the dramatic impulse, perhaps because they are not written in the first person, like Blunt's other sonnets. Although they contain some touches of the ballad qualities, notably in the last couplets (in 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 14, 18, 22, 27, 29, 31); the overall effect is far from rewarding; the work lacks the compactness of the ballad as manifested in Hawker's poem. On the other hand, the poem as a story lacks the elaborate details of a full narrative with its well conceived characters, scene portrayal, the use of dialogue; it is too short for a narrative sequence.

Blunt's "Love Lyrics", which fill two thirds of the Esther volume, need not delay us for long, since they deal with the same subjects as his Love Sonnets. However, a few of them are worth mentioning here, if very briefly. "Love me a Little" (pp. 59-61), which appealed to Siegfried Sassoon as an "eloquent poem" is reminiscent of Ben Jonson's "Drink to Me only with Thine Eyes":

Love me a little, love me as thou wilt,  
Whether a draught it be of passionate wine  
Poured with both hands divine,  
Or just a cup of water spilt  
On dying lips and mine.  
Give me the love thou wilt,  
The purity, the guilt,  
So it be thine. (p. 59)

"Oh for a Day of Spring" teaches that since life is too short, its fleeting joys should be grabbed in the prime of youth:

Win me that day from sorrow  
And let me die tomorrow.  
(p. 63)

"Twenty Days" is a light song, written in simple diction, whose racy tune reflects the playful mood of a young man who found happiness in the arms of a beautiful woman - not in books and theories that "Taught me only vanity":

Her hair was of red red gold,  
Her blue eyes looked me through and through,  
She was twenty-three years old,  
I was twenty years and two.  
(Esther, p. 65.)

On the other hand, some of these lyrics sound far-fetched and affected; they lack Blunt's usual sincerity, and their ponderous language lacks an inner glow. "Love's likenings" (pp. 66-68) and "Wilt thou take me for a Slave" (pp. 98-99) are obvious examples.

Love, but I would be a well  
In the sands of Araby,  
So thyself wert a gazelle  
Which must either drink or die.  
Bend above me, love, and lo!  
In my waters thou shalt spy  
All that my heart cares to show,  
Thy own face against the sky.  
(p. 67.)

In complete contrast to this coldness, "Not a Word" (pp. 153-4) is alive with a dramatic expression of feelings; it is a soliloquy whose quickening movement suggests the beating of a heart.

Although "A Rhapsody" is written in blank verse (pp. 70-77), it has a series of beautiful images which show nature as an endless

source of rapture, wonder and ecstasy. The same kind of sincerity prevails in the sad poem entitled "The Stricken Hart" (pp. 106-107), where the poet's sympathy with the animal humanizes it to become the symbol of all mute suffering. The language is compressed but highly expressive.

(v) The Later Poems

In 1893, Blunt published Griselda, and called it "A Society Novel in Rhymed Verse". It is the story of a young wife who resists the temptation of falling in love with the charming prince Beligrate, only to surrender, at a later stage in her life, to the whims of the unscrupulous young rake, Jerry Manton. After the death of the latter, she returns, full of remorse, to her old husband, Lord L., who forgives her. It is a well-conceived picture of the life and times of the rich class in Victorian England. The setting is the country house of the aristocracy, but some of the scenes are set in France and Italy as Blunt knew them. The theme of this tale was tackled earlier in the trio entitled "The Three Ages of Woman" in the third section of The Love Sonnets of Proteus. In Griselda, it is stretched into a lengthy poem which is certainly less than a success, yet it cannot be easily dismissed as a total failure. The long metrical tale was rapidly becoming unfashionable when Blunt composed Griselda. This tradition belonged to an earlier age. After Chaucer and Spenser, it was almost extinguished by the rise of the Drama. It began to re-emerge at the hands of poets like George Crabbe and Oliver Goldsmith; and it flourished in the works of some Romantic masters like Southey, Byron and Sir Walter Scott. It continued to linger on in the Mid-Victorian period at the hands of the Brownings, William Morris, and Owen Meredith. Then the public taste began to change in favour of a strong rival to this genre, namely the novel and the short story in prose.

Now, the problem with Griselda is that Blunt does not justify such a work by sustaining it through some of the devices used by his predecessors, and so it falls into dull prolixity. It does not thrill the reader or cast a magic spell on him by creating a new world with exotic effects, as we see in the narratives of Coleridge and Byron. It does not entertain by reviving the mysterious, forgotten past, as we see in Keats and Scott. It does not point a moral or inculcate a social doctrine as we see in Wordsworth and Shelley. It does not present ideas that can stimulate the intellectual faculties, as we see in Browning, nor does it have the sweetness of a Ballad that can become a tender, convivial song. True, Blunt is as realistic as Crabbe; but he moves in a totally different atmosphere, in an environment full of sweetness and light, with no pain or poverty. Although sympathetic to his unfortunate heroine, he is only a detached observer, with nothing of the vigour and personal involvement which enliven the poverty scenes in Crabbe's stories. The criticism levelled at Griselda by The Saturday Review of 17 September 1898 ("lengthy ... languid ... devoid of interest") is substantially true.

Griselda is written in heroic couplets, the measure used by Crabbe and the neo-Classicists of the eighteenth century. According to Harold Williams, this poem

... would hardly have been written had not Byron's Don Juan set the pattern; and it has sufficient wit and effective satire, combined with a fluent carelessness in versifying, to carry the reader on his way.

This opinion, also expressed by Anthony Clyne and Sister Mary Joan

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1. Harold Williams, Modern English Writers (1925 ; first published 1918), p. 35.

Reinehr,<sup>1</sup> should not be accepted without some reservation. It is true that the narration, which is a combination of description and satire, is naturalistic and easy moving. But the movement is hindered by several discomfoting digressions and discursive moralizing reflections. Such digressions can be tolerated in prose novels like Henry Fielding's Tom Jones or Joseph Andrews, but in a loosely-knit metrical tale, they become serious weaknesses. Don Juan is saved by the exotic atmosphere, the intimate self-revelation, the erotic undertones, the youthful gusto and the sweeping power of Byron's scenic splendour. Griselda, devoid of these qualities, shows all the weak symptoms of Owen Meredith's Lucile. Blunt should have adopted another style, moving with the rapid pace of John Masefield. Moreover, the sudden death of the lover is unconvincing. The characters, however, are true to life and well portrayed. Blunt's satire is at its best when he describes Lord L., Griselda's husband:

A silent man, well mannered and well dressed,  
Courteous, deliberate, kind, sublimely blessed  
With fortune's favours, but without pretence  
Whom manners almost made a man of sense.

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Knowledge uncatalogued, and overlaid  
With dust and lumber somewhere in his head.  
A slumberous man, in whom the lamps of life  
Had never been quite lighted for the strife  
And turmoil of the world, but flickered down  
In an uncertain twilight of its own,  
With an occasional flash, that only made  
A deeper shadow for its world of shade.

This sort of polished language, which enables the poet to tear somebody to pieces and retain the cleanliness of the hand that carries the

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1. A. Clyne, op. cit., p. 131. Cf: Sister Mary Joan Reinehr, The Writings of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1940), p. 18.
  2. "Griselda", The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt, (1898), p. 122.

stabbing dagger, recalls the satirical power of Pope. One of the noteworthy passages contains a beautiful description of happiness, likening it to an elusive wild bird.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note that Griselda is also the name of the heroine of the last story in The Decameron, which was borrowed by Chaucer in The Clerk's Tale, and made into a dramatic comedy by Thomas Dekker under the title of Patient Grissil (1603). In fact, most of the names used in Blunt's poems seem to have peculiar associations. Among the innumerable women loved by Casanova, for example, there is a Juliette, a Manon and an Esther; and Blunt was a Casanova in real life. He named his only daughter, Judith, after Shakespeare's youngest daughter; and the two pseudonyms he used for himself, Proteus and Merlyn, are associated with the supernatural powers of prophetic vision in Greek mythology and the Arthurian Saga respectively.

Blunt's later verse shows some decline in his creative power. In his last two long poems he repeats himself, giving an emotional autobiography in which he seems reconciled to his fate in a stoic way. "Quatrains of Life" is an enhanced version of his earlier "Quatrains of Youth", which was a lively recollection of his experiences, his search for a secure faith, and his dissatisfaction with the bad aspects of contemporary civilization. "The Wisdom of Merlyn" is written in rhymed triplets, and recalls Whitman's type of free verse; the lines run into very long, loose sentences, but retain a throbbing rhythm of their own. It is a repository of meditative commentary written in the quiet, melancholy tone of old age. He called it "my book of maxims". Influenced by Omar el-Khayyam, he preaches a similar philosophy, calling on man to relinquish his fruitless search for

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1. Ibid., p. 153.

immortality and remain as content as the other creatures. His opinions of love, marriage, friendship, life and death are given in a more explicit and definitive way.

Love is of body and body, the physical passion of joy;  
The desire of the man for the maid, her nakedness strained  
to his own; the mother's who suckles her boy  
With the passionate flow of her naked breast. All else  
is a fraudulent toy.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's personal intensity, self-indulgence and erotic overtones do not belong to the aesthetic trend of the nineties. His love of beauty stems from his own refined, aristocratic taste. His introspection is penetrating, pitiless self-analysis, not the morbid brooding or self-delusion of day-dreaming. Unlike the poets of the nineties, he was a tectotalter. The love he sang (and enjoyed) was the 'strong sexual love of the Arabian poets' chaunts: the love that must be all-powerful so long as there is anything of youth left in the world."<sup>2</sup> He did not seek the ivory and gold imagery or flowery language of the aesthetes. He told Lady Gregory:

... I have really never written any verse for writing's sake, only as a way of expressing myself, and I have felt as deeply and strongly about ... world politics as I have about love. My poetry has been my justification in both fields of active life, not the pursuit of an art for art's sake.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, he was "an accomplished revolutionary against the prettiness and sweetness of much of the poetry of that era. In contrast, he was a 'plain, blunt man'."<sup>4</sup> The reason for this attitude is not difficult to find. In the words of Anthony Clyne:

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1. "The Wisdom of Merlyn", Works, II, p. 458.
  2. P. Addleshaw, "Mr. Wilfrid Blunt's Poetry", op. cit., p. 205.
  3. Finch, p. 239.
  4. David Morton, op. cit., p. 460.

Mr. Blunt desires truth above beauty. The thing he says is far more important to him than the verbal form he may adopt.<sup>1</sup>

This is a true assessment. It represents the opinions of other twentieth century critics, such as Le Gallienne and G.N. Schuster.

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Where does Blunt belong as a poet? It is difficult to fit him in any ready-made mould. He did not take his poetry writing seriously enough; and he was too independent to follow any particular school of thought. In the words of G.N. Schuster:

This man of genius ... is perhaps the only modern whom Richard of the Lion Heart would have welcomed as a brother. Both have been men of action with a turn for song.

In many ways he has been a Stevenson whose craving has been appeased, whose hunger for the wild paths around the world has sought its fill in more substantial things than sonorous sentences.<sup>2</sup>

His love poetry, stemming from actual life, not refined art, contains nothing of the exotic dreams of Baudelaire or the decadent fragrance of the nineties. Percy Addleshaw gives another comparison:

Mr. Blunt indeed, reminds one of Mr. Kipling at his best ... in his vigorous handling of the narrative and his bold, almost savage, grasp of and delight in the apparent commonplace.<sup>3</sup>

He did not write for money or fame, nor did he feel it necessary to compromise his principles in order to satisfy the popular taste or to conform to the critical norms of his time. In fact, his Victorian contemporaries did not give him the attention he deserved because he was, in his own words, "A mid-Victorian poet a little in advance of his

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1. A Clyne, op. cit., p. 131.

2. G.N. Schuster, op. cit., pp. 152, 154.

3. P. Addleshaw, "Mr. Wilfred Blunt's Poetry", op. cit., p. 210.



epoch". To them, he was an outspoken rebel against well-established conventions both in poetry and in politics. They did not appreciate even the real merits of his poetry because

... it fell upon an age less lenient to artistic carelessness than the present. Then it was the work of an Englishman who<sup>1</sup> was violently anti-imperialistic in an imperialistic period.

This lack of harmony persisted well into the "Edwardian" period.

After The Wind and the Whirlwind and Satan Absolved, the same emotional intensity and strong, personal note of denunciation and frustration re-appeared in his "Coronation Ode", which Hilaire Belloc published in a prominent place in his magazine The Eye Witness on June 20, 1911.

England! Where is she? Where?  
Land of the fortunate free  
Which hath ceased to be?  
What hath she done with her fame?  
The nations that envied her  
Turned to her in their care,  
Sought her light upon land and sea,  
Called as once on her ancient name,  
The name of liberty.  
But her ears were shut to their prayer;  
Her place was a sepulchre  
She hath ceased in her strength to be,  
She is no more free.<sup>2</sup>

This poem harks back to Kipling's denunciation of jingoism in his "Recessional", written during the Diamond Jubilee of 1897. Naturally, neither the critics nor the general public could be expected to respond to this "unpatriotic" spirit. In their complacent mood, they preferred Kipling's "The English Flag". They liked to see England with the eyes of Alfred Austin, as a country

Whose sons have in their fearless eyes the light  
Of centuries of fame and battle won  
And Empire ranging roundward with the sun.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Verses of an Emotional Epicurean", op. cit., p. 7.
  2. "Coronation Ode", Works, II, p. 294.
  3. Alfred Austin, "Look Seaward, Sentinel!", Songs of England (1898), p. 21.

or to think that she was, in the words of W.E. Henley:

Chosen daughter of the Lord  
Spouse-in-Chief of the ancient sword.<sup>1</sup>

They would rather listen to Henry Newbolt's description of the English as " ... a race high handed, strong of heart / Sea-rovers, conquerors, builders in the waste".<sup>2</sup>

Like Whitman, Blunt in his love for liberty takes a general, human attitude which transcends the narrow borders of selfish patriotism; and his view of the other races is not condescending like that of the Kipling of "What do they know of England, who only England know", although his realism is very close to Kipling's.

In his article about Lord Lytton in The Nineteenth Century of April 1892, Blunt observed that "really good writers do not always gain their full meed or appreciation at once, or during the period of their best production"; and he gave Browning, Keats and Shelley as examples. This remark is true to a considerable extent and can be applied to Blunt himself. It was only at the end of his fifty-year poetic career, when he decided, at the age of 74, to stop writing verse because "That needs an overflow of vital force ...", that his work began "to have a certain bric-à-brac value with readers". In the words of Richard Le Gallienne:

[Blunt] was certainly "great" enough in a variety of ways that merit a far greater recognition than he ever received ...

[His political poems] are filled with noble indignation and prophetic fire. It is easy to understand why our modern poets should have taken Wilfrid Scawen Blunt for their hero.<sup>3</sup>

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1. W.E. Henley, "Pro Rege Nostro", which is poem No. III in the group collectively entitled "For England's Sake", The Works, 7 vols. (1908), II, p. 142.
  2. Henry Newbolt, "The Noncombatant", Collected Works: 1897-1907, (1908?), p. 126.
  3. R. Le Gallienne, op. cit.

These poets were a handful of rebellious youths at the time. On January 18, 1914, a number of them visited him in his New Buildings house to pay him homage. They were W.B. Yeats, T. Sturge Moore, Victor Plarr, F.S. Flint, Richard Aldington and Ezra Pound. John Masefield and Frederic Manning intended to come, but were unable to do so at the last minute. Hilaire Belloc arrived in the afternoon, and Robert Bridges refused to attend because he did not like Blunt's political leanings. The event was also witnessed by Blunt's friend and neighbour, Lord Osborne Beauclerk. D.H. Lawrence, Padraic Colum, James Joyce and Rupert Brooke "would have been present had they not been out of England".<sup>1</sup> The Poets presented him with a carved reliquary of marble, bearing a recumbent figure of a naked woman, with the following inscription, signed by them:

Because you have gone your individual gait,  
Written fine verses, made mock of the world,  
Swung the grand style, not made a trade of art,  
Upheld Mazzini and detested institutions;

We, who are little given to respect,  
Respect you, and having no better way to show it  
Bring you this stone to be some record of it.<sup>2</sup>

(They have used the name of Mazzini instead of Arabi by mistake.) They also gave him a collection of their poems in manuscripts. Blunt was greatly flattered and pleasantly surprised, telling them that he was an "imposter" and that he had been "all sorts of things ... but never a poet". He gave them roasted peacock for dinner, and read them his translation of "Don Juan's Good Night" from the French of his friend Count Gobineau. The second section of Yeats's poem: "The Realist", refers to this event under a separate title: "The Peacock"; and Ezra

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1. Maurice Lesemann, "The Passing Aristocracy", Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, Chicago, No. VI, vol. 22 (Sept. 1923), pp. 337-41 (p. 341).
  2. Ezra Pound, "Homage to Wilfrid Blunt", Poetry, No. XI, vol. III March, 1914), pp. 220-223 (p. 221). Other accounts of this event can be found in Finch, pp. 336-8; the Earl of Lytton, The Desert and the Green (1957), p. 36; Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939, 2nd. ed. (1965), pp. 272-3; and Richard Aldington, Life for Life's Sake, (1968), p. 153.

Pound makes a similar reference to it in Canto LXXXIII. Lady Gregory, who could not attend, wanted the affair publicized. Yeats thus reported the meeting to The Times of January 20, 1914, Pound wrote about it in the Chicago magazine Poetry (of March 1914), and Richard Aldington gave a full account of it in The Egoist of Feb. 2nd, 1914. This publicity gave rise to some indignation, particularly in conservative circles which hated Blunt.<sup>1</sup> Pound, however, was to pay another kind of homage to Blunt's memory, under adverse circumstances. In Canto 81, written during his confinement at the Disciplinary Training Centre at Pisa in 1945, Pound gives Blunt the key role of opener of the gates of knowledge for the wandering poet.

Yet, political prejudices continued to cast their dark shadows on the assessment of Blunt as a poet. "So Mr. Blunt's poems", a T.L.S. reviewer asserts, "are made a little ridiculous by the political campaigning which perpetually invades them". Then he accuses Blunt of condoning all vices "except those that helped to make the British Empire".<sup>2</sup> Another example of such prejudices against Blunt appeared in the talk on him by Rupert Croft-Cooke, published in The Listener of Sept. 25, 1947. Here is a sample of his sweeping generalization:

... there is no poem of his which "everyone knows" and only one or two which rise above the level of competent verse. A great deal of it ... is banal and derivative, full of hackneyed rhymes and stale metre.<sup>3</sup>

In reply to these charges, Sydney Cockerell gave the testimonies of other poets:

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1. Finch, p. 337.
  2. "Wilfrid Blunt's Poems", T.L.S. (Oct. 18, 1923), p. 687.
  3. Ruper Croft-Cooke, "Squire of Crabbet Park", The Listener, 38 (Sept. 25, 1947), pp. 519-520 (p. 520).

... I have heard both A.E. Housman and Kipling speak warmly of Blunt's poetry, especially of ... Esther ... Kipling told me that he knew several of these sonnets by heart.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later, in his Feasting With Panthers (1967), which he subtitled "A New Consideration of Some Late Victorian Writers", Rupert Croft-Cooke set the following criterion:

Sincerity alone survives the test of expression, and the only love poetry that escapes anticlimax, like Sidney's to Stella or Shakespeare's to Mr. W.H., comes from a dynamic, uncultivated emotion.<sup>2</sup>

Surely Blunt's love poetry would merit a better judgement from Croft-Cooke according to his own criterion, since neither friend nor foe had ever questioned Blunt's "sincerity" or the dynamism of his "uncultivated emotion". Blunt, however, is not one of the "Late Victorian Writers" reconsidered in this book.

Blunt may not be a major poet. His works may be unequal, and his longer poems in particular may be loosely-knit and formless, with much prolixity and repetition. He may have concentrated on himself too much, but in the final score, it must be admitted that he deserves, at least, a secure, if not prominent, position as a minor poet of the late nineteenth century. It is not difficult to suggest the props that can support this position. His achievement, in one

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1. Sydney Cockerell, "Wilfrid Scawen Blunt" in (Letters to Editor), The Listener, 38 (Oct. 2, 1947), p. 579.
  2. Rupert Croft-Cooke, Feasting with Panthers (1967), p. 1. Cf: the following remark by a reviewer who was praising Blunt:

One may even say that the very measure of a poet, that indeed by which he will ultimately stand or fall, is his insight into and passionate expression of "life".

See: "The Poetry of Wilfrid Blunt", The Spectator, (July 1, 1899), pp. 20-21 (p. 20).

sense, lies in his remarkable assimilation of several traditions and contradictory trends, Romantic, Pre-Raphaelite, Satirical, Elizabethan, Arabic, mixing them like the marriage of elements to produce his own independent brand of poetry, with a modern touch. He can be considered as a transitional bridge between the late Victorian and early modern schools of poetry; and in some respects, such as the simplicity and exactness of diction, lack of vague generalities and sonorous words, and the creation of new rhythms that do not copy or echo old moods, he can be said to anticipate the Imagists. In addition to his contribution to the enhancement of the scope of the sonnet, as can be seen in his Esther and a considerable number of his love sonnets, lyrics and pastorals, he stubbornly insisted upon "modern subjects"; while other poets, like his cousin Lord Alfred Douglas and Sir William Watson, were still content, at the turn of the century, in producing dull imitations of Petrarch and faint echoes of the Elizabethans and Rossetti. There are great satirical passages in his Satan Absolved, in which he revived the use of the neglected Alexandrine, and which won him the friendship of Father George Tyrrel, whose posthumous volume of verse, Versions and Perversions, was dedicated to Blunt.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, his rendering of the difficult Moallakat into English verse is a unique addition to English literature. F. York Powell, to whom this work was dedicated, was very proud, and wrote to his close friend, Mrs. Marriott Watson, that Blunt "is a very swagger poet indeed".<sup>2</sup> Blunt's poetry appealed to the young generation, to Pound, Yeats, Belloc, Rupert Brooke, George Wyndham, George Curzon and the elite social circle of the Crabbet Club. Others were encouraged and advised by

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1. Finch, p. 309.

2. Oliver Elton, Frederick York Powell, op. cit., I, p. 393.

him, as they wanted to follow in his footsteps. Basil Blackwood announced his intention of becoming his disciple; Helena Carnegie brought her nephew, "a young poet", to visit the old poet.<sup>1</sup> His daughter, Judith, published a book of verse entitled Love in a Mist in 1913.<sup>2</sup> Lady Margaret Sackville sought his opinion, and he wrote a preface to her Selected Poems (1919).

In The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, George Sampson describes Blunt as "a born rebel" whose "very original verse ... submits unwillingly to form and order"; and he concludes:

Blunt is a very considerable poet and his work ... must not be ignored among the many and various strains of Victorian Poetry.<sup>3</sup>

This call does not seem to have been taken up; and Blunt continues to "pay the price" of his rebellion. In 1892, he observed:

In our system ... of party warfare every organ of criticism, even the most exclusively devoted to art, is obliged to have its side declared or half-declared in politics, and so we see poets extolled or belittled in large measure according to their supposed political opinions ...

This is only natural ... but still it needs to be considered if we are to estimate things fairly.<sup>4</sup>

It is high time this man was given his due. That is what this chapter has endeavoured to do for the poet who "asked so little, and who altogether received so little, from an age to which he was creditor."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Finch, pp. 365, 366.

2. Ibid., p. 338.

3. George Sampson, The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, (Cambridge, 1946; 1st ed. 1941), p. 739.

4. W.S. Blunt, "Lord Lytton's Rank in Literature", op. cit., p. 574.

5. Maurice Lesemann, "The Passing Aristocracy", op. cit., p. 341.

(APPENDIX)

A Note on Derivatives in Arabic

The subject of derivatives is one of the most complicated questions in Arabic grammar. There are ten items in all, which can be coined from the simple original verb or infinitive. These items include, for example, the doer, (subject) the past participle, (object) the formula of intensified epithet, the comparative degrees, a type of adjective that works as a present participle, the place name, the time name, and the instrument name.

The majority of the verbs in Arabic are usually made up of three-letter roots. There are only three tenses, past, present and imperative. The past, not the present, is considered to be the original case; and the seven patterns of verbs are classified according to the mode of response which a "past" verb shows when changed into the "present" tense (The two verbs used in the following table belong to the same pattern). When conjugated, the verb changes according to the subject, whether singular, dual or plural, male or female; and the end changes according to its position in the sentence. These changes, which follow a set of consistent rules applicable almost in every case, give rise to assonance and consonance, (Note the ends of verbs in the table.) Other sets of formulas lead to certain modifications in the meaning. The two verbs conjugated in the table are Shareba (to drink) and Amela (to work). The modifications in the meaning of these two simple functions can come from a variety of additions to their original root. One type of addition can make the intransitive verb become transitive, or the transitive which usually needs one object, rule two or even more. Hence Sharraba (to cause, or to force, to drink) and A'amala (to force or to cause something or somebody to work).



It is also possible to coin a verb that involves mutual participation between two doers (Shā:raba, Ā:mala), a verb indicating false pretence of action (Tashā:raba, Ta'ā:mala) or a verb which means calling for the action of drinking or working to take place (hence Istashraba, and: Ista'amala). Other derivatives from these two verbs will include the doer (Shārib=drinker; Āmil=worker), the past participle (Mashroob=drunk; Ma'amool=worked or done), the intensified epithet or quality of the doer of the action (Sherrīb; Ammā:l), and the noun indicating the place where the action is done (hence Mashrab=bar; Ma'amal=factory). In the nouns, the dual and the plural in both masculine and feminine genders, whether the plural is regular or irregular, can also become prolific sources of assonance. (See Alfred Guillaume's preface to The Legacy of Islam, edited by himself and Sir Thomas Arnold (Oxford 1965; first pub. 1931), pp. vi-viii).

M = MASCULINE F = FEMININE S = SINGULAR

P = PLURAL

SUBJECT		PAST	PRESENT	IMPERATIVE	
	He	Shareba Amela	Yashrabu Ya'amalu	li Yashrab. li Ya'amal.	<p>Note: a) In Arabic, the first person is always the "Absent", the second is always the "Addressee" and the third is the "Speaker".</p> <p>b) Although the subjects are explicitly mentioned here, their presence with these verbs is quite unnecessary, since the character of the doer can be deduced from the verb's formula.</p>
(M. Dual)	They	Sharebā: Amelā:	Yashrabāni Ya'amalāni	li Yashrabā li Ya'amalā	
(M. Plural)	They	Sharebū A melū	Yashrabūné Ya'amalūné	li Yashrabū: li Ya'amalu:	
	She	Sharebat Amelat	Tashrabu Ta'amalu	li Tashrab li Ta'amal	
(F. Dual)	They	Sharebatā Amelatā	Tashrabāni Ta'amalāni	li Tashrabā li Ta'amalā	
(F. Plural)	They	Sharebné Amelné	Yashrabné Ya'amalné	li Yashrabné li Ya'amalné	
(M.S.)	You	Sharebta Amelta	Tashrabu Ta'amalu	Ishrab. I'amal.	
(M. Dual)	You	Sharebtumā Ameltumā	Tashrabā:ni Ta'amalā:ni	Ishrabā I'amalā:	
(M.P.)	You	Sharebtum Ameltum	Tashrabū:né Ta'amalū:né	Ishrabū: I'amalū:	
(F.S.)	You	Sharebti Amelti	Tashrabeené Ta'amaleené	Ishabee. I'amalee.	
(F. Dual)	You	Sharebtuma Ameltuma	Tashrabā:ni Ta'amalā:ni	Ishrabā: I'amalā:	
(F.P.)	You	Sharebtunneh Ameltunneh	Tashrabné Ta'amalné	Ishrabné I'amalné	
	I	Sharebtu Ameltu	Ashrabu A'amalu	li Ashrab li A'amal	
	We	Sharebnā: Amelnā:	Nashrabu Na'amalu	li Nashrab li Na'amal.	

### CHAPTER III : BLUNT AND DRAMA

This chapter offers a detailed study of Blunt's dramatic works, which have received little critical attention from his contemporaries and subsequent writers. Sister Mary Joan Reinehr's account of this subject in her The Writings of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1940) provides only summaries, with no analysis of the sources, background and literary methods in the works. Blunt wrote three dramas in rhymed verse, mainly Alexandrines, interspersed with songs. The three plays will be taken here in order of their writing rather than publication.

The Bride of the Nile, published in 1907, was written in Egypt in the spring of 1893, and given a private performance at Crabbet Park on August 23 of that year, and again, at New Buildings on July 13, 1907.<sup>1</sup> The Little Left Hand, written in 1897, was published in 1914, in the second volume of his Poetical Works. This play has never been performed. Fand of the Fair Cheek was completed at Fernycroft in 1902 and privately printed in 1904.<sup>2</sup> It was given "an amateur performance" at New Buildings on September 24, 1906, and publicly produced at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on April 20, 1907.<sup>3</sup> Satan Absolved (1899) cannot be considered as a play; it is rather a dramatic poem or "imaginary conversation" and will be dealt with in chapter 6.

Like Byron's, Blunt's dramatic writing sprang from a turbulent life; and its many "knots", conflicts and tensions reflect the spirit

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1. My Diaries, pp. 113, 588.

2. Ibid., p. 445. Cf: Viola Meynell (ed.), Friends of a Lifetime (1940), pp. 171-2.

3. W. G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre (1935), pp. 226, 308. Cf: Lennox Robinson, Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History, 1899-1951 (1951), pp. 55-56, 80. Blunt refers to the success of this production as reported by The Pall Mall Gazette of April, 22, 1907. (My Diaries, p. 583). See also Lady Gregory's Our Irish Theatre (London and New York, 1913, Reptd. London, 1972), p. 206.

of adventure, suspense and restlessness which ruled him on the political, social and emotional stages. Every aspect of his character involved the interaction of conflicting motives and forces which influenced his sensitive, often choleric temperament, sometimes leading to periods of introspection and withdrawal, but often surfacing as violent eruptions. As traveller, politician, lover, religious doubter, husband and father, Blunt generates tension. In all these fields, he always cuts a dramatic figure, ranging between the sublime and the bizarre, full of energy and involved in unresolved episodes. Some of these episodes were used by his friend G. B. Shaw in his plays. Blunt's account of the Denshawai Case, for example, was incorporated in Shaw's introduction to John Bull's Other Island, which, like Blunt's Fand, was originally written for the Irish Theatre at Yeats's request.<sup>1</sup> Blunt also claimed that his experience with Sir Douglas Powell, who had failed to convince him to undergo an operation in the spring of 1906, was "among the contributory causes" in Shaw's The Doctor's Dilemma.<sup>2</sup> Blunt certainly figures in Shaw's Heartbreak House as Hector Hushabye,<sup>3</sup> described later by Shaw as:

... liar, boaster, hero, stylist, Athos and D'Artagnan rolled into a single passionately sincere humbug; and, what is worse, you cannot trust him for a moment not to hold up the mirror to your own silly side.<sup>4</sup>

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1. The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw Collected Plays With Their Prefaces, 7 Vols. (1971; supervised by Dan. H. Laurence), Vol. 2, pp. 853-872. In this preface Shaw described Blunt as "an Englishman of unquestionable personal and social credentials ..." (p.870). He also praised his anti-imperialist attitude. Cf: Hesketh Pearson, Bernard Shaw (1942; Four Square edition, 1964), p. 246. Shaw sent Blunt the proof-sheets of this preface. See My Diaries, p. 578.
  2. My Diaries, p. 572.
  3. Dan. H. Laurence, Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters, 1898-1910 (1972), p. 111. Cf: St. John Ervine, Bernard Shaw: His Life, Works and Friends (1956), p. 380.
  4. G. B. Shaw, Letter to the Sunday Herald, 23 October, 1921; reprinted in The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw, op. cit., V, p. 184.

Some, if not all, of these qualities are betrayed by a number of Blunt's supposedly fictitious characters in all his plays. He obviously modelled these creations on himself and on people whom he knew. His life was the substance from which dramatists can mould their heroes; and his Byronic tendency was corroborated by many people who knew him well. Judith Blunt (Lady Wentworth), his daughter, described his "fearless courage in aggression", his "tangled love affairs", his "undoubted personal fascination", his "incendiary moods", his "brilliant genius," his "tyranny and spirit of discord", his "theatrical tendency to thunder and lightning stage effects" and his love of "living in the limelight of his self-made stage with himself as the hero".<sup>1</sup> His son-in-law, Neville Lytton, saw him in his domestic life as a towering patriarchal figure "constantly in a state of being appeased, like Zeus or the Old Testament Jehovah."<sup>2</sup> Both Siegfried Sassoon and T. E. Lawrence saw Blunt towards the end of his life; but, while the former could not think of Blunt in the context of "tyrannical disagreements and contentious crusades",<sup>3</sup> the latter was more perceptive. He could discern Blunt's "fire yet flickering over the ashes of old fury."<sup>4</sup> Lawrence suggested that "Only his vanity saved him from being a really great man in many roles."<sup>5</sup>

Knowledge of Blunt's circumstances sheds light on the purpose and content of his plays. His long, eventful life and multifarious

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1. Lady Wentworth, The Authentic Arabian Horse (1945), pp. 74, 75, 76 and 77.
  2. Neville Lytton, The English Country Gentleman (1925), p. 241; cf: Lady Emily Lutyens, A Blessed Girl (1953), pp. 118, 120.
  3. Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey (1945), p. 159.
  4. Bertram Thomas, Arabia Felix (1938), p. vii.
  5. Quoted by Lady Wentworth, op. cit., p. 77.

activities left many marks on his writings, and are important for any assessment.

As with Shaw, Blunt's plays were vehicles to propagate his own ideas. Love and anti-imperialism are dominant themes. The Bride of the Nile is anti-imperialistic, but it includes matters from his personal life. The Little Left Hand is a tragedy attributing the failure of social, moral and religious reform in Victorian England to the lack of strong political leadership. But it cannot be separated from the author's own aspirations and crisis of thought. Fand, adapted from an Irish legend, depicts Blunt's conjugal problems which culminated in his separation from his wife in 1906. It is within the mainstream of the theatre of ideas that we must see Blunt's dramatic works, taking into consideration the fact that he was seeking neither money nor fame. He was rather motivated by a sense of mission to achieve reform through social and political criticism. He was also giving vent to his pent-up feelings in a variety of dramatic settings, by masquerading behind thinly-veiled characters. We identify him as Hatib, the Muslim warrior in seventh-century Egypt, in The Bride of the Nile. We recognize him as Sir John Leicester, the dashing leader of an idealist revolution in Mid-Victorian England, in The Little Left Hand. In Fand, he figures as Cuchulain, the romantic knight of legendary reputation in ancient Ireland. The most viable approach to see Blunt's plays in true perspective is to realize that they all contain reconstructions of certain events in his actual life.

The Bride of the Nile, an "extravaganza", as he called it, consists of three acts, set in Egypt at the time of the Islamic conquest (circa 640 A.D.). It gives a picture of this country under the rule of the

Roman Empire, which subjected it to ruthless tyranny, using its local vassal, Al-Makawkas, as a puppet in the hands of the Roman Governor, Barix, his son (Alexis) and his Official Secretary, Boilas. Although Alexis loves Jael, the beautiful daughter of Benjamin, the Samaritan, his ambition makes him follow the advice of his opportunist father in seeking the hand of Belkis, daughter of the Makawkas, the Christian Prince of Egypt. When the overflow of the Nile is delayed, Jael is chosen as the virgin "bride" to be thrown into the river to appease it, according to an ancient barbaric custom. The Roman authorities refuse to interfere to save her from this fate. Belkis offers to replace her, but Jael insists on being sacrificed, too, as a bridesmaid. The Muslims arrive just in time to forbid this ritual "wedding". The stagnant Nile overflows through a miracle brought about by a letter thrown into it by the order of Amru, Emir of the Saracens. The two "brides", who insist on being inseparable, are both wedded to Hatib, the Caliph's envoy, since a "Mohammedan" is allowed more than one wife, thus bringing the play to a happy ending. True to the conventions of the newly emerging "play of ideas", Blunt draws a sharp contrast between the qualities of the Western and Eastern conquerors of Egypt and their treatment of the native Egyptians. The central event on which his plot is based deserves examination, since it contains a curious mixture of myth and history, compounded by a number of interesting anachronisms.

Blunt says in the preface that he got his historical material from "El-Murtadi, the Arabian chronicler". Elsewhere he names "Abulfeda" as his source.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the first Muslim historian to relate this incident of the year 638 A.D. was Ibn Abdel-Hakam

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1. My Diaries, p. 113.

(799-871) in his book entitled Futuh Misr (The Conquest of Egypt).<sup>1</sup> Several other historians seem to have followed his account without questioning its accuracy. These include the Persian geographer Ibnul-Faqih in his book: Futuh el-Buldan (The Conquest of the Regions), written in 903 A.D., Ibn Teghri Berdi (d. 1412 A.D.) in his Al-Nujum-ul-Zāhirah, Fi Mulūki Misra wal-Qāhirah (The Glowing Stars of the Kings of Egypt and Cairo), El-Qualquashandi (d. 1418 A.D.) in his Subhul-A'āshā ... (The Dawn of the Weak-Sighted) and El-Maqrīsi (d. 1442 A.D.) in his Khetat (The Plans). As for Abulfedā (1273-1330?), his history was entitled Mukhtasar Tārīkh el-Bashar (A Short History of Mankind), and his main source was the history of Ibn el-Athīr (1163-1239 A.D.) entitled Al-Kāmel (The Complete). The celebration of the overflow of the Nile was a very old custom in Egypt; but, according to Dr. Sayyedah Isma'īl Kāshef, the "bride" thrown in the river was only a symbolic dummy, not a real, live virgin. The Christian Copts gave the occasion some religious significance; before the Gregorian Calendar, they used to celebrate it on the 14th day of September.<sup>2</sup> The celebration was abandoned in the early days of Islam, but seems to have been revived later as an occasion of public festivities patronized by the semi-independent rulers of Egypt, who paid only lip service to the suzerainty of Baghdad, the centre of the Abbasid Caliphate. Today, the Muslim fellahin of Egypt still use the Coptic calendar in reckoning their agricultural seasons,

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1. Sayyidah Isma'īl Kāshef, Misr Fi Fajrel-Islam (Egypt at the Dawn of Islam) (Cairo, 1947), p. 194.

2. Ibid., p. 195. It is also interesting to note another ritual occult observed in ancient Egypt. At midnight on December 25, the priests of Isis used to take to the streets of Alexandria, chanting: "The pregnant Virgo hath just delivered its burden, giving birth to the Sun."



including the swell of the Nile.

Gibbon, who dismisses the story of the destruction of Alexandria's great library at the hands of the Muslims, similarly, rejects the Nile incident of 638 A.D. as a "fable" produced by the romantic imagination of the Saracens. However, Blunt seems to have adopted the story only as a framework, a skeleton, as it were, without bothering about the details, and used his imagination to clothe it with the flesh which constitutes his plot. He also adopted the term "Sarcens" to refer to the Muslim conquerors of the seventh century, although the term did not become popular till much later. It was perhaps coined to distinguish the Muslims of the East (or Sharkiyeeen in Arabic) from those of the West (or Moroccans, "Maghrebiyyeen", hence: "Moors"). As for the European rulers of Egypt in this play, Blunt considers them "Romans" receiving their authority from Rome, rather than Greeks or Byzantines from Constantinople. This was perhaps deliberate, since Rome would be a more suitable representative of the European arrogance which Blunt wanted to satirize and contrast with the magnanimity of the Easterners. In the preface, he refers to the Copts' reception of "the Moslem invaders as fellow heretics and allies against their imperial rulers". Omar's "letter" to the Makawkas in the third act (p. 31) is, in fact, a relatively accurate translation of Prophet Mohammed's letter to him of more than ten years before. Hatib, the "Caliph's envoy" was in fact Mohammed's own messenger. Omar's own letter to the Nile is attributed in the play to his general Amru (pp. 41-42). Here, the outlines of the source are considerably modified, perhaps to underline the dramatic effect of the miracle of the rise of the river. Blunt, who adopts the Muslim historians' dubious account of

human sacrifices in Christian Egypt, refers with amusement to a similarly dubious account of such sacrifices in Muslim Egypt. He observes in his preface:

It is interesting to note that the Cairo Correspondent of the "Pall Mall Gazette" of last year (August 26, 1906), with anachronistic but pardonable patriotism, transfers the abolition of the sacrifice ... from the seventh to the nineteenth century, including it in the list of Lord Cromer's beneficent reforms ...

Blunt does not mince his words about the parallel situations of the Roman and British occupations of Egypt. In this, he foreshadows Shaw's attempt in Caesar and Cleopatra (1898) to poke fun at the jungoistic ideas and popular conceptions of Empire. However, Blunt's speculation (in the Preface) about the future "liberation" of Egypt at the hands of "an Oriental invader, Japanese or other" was perhaps an afterthought. Japan's astonishing victory over Russia in 1904 was still fresh in memory. Similar speculations, coupled with scathing remarks about the Roman and British Empires, were put in the mouth of Ra by Shaw in his "prologue" to Caesar and Cleopatra, which he added to the play in 1912.

In the entry of 23rd August, 1893, Blunt admits that The Bride of the Nile was written "as a relief of my feelings, and to make fun of Baring and the British Occupation".<sup>1</sup> Thus, the play should be read as a satire directed against the British administration of Egypt under Cromer. Blunt's remarks are very accurate, and should be taken seriously in more senses than one. In addition to the oriental atmosphere it invokes, the play has its sources in a number of specific events in Blunt's real life. The plot, the scenery, the characterization, and even some seemingly insignificant stage directions, reflect various aspects of the poet's own experiences throughout the eighteen eighties and early 'nineties on the political, social and personal

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1. My Diaries, p. 113.

levels. He suffered a series of resounding defeats in several successive battles on more than one front while defending causes which he held dear to his heart. Arabi's revolution, whose aspirations of reform he supported, was crushed by the English occupation in 1882. His enthusiastic agitation for reforms in India (1883) went unheeded. Gordon's death and the bitter controversies and popular uproar that came in its aftermath, could have been averted, he felt, if the Gladstone Government had taken up Blunt's effort to mediate with the Mahdi in 1884. This was followed by his failure to secure a seat in Parliament in three successive attempts, in the elections of 1885, 1886 and 1887, as a Home-Rule candidate. He spent the first two months of 1888 in an Irish prison, from which he was released in March, only to face the harsher penalty of social ostracism. Well might he seek to give vent to his feelings of frustration. He thus identified his position with that of his politically frustrated friend, William Morris, and together they fell "back on earlier loves, art, poetry, romance." Blunt remained absorbed in these "earlier loves" for five years during which he remained politically inactive. However, the death of the Khedive revived his interest in the political situation in Egypt. He began to agitate once more for the release of Arabi, whose life he had saved in 1882. When Cromer refused to listen to him, he encouraged the new Khedive, Abbas Hilmi, to assert his independence vis-a-vis Cromer. Then he began to attack the heavy-handed policy of the latter in a series of articles published in The Nineteenth Century.<sup>1</sup> It was during this new

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1. W. S. Blunt, "Lord Cromer and the Khedive", NC, Vol. 33 (April, 1893), pp. 571-585; and "The Khedive and Lord Cromer", Ibid., Vol. 35 (Feb., 1894), pp. 177-188.

revival of his political activity that he wrote The Bride of the Nile. Meanwhile, his involvement in a fruitless affair with Lady Emily Lutyens had its bearing on the play. Blunt projected into fiction what he failed to obtain in the fields of both love and politics. These motifs reflect his nostalgia and the struggle, both internal and external, which is sustained throughout the play. Alexis fluctuates between Jael, whom he professes to love, and Belkis, whom his father wants him to marry. Belkis is torn between two motives, to sacrifice herself as a "bride" to the Nile, or to become the bride of Alexis in a political marriage of convenience. Barix has mixed feelings towards the natives, alternating between mercy and suppression. On the political level, there is the contrast between the magnanimity of the Arab conquerors, whom Blunt presents as liberators, and the arrogance of the Romans. Belkis sees the Arabs as "kings, born for the world's rule", bringing with them salvation through their "message proud/To all who bear Rome's yoke, a message to the poor". (p.31). Benjamin the Samaritan welcomes them with several utterances vaguely echoing the Old Testament:

They come with liberty  
And in the name of God, the God that is our own,  
To purge a weary world of Rome's dominion.  
It is the God of Israel smiting with their sword.  
(p. 38)

The Romans on the other hand, are "too dull" and "Too full of their own selves." (p. 23).

There are two contradictory approaches to responsibility, determining the attitudes of the characters to the important issues in moments of crisis. The first approach stems from honesty, noble motives and altruistic feelings, tinged with credulity and bordering on naïveté. The other approach stems from selfishness, opportunism,

racial arrogance and political profiteering, covered with self-justifying slogans. The oriental characters represent the first approach, regardless of religious profession; the Romans, the latter. The satire is harsh, merciless in intention but crude in effect. In the struggle between these two sets of values, Blunt denounces the philosophy of "Might is Right" and vindicates its victims, who prevail in the end. Here is a sample of this philosophy as expressed by Barix:

Rome has too much on hand  
To trifle with loose ways of action and command,  
Too high a duty. Here in Egypt more than all  
We need to prove our strength, to be equipped, like Saul,  
Taller than all our brotheren, with the actual show  
Of kingship in the world - since Heaven has willed it so,  
And given us this high mission for the world's more good.  
(pp. 8-9)

At an allegorical level, the characters and situations are well-conceived, but the weaknesses of allegory are unavoidable. The characters are modelled on historical people and events which Blunt knew well, and directed against prominent contemporary personalities. Each character represents a type, an attitude, an outlook on life, a set of ideals. Alexis, for example, is the unscrupulous dandy, being groomed for a political career by his wily, authoritative father, Governor Barix. Boïlas is the narrow minded secretary who represents the worst aspects of bureaucracy. To him, truth consists only of the formal texts of official reports. He was modelled on the covenanted civil servants, such as Sir Edward Malet, A. Colvin and Moberly Bell, with whom Blunt crossed swords on several occasions. Boïlas is the forerunner of Britannus, the ancient Briton who figures as Caesar's secretary in Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra. This is how Boïlas describes himself:

I was bred in the old school  
Which holds official truth sacred as Holy Writ,  
No matter what the fact. I make no face at it  
But swallow it whole ...  
- I back the published plan  
And my word of faith to the State legend still.  
It is only in raw boyhood that one bites one's pill.  
(p. 34)

Shaw's Britannus belongs to the same category:

He is carefully dressed in blue, with portfolio, inkhorn, and reed pen at his girdle. His serious air and sense of importance of the business in hand is in marked contrast to the kindly interest of Caesar ... 1

The Makawkas, "Sad phantom of the Paroahs", represents the powerless native figure-head, tamed by Barix, who treats him exactly as Cromer used to treat the Egyptian Khedive, considering him a "dull-witted child", put in the position of "a tame Rajah in a gilded cage". Again, this foreshadows Caesar's treatment of Cleopatra in Shaw's aforementioned play. Barix represents the experienced politician who uses his administrative efficiency to wield absolute power by devious means, denying the Egyptians their right to rule themselves. He reveals his intentions to his son:

I drew aside the mask,  
And showed you my ambition, all that I designed  
Of honour for Rome's name, uncabined, unconfined  
In African dominion. And for ourselves - ah, well,  
There, too, we had our hopes, high set, impregnable.

...  
... I felt my fight half won,  
An Empire in my hand. All that remains now is  
To put our final stone upon the edifice.  
(pp. 10-11)

Such ambition and sense of superiority apply to Cromer; and Blunt's view is corroborated by J. A. R. Marriott, who criticizes Cromer's suppression of freedom in Egypt - under the pretext of achieving

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1. "Caesar and Cleopatra", The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw, op. cit., II, p. 198.

reform. Cromer, who was "technically only a British agent and Consul General ... became virtually the ruler of the country."<sup>1</sup>

Barix's recurrently expressed low opinion of the Egyptians (pp. 8, 9, 10, 14, 16, 33) reflects Lord Cromer's racial prejudice. Barix considers them as "Children all and need a mother":

We are their Providence, to bid them live or die.  
Yes, Boiflas, we are great.

(p. 14)

It does not pay with Easterns thus to give them rope,  
They only flout at you; your patience feeds their hope  
And they grow fierce as wolves at first sight of your back.  
O, Lord, the fools men are! Let them come here, the pack,  
And they shall learn of us what Rome's schooling is,  
When she finds time to strike and chide their childishness.

(p. 16)

This attitude tallies with Cromer's words quoted by the Marquess of Zetland. Cromer considered the appointment of "one of Blunt's friends ruler or Prime Minister of Egypt as little less absurd than the nomination of some savage Red Indian Chief to be Governor-General of Canada."<sup>2</sup>

In portraying his characters, Blunt is too emotionally involved to achieve balance. On several occasions throughout the play, we hear his own voice in an inconsistent way which is psychologically interesting. He seems to see himself as a young Roman turned Arab. He found in the East "a mission in life" and adopted oriental manners and customs, but he wanted the best of both worlds. He thus identifies himself with Hatib, the Caliph's envoy, who carries off two wives in the end. Yet, further flattering glimpses of himself appear in some of the other characters. From the outset, Alexis,

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1. J. A. R. Marriott, The Evolution of the British Empire and Commonwealth (1939), pp. 185-6.

2. The Marquess of Zetland, Lord Cromer (1932), pp. 164-5; quoting a letter dated May 1st, 1887, sent by Cromer to Lord Salisbury.

the son of the Roman Governor, as the egotist, amorist and dandy, reminds us of Blunt as a young man in the 1860s. Alexis' declaration:

I want something fresh,  
A new sea for my nets, and those of larger mesh

harks back to Blunt's youthful cry after his separation from Catherine Walters:

From this day I seek another life

Today I am a pirate at sea.<sup>1</sup>

Another glimpse of the author comes in the character of his arch enemy, Barix, the Roman Governor who represents Lord Cromer:

... Men talk of the divine  
Pleasures of youth. Give one the joys of middle age.  
The age of fifty two. There stands life's happiest age  
With honest work each day enough to stir the blood.  
'Tis worth all wine and women, if men understood.  
(p. 12)

Blunt and Barix (Baring, Lord Cromer) were both fifty two when these lines were written. Again, Barix's unusually sentimental tone as he recollects the pathetic scene of the hunted gazelles "On the Sakhara plain" is incompatible with his authoritarian pomposity; it has the effect of bringing ridicule on the heartless Governor and is probably an intended irony. His greyhound

... had the fawn by the throat, a bloody strangled heap,  
Before I could say "off", that just before could leap  
A dozen yards at a bound. The old doe, bleating by,  
Refused to leave the spot, but lingered piteously,  
Running this way and that till the hound had her too,  
And both had got their death who but an hour ago  
Were the beauty of the place, and filled it with strange life.

It almost made me weep (he weeps)  
(p. 18)

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1. W. S. Blunt, "His Bondage to Manon Broken", Poetical Works, I, p. 47.



He thus sheds genuine tears over the death of a fawn and a doe but withholds pity from the human victims about to be sacrificed.

Barix is possibly an aspect of Blunt's personality which he rejects, for Barix's words here reconstruct experiences from the poet's hunting expeditions. The passage contains the only reference to a specific place in the Egyptian desert in all his poetry. The emotionally charged atmosphere of the whole passage echoes the pathos of a previous poem, "The Stricken Hart", in his 1892 edition of Esther and Love Lyrics (pp. 106-107). In Act II, Blunt's voice is heard again in the words of the Makawkas as he dwells lovingly on the ancient history of his garden at On (the old site where Heliopolis was built later):

This once was Pharaoh's garden. Potiphar lived here,  
The Captain of the Guard and Pharaoh's officer,  
And Joseph in these walks, as you, my child, now do,  
Wandered the morning long and heard the wild doves coo.  
I like to live with them in thought and circumstance  
Near their own pyramids - one scene in romance  
Of their six thousand years.

(p. 24)

This reconstructs Blunt's fanciful history of his own garden at Sheykh Obeyd, near Cairo.<sup>1</sup> The grand style, as reflected in the statements of Benjamin, the Samaritan, (pp. 37-39), is reminiscent of Blunt's own prophetic fulminations in The Wind and the Whirlwind (1883), to be re-iterated later in his Satan Absolved (1899).

Blunt's satirical touches tend towards caricature, but the effect is often ludicrous. Some aspects of a number of characters are exaggerated out of proportion. Barix and his conception of Rome's divine mission in the world illustrates this. When he makes

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1. Secret History, pp. 207, 208; cf: Frederic Harrison, Autobiographic Memoirs, 2 Vols. (1911), II, pp. 174-5, 177. See also the Earl of Lytton's Memoir of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1961), pp. 58-63.

his first appearance on stage he is described as "a stout, red-faced, puffy man, not altogether unlike Sargent's portrait of Lord Cromer."

(p. 8). Blunt here echoes his comments in My Diaries:

[John] Sargent [R. A.] has a genius for seeing and reproducing the base passions of his sitters; and here is Cromer with bloated cheeks, dull eyes, ruby nose, and gouty hands, half torpid, having lunched heavily. Truly my quarrel with him is avenged.<sup>1</sup>

The values of the portrait are sustained throughout the play. He is devious, practical, greedy and intoxicated with a sense of superiority, hoping that his interpretation of the administration would eventually become a standard institution in the world of Imperialist Officialdom. He is obsessed with the idea that "Rome is all justice" and can do no wrong (p. 17); but he likes to think that his schemes are the grand designs of Rome and her mission to "civilize" the world (pp. 9-10). His motive behind the arranged marriage of convenience between his son, Alexis, and the daughter of the Makawkas, Belkis, is to have "a kingdom pocketed" (p. 12). Blunt here works out his recurrent notion that the world laughs at an England preaching altruism, with Egypt dangling "from one of its pockets and Cyprus from the other". Through Barix, Blunt pokes fun at the conventions of the Victorian Establishment, the philosophy of material success and work (p. 12), the attachment to appearances and façades (p. 14) and the feelings of grandeur, racial prejudice and cultural superiority (p. 22). At best, Barix views the Egyptians with benign condescension, but sometimes he becomes overtly racist (p. 14). He handles his responsibility with ruthless opportunism. Even when he contemplates exercising the prerogative of mercy, he has ulterior motives. In the case of Jael, the first intended victim of the Nile, Barix wonders:

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1. My Diaries, p. 469.

But might it not perhaps  
Be a wise policy, a feather in our caps,  
Here to protect the weak?  
(p. 18)

But he is soon dissuaded from taking merciful action. Boflas, who represents the official machine at its worst, convinces Barix that an act of mercy could lead to other complaints against other failures of equity in the system. The dramatic contrast in Barix's motives and attitudes becomes more conspicuous, since his decision not to help the victim comes immediately after his sentimental description of the death of the gazelles. Barix weeps, thus giving Benjamin, the victim's father, the impression that

These Romans, then, have hearts.  
He seems about to yield.  
(p. 18)

A similar situation arises in the third Act, when Barix is "about to yield" over the second intended victim, Belkis, only to be dissuaded again by Boflas, who considers Belkis as "a dangerous character."

Boflas even succeeds in appeasing the qualms of his master's conscience:

No, my Lord, 'tis well  
Things take the turn they do. Let us stand by and tell  
Our beads for her soul's sake, if you will, but leave the rest  
For Father Nile to purge in the public interest.  
(p. 35)

Ironically, this "public interest" has been shown in the first Act to amount simply to Barix's machinations (pp. 9-10). Barix's character is well conceived in this play. While Blunt grudgingly concedes Barix's (i.e. Cromer's) administrative efficiency in serving this "public interest" (p. 12), he attacks Barix's concept of it in several ways. For example, the quality of mercy, although it seems genuine enough in Barix's heart, somehow never prevails, because it is always subjected to his distorted notions of "public interest", which are invariably invoked exactly when his better feelings are

about to be translated into magnanimous action. Blunt satirizes the "divine mission" of Rome (hence the West of modern times) to "civilize" the vanquished East, and, instead of seeing in this "mission" any public interest, he exposes the racial prejudices behind it (pp. 12, 15, 22, 25, 33). These prejudices, which have already been exemplified, are identical with Cromer's sweeping generalizations in his condemnation of the oriental character, religion, mentality and social customs in his Modern Egypt (1908). In order to justify the perpetuation of the English occupation, Cromer accuses the Egyptians, and the Muslims, of being devious, stupid, illogical, intolerant, servile to their superiors and brutal to their inferiors.<sup>1</sup> He concludes his diatribes by asserting the task of the European race to set things straight in a society which he sees as "morally and politically speaking, walking on its head."<sup>2</sup> Foreseeing a day of reckoning, Blunt, who sympathizes with the conquered East, puts a warning in the mouth of Belkis:

When the Earth wakes in thunder and mad fires,  
Then it shall be. But not today, not yet.  
I swear by all the Gods that were my sires,  
Not to forgive and never to forget.  
(p. 22)

Blunt also scoffs at Barix's dependence on Roman officials for his view of public affairs. In Bollas, he attacks even the seemingly impartial convenanted Civil Service, and, like G. P. Gooch, urges that it, too, is a heartless institution, reared on false reports.<sup>3</sup> In this respect Blunt follows the tradition of Dickens's satire on

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1. Lord Cromer, Modern Egypt, 2 Vols. (1908), II, pp. 134-164 passim.
  2. Ibid., p. 165.
  3. G. P. Gooch, "Imperialism", The Heart of the Empire, ed. C. F. G. Masterman (1901; Reptd. 1973 in Brighton), p. 355.

the Circumlocution Office. Barix, being a key figure in this "huge impersonal machine", trains his son, Alexis, in the art of wielding enormous power and manipulating it to promote his own political career under the guise of serving "the public interest".

He explains:

The thing needs all our skill ...  
... I let you see within  
The secret springs of power, the pulse of the machine  
(p. 10).

As a good pupil, Alexis soon learns how to get his way with the local vassal, Makawkas, through this policy of the iron fist in the velvet glove. He says:

Your Highness is the spring  
Of the great State machine - We Romans are the wheels,  
And where there friction is we need to grease our heels  
And show ourself alert  
(p. 25)

A later echo of this insight into Barix's mentality and style of ruling occurs in Lytton Strachey's portrayal of Lord Cromer in his Eminent Victorians:

His temperament, all in monochrome, touched in which cold blues and indecisive greys was eminently unromantic. He had a steely colourlessness, and a steely pliability, and a steely strength ... He progressed imperceptibly; he constantly withdrew ... But though the steel recoiled and recoiled, in the end it would spring forward. ... and the East meant very little to him ... it was something to be looked after. It was also a convenient field for the talents of Sir Evelyn Baring.<sup>1</sup>

In his anti-imperialistic attitude, Blunt was within the tradition of a minority of writers who used to criticize the heavy-handed treatment of the native populations of the British colonies. John Stuart Mill's criticism of Governor Eyre's repressive measures in the West Indies (1865-69) belongs to this tradition, which set him

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1. Lytton Strachey, Eminent Victorians (1918; Chatto & Windus, 1974), pp. 285-6.

against some prominent Victorians, such as Ruskin, Carlyle, Dickens and Kingsley, who were more interested in effecting reforms at home and considered the concern for negroes in Jamaica a sort of misplaced philanthropy. Philanthropic concern had grown considerably in the eighteen eighties and nineties, particularly in the cases of Egypt, India and, to a lesser extent, Ireland; in this cause, miscellaneous writings by Sir George Campbell, A. J. Wilson, A. M. Broadley, Lady Gregory, Frederic Harrison, Sir Wilfred Lawson, Sir Arthur Hobhouse, Michael Davitt, J. R. Seeley, John M. Robertson, John A. Hobson, G. P. Gooch, R. B. C. Graham, Leonard T. Hobhouse, Herbert Spencer, E. D. Morel and others, form a strong body of witnesses. John Bright, the Radical Liberal, resigned his seat in Gladstone's cabinet in protest against the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882. Ironically, Gladstone himself had been a "Little Englander" campaigning against Disraeli's active policy of expansion after the Berlin Conference (1878) and against the suppression of freedom in the East. Thus the Liberal Party's subsequent support for Cromer drew bitter attacks from Blunt, who considered this a betrayal of their own cause.<sup>1</sup> Cromer's efficiency could not justify the occupation, even under the pretext of implementing reforms. Blunt "disagreed with his [Cromer's] way of carrying them out through Englishmen". He saw in these officials a "narrow school of dictatorial arrogance". These ideas are borne out well in The Bride of the Nile.

Many episodes in the play are based on events in Egypt, of which the poet had first-hand knowledge. Barix's interest in revenues reflects Cromer's obsession with the financial question in Egypt

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1. W. S. Blunt, "Lord Cromer and the Khedive", op. cit., p. 585.

after his arrival in 1883. Again, this foreshadows Shaw's treatment of Caesar's avarice in Caesar and Cleopatra. In Shaw's play, Caesar's demands are expressed in the official language of his British secretary, Britannus:

My master would say that there is a lawful debt due to Rome by Egypt, contracted by the King's deceased father to the Triumvirate; and that it is Caesar's duty to his country to require immediate payment.<sup>1</sup>

In Blunt's play, Barix's "duty" was of the same nature. "Rome's millions clamouring day by day / To Caesar for more bread" (p. 9) represents the cries of the English and French holders of the bonds of the Egyptian Debt; and the leaders of these bondholders would later "Rise in their ranks and call aloud for blood." Barix's reference to the Makawkas as "Sad Phantom of the Pharaohs" applies to Khedive Ismail. Again, the atrocities which warrant the deposition of the Makawkas (p. 33) invoke the deposition of Ismail in 1879 and the occupation of Egypt in 1882. "The too tender conscience of Herclius" (p. 9) recalls Gladstone's initial reluctance to use force. The official Roman "Notes" submitted to the Makawkas (pp. 9, 15) are reminiscent of the "Joint Notes" submitted by England and France to the Egyptian Government in January and May, 1882. The "Dual Government" is a reference to the "Dual Control" of Egypt's financial affairs by British and French comptrollers in the last three years of Ismail's reign.

Blunt's hostile depiction of these policies in the play is within the mainstream of his rebellion against the established values and political conventions of his society. The intensity of his hostility to the double standards of Victorian morality brings out

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1. G. B. Shaw, "Caesar and Cleopatra" op. cit., pp. 199-200.

his affinity with Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. Yet, somehow his play falls short of achieving anything like the success of their "problem" plays; nor does he give us the light-hearted entertainment of Oscar Wilde's comedies. Although he did not lack the present wit, and enjoyed his "decadent" pleasures in the 1890s, he was far too serious to reveal this streak of his personality in society. Like the Prince of Wales, he wanted to enjoy himself without social scandals. This devious aspect of his character left unmistakable traces on his creative writings, including his plays. The Bride of the Nile was written at the height of his involvement in an affair with Lady Emily, the youngest daughter of his old friend, Robert Lytton ("Owen Meredith"). This desultory relationship lasted for more than five years, from the summer of 1891 to the autumn of 1896. Lady Emily's book A Blessed Girl (1953) tells the story of her infatuation; and her private letters are quoted by her nephew, the Earl of Lytton, in his memoir of his grandfather, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1961).

Having spent the winter in Egypt, Blunt wrote to Lady Emily on March 13, 1893 that he was writing "a historical drama of the year 1893 ... - the chief part written for you, the hero a noble Arabian".<sup>1</sup> In another letter, dated August 17, he wrote:

I hope you will like the ending of the play. It is not quite so bloody as I had intended, but the idea of the double meanings I am sure you will think original.<sup>2</sup>

This is perhaps a hint to the "double" wedding in the play. By then, Lady Emily was under the spell of the experienced poet, whom she described as

a strikingly handsome man ... - like some splendid chieftain, and romantic enough to capture any woman's heart He had dark

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1. The Earl of Lytton, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, pp. 41-42.

2. Ibid., p. 42.



eyes, with which he seemed able to speak his thoughts.<sup>1</sup>

Whether the performance of the play was "a considerable success", as Blunt wrote in his diary or "absurd" as Lady Emily described it in hers, is debatable. By the standards of the "theatre of Ideas" it is weak as a drama; the action behind the scenes was more important. Blunt obviously identified himself with the Muslim hero, Hatib, and considered the young Emily one of his "two brides". This is part of her version of Blunt's intimacies, vividly recalled sixty years later:

He said to me, "I love you in that [Arab] dress, Emily. I will call you my Mohammedan wife. I don't see why I should not marry you. Here is the little ring I promised you. I will marry you with it." Then putting it on my finger he said, "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship."<sup>2</sup>

In one of his confidential letters to her, Blunt refers to a "Turkish gentleman" he has seen with his two veiled wives as "a very pleasant domestic arrangement."<sup>3</sup> His repudiation of monogamy as a "rigid doctrine" is recurrent in his poetry. But his sympathy with Islam's permission of polygamy was predominantly a vindication of his motives of sensuality.

Blunt utilizes the oriental customs in creating scenes of colourful pageantry. Drawing on his personal experience among the desert Arabs, he succeeds in giving the effects of pathos, particularly through depicting the situation of the intended victim and her father's emotions in the third Act. The scene springs to life as Jael, in her despair, trusts her threatened life to the hands of Belkis (p. 31). This recalls a similar episode, vividly portrayed

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1. Lady Emily Lutyens, A Blessed Girl (1953), p. 16.
  2. Ibid., p. 223.
  3. Letter dated October 6, 1895, quoted by the Earl of Lytton, op. cit., p. 469.

by Lady Anne Blunt in A Pilgrimage to Nejd. The Blunts narrowly escaped death in Wadi Sirhan, where they were suddenly attacked by Bedouin robbers.

Resistance seemed to me useless, and I shouted to the nearest horseman 'ana dahilak' (I am under your protection), the usual form of surrender.<sup>1</sup>

This immediately turned the attackers into friends who conducted the Blunts to safety. The Bedouins still observe this custom as a matter of honour dearer to them than life itself. Hence Belkis's determination to protect Jael: a noble attitude which contradicts Barix's reluctance.

This lady shall not die,  
Father, while I live here. She is my suppliant.  
I give her my asylum - 'tis no idle vaunt.  
(She throws her robe round JAEL)  
She lies beneath my robe. I take on me her doom.  
(p. 30)

However, the play has several weaknesses. It contains too little action and too much oratory. Throughout the first Act and in a considerable part of the third, action is often suspended to allow the use of Barix as a tool to parody the pompous speeches of Lord Cromer. The dialogue becomes artificially lengthy, especially when long passages have to come forth as asides, leaving the other character conspicuously alone on the stage. This may be attributed to the bad influence of Bernard Shaw; however, Blunt's asides are woven into the text, and this makes them discursive, weakening the momentum of action. These asides have almost the same function as Shaw's comments and explications in the prefaces and introductions and stage directions of his plays.

Although the setting and the atmosphere call for a romantic style, the poet uses a naturalistic, everyday style which would be

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1. Lady Anne Blunt, A Pilgrimage to Nejd, I, pp. 104-105.

more suitable for prose. For example, Alexis' description of Belkis's beauty sounds like an official report:

She has made a slaughter  
Of half the Egyptian youth, who are susceptible,  
And drown themselves by scores in the Pharaonic well  
Her windows overlook.  
(p. 10)

Then he speaks about the danger to "public health" from these suicides. Belkis, alone with Alexis, her future husband, invites him to play "chess / Or draughts, or dominos" (p. 21). Again, taking Jael aside, she inquires about her lover as follows:

Your lover? What was he,  
Soldier or citizen, of low or high degree,  
Wise, foolish, forward, fond? I find them all alike.  
(p. 28)

There are anachronisms, but these can be forgiven, such as the reference to football (p. 9), the law of gravity (p. 28) and coffee (p. 33). Yet, it would be too harsh to dismiss this extravaganza as a dramatic failure. It speaks the language of anti-imperialism in Blunt's time and in ours, and this gives it a modern outlook. If it were translated and produced on any stage in the Arab countries, it would arouse admiration and participation of the audience.

By the time Blunt wrote his second play, The Little Left Hand, in 1897, his personal and social circumstances were altered. The affair with Lady Emily was over, and other, more dangerous liaisons were in progress. He fathered two illegitimate children, one was Mary Elcho's, the other probably Alice Kippel's, or Margot Asquith's, and narrowly escaped being named as a co-respondant in a divorce case. He was involved in the first major quarrel with his daughter, Judith, who was shocked to discover her father's feet of clay.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The Earl of Lytton, op. cit., pp. 242-4; cf: Lady Emily Lutyens, op. cit., pp. 287-88.

The early months of 1897 produced another fiasco. He went on a daring expedition across the Libyan desert in search of the Sheykhs of the Senussia, whom he considered as the purest sect capable of reviving Islam and creating an exemplary Utopia for mankind. He wanted to join them, but they nearly killed him in an ambush, considering him a spy.

Cromer had described him as "an enthusiast who dreamt dreams of an Arab Utopia". Perhaps The Bride of the Nile was one of these dreams and this expedition, another. Undoubtedly, the failure of William Morris and Charles Stewart Parnell to create their own Utopias in England and Ireland respectively must have given him food for thought. All these elements were interwoven into the tragedy which he wrote in 1897 and published in 1914, in the second volume of his Poetical Works (pp. 399-448). The Little Left Hand depicts an armed conflict in Mid-Victorian England between a movement of Idealist rebels, led by Sir John Leicester, and the forces of the constitutional authority, led by the wily General, Lord Bellingham. Bellingham succeeds in using his beautiful wife, Lady Marian, as a decoy to lure Leicester to his downfall. A battle takes place at York. After winning the first round, the Idealists, intoxicated with this "victory", try to chase the Queen's troops. This rash movement leads to disaster, as the Idealists are ambushed and routed by a superior force. Leicester is captured; but instead of surrendering to a noble martyrdom, he succumbs to the temptation offered by Lady Marian, and tries to elope. Phoebe, the young Idealist who once adored Leicester, shoots him, and he falls as the curtain drops. This drama deserves a closer look at its elements and sources, but as a play it is a failure. As a tragedy, it is slight, with a thin,

ill-conceived plot, betraying a glaring lack of dramatic appropriateness. The characterization is superficial. There is no dramatic conflict. Most of the characters remain flat and unconvincing; and even those, like Paul and Phoebe, who offer good opportunities for a deep study, are meagrely portrayed. Had such characters been more carefully developed, they could have contributed a great deal, not only to the heightening of the tragic emotion, but also to the substantiation of their cause. As it is, we remain to the very end ignorant of the nature of this cause, which is nothing more than a hazy dream in the remote world of the abstract. This deals a fatal blow to the play. In order to know what these Idealists stand for, we can only speculate, or glean their principles in a negative way through the scattered notions given at various points against the Establishment. These principles may eventually turn out to be a frustrated cry for social, political and religious reform - a mixture, perhaps, of several small movements that were active towards the end of the last century, such as the Salvation Army, the Fabian Society, the Anti-Agression League, the Modernist Catholics and the Irish Home-Rule. The organization of the rebels' action under a League (p. 403) gives them affinity with the Irish Land League, whose "plan" Blunt supported in 1886-7. The religious aspects of the struggle are stressed:

Our first point is the churches. These in your possession,  
You have half gained your cause, and half fulfilled your  
mission.  
(p.403)

The zeal of the Idealists recalls that of the Catholic Modernists, whose movement was crushed by the Papacy. Blunt's friend, Father George Tyrrell, for example, was excommunicated. Leicester also refers to the principle of force and coercion:

These are the days of force ...

...  
All must have heart to fight if they would hold their own,  
The Priest to hold his creed, the King to hold his throne.  
Strength justifies alike coercion and revolt.

(p. 402)

The attack on militarism in the following lines links the cause of the Idealists with the Anti-Aggression League. Paul, the Idealist, exclaims:

He was a soldier too - the name  
Stinks in all honest nostrils. 'Tis a double game  
These soldiers play for honour in their fool's career -  
This side a patriot, that a licensed buccaneer.

(p. 410)

The immoral manipulations of governments also come under attack.

Leicester tells Bellingham

The Imperial Government  
Is not a moral force with honourable intent  
On which a man may lean in perfect confidence..  
All governments have ways of coming to their ends  
Right-minded men would scorn.

(p. 426)

Jingoism and vulgarity are singled out by another Idealist leader, Davis, as repellent things. He describes the soldiers as "a devil's syndicate / Roaring and ranting out their music-hall lewd songs" (p. 434). Leicester's concept of the criminal as a "Poor wretch" victimized by social circumstances and the technicalities of a misapplied penal code which needs reform (pp. 426-427) brings him close to the opinions of General Booth in In Darkest England.

These sparse hints are the only clues to the nature of the cause for which the Idealist rebels are fighting. The best approach to sort out this puzzling mixture of motives is to try to analyse the character of Sir John Leicester, who is a bundle of contradictions and inconsistencies, reflecting Blunt's own confusion of thought. His description as "a Revolutionary Soldier of Fortune" is a paradox,

since the first word means a man of principles, while the qualification makes him a mercenary. His experience is "bought / Upon so many fields" (p. 411). The "little left hand" is a white glove given to Leicester by the woman he secretly covets, Lady Marian, wife of his arch-enemy, General Bellingham. This glove symbolizes various things to various people, as we shall see. When Blunt wrote this play, he was pessimistic about the prospects of political and religious reform. On the other hand, he must have been influenced by the "Boom in Shakespeare", which was viewed with considerable satisfaction by the critics as "the only encouraging feature" in the world of the theatre.<sup>1</sup>

Sister Mary Joan Reinehr asserts that The Little Left Hand is an imitation of "the methods of Shakespearean tragedy", and thus considers Leicester as a "tragic hero", like Hamlet.<sup>2</sup> But the similarity is only superficial. Leicester, like Hamlet, gives a number of introspective soliloquies, one of them even beginning with "To be or not to be" (p. 428), when he is lured to see the married woman he still covets, during the negotiations. But Hamlet's soliloquies reflect deep, internal conflicts in a character whose motives are not petty or base. Shakespeare gives us an analysis of the intellectual and emotional depths, whereas Leicester is an impostor, an egoist and a flashy poseur. He admits his "dark past", his "insolence of youth", his "rebellious instincts" which rule his "enfeebled will" and make him "a fraud" (p. 404) who espouses "a cause ... which is not quite his own" (p. 425). Then, holding

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1. A. Nicoll, A History of English Drama, 1660-1900, 5 Vols., (1959), V, pp. 38, 188, 210.
  2. Sister Mary-Joan Reinehr, The Writings of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (Wisconsin, 1940), pp. 25-26.

Marian's hand, he simply denounces his ideals:

What are the joys men prize?  
Ambition, glory, duty? Empty mummeries!  
Even in their best ideals! Nothing to this sweet hand ...  
(p. 432)

In fact, Leicester's introspection echoes Blunt's own indulgence in subjective self-analysis. Leicester never succeeds in stirring our sympathetic emotions; he lacks Hamlet's sincerity and sense of dedication. He is a paid mercenary, rather like the Players employed by Hamlet; and Paul, the keen-eyed Idealist sees him as such, and warns Phoebe:

A God? A mountebank! He has a tragic face  
And a voice that trembles well, and that is all his case.  
What is he to you Phoebe, but a name in print?  
Poser and partisan?

Compare this to Hamlet's description of the performance of the hired Players:

What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba  
That he should weep for her? What would he do  
Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have? ...  
(Hamlet: Act 2, Sc. II, ll. 552-55)

It is this lack of sincerity, dedication and self-abnegation which robs Leicester of the quality and stature of tragic heroes. He has many flaws, but the one which leads to his downfall is unpardonable: his base lust for another man's wife. His actions and dreams and temperament reflect traits from a variety of real and fictitious characters: Blunt, Byron, Parnell, Antony and Don Quixote. But, unlike the fall of these heroes, Leicester's downfall is not an undeserved destiny. His major flaw is not associated with any extenuating circumstances, internal or external, which could arouse our sympathy for him as a towering example of nobility falling victim to powers beyond his control. His inconsistency of thought reflects



Blunt's own confusion concerning religion. He describes himself as "a man without a creed";<sup>1</sup> yet, he identifies himself with "a cause half-divine". although he is "... without hope of the world's better way". He justifies his stand by asserting that "All faith is a wise thing, / Compared with the lack of it". He even gives the impression of trying to atone for his "sins of yesterday" and praises the virtue of the Idealists (p. 404). These high sounding principles, however, prove hollow in the end, as Leicester's determination foresakes him when the real test comes. He takes a Byronic attitude which ends in an anti-climax, because, unlike Byron, he accepts a shameful escape instead of laying down his life for the cause he has embraced. Leicester's destiny can be seen as a self-inflicted punishment, representing Blunt's own dissatisfaction with his love affairs which he allowed to distract him from the two political causes which he held dear, namely the causes of the Nationalists in Egypt (1881-1883) and the Home Rulers in Ireland (1885-1887). Like Don Quixote, Blunt's hero has a noble dream, but he lacks Don Quixote's persistence in pursuit of this dream. Leicester's analytical mind and cynical observations about the evil embedded in human nature may be similar to Hamlet's, as these examples show:

"... a woman wronged becomes in church a bride".  
(p. 403)

"...                   ... We are too ignorant  
To do good in the world except by accident"  
(pp. 404-5)

"Tomorrow will prove all"  
(p. 405)

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1. This is probably an echo of Blunt's desperate cry at the end of his expedition to the Libyan desert, where the Senussia followers nearly killed him instead of accepting his offer to join them as a convert. This made him declare: "The less religion in the world, perhaps, after all, the better." See My Diaries, p. 276.

"Sweet things are seldom right"  
(p. 407)

"[Governments] twist, equivocate, but seldom in terms lie."  
(p. 416)

"It is best to be forewise"  
(p. 417)

"The world forgives success"  
(p. 433)

Yet, he has no hesitation or melancholy. The conflict between his ideals and mundane motives is neither deep nor devastating. As a man of the world, he succumbs to the latter without any qualms. This opportunism, which seeks expedient means to unite personal affections with political ambitions, brings Leicester nearer to the character of Mark Antony in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. In both cases, such compromises, which lack innocence, end with a total surrender to passion. Other Shakespearean influences can be detected. For example, there are small but significant gestures given at an early stage to foretell the downfall of the hero. Leicester does not give total loyalty to the Idealists whom he leads in the rebellion. Paul suspects his royal leanings:

His fetish is the rag  
Borne by his regiment. The honour of the flag  
Excuses all dishonour in a soldier's mind.  
He will not strike at it, or strike as one being blind.  
(p. 411)

Leicester is aware of this suspicion: "The child's eyes on me / Are a reproach" (p. 413). He goes to the negotiation table, against his better judgement, after seeing a letter written by the hand of Lady Marian (p. 415). Another early manifestation of the weakness of the flesh is given as Leicester tries to corrupt Phoebe, the young, innocent Idealist who idolizes him (pp. 406-407). He is also an egoist, seeing himself as "a popular leader, one who would persuade mankind" (p. 405)

Another Shakespearean device is the attempt to leave some words, deeds, attitudes and motives open to multiple interpretations, with valid grounds for each, so that it becomes impossible to pin things down exclusively to a single aspect or one meaning. The little white glove, worn as a feather in Leicester's cap, is a case in point. To the Idealists, it is the insignia of their leader, and they "look for it with love" because it is his "badge of fortune now become their own" (p. 402). There is a double meaning in the word "fortune" wherever it occurs. This innocent, patriotic love they attach to the glove contrasts sharply with the base, illicit "love" which has procured it for him from Marian. Yet, Leicester considers it as the hand of fate. Hence his pompous exclamation:

Oh, Marian, Marian! With that little white left hand  
What kingdoms have you rent!  
(p. 405)

It is only the kingdom of her heart; Marian's concept of fate associated with the glove is confined to her own petty, selfish desires. She moans:

We spread our sails in the sun.  
We want it for someone else. It is lost and given and gone.  
The deluge comes apace. The storm howls on the track.  
Vainly the hand goes forth. Time heeds not, nor gives back,  
And the soul is drowned in tears.  
(p. 421)

This contrast between the two ambitions has the ironic effect of reducing the significance of the glove into a merely personal token of an ignoble passion. When one of the rebels praises Leicester's military skills which the Idealists "bought", Leicester replies "Keen measures are my trade" (p. 411). This has a double meaning. It means that he specialises in taking effective measures for battle; and it means that he is selling his professional skills, as a trader, to those who pay him the full price.

Throughout the play, the language of the three main characters, Leicester, Lady Marian and Phoebe, is distinguished from that of the others by its eloquence, dignity and poetic beauty. Phoebe's description of her love for Leicester compares favourably with Mrs. Browning at her best:

I loved him as a flower  
Loves the white sunlight, ay as a wave of the sea the power  
Of the storm shaking it, as a child's voice loves the sound  
Of its own echo shouted from the hills around, -  
As something loftier, mightier than itself, divine  
And far beyond these arms to reach to or entwine,  
Far, far beyond these tears.

(p. 439)

This graceful elevation of language above the ordinary level of the speech of the other characters in the play is yet another Shakespearean effect. However, these beauties of style are sporadic and seem to have been wasted on characters that fail to spring to life. Despite the ups and downs in Leicester's public and private affairs, his tone and rhythm remain bland and unperturbed, even in situations calling for passionate eruptions. Phoebe is a good example of a meagrely portrayed character whose development could have had great dramatic effect. She asserts that the only way to purge the world of its wickedness is "to stamp this out in blood" (p. 408). This is a tragic irony whose full impact is realized when her idol himself perishes at her hand in fulfillment of this terrible pledge. In her enthusiasm for the cause, she is unaware of what fate has in store for her. This recalls the case of Oedipus's sincere determination to discover and punish the culprit, not realizing that it will turn out to be himself. Phoebe sees in Leicester's restoration of the glove to Marian an act of betrayal (p. 432), whereas obtaining it in the first place was an act of betrayal. However, in spite of her romantic nature, dreamy temperament and patriotic verve, Phoebe

remains a pale reflection of Shaw's Raina (in Arms and the Man), Lady Emily Lutyens and Mary Magdalene rolled into one woolly entity. Like Raina, Phoebe shows a mixture of patriotic zeal and romantic dreams in her love; she is blind to the flaws and follies of her beloved, till the harsh realities of life awaken her with a shock:

What is the truth? Ah, God! We see but what we will.  
We think but what we choose. We have no certain guide  
But our own heart's desire at death-grips with our pride.  
(p. 439)

Phoebe's fascination with Leicester recalls Lady Emily's fascination with Blunt. She sees herself as "the companion of his thoughts", and feels that "it is pleasant to be loved" (p. 407). "But love is not to blame / If men do evil things and call it in love's name" (p. 408). Phoebe's religious idealism makes her love transcendental, like Mary Magdalene's:

I would sit  
Your daily worhsipper, a Mary at your feet  
(p. 406)

I would rather die for you  
Than be loved by all the world - even if that were true.  
That were the ideal ending of the ideal life.  
(p. 407)

Parnell's life was used as the principal model for Leicester's character, while the events of the Egyptian Revolution of 1882 supplied the plot.<sup>1</sup> In both countries (Egypt and Ireland), the conflict had

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1. In a letter to S. C. Cockerell, Blunt wrote: "I feel I could write a tragedy on Parnell ... " See Viola Meynell (ed.), Friends of a Lifetime (1940), p. 176. Cf: W. S. Blunt, The Land War in Ireland, pp. 1-2.

religious connotations, but the core was political.<sup>1</sup> Parnell loved a married woman whose husband took advantage of him to bring his eventual downfall.<sup>2</sup> Like Captain O'Shea, General Bellingham is an army officer who succeeds in using his wife as a bait to lure the hero to his doom, since "With this sort of men / Women have influence". (p. 423). The influence of the woman was harmful to Parnell's political career and personal integrity. Blunt described Parnell as "a dark horse in his private life, and of whom I do not feel the same absolute confidence politically."<sup>3</sup> The liaison led Parnell to conduct secret negotiations behind the backs of his followers and contrary to their cause, manouvering and manipulating as "a man of shifts and expedients", through the mediations of both Captain and Mrs. O'Shea.<sup>4</sup> He was superstitious.<sup>5</sup> Part of his dilemma was that he had conservative leanings and yet was called upon to lead a revolution against the Establishment.<sup>6</sup> Parnell's love affair was

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1. W. S. Blunt, Secret History, pp. 81, 86, 121 and 159. Cf: W. S. Blunt, The Future of Islam (1882), pp. 27, 166, 189-190. In The Land War in Ireland (p. 447), Blunt describes the Irish protagonists as an "army of virtuous and pious men, including three or four real saints". Paul and Phoebe are two characters that exemplify this saintliness in the play. The religious tinge of the Idealists' cause appears in their intention to proclaim it from the Churches. ("The Little Left Hand", p. 403).
  2. The Land War in Ireland, op. cit. Ch. XII, pp. 450-466 passim. Cf: My Diaries, p. 795.
  3. The Land War in Ireland, p. 447. Like Parnell, Leicester's heart is never fully committed to his public duty or his political cause. The secret liaison with Marian distracts him ("The Little Left Hand", pp. 413, 425).
  4. F.S.L. Lyons, Charles Stewart Parnell (1977), pp. 190-91; 285-86. Leicester's behaviour during his encounter with both General Bellingham and Lady Marian is similar to Parnell's. ("The Little Left Hand", pp. 423-33).
  5. Frank Harris, My Life and Loves, (Gorki Edition, 1970), pp. 454, 525. Similarly, Leicester admits his superstitious belief in the magic power of the little left hand as an amulet (p.432)
  6. The Land War in Ireland, p. 3. My Diaries, p. 559. See also F. S. L. Lyons (op. cit.), p. 268 on Chamberlain's recognition of "Parnell's perfect loyalty". Leicester's loyalty to the cause of the Idealists begins to waver when he is reminded of his loyalty to the Queen in the past. (p. 414).

discovered by his followers when they opened a letter from Mrs. O'Shea to him.<sup>1</sup> This made him lose the respect and confidence of his fellow rebels and eventually led to a split in their ranks. Yet, he continued his liaison, neglecting his political struggle at a decisive stage, and continued to seek applause. Parnell refused to admit his diminishing status and continued to believe that he was still enjoying the support of the rank and file on account of his past services to the cause.<sup>2</sup> This disillusioned view of Parnell emerges in Blunt's portrayal of Leicester. The characters of the Idealist leaders, Davis and Bradshaw, are possibly portraits of the anti-Parnellites in the Irish Nationalist movement, Dillon and O'Brien.

On the other hand, Leicester's activities are reminiscent of the role played by Blunt himself in the Egyptian Revolution of 1881-1882. They both had a checkered past studded with sins and positive achievements, and they both wanted to turn a new page by plunging into a political struggle.<sup>3</sup> The comparison of forces (p. 414) harks back to the similar reference to the confrontation between the Egyptians and the British in The Wind and the Whirlwind. The Idealists' abuse of the flag of truce to gain some advantages (p. 416) is based on the incident in 1882 when the Egyptians were accused of using this pretext to continue the evacuation of Alexandria.<sup>4</sup> The

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1. F. S. L. Lyons, op. cit., pp. 149-150. In the Play, the fateful letter, which lures Leicester to the trap of negotiating with his enemies and alienating his Idealist followers, is written by Lady Marian (p. 412). It proves to be his doom.
  2. See Blunt's description of Parnell's patriotic zeal before he fell under Mrs. O'Shea's spell, and the destructive influence of this affair on his stature as a leader, in: The Land War in Ireland, pp. 455 and 153 respectively.
  3. Secretary History ..., p. 58.
  4. Ibid., pp. 369-370.

rebels' burning of the Council Hall at York (p. 426) is borrowed from the burning of Alexandria after its bombardment.<sup>1</sup> Leicester's attempt to get a general amnesty for the rebels (pp. 425, 426) echoes Blunt's own successful defence of Arabi throughout the year which followed the British occupation (1882-1883).<sup>2</sup> The maltreatment of the defeated rebels at the hands of their conquerors (p. 442) has its parallel in the excesses of the Khedive's supporters against the followers of Ahmed Arabi. Blunt's attacks on the immoral dealings of Governments (p. 426), the jingoism of the vulgar masses and their music halls (p. 434) and the soldiers' licence and looting in the chaotic conditions of war (pp. 410, 442) represent a standard attitude in all his writings. He usually singled out Wolseley and Kitchener for his bitterest rebukes.

These details explain why the dialogue often degenerates into versified extracts from the poet's own political diaries, with the events transplanted from their natural, historical context into the hypothetical setting of York in Mid-Victorian England. This process has harmed both character and atmosphere. Problem plays with Ibsenesque themes stemming from anti-Establishment attitudes like The Little Left Hand are better written in a naturalistic prose style; and Blunt's ability to portray convincing characters is superb in all his prose writings. The atmosphere would have become very exciting had it been infused with a charge of dramatic tension of the kind which animates Blunt's Satan Absolved and fills it with consistent,

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1. Ibid., p. 372.

2. Ibid., pp. 433-6. Leicester's defence of the rebels' actions as political, not civil, offences is reminiscent of Blunt's demand for better treatment and conditions in the Irish prisons, especially for those whose crimes have political motives. See The Land War in Ireland, pp. 372-80.



provocative vitality.

When Leicester utters his bitter cry:

My fame has been false glory, my romance a lie,  
My world's career a sham. Today I am face to face  
At last with a hard fact - defeat, disdain, disgrace.  
(p. 447)

we cannot sympathize with him. This destiny is not undeserved. Noble innocence playing into the hands of evil is an important factor in tragedy, and it is the conspicuous absence of this factor which makes The Little Left Hand a failure.

Fand of the Fair Cheek (1904) is Blunt's best play. It is a heroic romance, full of love and chivalry, derived from an episode in the Irish Cuchulain saga. The original title of this episode was "The Only Jealousy of Emer", as it appeared in Lady Gregory's book, Cuchulaine of Muirthemne: The Story of The Men of the Red Branch of Ulster (1902). In May of that year, Blunt wrote a highly laudatory review of the book in The Nineteenth Century; and on June 16, 1902, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory:

Blunt is quite bent on the Cuchulain play and proposes to take "the only jealousy of Emer" for his subject, which would fit into our plan very well. I shall have to find out in Dublin, however, whether the young men will let an Englishman write for them.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Fand became Blunt's contribution to the Celtic revival, which he described as "a wonderful new literary birth" of the Irish national life, showing "the outer unbelieving world what treasures of passionate emotion lay buried in Celtic history".<sup>2</sup> Lady Gregory was not alone in praising Blunt's ability to dramatize an episode of

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1. Allan Wade (ed.), The Letters of W. B. Yeats (1954), p. 376.
  2. W. S. Blunt, "The Great Irish Epic", The Nineteenth Century, Vol. 51 (May, 1902), pp. 811-816 (p. 811).

this legend in rhymed verse. Warm reception came from others, such as Yeats, Gilbert Murray and J. W. Mackail.<sup>1</sup> Blunt told Padraic Colum that he had adopted rhymed verse "for the sake of the theme" because this type "comes nearest to Celtic form",<sup>2</sup> unlike blank verse, which Blunt held to be "essentially English". Yeats believed that if Blunt had begun to write plays at the age of 30, he would have gained a European reputation.<sup>3</sup> This is an exaggeration; but Fand seems to have exercised a positive influence on the young Irish poet, for, several years later, Blunt was to record in his diary on June 9, 1909:

He [Yeats] told me he had been converted to my use of the Alexandrine metre for plays in verse, but that he had such a difficulty in finding rhymes that a rhymed play would take him two years to write.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Suhail B. Bushrui proved that Yeats was actually under the influence of Fand when he wrote The Golden Helmet (1909), the only play in which Yeats used this metre.<sup>5</sup> The story of Fand, however, had appeared, in its main outlines, in one of Blunt's earlier love lyrics, entitled "Pictures on Enamel".<sup>6</sup> Fand is a drama of passion, with no political aim or moral purpose. This is perhaps the main reason for its success. Love is the main theme, with its great power both for good and for evil. Cuchulain, champion of Ulster, is lured by Fand, wife of Manannan, King of the Sea, and taken to her fairyland.

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1. My Diaries, p. 529. Cf: Letters to W. B. Yeats, edited by R. J. Finneran et al, 2 Vols. (1977), Letter from Gilbert Murray to Yeats, dated 27 Jan., 1905, Vol. I, p. 146.
  2. Padraic Colum, A Half-Day's Ride, (1932), p. 144.
  3. My Diaries, p. 529.
  4. Ibid., p. 666.
  5. S. B. Bushrui, Yeats's Verse Plays (Oxford, 1965), pp. 184-5.
  6. W. S. Blunt, Esther, Love Lyrics and Natalia's Resurrection (1892), pp. 82-86.

She takes him under the pretext of curing him from a stupor which neither his friends, nor his wife, Emer, nor his beloved, Eithne the poetess, can dispel. He becomes Fand's lover and destroys the enemies of her people after regaining his strength. After forty days, Fand returns him to his wife. Manannan comes to regain his unfaithful Fand, who succumbs to his supernatural powers and disappears in a storm. Eithne uses Manannan's cloak, which has magic qualities, waving it in a gesture that indicates forgiveness and forgetfulness, leading to domestic peace between the hero and his wronged, jealous wife.

Blunt does not follow the original story slavishly, but takes the basic outlines from his Irish source. He shows his independence by modifying and adapting moods, events and scenes for his dramatic purpose. The characters are individualized and given real life and full human vitality. They come out of the shroud of mystery which engulfs them in the original, Celtic myth. In the original story, Fand's attempt to lure Cuchulain to her fairyland is carried out indirectly, at tedious length, through two messengers. Blunt cuts it short by having Fand herself appear directly on the stage, disguised as an old woman.<sup>1</sup> Cuchulain's response is also direct, as he goes with Fand to become her champion and lover, instead of sending his charioteer to investigate things first, as the original myth has it. Blunt's economy heightens the tension and the dramatic effect. But this effect is curtailed in the first act, which lacks exciting action, although the setting seems well prepared for such action.

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1. "Fand of the Fair Cheek", Poetical Works, II, p. 310. All subsequent reference to Fand will be to the edition in this volume, pp. 298-353.

Cuchulain has spent a full year in a state of coma, not in the house of his wife, but in that of his beloved, Eithne. The dialogue and the memories of his friends around his bed could have been shortened for dramatic concentration. Still, this dialogue is useful in revealing the full dimensions of Cuchulain's character, his heroic achievements and his conjugal problems. Everybody, including Conhor, King of Ulster, fails to awaken the entranced knight. So, contrary to his wishes, they send for his wife, Emer. She cuts an impressive figure, and her presence sets things moving at a breath-taking pace. This first act thus achieves its necessary dramatic purpose. The main characters are introduced; we are acquainted with their moods. The problem is known through a well-contrived situation. The wheel of action has been set in motion; and, as Emer allows Fand to "borrow" the services of Cuchulain in exchange for curing him, our expectations are aroused. This is a technical success on the stage; suspense, curiosity and keen interest are sustained. The second Act portrays the serene state of happiness in the fairyland of Fand, who celebrates the victory of Cuchulain and the Sidhe army over all their enemies. But this state is ephemeral and the atmosphere of beauty, contentment and sweet song is darkened by two factors, namely, that Cuchulain's departure is impending, and some vague references to the looming dangers ahead, threatening to upset the balance. These hints are expressed effectively in the songs of praise sung by two strange minstrels. They turn out to be Eithne and Manannan in disguise, bringing prophecies of doom. Manannan, who has thrown in his lot with his wife's defeated enemies, has come to deprive Fand and her lover from enjoying their hour of triumph. Eithne, jealous and vindictive, becomes an intimidating soothsayer. Cuchulain sees through her disguise, and Fand recognizes her husband as the

scene ends in general tumult. Again, dramatic tension is sustained. The third Act leads to the most explosive confrontation between the jealous, angry Emer and the fairy queen, Fand, who is still clinging to the enthralled knight. The impetuous hero asserts his authority, forcing Emer to drop the dagger with which she has intended to kill Fand. Although Cuchulain's love for his wife is rekindled, he blames her for the sudden disappearance of Fand. The reconciliation of the couple remains unconvincing. This is a reflection of the precarious state of Blunt's own marriage, which was on the brink of a rupture at the time. Lady Anne left him less than two years after the publication of this play. Having read it to his cousin, George Wyndham, on September 6th, 1904, Blunt noted his cousin's comment that "it should be called a tragedy, because it ends in the hero going back to his wife".<sup>1</sup>

Love, the main theme in this play, is neither pure nor delicate, neither Platonic nor romantic. Even marital love is viewed negatively as a boring bond or a repressive force which crushes the budding dreams of a carefree life as cherished by both Fand and Cuchulain. The materialist concept of love which Blunt propagates in this play is frankly physical and Epicurean. Passionate desire is portrayed as the invincible, even disruptive, force which controls the behaviour of almost everybody, regardless of any consideration of good or evil, right or wrong. Everything in the play contributes to the development of this idea and its ramifications. Although there is nothing flagrantly obscene, improper or pornographic, one is always aware of the erotic overtones which fill the whole atmosphere. This says a

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1: My Diaries, p. 519.

great deal for the evocative power of Blunt's style. In his review of the Irish saga, he praised "the skill with which Lady Gregory has steered her course between the rocks and shoals of taste in sexual matters which ... are admirably evaded." He then prophesied:

Someday, perhaps, when Cuchulain has taken its rank, as it is sure to do, with its literary compeers, the sagas and romances of Norway, France and Germany, it may be necessary to have a hardier translation, ...<sup>1</sup>

He seems to have taken a big step towards giving us such a "translation". His achievement in this respect compares favourably with Swinburne's "Laus Veneris", whose subject is the Tannhäuser Legend, the German "literary compeer" of Cuchulain. Blunt, who admired Swinburne, may well have benefitted from the lyrical power and erotic atmosphere of this poem, which gives a vivid description of Tannhäuser's seduction by Venus. In both works the heroes are warriors, and in both works the Gods remain aloof and inaccessible; and more emphasis is laid on carnal pleasures. In Fand, Blunt's belief that love justifies everything is carried a step further than the approval of polygamy in The Bride of the Nile; here, love is used to vindicate marital infidelity. These attitudes are forcefully re-asserted in "The Wisdom of Merlyn":

There are habits and customs of passion. Long  
loves are a tyrannous debt.  
But to some there is custom of change, the desire of the  
untrodden ways, with sunshine of days that were wet.  
Of the four fair wives of love's kindly law by licence of  
Mahomet

Love is a fire. In the lighting, it raises a treacherous  
smoke.  
Telling its tale to the world; but anon growing clear in  
its flame, may be hid by an old wife's cloak,  
And the world learn nothing more and forget the  
knowledge its smouldering awoke.<sup>2</sup>

1. W. S. Blunt, "The Great Irish Epic", op. cit., p. 816.
2. W. S. Blunt, "The Wisdom of Merlyn", Poetical Works, II, pp. 460, 459.

Thus Cuchulain, who is a portrait of Blunt, is a libertine whose passion for Fand is not seen as illegal. On the contrary, it is justified as a healthy affair which revives him in a miraculous way, just as we have seen in the case of "Natalia's Resurrection". This sort of love brings the fairy Fand out of her ethereal world to become almost human, practising the female wiles of Eve, and fearlessly betraying her husband.

She taketh delight in heroes. All things great and fair  
Move her to joy and pity - battle, glory, fame,  
Heroic feats of arms, the deeds that earn a name  
The songs that win men's tears.<sup>1</sup>

Love also unsettles the mental balance of the poetess Eithne

(pp. 336-38). She sees love as degrading

Since man is the thing he is,  
Slave of a day's desire,  
Thrall of a woman's kiss,  
Breath of a serpent's hiss,  
Man, of a woman born.

(p. 331)

These lines are comparable to Swinburne's:

An one that hath a plague - mark on his brows;  
Dust and spilt blood do track him to his house  
Down under the earth; sweet smells of lip and cheek,  
Like a sweet snake's breath made more poisonous ...  
"Laus Veneris"<sup>2</sup>

Love is an elevating power to both Fand and Cuchulain (pp. 322, 327).

They believe that in love "the least generous ranks / With the most glorious god in all he can bestow". Love makes Emer swallow her pride, forgive and obey her wayward husband (pp. 306, 336, 338, 343). Emer can be easily identified as a portrait of Lady Anne Blunt. She is a

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1. "Fand", p. 312. See also pp. 315, 322, 327 and 339.

2. A. C. Swinburne, "Laus Veneris"; The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne, 6 Vols. (Chatto & Windus, 1904), I, p. 20.





Fand is pervaded by songs, significant symbols, nostalgic memories, beautiful imagery and gems of ancient wisdom. These devices are culled from a variety of sources, Homeric, Elizabethan, Tennysonian and Arabic. The result is a colourful atmosphere of exuberant entertainment throughout the play. The songs, for example, are more than resting places to break the Alexandrine's possible effect of monotony. They have dramatic functions of their own, not unlike those of the Greek chorus. They illuminate various aspects of the dramatic situation by different means. Eithne's spinning song at the beginning is a deep contemplation of love, life, death and the forces which control man's destiny (p. 299). Fand's first song, "Beautiful Eyes Awake" is a magic incantation from another world. It precipitates action, dispels Cuchulain's stupor and heralds his heroic deeds (pp. 316-317). The choric song which opens Act II is a happy lay in honour of the victors returning from the battlefield (p. 321). The song entitled "Who is this Man?", sung by Fand and her sister Liban in praise of the victorious hero, recalls both the first lines of the epic of Gilgamesh and the procession of Bacchus in Keats's Endymion.

Who is the man I see,  
Set on his chariot of war,  
Beautiful, dark-faced, proud?  
His eyes as the eagle's are,  
His brow is a summer cloud,  
His smile is of victory.  
He hath looked on the lands afar,  
He hath scorn both of fool and wise.  
The man with the eagle's eyes  
Is the man I see.  
"Fand" (p. 326)

Compare this image with that of Gilgamesh:

O Gilgamesh, ... great is thy praise. This was the man who  
[saw everything]; this was the king who knew the countries  
of the world. He was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret  
things ... He went on a long journey,.... and returning engraved  
on a stone the whole story.<sup>1</sup>

The image also invokes the triumphant "Bacchus and his kin! / Crown'd  
with green leaves, and faces all on flame.":

Within his car, aloft, young Bacchus stood,  
Trifling his ivy-dart, in dancing mood,

. . .  
"We follow Bacchus! Bacchus on the wing,  
A-conquering!  
Bacchus, young Bacchus! good or ill betide,  
We dance before him through kingdoms wide."<sup>2</sup>

The song also gives us the details of the battle behind the scene.  
Eithne's second song, when she is disguised as a minstrel, is a  
foreboding lament prophesying a quick end to the pleasures which  
enslave man (pp. 330-31). It continues as a cynical comment on  
Cuchulain's folly (pp. 333, 334). Fand's enticement of Cuchulain  
is summarized in an Elizabethan song (pp. 339-340). Here is a sample  
of it:

Apples of love, how sweet,  
Love, for thy sake I gather  
Who that of these shall eat  
Love's guidance shall guide his feet,

. . .  
Since laughter is all love's meat  
And tears shall assail him never.  
(p. 340)

In tone and spirit, this song is an expression of pastoral simplicity  
and Arcadian contentment, enjoyed by a man of high rank who is  
otherwise used to a life of wealth and luxury. All this applies to  
the song of the exiled lords in As You Like It:

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1. The Epic of Gilgamesh: An English Version with an Introduction  
by N. K. Sandars (Penguin Classics, 1960 and 1971), p. 59.
  2. John Keats, "Endymion", Book IV; John Keats's Poems; ed. by  
Gerald Bullett (Everyman's Library, 1957), pp. 126-27.

Under the greenwood tree  
Who loves to lie with me  
And tune his merry note  
Unto the sweet bird's throat,  
Come hither, come hither, come hither  
Here shall he see  
No enemy  
But winter and rough weather.  
(As You Like It, II. v. 1-8)

Eithne's last song signifies the reconciliation between the hero and his wife, or the miraculous dénouement. Interestingly enough, this song is almost a perfect example of an Andalusian Muwashshah in its theme, tone, length of lines, internal rhythm and rhyme scheme. Here is a sample:

All that was pain  
Has become our gain,  
Like a night of rain on a cloudless morrow.  
For love, the master,  
Has brought disaster  
Through flying faster than feet could follow..  
(p. 352)

This form first appeared in the village of Ḳabrah in Spain towards the end of the third century after Hijrah (the first half of the tenth century A.D.), during the reign of Emir Abdillah Ibn Mohammed el-Marwani. It was invented by two poets, Muqaddam Ibn Mu'afa and Mohammed Ibn Mahmoud, who began to modify some of the light metres of Arabic poetry and to introduce new rhyme schemes for verse lines of varying lengths. The new form was more suitable for songs and music and dancing than the classical forms; but it did not flourish without fierce resistance from the conservatives, who considered it inferior and, at times, vulgar. It did not establish itself firmly in Al-Andalus till the first half of the eleventh century A.D., at the hands of Abu-Bakr Ubāda Ibn Ma'ĕss-Samā'a (d. 1040 A.D.), not Ubāda el-Quazzāz, as Ibn Khaldoun claims.<sup>1</sup> This

1. Dr. Jawdat el-Rikabi, Fil Adab el-Andalusi (On Andalusian Literature), Third edition (Cairo, 1970), pp. 287-89.

form later became the forerunner of the Troubadours' poetry of courtly love in Provence.

Blunt was immersed in Arabic poetry before, during and after his writing of Fand. He published his translation of the Seven Moallakat or the Golden Odes of pre-Islamic Arabia in 1903, one year before Fand appeared in book form. He had also translated another story of chivalry and heroism from Arabic folklore, The Stealing of the Mare (1892). In 1896 he wrote an article on Arabic poetry for The New Review. In his review of Lady Gregory's translation of Cuchulain, he likened this work to "Homer's narrative" and to the Shahnameh and "the romance of Antar."<sup>1</sup> These, and other Eastern sources had further effects on the play. For example, Fand postpones her vengeance till tomorrow in order to enjoy today (p. 320):

I will not grieve today,  
I am too light-hearted. No. Let grief come when it may,  
Today I will laugh and sing.  
(p. 323)

This is borrowed directly from the story of Imr'el-Ka'is (Imr el-Ka'is was one of the seven poets translated by Blunt). When he received the news of the murder of his father, he exclaimed: "Today is wine, and tomorrow is woe. No sobriety today, and no drunken<sup>n</sup>ness tomorrow". The description of the actual fighting owes much to The Stealing of the Mare, especially such un-English expressions as "each a granite wall / Leaning upon the other", denoting two heroes clashing in a duel. Sending the shaft "singing", "piercing" the enemy's shoulder "through" and shouting defiance "to each mother's son" are not Celtic idioms (p. 324), but exaggerations from the Arabic story of Abu-Zeyd el-Helali Salāmeḥ.<sup>2</sup> Lighting fires on tops of hills (p. 319) is an

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1. W. S. Blunt, "The Great Irish Epic", op. cit., p. 812.

2. W. S. Blunt, "The Stealing of the Mare", Poetical Works, II, pp. 184, 212, 215.

ancient custom practised by the Arabs of the desert, like sitting round a poet or a story-teller (p. 328). However, the reference to a "blind harper" suggests Homer.

Fand's sad reflection:

We are time's slaves, not masters, - even we who ride  
Like kings upon his back, in our joy glorified.  
Time bears us royally, but only at his will  
Here he has stopped with us and points towards the hill  
And bids us down afoot  
(p. 340)

is a very accurate rendering of the metaphorical language of a famous saying by Imam Ali, Prophet Mohammed's cousin and fourth Caliph (d. 660 A.D.). Blunt may have heard it from his friend, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheykh Mohammed Abdu, who edited the speeches, letters and sermons of Imam Ali during the 1880s.

The sound of Tennyson in "The Lotos Eaters" can be discerned in Emer's sad meditations on the gods' attitudes of detached indifference to man's woes on earth:

The gods have little pity on the sons of men.  
They live in their own worlds apart, their mountain tops,  
Their inaccessible mists, aloof from human hopes.  
They know not of our doings and we know them not.  
(p. 310)

Other echoes from "The Lotos Eaters" occur in the second and third Acts (pp. 321, 332 and 342). Fand's descent from this high world of the gods because of love for a mortal hero (pp. 315, 327, 341) is a Greek theme; Fand's knowledge of magic and her use of songs to lure Cuchulain to her enchanted world repeats the role played by Circē in the life of Ulysses in Homer's Odyssey.

Blunt's success here lies in his assimilation of such divergent traditions and utilizing them all harmoniously to create this mature work of art, without sounding derivative or losing his independence.

Nevertheless, Blunt's dramatic works in general contain major flaws. He chose to treat subjects which he alone felt so strongly about, and to propagate unpopular political ideas in a subjective way. He chose a naturalistic style for the romantic topic of The Bride of the Nile and a romantic style for the realistic socio-political problem of The Little Left Hand. He insisted on using rhymed verse at a time when most of his contemporaries in Britain and Europe, from Shaw to Ibsen, from Wilde to Chekov, were showing an increasing awareness of what the simple prose language might be made to "say" or express in drama. In his prose diaries he did give some excellent character studies which show remarkable insight; but his plays do not show enough interest in the study of human nature or in the development of plots and sub-plots. Only in Fand could he turn a theme of topical interest into one of perennial value. Like Lord Byron, Blunt "cuts a figure - but he is not figurative", to use Keats's terms. Many of his major characters in the plays are self-portraits; the villains are crude embodiments of hateful characteristics he saw in his political opponents. Others are marionettes used as vehicles to express his own ideas and personal dreams, just as Tennyson used his "Ulysses" as a means to run away from the harsh realities of his world into a more secure haven, into the better known, less shifting and more stable atmosphere of the past.

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#### CHAPTER IV : BLUNT'S TRANSLATIONS FROM THE ARABIC

This chapter deals with Blunt's verse rendering of specific texts from the Arabic, namely: The Stealing of the Mare (1892) and the Moallakat or: The Seven Golden Odes of Pre-Islamic Arabia (1903). Both works were undertaken in collaboration with his wife, Lady Anne Blunt, who was the better Arabist; she gave a translation into simple prose, which he then rendered into poetry. Although this was not the first time that such works were presented to English or European readers, Blunt's translations were original contributions to English literature, in spite of the great difference of value between the two items as works of art. An attempt is made in this chapter to assess these works and put them in perspective in relation to the role of Arabic literature as it emerged through cultural and literary contacts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Numerous reasons prompted Blunt's undertaking of this task. D.G. Hogarth notes that what distinguished Blunt from other European Orientalists was his romantic curiosity and imaginative sympathy with Bedouin society.<sup>1</sup> This may be true, but it is a simplification of the real issues. Certain qualities in these Arabic works appealed to Blunt. First, they were products of an area which he knew very well, of an age whose traditional values of honour, dignity and generosity he admired. Secondly, they contained romances of chivalry appealing to his notion of heroism; he envisaged himself as a noble fighter, an "inverted crusader" defending noble causes. Thirdly, they transferred him to a world of beauty and grandeur, a haven from the commercialized society of industrialized England.

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1. Finch, p. 110.

In various ways, many Victorian writers celebrated similar values. Matthew Arnold's Scholar Gypsy and Sohrab and Rustum, Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat, Tennyson's "Haroun al - Raschid" and Idylls of the King, Rossetti's translations from Dante and the Renaissance poets, Browning's Return of the Druses and William Morris's fascination with the Icelandic sagas, were all excursions into legendary times and remote places or cultures full of strange adventures. But their settings were generally far removed from their creators' actual lives or their literary careers as artists. With the exception of Morris, none of them visited the places described in their poems. In contrast, Blunt's interest in the East was based on lasting experience. It exerted a direct influence on many aspects of his life. To him, the East was not just an image or a source of imagery, but a "career" in a sense opposed to Disraeli's in Tancred. On the other hand, his estimate of the East's cultural and moral values was higher and based on better perception and more authentic experience than that of most of his contemporaries. Blunt lacked the academic scholarship and accomplishment of men such as D.S. Margoliouth, T. Noldeke, Ernest Renan, S. De Sacy, C.M. Doughty and Richard F. Burton. Yet, his understanding of the spirit of the East, his ability to present Arabic texts in versions that were faithful to the original and appealing to the European reader, and the unassuming style of his translations were unprecedented. In dealing with the East, studying its texts or judging its culture, he was neither egocentric like Burton, nor Eurocentric like Renan. In presenting Arabic texts to English readers, Blunt was neither pedantic nor boastful. Where the other Orientalists' approaches to the East generally produce a "coloured" view, betraying dehumanizing



anthropological prejudices, Blunt succeeds in capturing the real, rather than the "exotic" image. His vision and conception of the East was not distorted by the traditional hostility expressed in the works of such "experts" as Eliot Warburton, Robert Curzon or W.G. Palgrave; nor by the attitudes of superiority reflecting the widespread "social Darwinism" in the works of Renan, Doughty, D.G. Hogarth and Lord Cromer.<sup>1</sup> In propagating political views about the Eastern question he was as assertive as anyone of these, as we have seen elsewhere; but history has vindicated him by fulfilling his prophecies.

The Stealing of the Mare, one of Blunt's translations, is an episode in a huge cycle of popular, folklorish adventures, love stories and incessant wars dealing with the life of the tribe of Beni Hilal. Based on a seed of historical truth, this saga was blown out of all proportion by successive generations of narrators, reciters and wandering minstrels. As a work of literature, the Arabic original has no value, although it can safely be described as one of the most extensive legends that we have of Arabic colloquial narrative. The cycle appeals mainly to the unlettered masses, particularly in provincial areas, from Iraq in the East to Morocco in the West. It is popular in Arabia, the Sudan and parts of Central Africa. The practice of reciting it in cafés is dying but is not yet extinct.

Blunt's estimate of the literary value of this cycle as a work of art is as exaggerated as the value the Europeans generally attach to the Arabian Nights. He describes it in his preface

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1. Edward W. Said, Orientalism (1978), p. 237.

as "an excellent example of the Mediaeval Epic in its Eastern dress". This assessment is exaggerated; in the light of Arabic literary tradition it is misplaced. However, Blunt's inflated esteem of this work was taken at face value and upheld by J. W. Mackail, who lectured on it when he was Professor of poetry at Oxford. The lecture has many errors of judgement and interpretation which have not been corrected yet. The historical background of Beni Hilal, and the origin of the cycles relating their adventures illumine the episode translated by Blunt and provide the materials for its assessment.

The clans (of Banu Hilal) made their first appearance on the stage of history in Nejd, north east of Mecca, in pre-Islamic times. They are mentioned in the works of many Muslim historians, such as: Yaqut el-Hamawī, Abdullah ibn Abdel-Azīz el-Bakrī, Ibn Hazm, Ibn Khaldoun, El-Nuwairi, Abul-Faraj el-Isphahāni, Ibn Abdi-Rabbih, Ibn el-Athīr and others. The tribe derives its name from the common ancestor known to the Arab genealogists as Hilal ibn Āmer ibn Sa'asa'a ibn Muāwiyeh ibn Bakr ibn Hawāzin ibn Mansour ibn 'Ikrimah ibn Khassafeh ibn Qais ibn Ailān ibn Mudhar ibn Nizār ibn Ma'add ibn Adnān. Before Islam, they fought against Quraish, Mohammed's tribe, when he was between 14 and 20 years of age. This war, known as al-Fijār, ended in reconciliation. More than thirty years later, two of the Prophet's wives, both widows, were to come from Beni Hilal. They were Zaineb bint Khuzaimah and Meimounah bint el-Harith. The latter was the maternal aunt of Abdellah ibn Abbas, the great interpreter of the Koran, and Khaled ibn el-Walid, conqueror of Iraq and Syria in the fourth decade of the seventh century A.D. Banu Hilal participated in the conquest of north eastern Persia a

century later. Their first act of insubordination, however, was the refusal to pay alms towards the end of the seventh century. Some of them settled in the southern parts of Syria (today's el-Suwaida'a Province) and in 783 A.D. there was a mosque named after them in Kufa, on the right bank of the Euphrates in Iraq. Other Hilali clans moved to Khurassan in Persia. Banu Hilal began to move from Syria to Egypt in 727 A.D. Ibn Khaldoun thinks that they were forced to migrate when the Omayyad Caliphs of Damascus began to suspect their loyalty. One of their major insurrections, leading to much bloodshed, took place in Arabia in 844, when they cut off the pilgrims' route to Mecca, forcing the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, Al-Wātheq, to send a major military campaign to reopen it. A century later, they supported yet another, more dangerous revolt, the Qarmathian havoc, which led to a state of almost total chaos from Bahrain to Syria. Damascus fell in their hands, but was redeemed shortly afterwards at the hands of the Fatimid Caliph, el-Aziz, who took a great number of Beni Hilal to Egypt in 975 A.D. Half a century later, their recurrent acts of insubordination caused a famine which lasted for seven lean years in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> In 1042 A.D. Banu Hilal began another massive migration to Libya, Tunis and the Maghrib, falling on the region like a swarm of hungry locusts, destroying the Berberic Kingdoms of Ṣanhāja and Zinata. In 1053 they besieged the great, prosperous metropolis of Qairewan and put it to fire and the sword. The Maghrib regions remained fragmented for almost another century, till they were unified by Almohads in 1146.

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1. F. A. Mukhlis, Studies and Comparison of the Cycles of the Benu Hilal Romance (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Univ. of London, 1964), p. 43.

After a series of bloody wars, Abdul-Mumen, the Mohad Caliph, was able to subjugate them. To get rid of such unruly warriors (some of whom had collaborated with the Normans against the Muslims in Tunis), Abdul Mumen shifted a thousand of each Hilali clan to Morocco, whence they crossed to Spain.<sup>1</sup> He encouraged them to settle near Cordova and Seville, where they remained a force to be reckoned with, with more than 5000 horsemen, till 1224. They were capricious. In 1164 they rose against Almohads, but in 1184 they supported them against the Spaniards, only to collude with another revolt in the Balearic Islands a year later. Defeated, they sued for peace and amnesty; and in 1186 Almansour banished the rebels to Morocco. Centuries later, the descendants of Beni Hilal in Algeria were still "many, rich and powerful" as Leo Africanus (1495-1552) described them, while Ibn Khaldoun speaks of their mingling with the Berbers.<sup>2</sup> The remnants of the Hilali clans of Amer and Zughbeh were among Abdel-Kader's warriors in Oran in 1832. In order to humiliate Ouled Draid, another Hilali clan, for their stiff resistance of the French in Tunis in 1881, the French ordered their Sheikh to collect a thousand frogs in one day.<sup>3</sup>

From Upper Egypt, Banu Hilal invaded Dongola in the Sudan in 1287, whence they seem to have crossed into Kordofan, where H. A. MacMichael claims that "the fusing of the Arab and Black elements into a single race gives great prominence to the Banu Hilal".<sup>4</sup> This wide dispersal and the successive wars that it entailed gave rise to

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1. Ibid., pp. 61, 63

2. Quoted by Mukhlis, ibid., pp. 74 and 77 respectively.

3. Ibid., p. 87.

4. H. A. MacMichael, The Tribes of Northern and Central Cordofan (Cambridge, 1912), p. 54.

a variety of tales of romantic heroism. MacMichael suggests that the Tangur tribes are the result of mingling between the Beni Hilal and Zenata Berbers. In fact, such claims prevail in various parts of Africa, North and South of the Sahara, from the Blue Nile to the Senegal, and from Upper Egypt to West Africa.<sup>1</sup> In the latter region, J. R. Patterson speaks of the Yabiri and Gulumba tribes in the Dikwas Emirates as related to Beni Hilal.<sup>2</sup> Such traditions are even more extensive in Western Asia, from Yemen to Iraq. Throughout Arabia, the Sinai Peninsula, Nejd, the Hijaz and the Hadramout there are not only tribes who claim kinship to Beni Hilal, but there are also ruins, oases, valleys and other landmarks that are ascribed to them and still carry Hilali names. References to these can be found in the works of Doughty, Bertram Thomas, G. W. Murray and H. St. J. B. Philby.<sup>3</sup> However, most of these traditions are full of conjecture, contradictory anecdotes and imagined or supernatural elements. In many cases, it is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to disentangle fact from fantasy in both the genealogical and archaeological fields. There is a great deal of truth in Philby's observation that the local Bedouins have the habit of attributing everything they cannot conceive or know anything about to the legendary Beni Hilal.

It is historically true, however, that their adventures, particularly in North Africa, produced a number of poems in the

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1. Ibid., pp. 57-58.

2. J. R. Patterson, Stories of Abu Zeid the Hilali in Shuwa Arabic (1930), p. 13 et seq.

3. See C. M. Doughty, Travels in Arabia Desert, 2 Vols. (1923; First Pub. 1888), I, p. 388; Bertram Thomas, Arabia Felix (1932), p. 208; G. W. Murray, Sons of Ishmael (1935), pp. 272-3; H. St. J. B. Philby, Arabian Highlands (New York, 1952), pp. 49, 103, 117, 273, 276.

first half of the eleventh century. But only scattered fragments of those poems remained. There is no relationship between those fragments and the poems of the "Beni Hilal" cycles as they stand today. Those poems seem to have died for several centuries during and after the Crusades. Revivals in the days of Ibn Khaldoun introduced distortions, additions and exaggerations; these continue today in retellings by narrators in cafés.

At the hands of the wandering minstrels, the historical seeds were enlarged out of all proportion. Ibn Khaldoun refers to this as he quotes Bedouin verses known in his day, always preceded with such expressions as "they claim", "their stories have it that", rightly showing his scepticism and treating these verses with deserved contempt. Narrators from various tribes continued to add to these cycles, changing them in the process of transmission from lyrical fragments to snowballing tales and romances. Events were invented, genealogies tampered with, and verses composed, with grammatical, syntactic and prosodic mistakes, besides vulgarisms, anachromisms and additional supernatural elements. The same developments, more or less, characterise the adventures of Antar, el-Zir Salem, Seif ibn Dhi Yezan, Orwa and Afra'a, Mejnoun Leila, Qais wa Lubna, el-Amirah Dhatel Himmeh, Hatim Tayy, Shajaratud Durr and el-Dhaher Bibers. There are considerable differences between the versions of the Hilali stories. The text itself can often be misleading. Internal evidence shows that the cycle was not committed to writing till after the first half of the fourteenth century. A well known mosque in Cairo, for example, is attributed to the Hilali Sultan Hassan ibn Serhān. In fact, it was named after the King el-Nāsser Hassan, who had it built in 1356.<sup>1</sup> The

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1. Mukhlis, op. cit., p. 121.

supernatural episodes betray the unmistakable fingerprints of the Arabian Nights. The narrators of the Beni Hilal cycle were undoubtedly in touch with those of the Arabian Nights. The cycle is the result of several generations of narration, accretion and modifications, as it remained in a state of amoebic flux. A great deal has been lost, but a great deal has also been invented. The cycle remains as loose and flexible as ever. It cannot be pinned down to one age, let alone one author. Blunt names Abu Obeid as the transmitter, but the Arabic texts name several others such as Al-Bakri, Al-Wākidi, Al-Asma'i, as well as two fictitious narrators: Hassan el-Khazreji and Nejd ibn Hishām. The latter appears also in Sirat Antar.

The Egyptian reciters seem to have played the most important role in transmitting this legacy to us. Without them it may have been completely forgotten. They took scattered fragments and strung them into metrical romances, not unlike the European ballads. The poems are full of redundancies in the vernacular dialect. The narrators who transmitted them, though assuming for themselves the titles of Shu'ara (poets), often betray their ignorance of the rules of Arabic poetry. Edward Lane notes that the singers of the Beni Hilal cycles in the cafés of Cairo used this title to distinguish themselves from the romancers who used to tell the story of Bibers, in which poetry plays no part.<sup>1</sup> This "specialization" must have taken place long before the time of Lane. Such self-styled "Shu'ara" were professionals, earning their living exclusively from their recitations. They are a species not yet extinct in many Arab countries.

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1. Edward Lane, Manners and Customs of the modern Egyptians (Everyman's Edition of 1966), p. 398.

Their audiences are usually the simple, uncultured common people from the villages where this is the only form of entertainment they have learnt to enjoy. Any limits to control their metrical romances could have spelt disaster and bankruptcy to these "poets". They usually invent, extempore, improvise, repeat, modify and exaggerate their stories in their attempt to fascinate their audience and earn instant praise and reward. Whether their narrative is consistent, credible or compatible with reality, history, logic, the rules of verse or moral traditions, is of no consequence to them. The general history of Beni Hilal, being pervaded by adventures, insurrections and the feuds which lasted for generations across an extensive region, could lend itself to all forms of fiction. Thus the Siret Beni Hilal became a long series of romances. Although the narrators of Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Syria, were better masters of classical Arabic literature, it was the Egyptian version which began to prevail, since it was published towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Edward Lane was among the first European Orientalists to take an interest in these romances. Chapter 21 of his Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (1836) contains a lively description of the public recitations; he also translated the chapter dealing with the birth of the dark-skinned hero, Abou Zeyd.<sup>1</sup> Later in the century, other Orientalists entered the field. R. Basset published a French translation of another chapter of the cycle under the title "Une épiode d'une chanson de geste Arabe" in the Bulletin de Correspondance Africaine in 1885. M. Ahlwardt published a

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1. Ibid., pp. 398-406.



bibliographical essay in Historischer Verein des Kantons, Bern, Vol. 19 (1896), in which he described some 173 MSS containing Hilali stories, of the early nineteenth century. Another article, dealing with the third stage of the cycles, i.e. Beni Hilal's migration to North Africa, was written by Martin Hartman in Zeitschrift für Afrikanische Und Oceanische Sprachen (1898). These North African folklore stories had been gathered from the Sahara nomads, first at the hands of Laurent Charles Feraud in his Kitab el-Adouani (Paris, 1868), then by Victor Largeau, whose book appeared in 1879 under the title: Flore Saharienne, histoires et légendes traduites de l'Arabe. A third book, based on North African folklore, was written by A. Bel, entitled La Djaziya (Paris, 1908). In 1930, J. R. Patterson published yet another collection entitled Stories of Abu Zeid the Hilali in Shuwa Arabic, also from North African traditions, but greatly modified as they crossed into the general area of West Sudan.

The Hilali cycles were never taken seriously by Arab scholars, and it was not till the late 1940s that any literary studies or assessments began to appear, mainly in Egypt. M. F. Abdul Latif's Abu Zeid el- Hilali (Cairo, 1946) was perhaps the first scholarly attempt to interpret the cycle and to show its significance in traditional folklore. This was followed by F. H. Ali's Qassasuna al-Sha'abi (Our Popular Tales) in 1947. Mohammed Ahmed Baraneq and others made an attempt to rewrite the romance in classical Arabic. The result was not entirely positive. They got rid of verbiage, repetition and exaggerations, but omitted the verse passages which usually constitute the spine of the romance. They also overlooked a number of vital incidents, thus depriving the work of much of its

vigour, but left many parallel episodes containing the marriage stories of Hilali youth. Their attempt provides simplified tales of heroic deeds for children, using methods of selection similar to the pantomime conventions of the Arabian Nights. A. H. Younis's study (Al-Hilaliya in History and Folk Literature (Cairo, 1956) illustrates the recent attention drawn to the cycles in the Arab world after centuries of being confined to the imagination of the naïve, unlettered classes. Some episodes have been given a new lease of life as sources of dramatic series over the mass media. A number of popular Hilali songs were recently composed in a new form adapted for collective chanting by the Egyptian Chorale, led by Mr. Abdul Halim Nuweireh. This chorale has been performing, with great success, to packed music halls throughout the Arab world since 1968.

It is difficult to determine the number of romances that make up the whole Hilali Saga. It is even more difficult to determine whether Abu Zeid, one of the most important heroes, is a historical character or a product of Bedouin fancy.<sup>1</sup> The length of the episodes usually varies according to the whims of various narrators. There are Cairene, Damascene and North African (mainly Tunisian) editions. The Egyptian editions (1865, 1880, 1948) divide the saga into 12 parts, while the Syrian editions (1871, 1898, 1962) divide it into 26 parts.

The episode which Blunt translated occurs in at least three versions. The owner of the mare is the Agheyli Jaber in the Cairo edition of 1865; the edition of 1948 gives the name as Hussein el-Jabiri,

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1. See under the items of "Abu Zeid" and "Hilal" in the Encyclopedia of Islam.

sultan of the Agyel clan. This version gives the name of the guest whose description of the mare tempted Abu Zeyd to steal it as Zāmil ibn Kāmel, while this guest in both the earlier Egyptian and the Syrian versions is said to be a lady in distress. Blunt used this latter version, perhaps to give a nobler motive to the theft. The mare was wanted by the lady's relative as a condition to his consent to give his daughter's hand in marriage to the lady's son. Disguised as a poet, a wandering minstrel, and a peddler, Abu Zeyd reaches the neighbourhood of the Aghyli clan, only to find another lady in need of succour. Princess Alia is about to be raped and killed by an outcast villain lying in ambush under the tree on top of which Abu Zeyd was hiding. She is saved by Abu Zeyd, who slays the assailant, Sahel. He then tells Alia about his real name and mission, seeking her assistance in stealing the well-guarded mare. Out of gratitude, she gives him the mare, risking the wrath of her father. Abu Zeyd, nagged by his guilty conscience, hides the mare in a cave and returns in the nick of time to stand by Alia, who is about to be burnt on a stake. Disguised as a Dervish this time, he eventually succeeds in convincing everybody of Alia's innocence. He fetches the mare, which is gladly given to him as a reward, in addition to Alia, who had loved him at first sight, for his lawful wedded wife.

In the preface, Blunt refers to aspects of the story which appealed to him:

The knight-errantry of our Middle-ages was purely Arabian; the championing of the distressed, especially women, by wandering adventurers; the magnanimous code of honour in war; even the coats of mail-armour and the heraldic bearings ...<sup>1</sup>

Blunt was never tired of projecting himself as a champion of just

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1. W. S. Blunt, The Stealing of the Mare (1892), pp. viii-ix.

causes, who, like the mediaeval heroes, had learned from the Arabs. Another source of attraction, Blunt explains, is the picture of "Arab life and ideas, a picture naïve in its fidelity to the African form of Arabian thought." He also admires "the liveliness of the plot and the individuality of the characters."<sup>1</sup>

As in early European romances, prose and verse alternate in The Stealing of the Mare. In form as well as in content, it resembles a number of the Nordic romances which William Morris translated in the early 1890s, such as The Roots of the Mountains (1890), the Story of the Glittering Plains (1891), and The House of the Wolfings (1889). When Blunt read his translation to him, Morris approved and advised publication, though he said "nobody will read it". This was perhaps, a reflection of Morris's disillusionment with poetry as a relevant literary form.<sup>2</sup> More scope is given to verse in The Stealing of the Mare. As in the Arabic original, prose gives the narrative outlines; verse fills in the details in lively scenes portraying Arab manners, customs and social conditions in war and in peace. Variations between prose and verse are illustrated in the incident of the lady in distress, who came to Beni Hilal as a stranger seeking the help of the chivalrous Abu Zeyd:

... and he threw his cloak as a gift to Abul Komsan [his servant, who had brought him the good news that a guest was seeking his hospitality], and he bade him go to the Lady Ghanimeh and treat her with all honour ... So Abul Komsan ... built for her a tent, and did all that was needed.<sup>3</sup>

The verse treatment of this event makes it larger than life. Abu Zeyd orders his servant:

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1. Ibid., p. ix.
  2. My Diaries, p. 68. Cf: R. C. Ellison "The Undying Glory of Dreams" in Victorian Poetry, ed. by M. Bradbury and D. Palmer (1972) p. 139.
  3. The Stealing of the Mare, op. cit., p. 3.

Go with this lady and build her a pavilion,  
With breadth of perfumed silk, and bid prepare all dainties  
That she eat of the best, and serve her in due honour.  
For well it is in life to be of all things generous  
Ere we are called away to death's unjoyful dwellings,  
Even of the shoulder meat, that the guest may rise up praising ...<sup>1</sup>

Again, the plight of Lady Ghanimeh and the impossible demands of her brother-in-law are described in one page of prose, but the five pages of verse giving the same incident are laden with ornament, metaphors and extravagant praise of the qualities of the hero, who could achieve feats of courage that even the "jinn" dare not contemplate. The lady supplicates Abu Zeyd:

Thus have I come to thee on my soul's faith, Salamé,  
Thee the champion proved of all whose hearts are doubting,  
Thee the doer of right, the scourge of the oppressor,  
Thee the breeze in Autumn, thee the Winter's coolness,  
Thee the morning's warmth after a night of watching,  
Thee the wanderer's joy, well of the living water,  
Thee to thy foeman's lips as colocynth of the desert,  
Thee the river Nile, in the full day of his flooding

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Thou art my last appeal, O Hilali Salamé  
Glory of the Arabs, beauty of all beholders.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt is taking liberties with the text here, but he remains close to the spirit, if not the letter, of the story. He uses the style of panegyrics in Arabic poetry, both classical and colloquial. It is also clear that Blunt identifies himself with the character of Abu Zeyd. Abu Zeyd is more than just a clever impostor. He is a man of action and determination whose promises (and threats) at the beginning of the story are all carried out, by hook or by crook, towards the end, whenever he is put to the test in any crucial situation. For example, he throws himself into the fire to save princess Alia; and, by a supernatural miracle, they both emerge from

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1. Ibid., p. 11.  
2. Ibid., p. 10.

the flames "scathless" (pp. 89-90). This scene is charged with electrifying drama. In combat, Abu Zeyd confronted scores of horsemen, and, single-handed, killed "twenty foes and five" (p. 75).

As a breeder of horses, Blunt must have shared Abu Zeyd's enthusiasm, which he reproduces in the description of the Agheyli's "grey mare, the renowned":

Spare is her head and lean, her ears set close together;  
Her forelock is a net, her forehead a lamp lighted,  
Illumining the tribe, her neck curved like a palm branch,  
Her wither clean and sharp ...

... Her forelegs are twin lances.  
Her hoofs fly forward faster ever than flies the whirlwind  
Her tail bone high aloft, yet the hairs sweep the gravel;  
Her height twice eight, sixteen, taller than all the horses,  
Here are her virtues told in full enumeration ———  
Dear to her master's eye as gold and precious jewels.

(p. 25)

These are the qualities of the Arabian thoroughbred horses which Blunt and his wife brought to England in 1878 and 1879. Oriental similes and metaphors are also effectively reproduced in the description of women, whose faces are likened to "fair moons".

With brows divinely knit for their sad lover's dooming,  
And eyes aflame to smite and pierce his soul like lances,  
And red cheeks, every one a rosebud newly bloomed  
And noses keen and finely shaped as sabres

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And mouths like lover's knots, and teeth agleam like jewels.  
(p. 38)

The last word here should be "pearls", to give the better, exact image of the original. The whole picture is reminiscent of the style of the Moallakat. Antar, for example, says that he wanted to kiss the swords, whose lightning flash in the din of battle reminded him of his beloved's flashing smile.

Before divulging the secret of his mission and unveiling his true identity, Abu Zeyd concludes a covenant of mutual loyalty with Alia, sealed with a solemn oath:

"Stretch forth thy hand to me, in covenant between us,  
Who so then shall betray, let him be as an unbeliever;  
And I stretched my hand to her hand and touched it  
    [With my fingers...]

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And I placed the veil between us, and we held fast by  
    [the girdles,  
And I recited the oath and sealed with prayer our treaty".  
    (pp. 51-52)

This is an old custom, and Blunt is drawing on his own experience during his journey to Syria in the Winter of 1877-8, where he concluded similar covenants of perpetual brotherhood with Faris, the Sheykh of Shammar and Jadaan, the Sheykh of Anezeh. He took such ceremonial oaths most seriously and kept them, remaining faithful to his friends, men or women, such as Arabi and Violet Fane. The description of the oath here shows how much he identified himself with Abu Zeyd.

In addition to the main plot, there are several supporting sub-plots, such as the story of the widowhood of Lady Ghanimeh, the story of the outcast Sahel and his girl Zohwah, and the story of the sand diviner from Baghdad. These sub-plots reflect the inventiveness of the reciters' imagination. The first sub-plot introduces us to the main characters, gives us the nature of the problem or the quest, and sets the stage for further action. The second supplies the hero with the device to achieve his main objective; and the third gives the reciter a chance to recapitulate, repeating the whole story in a quick resumé, embellished with comments on fate. Disguise, magic, Jinn, sand-divining, necromancy and the like are supernatural motifs obviously borrowed from the Arabian Nights. In addition to entertainment, these supernatural elements, which pervade the saga as a whole, illustrate the manners, customs and beliefs of the lower ranks of

Egyptian society, as Edward Lane rightly pointed out.<sup>1</sup> Both good and bad aspects of the life of the Bedouins are reflected in these stories. The bad aspects, such as brutality, vengeance and superstition had a very harmful influence. M. F. Abdul-Latif in his Abu Zeyd el-Hilali, maintains that the Hilali romances stimulated crime, particularly in remote areas, where some unruly Egyptians used to thrive on a life of robbery and blood feuds in imitation of the heroes of some Hilali stories.<sup>2</sup> In the episode translated by Blunt, the killing of Sahel's father for Sahel's misdemeanour (peeping at naked women bathing in a pond) is an example of pre-Islamic savagery. However, the good qualities, i.e. generosity, courage, chivalry ... etc. are said to have encouraged one of Khedive Ismail's generals to have the Siret Beni Hilal recited to his soldiers in the Sudan in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Blunt was surprised when The Stealing of the Mare left his cultured Arab friends, such as Mohammed Abdu, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, and Hafez Ibrahim, one of Egypt's greatest poets, completely unmoved.<sup>4</sup> Only non-Arabs, such as Clement Huart, T. E. Lawrence and J. W. Mackail showed something equivalent to Blunt's interest in this work, which is, to the historians of Arabic literature, only a worthless old tradition of verbose grandmothers' tales, a non-literary work. Yet T. E. Lawrence, for one, exclaims:

What a good book it is! I ungratefully delayed writing [to Edward Garnett] while I read it. How nearly big, as a poet, Blunt was. Only his vanity saved him from doing really good things in three or four tales.<sup>5</sup>

1. Lane, op. cit., pp. 397-8.
2. M. F. Abdullatif, Abu Zeyd el-Hilali (Cairo, 1946) pp. 113-114; quoted by Mukhlis, op. cit., p. 12.
3. Ibid., p. 116; quoted by Mukhlis, p. 12.
4. My Diaries, pp. 456-7.
5. David Garnett (ed.), The Letters of T. E. Lawrence (1938) p. 708.



In A History of Arabic Literature, Clement Huart draws parallels between the Hilali Saga and Al-Firdawsi's Persian epic, The Shahnameh. He likens Abu Zeyd's alienation from his father to Asfandiyar's similar plight. Most of the Hilali heroes, Abu Zeyd, Diab and Hassan ibn Sirhan, are assassinated; so were the Shahnameh's heroes, Rustam and Bahram Gur. Other parallels include fatalism, magic, soothsayings and other forms of superstition. The defection of Zinati's daughter, Sa'ada, to the enemy camp, due to her love of the Hilali prince Mer'i, Abu Zeyd's nephew, is similar to the defection of the daughter of Shangul, King of India, through her love to Bahram Gur.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt compares the romance to the Iliad and the Odyssey.<sup>2</sup> Beni Hilal's long siege and the eventual destruction of al-Qairewan are certainly comparable to the Greeks' siege of Troy. In The Stealing of the Mare, Alia's help to Abu Zeyd in stealing the mare is similar to Medea's help to Jason in capturing the Golden Fleece in Greek mythology. But these and other speculations establish no real links between the Hilali poems and their literary parallels.

Parallels with Persian literature may point to common sources in the lost legends of the ancient Orient, which were inherited by both Arabic and Persian societies. The ignorance of the Hilali narrators and reciters of their own Arabic literature, let alone the literature of other nations, precludes any possibility of influence filtering through to them from the Greek legacy. No documented evidence has reached us to establish any possibility of links.

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1. C. Huart, A History of Arabic Literature, Translated by Lady Mary Lloyd (1903). Quoted by Mukhlis, p. 12.

2. The Stealing of the Mare, p. x.

The difficulties of interpretation have emerged in the critical tradition attaching to this work. J. W. Mackail's lecture on The Stealing of the Mare, entitled "Arabian Epic and Romantic Poetry", gives a distorted and misleading view of its subject. He recognizes the effect of "Arabic poetry upon the mediaeval epic as well as upon the mediaeval romance",<sup>1</sup> but in suggesting that an Arabic epic tradition was stifled by the advent of Islam, he provides a distortion of the historical growth of poetry in the Middle East.

The concentration of Arabian poetry in what may be called the epic age never had a chance to expand and dilate itself by any normal course of growth.<sup>2</sup>

"What may be called the epic age" belongs neither to pre-Islamic Arabia nor to post-Islamic Arabia, as Mackail seems to imply, but rather to the remote past, to the dawn of the ancient dynasties, which did produce the epic Mackail is looking for. The epic of Gilgamesh was at least 1500 years older than Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Mackail observes:

To the kindred stocks of the Arabo-Syrian plateau ... we owe largely or even mainly the vital forces which make the Middle Ages spiritually and imaginatively different from the world ruled over by Rome.<sup>3</sup>

These "vital forces", at work from the eighth century onwards, were overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, Islamic. Mackail is right when he observes that "To Dante and Petrarch, as to the whole age of their contemporaries and predecessors Homer was a sealed book", while knowledge of Arabic was, by contrast, "widely diffused" in Renaissance Europe.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Mackail's view of The Stealing of the Mare

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1. J. W. Mackail, Lectures on Poetry (1914), p. 124.

2. Ibid., p. 125.

3. Ibid., pp. 125-6.

4. Ibid., p. 126.

as an "inchoate epic", "half-developed", is incorrect. R. A. Nicholson's term "historical romance", with which he quarrels, is more accurate.<sup>1</sup> Mackail's claim, "even among Arabic scholars I find it but little known"<sup>2</sup> cannot be sustained. His speculation, "[Benu Hilal] may have penetrated to Spain and came into actual contact with the developing poetry of Southern France"<sup>3</sup> is misleading. Benu Hilal did cross into Spain, but they were confined to the Southern parts of the country; Arabic poetry had penetrated Provence at least 300 years before Benu Hilal set foot in the Iberian Peninsula. That poetry was neither oral nor corrupted; it was a mature tradition at the height of its flowering.

Mackail's contention that despite corruption and vulgarisms, the poetry of the Hilali saga retained its "essential excellence", "resisted decay" and has become "neither greatly debased nor badly mutilated" but, remained "true metal", lacks substance, and uncritically upholds Blunt's overestimation of his source material. His conclusion that the "epic" is "the best single picture" of romantic Arab chivalry "handed over to Europe" is inaccurate.<sup>4</sup> The source of The Stealing of the Mare is lacking in "essential epic construction" and was not composed as an epic. The story did not originally exist "in the shape of a continuous poem", nor was it the work of a master poet capable of handling "the mechanism of an epic poem in the full sense".<sup>5</sup> Blunt's poem, in turn, is neither "an epic in disintegration" nor "an epic in the making", as Mackail

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1. Ibid., p. 128.

2. Ibid., p. 129.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 130.

5. Ibid., pp. 148-9.

claims. He gives a bold judgement:

... there are passages in the earlier part of the romance which, standing alone, might be classified with those lyrical or quasi-lyrical fragments which are among the precious lyrics of the poetry of the Ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

- that is, the pre-Islamic period in Arabic Poetry. But nowhere in the thirty eight or more episodes of the whole Hilali cycle can we find a passage which even remotely approaches the standard of pre-Islamic poetry. Mackail's enthusiasm is misplaced:

It was this Arabian poetry, charged and saturated with the potentialities of a supreme poetical art, which kindled the new life of poetry in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

But it was the post-Islamic poetry of the period between the second half of the eighth century and the first half of the eleventh, and not the later, irregular and degenerate poetry of "Beni Hilal", which kindled the poetry of France.

Mackail's further reference to the romance of Antar and what he terms as its "strong Persian influence" incorporates a further error.<sup>3</sup> In its present form, this romance is an Egyptian invention from the days of the Fatimids. Moreover, the scene of Antar's death to which he refers, has nothing to do with Antar. It is an account that depicts the death of another hero, named Rabi'ah ibn Mukaddam, and can be easily found in Kitab el-Aghani (The Book of Songs) of Abul Faraj el-Isphahani.

We have already seen some samples of Blunt's rendering of this Hilali episode into verse. Its superiority over Lane's attempt shows in its retention of the spirit and the dramatic vigour of the original. Blunt was right in resorting to assonance in order to imitate the

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1. Ibid., p. 149.

2. Ibid., p. 151.

3. Ibid., p. 152.

effect of the single rhymes of the Arabic passages, since it is "beyond the scope of the richest European languages to reproduce" this effect. Blunt further explains:

Only the colloquialisms have been ignored, and for the metrical irregularities has been substituted a uniform metre as nearly as possible reproducing to the English ear the rhythm of the less imperfect portions of the poem.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's modification of the original is more drastic than these words imply. The positive aspect of his verse rendering is that he has given the poem a large, uninterrupted movement, capable of conveying the quick, dramatic vitality - an effect exactly equal to that atmosphere of wonder, suspense and admiration which the narrators strive to achieve in the cafés. To achieve this, Blunt used long lines, containing six stressed feet each, with assonance to compensate for the lack of rhyme. Assonance is tolerably helpful if we remember that the poems are usually sung in a loud voice to the accompaniment of the simple oriental instrument, the rhabab, in noisy cafés. Nevertheless, Blunt seems to have striven to raise the standard of poetic diction to make it approximate to the grandeur and nobility of the classical Arabic poetry; his model for this may have been the Moallakat. His originals, the Hilali poems, had the faltering metres which betray their composers' ignorance of the rules of Arabic prosody... The popular minstrels viewed the classical poetry with awe, reverence and something like an inferiority complex. Although their ears became attuned to the metres of classical poetry, they are usually unable to produce a uniform style. Each passage contains a random mixture of metres. The disparity is increased through the improvisations of each individual rawi (or narrator).

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1. The Stealing of the Mare, op. cit., p. x.

Some professionals try to modify or rectify mistakes; but the result is not too happy. The poetry of Siret Beni Hilal has not achieved recognition as an integral part of the development of Arabic poetry and has no place at all in the history of Arabic literature. It has the social function in that it stirs the emotion of the urban audience and revives nostalgic memories of Bedouin life in the remote past. Thus, Blunt acts as a "schoolmaster" to the tradition from which his narrative source is taken. His handling of the incident is accompanied by an incongruous injection of technical sophistication into a crude original. By giving it the prestige of stately, regular rhythm and cadence he has somehow uprooted it from the folklorish environment where it naturally belongs.

Despite his fidelity to the substance of his original, Blunt's notes (pp. 121-7) contain a number of errors. There is no evidence to corroborate his claim that some tribal names in ancient Arabia come from old Totem worship; for this he leans on the unreliable claims of Robertson Smith. It is not true that the term "sultan" was "not used ... at all by the Arabs until the eleventh century ...". It occurs many times in the Koran and in the early days of the Abbasid Caliphate (i.e. the second half of the eighth century). Also, the Arabic word for "colocynth" is not Alkam, but Handhal. It occurs as the rhyme word in line 4 of the Moallaka of Imri-el-Ḳais. Blunt - and Mackail, who follows Blunt - make much of the recitation of Fat'ha (the opening chapter of the Koran). Sahel's refusal to recite Fat'ha for Alia before killing her is seen as the greatest of crimes.<sup>1</sup> This is untrue. Claims about Alia's ignorance of this

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1. Ibid., pp. 42, 124; Cf: Mackail, op. cit., p. 140.

chapter of the Koran are equally untrue. It is also not true that "few Arab women say the prayers prescribed to men ... [due to] their general lack of education". Every illiterate man, woman or child is usually able to recite the seven rhyming, short sentences of the Fat'ha, in spite of any "lack of education". Despite these errors however, the notes contain a sympathetic account of the manners and customs of the Arab Bedouins.

In spite of all the criticism that can be levelled at this work, and although it is based on a tale which does not occupy in Arabic history and literature the place which Blunt thought it deserved, The Stealing of the Mare remains a unique contribution to English literature, more elaborate, lively and entertaining than Edward Lane's Hilali chapter.

Blunt's more significant, and by far more successful contribution to English literature remains his rendering of the difficult Moallakat into English poetry. This original achievement deserves further consideration, particularly since no detailed study has ever been undertaken of this particular work by Blunt.

The Moallakats are seven odes composed by seven great poets who were universally favoured in pre-Islamic Arabia. The poets were respectively: Imrel-Kais (502 - Circa 540 A.D.), Tarafa (529-555), Zoheyr (523-618), Lebid (532-662), Antara (525-610), Amru ibn Kolthum (514-609), and El-Harith ibn Hillizeh (477-578). These poems do not represent the whole legacy of pre-Islamic poetry. Arab historians, particularly el-Amidi (d. 964 A.D.) and Ibnul-Nadim (d. 980) name at least sixty anthologies of poetry, committed to writing by various tribes to commemorate their poets who were the

source of their pride.<sup>1</sup> The importance of the Moallakat, however, comes from the fact that they were considered the epitome of what was best in Arabic poetry. They are examples of high artistic accomplishment, expressed in a natural, realistic style, although their themes are highly charged with evocative emotion. They are given as examples of aesthetic romanticism at its best, moderate in the description of feelings; yet they are frank in giving sensual and, at times, flagrantly erotic pictures of feminine beauty. They are examples of expressive brevity, eloquence and richness of idiom and figurative diction. They also represent ancient quarries containing historical information, codes of ethics and gems of wisdom. They continued to exert a literary influence on generation after generation of poets for at least three centuries after Islam, supplying poets with themes and archetypes of style.<sup>2</sup> In short, they became the cornerstone of a long tradition, occupying in the history of Arabic poetry and diction a place similar to the position of Greek and Roman mythology and mythical figures in modern European poetry.

In this study, we shall give a quick survey of the origins and background of the Moallakats, their first appearance in Europe, the lyrical aspects of ancient Arabic poetry, an analysis of its metres, the influence of Jones's translation, the importance of Blunt's verse rendering, the difficulties he faced, a correction of his mistaken opinions and samples of his translation compared to others in order to reach a fair assessment.

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1. Quoted by Dr. Nasserel-Din el-Asad, Maṣadir el-Shi'ir el-Jahili (Sources of Pre-Islamic Poetry) (Cairo 1956, Rptd. 1969), pp. 543-7.
  2. Dr. M. N. el-Behbiti, Tarikh el-Shi'ir el-Arabi (History of Arabic Poetry) (Cairo, 1950; Rptd. 1961) pp. 58-83.



While Blunt exaggerated the importance of The Stealing of the Mare, he seems to have unwittingly underestimated the Moallakat, despite his attempt to benefit from his intimate knowledge of the desert and his enthusiasm and sympathy for things Arabian. Yet, he should not be blamed too much. Better equipped scholars and more academically qualified Orientalists like Sir William Jones, William Ahlwardt, T. Noldeke and D. S. Margoliouth, have propagated worse misconceptions, half-baked theories and erroneous judgements. One of the most dangerous examples of their mistakes is their misinterpretation of the word "jahiliyya". This was an Islamic term, coined to describe the state of fratricidal wars among the Arab tribes before Islam. In this context, it means "vindictive savagery" or "proud arrogance". It occurs in the Koran (3:154, 5:50, 33:33, 48:26). This is also the meaning in which the term is used in line 53 of the Moallaka of Amru ibn Kolthum. Unfortunately, most Orientalists (with the exception of Goldziher and R. A. Nicholson) translated it as "ignorance" and "illiteracy", then applied it to all Arabia before Islam. Blunt adopted this mistaken translation of the term,<sup>1</sup> hence his description of pre-Islamic poetry as a "delightful wild flower", the work of "unlettered Bedouins" who "could neither read nor write". In fact, "poetry is the public register of the Arabs: by its means genealogies are remembered, and glorious deeds handed down to posterity".<sup>2</sup> These were the words of

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1. W. S. Blunt, The Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia (1903), p. ix; Cf: "The Arabian Poetry of the Days of Ignorance", The New Review, vol. 14 (June, 1896), pp. 626-35 (p. 626).
  2. These words are ascribed to Ibn Abbas, Mohammed's cousin. Quoted by Sir. C. J. Lyall, Ancient Arabian Poetry (1930; first pubd. 1885), p. xv. Cf: K. Ahmad (ed.), Islamic Perspectives (1979), p. 139.

Abdullah ibn Abbas, Prophet Mohammed's cousin, who used to cite examples from pre-Islamic poetry whenever he was asked to interpret any difficult Koranic verse. Illiteracy in pre-Islamic Arabia is a myth, and pre-Islamic poetry was rightly described by Omar ibn el-Khattab, the second Caliph, as "the archive of all they knew, and the utmost compass of their wisdom".<sup>1</sup> The ancient form of the Arabic Kassida, or poem, as represented by these Moallakat, is a perfect, fully accomplished object of art. We are confronted with a type of mature structure in language and assonance, in monorhyme and internal rhythm, in grammar and syntax, in diction and metaphor, and in theme and style. This composition does not belie the first primitive origins, the faltering, experimental steps or inferior forms or capacity which the Kassida must have gradually gone through, generation after generation, before it could ever achieve this degree of growth in these extremely complicated prosodic moulds or metres. It is thus necessary to keep in mind that Arabic poetry is as old as the first signs of cultural awakening in Arabia and the Near East; and that only bits and pieces have actually reached us, the oldest of which cannot date back more than two centuries before Mohammed.

A French writer noticed this and wondered:

Malheureusement, les origines de cette littérature nous échappent, et, quand elle apparaît pour la première fois, elle est sortie complète du désert, comme la Minerve tout armée du cerveau de Jupiter.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt himself observes in his Introduction:

All that it can be likened to with any justice is the lyrical portions of the older Hebrew Scriptures - parts of the Book of Job, the Psalms of David without their piety, the love - canticle of Solomon without its mystic meaning.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Dr. el-Behbiti, op. cit., p. 104.

2. J. M. A. Noel Des Vergers, L'Arabie (Paris, 1847), p. 472.

3. W. S. Blunt, The Seven Golden Odes, op. cit., p. ix.

Here it is interesting to notice that the Arabic word for poetry, "Shi'r", is similar to those used in the most ancient known Semetic languages; in Babylonian the term is "Shiro", the Aramaeic is "Shur" and the Hebrew is "Shir"; hence "Shir Ha Shirim" or "Song of Songs".<sup>1</sup> Under the term "Semites", R. A. Nicholson classifies "the Babylonians and Assyrians, the Hebrews, the Phoenicians, the Aramaens, the Abyssinians, the Sabaeans and the Arabs". After asserting the close relations among the Semitic languages and giving a chronological table in the order of their extant literature, Nicholson observes:

Notwithstanding that Arabic is thus, in a sense, the youngest of the Semitic languages, it is generally allowed to be nearer akin than any of them to the original archetype, the "Ursemitische", from which they all are derived, just as the Arabs, by reason of their geographical situation and the monotonous uniformity of desert life, have in some respects preserved the Semitic character more purely and exhibited it more distinctly than any people of the same family.<sup>2</sup>

This conclusion is borne out by the reser<sup>a</sup>ches of a number of philologists.<sup>3</sup> Blunt is right in assuming that the seeds of this ancient Arabic poetry were "an indigenous product of the Arabian soil, not unconnected with the primaeval civilization of Yemen".

Here Blunt seems to be echoing the remarks of Sir William Jones:

... thus the odours of Yemen, the musk of Hadramut, and the pearls of Omman, supply the Arabian poets with a great variety of allusions ... where can we find so much beauty as in the Eastern poems, which turn chiefly upon the loveliest objects in nature.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Professor Taha Baqer, Melhemet Gilgamesh (Baghdad, 1970), p. 11.
  2. R. A. Nicholson, A Literary History of the Arabs, (1907, reprinted 1914), p. xvi.
  3. Dr. Shawqi Daif, Al-Asrul-Jahili (The Pre-Islamic Era) (Cairo 1955), pp. 104-117; Cf: el-Behbiti, op. cit., p. 278; and Dr. N. el-Asad, op. cit., pp. 23-25.
  4. The Poems and Essays of Sir William Jones, Published by Suttaby, Evans & Fox (1818), p. 241.

Both the Sabaeans of Arabia Felix and the Nabateans of Arabia Petraea remained rich and powerful for a very long time. The splendour of their civilization is described by many historians of antiquity, such as Agatharchides, Diodorus Siculus, Pliny and Strabo.<sup>1</sup> Horace, in one of his odes makes a simple but significant reference to Saba:

Your heart on Arab wealth is set,  
Good Iccius: you would try your steel  
On Saba's kings, unconquer'd yet,  
And make the Medes your fetters feel.<sup>2</sup>

The Arabian Peninsula continued to prosper throughout antiquity, living side by side with all the great empires of the ancient Near East. It saw the rise and fall of Babylon, Assyria, Tyre and Egypt; then it witnessed the rise of the Greek, Roman and Persian empires, living in their midst, secure by the natural immunity of its vast "sea" of sand. It was known by the ancients as an unconquerable land, and described as such by Herodotus and Diodorus.<sup>3</sup> The wealth accumulated from monopolizing the trade routes between India and the Mediterranean enabled Arabia to nourish well-organized communities whose culture dates back to the dawn of history.<sup>4</sup> The frequent historical allusions to these civilized communities are corroborated by the ruins of their cities, scattered from Yemen in the south to Palmyra and Tel Mardikh in the north. Professor A. H. Sayce observes:

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1. The Cambridge Ancient History (Cambridge, 1934, rptd. 1952), Vol. X, p. 249. Cf: A. Gardiner, Egypt of the Pharaohs (Oxford, 1964), pp. 5-7.
  2. The Odes and Carmen Saeculare of Horace, Translated by John Conington (1877), Book I: Ode 29.
  3. Herodotus: The Histories, translated by A. de Selincourt and revised by A. R. Burn (Penguin, 1976), Book III, Par. 88, p. 242; Cf: The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian, translated by G. Booth (1814), vol. I, Book II, Ch. iv, p. 140.
  4. H. St. J. B. Philby, The Background of Islam (Alexandria, 1947) p. 11.

We must cease to regard Arabia as a land of deserts and barbarism; it was, on the contrary, a trading centre of the ancient world, and the Muslims who went forth from it to conquer Christendom and found empires, were but the successors of those who, in earlier times, had exercised a profound influence upon the destinies of the East.<sup>1</sup>

However, the two centuries that preceded Islam witnessed some drastic changes in the status of the Arabian Peninsula in the life of the ancient world. This period was so full of tragic, fratricidal wars and outside invasions and invasion attempts that the Arabs suffered amnesia, and nearly forgot their entire past history. There appears in the history of the Arabs an almost totally blank gap between the reign of Belquis, the famous queen of Sheba (d. 948 B.C.) and that of Zenobia, the equally famous queen of Palmyra (d. 274 A.D.).<sup>2</sup>

These changes and historical developments are better left to the historians and archaeologists. What concerns us here is to register the fact that pre-Islamic poetry, as it has reached us, represents the result of at least two thousand years of development.<sup>3</sup> Sir

Charles James Lyall observes:

The number and complexity of the measures which they use, their established laws of quantity and rhyme, and the uniform manner in which they introduce the subjects of their poems, notwithstanding the distance which often separated one composer from another, all point to a long previous study and cultivation of the art of expression and the capacities of their language, a study of which no record now remains. In the earliest poems, as they now stand ... we can detect little that is archaic or immature.<sup>4</sup>

The bulk of what has reached us of this poetry has political connotations concerning the intertribal wars; it was mostly composed by the

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1. Professor A. H. Sayce, Early Israel (1899), p. 128.

2. Philby, op. cit., p. 135.

3. Omar Farroukh, Tarikhul Adab el-Arabi (A History of Arabic Literature), 4 vols. (Beirut, 1969), I, p. 73; Cf: el-Bahbiti; op. cit., pp. 3-5.

4. C. J. Lyall, op. cit., p. xvi.

political and social leaders who represent the top aristocracies of pre-Islamic Arabia. It should be read against the historical background of the period. A poet was usually held in high esteem in those days, and the art of composition was taken most seriously and approached with sombre reverence. R. A. Nicholson explains:-

The ideas which reveal themselves in Arabic literature are so intimately connected with the history of the people, and so incomprehensible apart from the external circumstances in which they arose, that I have found myself obliged to dwell at considerable length on various matters of historical interest.<sup>1</sup>

The two most destructive wars of "Dāhis and Ghabrā" and "el-Basûs", lasted for over a generation and gave rise to four of the Moallakat. Nicholson's brief account of these two wars covers seven pages in A Literary History of the Arabs.<sup>2</sup>

The term "Moallakat" means "The Suspended Odes". It stems from the tradition that these seven poems by seven great poets were so highly esteemed that they were inscribed in letters of gold on Egyptian linen and suspended inside al-Kaaba in Mecca. They were also known as "al-Mudhhabāt" (The Golden Ones), "al-Sumūt" (Pearl Necklaces), "al-Ṭiwāl" (The Long Ones), and later as "al-Qassā'id el-Jāhiyyāt" (The Pre-Islamic Odes) or simply "The Ones". For at least three generations before Islam, the tribe whose critical judgement was universally accepted was Qureish, whose literary dialect was used in poetry - a dialect which served as a crucible through which the various linguistic currents from the east, the north and the south were pooled and refined. As a commercial, religious, and cultural centre, Hijaz used to attract poets from all over Arabia.

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1. R. A. Nicholson, op. cit., p. xxx.

2. Ibid., pp. 55-62.

They used to gather in a great annual season of poetical competition at Okādh, near Mecca.

The Moallakat, put together in one anthology, were annotated and interpreted by more than thirty different commentators, of whom Brocklemann names only thirteen.<sup>1</sup> They were printed scores of times in various parts of the world, and translated, wholly or partially, to many languages, including Latin, German, Russian, French, English, Polish, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Persian, Turkish and Hindustani. The individual Odes began to appear in Europe from 1742 onwards; but the first complete edition was that of Sir William Jones (1783).<sup>2</sup> In 1796, Joseph Dacre Carlyle published Specimens of Arabian Poetry at Cambridge, where he was Professor of Arabic. His first "specimen" was Lebid's Moallakah, which he likened to Oliver Goldsmith's Deserted Village. In 1823, another British Orientalist, Matthew Lumsden, wrote a running commentary on the text of the seven, which was prepared by Maulawi Abdul Rahim ibn Abdel Karim Safipuri and published in Calcutta. William Ahlwardt's edition of The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets (1870) included the Moallakat of Imral - Qais, Tarafa, Antara and Zuhair. This was, in fact, the edition first prepared by Al-Asma'i, the great philologist (d. 831). The collection was reproduced by el-A'alam al-Shantamari, the Andalusian commentator who died at Santa Maria in 1038. In 1877 Sir Charles James Lyall started an ambitious project to translate the seven "Suspended Poems" at the instance of Dr. William Wright. This project was never completed. Lyall, however,

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1. M. Ali Hamdallah (ed.), Sharh el-Moallakat el-Sab'a (A Commentary on the Seven Moallakat) (Damascus, 1963), pp. 56-60.
  2. Ibid., pp. 60-64; Cf: the introductions preceding each one of the Moallakat in A. J. Arberry, The Seven Odes (1957).

published Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry (1885), an anthology mainly chosen from Diwan el-Ḥamāsah, which was originally collected by the Abbāsīd poet Abu Tammām (d. 845), to which Lyall added a translation of the Moallakah of Zuhair and a passage from that of Imra-al-Kais. In 1894, Lyall wrote an introduction to the Arabic text of Al-Tabrizi's edition of the Moallakat. Sir William Jones's prose translation was included in W. A. Clouston's Arabian Poetry for English Readers (1881). F. E. Johnson's The Seven Poems Suspended in the Temple at Mecca (Calcutta, 1894) is a literal translation which has no literary value at all. Blunt wrote an article about the Moallakat entitled "The Poetry of the Arabian Ignorance" in The New Review of June, 1896. After Blunt's verse rendering of The Moallakat in 1903, these poems were not translated again till A. J. Arberry published his brilliant book, The Seven Odes, in 1957. The manuscript of William Wright's prose translation of the Moallakah of Lebid, completed in the early 1850s, was published by Ursula Schedler in the Journal of Semitic Studies (1961). Thus, Blunt participated in a long and unbroken tradition of scholarship and criticism.

Arabic poetry seems to have been associated with music and singing from the very beginning. In rhyme and <sup>n</sup>interval rhythm it lends itself easily to timed recitation. Many Arabic words for musical instruments and lyrical terms are strikingly identical with their ancient Assyrian, Babylonian, Aramaic and Hebrew counterparts. The Assyrian Zamāru is equal to the Hebrew Mizmōr and the Arabic Mazmour (psalm). The Hebrew reed pipe, called Zemer, is the Arabic Mizmār. The sad effect of the long-drawn sounds of the solemn song is called shigū in Assyrian. The Hebrew equivalent is shiggāiōn and



the Arabic is shejw or shajan. The Assyrian allū is the Hebrew elāl and Arabic wilwāl (wailing). The happy, noisy song of praise, collectively sung, is alalu in Assyrian, tehillāh in Hebrew, and tahlil in Arabic. The word for lament in Assyrian is naqū, which is connected with the Hebrew nehi and the Arabic nauḥ. The Assyrian term for recitation, shidru, has its cognate in the Arabic words shadu and inshād.<sup>1</sup> Many other parallels are found in this field, such as the terms for drum, pipe, horn, tambourine, etc. Songs and singing girls are mentioned in the Moallakat. Abul-Faraj el-Isphahani's Kitabul-Aghani (Book of Songs) contains samples of Arabic poems, both Islamic and pre-Islamic, which were set to music, till the first half of the tenth century A.D. (Abud-Faraj died in 956). The book, 22 volumes, totalling 10,000 pages, is by no means comprehensive. The complicated laws of Arabic prosody were discovered by the great musician, lexicographer and mathematician, Al-Khalil ibn Ahmed el-Farāhīdī of Basrah (d. 791 A.D.). Arabic poetry can take the form of sixteen principal prosodic moulds. It is not necessary to study all of them here: we shall take only the four metres represented in the seven Moallakat. The Moallakat of Imrel-Kais, Tarafa and Zoheyr are composed in the metre called Ṭawīl (Long). The Moallakat of Lebid and Antara are composed in the Kāmil (Perfect), the Moallakah of Ibn Kobthum is composed in the Wāfer (Ample) and that of el-Harith is in the Khafīf (Light) metres. An Arabic Bait (Verse) is equivalent to two English lines, i.e. one line in Arabic makes a couplet in English. The ordinary English line is equal to one hemistich in Arabic, where every line is made up of two equal hemistiches. Like

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1. H. G. Farmer, A History of Arabian Music (1929), p. xiv.

the English heroic couplet, each "line" in Arabic must be an independent unit which will continue to give the full sense of a complete statement even when detached from the body of the Kassida, or poem. This full sense must not depend on any line before or after it. Yet when the poem is read as a whole each line must fall naturally into its allotted slot, contributing to the cumulative effect of the full text of the poem. Let us now take the formulae of the four metres and apply them to some lines, transliterated and translated from the Moallakat. The Tawil metre is composed according to the following formula:

1                    2                    3                    4  
 u - u / u - - - / u - u / u - - - / repeated in the second

hemistich to make a complete line. However, one of the most common licences allowed in this formula is to replace the second stressed syllable of the fourth foot with an unstressed one to become (u - u -) instead of (u - - -). This occurs more often in the last syllable but one of the second hemistich.

Example (a)::from the Moallakah of Imr-el-Kais:

Qifā nabki min dhikrā habibin wamanzili  
 bisiqti(1) liwā baina(d) dakhuli fahawmili

Stop (here, my two comrades), that we may weep at the  
 memory of the beloved (at the sight of) the remains  
 of her tents  
 by the edge of yon bending sands between Dakhul and Hawmil.

This line can be cut into the syllables of the above formula as follows:

u - u / u - - - / u - u / u - u -  
 Qifanab kimindhikra habibin wamanzili  
 u - u / u - - - / u - u / u - u -  
 bisiqtil liwabainad dakhuli fahawmili

The rhyming sound (li) is repeated at the end of each one of the eighty-one lines of the Moallakah. The Kamil metre is composed

according to the following formula:

1                      2                      3  
u u - u - / u u - u - / u u - u - / repeated in the second

hemistich to make a complete line. However, a common licence allowed in this formula is the omission of one of the first two unstressed syllables, so that the foot concerned becomes (u - u -) instead of (u u - u -).

Example (b): from the Moallakah of Antara:

Hal ghā dara(sh) shu'arā' min mutaraddami?  
am hal 'araftad(d) dāra ba'ada tawahhumi?

(Have the bards left any theme unsung?  
dost thou recognize the home of thy beloved, after  
long hesitation?)

This line can be cut to syllables according to the above formula of its metre as follows:

u - u - / u u - u - / u u - u -  
Halgadarash shu'araumin mutaraddami  
u - u - / u - u - / u u - u -  
amhal'araf taddaraba'a datawahhumi

The rhyming sound (mi) is repeated in each one of the seventy seven lines of this Moakalah. The Wāfer metre is composed according to the following formula:

1                      2                      3  
u - u u - / u - u u - / u - - / repeated in the second hemistich

to make a complete line. However, a common licence allowed in this formula is to omit one unstressed syllable from the middle of either the first or second two feet, which are identical, to become (u - u -) instead of (u - u u -). This omission is not allowed in both feet. It occurs more frequently in the first foot.

Example (c): from the Moallakah of Ibn Kulthum:

Alā hubbī bisahniki fasbinhInā  
walā tobqī khumūra(l) andarInā

(Ho! wake up, (woman), and bring our morning (wine) glasses and do not leave the wines of Andarin hoarded.)

This line can be cut into syllables according to the above formula of its metre as follows:

u - u - / u - u u - / u - -  
Alahubbi bisahnikifas bihina  
u - u - / u - u u - / u - -  
Walatobqi khumural'an darina

The rhyming sound (ina) is repeated in each one of the 108 lines of this Moallakah. The Khafif metre has the following scansion:

1 2 3  
- u - - / - - u - / - u - - / repeated in the second himstich

to make a complete line.

Example (d): from the Moallakah of el-Harith:

Ādhanatnā bibainihā Asmā'u  
rubbé Thāwin yumallu minhu(th) thuwā'u

(Asma'a, [the poet's beloved], has given us notice of her departure; lingering guests may make their hosts weary of their presence, [but Asma'a is not like that]).

This line can be cut into syllables, according to the formula of its

Light metre as follows:

- u - - / - - u - / - u - -  
Adhanatna bibainiha Asma'u  
- u - - / - - u - / - u - -  
rubbethawin yumallumin huththuwa'u

The rhyming sound (ā'u) is repeated in each one of the 82 lines of this Moallakah.

Blunt found these rules of Arūd (prosody) so complex that he considered them "an example of pedantry gone mad". Yet, he succeeded in producing, in English rhythm, the sound effects and the real atmosphere of the originals. His success becomes conspicuous when his adaptation is compared to the attempts of both Tennyson and Browning, the two major Victorian poets who were influenced by the Moallakat. As for Shelley's small fragment (From the Arabic:

an Imitation), written in 1821, after he had read Terrick Hamilton's translation of the Romance of Antar, (1819-20), it is such an abject failure that it is better neglected, as is the similar attempt of the Reverend George Croly.

In "Locksley Hall", Tennyson borrowed most of his motifs from Sir William Jones's translation of the Moallakat. Tennyson told W. G. Palgrave that this poem had been "suggested by reading Sir William Jones's prose translation of the Old Arabian Moallakat". Tennyson's son, Hallam, adds his testimony to corroborate this fact; he too, heard his father refer to the Moallakat as the source of "Locksley Hall".<sup>1</sup>

Outlining the contents of the pre-Islamic Ode, the Abbasid critic, Ibn Qutaibeh (828-889 A.D.), in his book Kitabul Shi'ir wash-Shu'ara'a (Book of Poetry and Poets) gives the following summary of the topics treated by the pre-Islamic poets in their Kassidehs:

... the composer of Odes began by mentioning the deserted dwelling places and the relics and traces of habitation. Then he wept and complained and addressed the desolate encampment, and begged his companion(s) to make a halt ... and bewailed the violence of his love and the anguish of separation from his mistress and the extremity of his passion and desire ... Now, when the poet had assured himself of an attentive hearing, he followed up his advantage and set forth his claim (complaining) of fatigue and want of sleep and travelling by night and the<sup>2</sup> noonday heat and how his camel had been reduced to leanness.

Then after describing the dangers of his long journey, the poet would enter upon his subject of praising the prince or king whose palace had been his destination, or he may give some wise comments on the ideals of peace, reconciliation and mutual respect. He may glorify

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1. H. Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memoir, 2 vols. (1897), II, p. 484. See also Vol. I, p. 195.
  2. Quoted by R. A. Nicholson, op. cit., pp. 77-8.

the deeds of his tribe in war, the generosity of his people, in contrast to the foul deeds of treachery committed by others ... etc.

The Moallakah from which Tennyson benefited most was that of Imrel-Kais (though it was by no means the only source). It must be stressed that Jones's translation and transliteration, though often close to the original, give no more than a general paraphrase, sometimes romanticised at the expense of accuracy, with serious mistakes resulting from his misreading of the text. Jones knew the Gallandian atmosphere of the Arabian Nights and tried to incorporate it in his translation. These defects found their way to Tennyson's "Locksley Hall". Like Imrel-Kais, Tennyson stops at a desolate station, remembering the happy days of amorous adventures. The nostalgic warmth of the past is contrasted to the dreariness of the present. Tennyson's Amy is his cousin, just as Imrel-Kais's beloved, Oneizeh, was his cousin. Both the Arab and Victorian women have slighted their lovers. Tennyson's violent reaction to the inconstancy, and cruelty of his Amy, however, bears the fingerprints of Lebid's Moallakah, where the Arab poet shows his determination to forget his Nawar. (ll. 16-20, 55-56). Imrel-Kais describes the Pleiads in his poem (line 25), so does Tennyson in his (line 10). The Arab poet describes a hunting scene with his powerful horse (ll. 52-69); the Victorian refers to a company of huntsmen (his comrades) in the background. Imrel-Kais describes the effects of a great storm at the end of his poem (ll. 70-81), and "Locksley Hall" ends with the foreboding signs of a gathering storm (ll. 190-194). Tennyson uses all these motifs to assert his own faith, his own philosophy of positivism and the idea of modern progress. He refers to the Orient as a "retreat" (ll. 153-160) only to reject it and to go back, in a

sombre mood, to his native West: "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay". Similarly, he derives certain images and names from the East in other poems to suit his own purposes; he borrows them from the Moallakat, like "Fatima", which he used as a title to one of his early poems. Other images come from the Arabian Nights (ll. 163-166 of "Locksley Hall") or from Persian love songs, as in the case of some lyrical pieces inserted in The Princess (Section vii, ll. 176 et seq.) and Maud (Part 1, "Come into the Garden, Maud", Stanzas iii, iv and ix). (Tennyson's Oriental sources can be the subject of an independent thesis.)

In addition to the themes of the Arabian Odes, which suggested the idea of "Locksley Hall", it seems that Tennyson was trying to imitate the metre of the "long line" or Tawil. Jones's transliteration, though imperfect and faltering, gave Tennyson some idea, however vague, of the rhythmic pattern of this Arabic metre. So, "Locksley Hall" was written in octasyllabic trochaic couplets. This metre, however, is similar to the Arabic Ramal, whose formula is (- u - -) repeated three times in each hemistich, or twice when it is "curtailed". According to Enid Hamer, Tennyson's

great contribution to the history and development of trochaic metre is of course the couplet of eight-foot lines curtailed, which is now known as the "Locksley Hall" metre.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Browning's attempts to imitate Arabic poetry are even more interesting. These sporadic attempts appeared in at least three poems written in 1842, 1864 and 1886. In "Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr" we see the only poem written in monorhyme in English. The speaker is an Algerian warrior, describing his horse:

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1. E. Hamer, The Metres of English Poetry (1930), p. 247. For the Significance of this poem in literature see W.D. Templeman "A Consideration of the Fame of Locksley Hall", Victorian Poetry, I (1963), pp. 81-103.

As I ride, as I ride,  
Ne'er has spur my swift horse plied,  
Yet his hide, streaked and pied,  
As I ride, as I ride  
Shows where sweat has sprung and dried  
Zebra footed, ostrich-thighed  
How has vied stride with stride  
As I ride, as I ride!<sup>1</sup>

This image is borrowed from Imrel-Kais's description of his horse. Line 59 of his Moallakah reads: "He has the waists of an antelope, the thighs of an ostrich, the trot of a wolf, and the gallop of a young fox". Line 66 reads: "He outstripped a wild bull and a wild cow in a single heat, without being bathed with sweat". Here is Blunt's rendering of the said lines:

Lean his flanks, gazelle-like, legs as the ostrich's,  
he like a strong wolf trotteth; lithe as a fox-cub he

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'Twixt the cow and bull herds held he in wrath his road;  
made he of both his booty, - sweatless the neck of him.

In "Abt Vogler", there are some lines where Browning succeeds in reproducing the exact intonations of the long metre "Ṭawīl". Sir Charles James Lyall gives the following lines as samples which fulfill the requirements of this metre:

Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told.  
Existent behind all laws, that made them and lo, they are!  
And there! Ye have heard and seen: consider and bow the head.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, this rhythm is not sustained throughout the poem. Browning's last attempt, "Muleykeh" (1886), contains a confused mixture of motifs culled from a number of pre-Islamic poems and stories that are not connected at all. He took them from the war of Dahis and el-Ghabra, which gave rise to the Moallakat of Antar and Zoheyr, and from another story, that of Kurait ibn Unaif and his stolen camels.

1. The Works of Robert Browning, ed. by F. G. Kenyon (1912), 10 vols., vol. 3, p. 116.
2. C. J. Lyall; op. cit., p. xlix.



Browning had read all these things in Sir Charles James Lyall's anthology, Ancient Arabian Poetry (1885). Browning cut off both stories from their respective backgrounds and mixed them into a new dramatic idyll concerning the stealing of "Muleykeh", the "pearl" among thoroughbred Arabian Mares. In these long lines of rhymed verse, there are some good glimpses of the tone and atmosphere of an Arabic Ode. Most of his images, however, are pale echoes of the Moallakah of Zoheyr. Professor A. J. Arberry rightly observes that these attempts remind us of "the extent to which the Victorian poets, Tennyson among them, sought to extend English prosody to take in the exciting rhythms newly discovered in the East."<sup>1</sup> One cannot help speculating how much English poetry could have gained had these major poets continued to pursue these "exciting rhythms" of the East. Long before Lyall's scholarly study of Arabic prosody, these rhythms were analysed by William Wright in his A Grammar of the Arabic Language (1859-62). The precedent of the Troubadours could have been repeated in the nineteenth century, pumping new blood into English poetry. Instead, Tennyson, Arnold, Browning and Fitzgerald began to fall under the relatively inferior influence of the Arabian Nights and Persian legends and love poems, all of which were the products of a very late stage of decline in the Orient as a whole, when its literary inventiveness was already a spent force, heading towards the stagnation which lasted for several centuries. From the end of the Crusades till the end of the 19th century, Arabic poetry and Persian poetry produced nothing that can be considered a healthy source of inspiration. By contrast, Arabic poetry in its

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1. A. J. Arberry, op. cit., p. 55.

golden age from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, was able to exercise a fecundating influence in the East, where it helped the nascent Persian verse in its first steps towards the later flowering lyricism of Jaami, Sâdi, Daqiqi, Hafez el-Shirâzi and Omar el-Khayyâm. The same vigorous prosody left its telling marks in the West, in Muslim Spain, where the almost extinct Hebrew poetry was resurrected and began to flourish, from the 9th till the 13th centuries. Even anti-Arab Zionist scholars admit this fact.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the verse translation of the full Moallakat was left to a minor poet, who was in the depths of unpopularity among his contemporaries, and at a time when poetry itself was rapidly losing ground to fiction on the one hand, and prose drama on the other. Though a unique contribution to the English literature, Blunt's translation went almost entirely unnoticed by both the literary critics and the reading public of the first decade of this century.

Most of Blunt's mistakes in the introductions and the notes to the Moallakat come from the habit of European Orientalists of giving sweeping generalizations about the nature, the habits, the temperament, and the social conditions of the Arabs, without caring to differentiate between the Arabs of today and the Arabs of the sixth century, or between the urban, suave and cultured Arabs of the cities of the caravans and the cruel, treacherous and savage Bedouins. We must not forget that Arabia is a sub-continent; and what applies to Nejd may not apply to Yemen. The Nefud is not like the Hijaz. Oman is different from Jebel Shammer. Arabia does not only contain tents

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1. See the preface of David Goldstein's The Jewish Poets of Spain (Penguin, 1971). See also Raymond P. Schendlin's article, "Rabbi Moshe Ibn Ezra on the Legitimacy of Poetry" in Medievalia et Humanistica, n.s. No. 7 (1976), pp. 101-115.

of nomads. It also contains stable commercial centres where people live in big houses made of stone, even marble. These facts seem to be forgotten by the Orientalists who give their false stereotypes. Thus it was that Blunt thought that his first-hand knowledge of today's nomads in the desert had given him insight into the poetry composed by the cultured aristocracy of the urban Arabia of the sixth century, because he refused to see any difference between the two! The Arabs, like any other human beings, cannot all be huddled together under such labels as materialistic, epicureans, agnostics.<sup>1</sup> Such generalizations are bound to be dangerously mistaken. Blunt claims that he has understood the Moallakat better than the old commentators who, in his opinion, lacked "personal knowledge of the customs and ways of Bedouin thought". He even makes the claim that he is capable of correcting the "mistakes" of these "townsmen" which "have been handed down from age to age almost as a religion". Then he submits his translation to two "townsmen", Sheykh el-Shanqiti, and Sheykh Mohammed Abdu, for revision.<sup>2</sup> In his introduction, Blunt seems to notice a number of trends in Arabian poetry and to give interesting observations about the temperament of its composers; but, instead of making these apply to individual poets, he gives them as universal phenomena. Here are some examples of such sweeping generalizations:

The primitive Arabs, just as are still their true Bedouin descendants, were rank materialists (p. xi).

Islam was fatal to Arabian poetry (p. xvii).

the special desert flavour ... that splendid realism ... that plainness of speech and that naïveté of passion ... [were] Arabia's loss [after Islam]. (p. xviii).

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1. W. S. Blunt, The Seven Golden Odes, op. cit., p. xi.
  2. Ibid., p. xx.

... none of it all ... was put down in writing. (p. xviii).

None of these statements is true. Other inaccuracies occur in the small biographical notes and the terminal footnotes; Imrel-Kais, for example, was not "the earliest" of "Poets of the Ignorance", nor is his Moallakah "the easiest to read". Others preceded him and several of his contemporaries were also great poets. His name was Hindej, not "Jendah", ibn Hujr ibn el-Harith ibn Amr ibn Hujr (Ākel el-Murrār) from the Yemeni tribe of Kindah, not "Kindi".<sup>1</sup> Both his grandfather and his father were Kings. His mother, Fatimah, was the sister of Kulaib, King of the tribe of Taghlib, whose murder ignited the horrible wars of el-Bassûs. Imrel-Kais's maternal uncle was the great poet and hero of popular legends and romances, el-Muhahil. El-Muhahil's daughter, Leila, was the mother of Amru ibn Kulthum, the composer of another Moallakah.

The ups and downs of Imrel-Kais's life made him the hero of a number of popular romances and adventures. Most of these stories (which can be found in Kitab el-Aghani) are baseless; but there seems to be a grain of truth in the story of his visit to Justinian in Constantinople, seeking Byzantine help to continue his campaign of revenge against Beni Assad, who had murdered his father.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt benefits from his travels to give explanatory notes to some lines in the Moallakat. This experience can be positive as far as natural conditions are concerned. Description of sand, wind, stars, desert flora and fauna can be enhanced through such first-hand knowledge of these things as Blunt possessed. The danger comes from his attempt to extend this experience into the human fields of history

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1. Ibid., p. xx

2. el-Bahbeti, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

and social conditions. His assumption that life in the desert regions has never changed is a false assumption which seems to have been (and is still) held by some Europeans who claim that the Bedouins are still leading the same kind of life as in the days of Abraham and Moses. Doughty's assessment of the Sa'alik of modern Arabia, which is adopted by Blunt, shows the ignorance of both English travellers of the history, values, and creative literature of the Sa'alik of pre-Islamic times.<sup>1</sup>

Imrel-Kais's amorous adventures must have appealed to Blunt. He must have identified himself with the "wandering king" in many respects. Here is Blunt's translation of what Arab critics used to describe as "the most indecent lines" ever spoken by an Arab poet:

Wooed have I thy equals, maidens and Wedded ones  
Her, the nursling's mother, did I not win to her?  
What though he wailed loudly, babe of the amulets,  
Turned she not half towards him, half of her clasped to me?  
(pp. 4-5)

Blunt succeeds in capturing the sense of drama in the following lines, where Imrel-Kais describes one of his frequent nocturnal rendezvous:

Passed I twixt her tent-ropes, - what though her near-of-kin  
lay in the dark to slay me, blood-shedders all of them.  
Came I at the mid-night, hour when the Pleiades  
Showed as the links of seed-pearls binding the sky girdle.  
Stealing in, I stood there. She has cast off from her  
every robe but one robe, all but her night-garment.  
Tenderly she scolded: what is this strategem?  
Speak, on thine oath, thou mad one. Stark is thy lunacy.  
(p. 5)

This notorious womanizer took both his womanizing and his poetry-writing from his uncle Muhalhill, who was known as el-Zir, i.e. the womanizer. These trends may have come to the family from Persia, from the creed of Mezdak (which Blunt mistakes for Mardak) - a creed

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1. W. S. Blunt, The Seven Golden Odes, op. cit., pp. 1, 52.

calling for sexual communism, which was accepted by the poet's grandfather el-Harith ibn Amr, king of Kenda. This tyranny was continued by his son, Hujr, till Banu Assad murdered him. Imrel-Kais's horse occupies a prominent position in his Moallakah. One of the greatest lines in Arabic poetry is almost fully recreated by Blunt, in the description of the sudden, lithe movements of his horse:

Lo, he chargeth, turneth, - gone is he - all in one,  
Like to a rock stream - trundled, hurled from its eminence.

When Imrel-Kais died, near Anḳara, (C. 540 A.D.), Justinian had a statue of him erected there. The statue was seen by the Abbasid Caliph, el-Ma'moun ibn Haroun el-Rashid, during his wars against the Byzantines. The head of the statue was still extant in 1895.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's rendering of the meaning follows the example of Fitzgerald's Rubāiyāt. Although he succeeds in capturing the atmosphere, he sometimes makes curious mistakes, as can be seen in a number of lines in the Moallakah of Tarafa, the young poet who was killed at the instigation of Amr ibn Hind, King of Hira, at the tender age of 26 (Circa. 560 A.D.). The reason for such mistakes is that Blunt was dealing with classical Arabic at its highest standard, and thus facing problems of irregular syntax, obsolete words and the quality of 'extreme economy in poetical expression. Arab poets used to leave a great deal to the imagination in order to achieve the greatest degree of compression by such means as ellipsis. Furthermore, Arabic has a copious diction, which meant that objects have several names; and the wide usage of figurative language usually gives room for many ways to express one and the same idea. Only an Arab would understand the exact meaning of this

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1. M. A. Hamdallah, op. cit., p. 73.

clause, for example: "We grazed the clouds". It means: "our animals grazed the pastures which grew as a result of the rain that fell from the clouds". Many lines in Tarafa's Moallakah are appropriated to a description of his she-camel, where he uses subtle images and difficult diction - which seems to have confused Blunt, as in his translation of lines 16, 17 and 24, for example. Other inaccuracies result from a combination of misunderstanding the original text and taking too much liberty in rendering it to English. An example of this case is the description of the horrors of war in Zoheyr's Moallakah. This is given in a highly metaphorical language in the original, where war is envisaged as an ominous she-camel, whose prolific womb produces monstrous breeds of death and destruction (lines 30-32). Again, in line 36 the word um-qash'am is a metaphor which means "death", but Blunt gives the literal meaning of the term, which is "vulture". The footnote for line 55 is both discursive and irrelevant. Blunt's rendering of it reads:

That he, who shall refuse the lance butts borne by the  
peace bearers  
him the lance - heads shall find fenceless, naked the  
flesh of him.

The translation is accurate enough, but the style of the original is figurative. It simply means that he who does not respond to the call of peace is a warmonger who should bear the consequences of his arrogance. Blunt's footnote (p. 60) can be misleading. The figurative expression is subtle; based on an ancient habit in intertribal wars in pre-Islamic Arabia. When two groups met in the battlefield they used to direct the lance-butts at each other to give peace a chance through the mediation efforts of envoys shuttling between the two camps. When such efforts failed, the fighters would turn their spearheads against each other and start the attack. There are other mistakes that seem to be the result of Blunt's lack of

knowledge of the historical background of the Moallakat and their authors. The last line but one of Tarafa's Moallakah is rendered as:

Only shall Age, the slow-foot, arraign thee of ignorance:  
only shall One bring tidings, when least thou desirest him.

In the footnote to this line, Blunt claims that "some Moslem commentators have affected to see in it a prophecy of Mohammed's coming". Perhaps this is why he capitalized the word "one". The line has nothing to do with Mohammed. The only explanation of this footnote would be that Blunt seems to have misunderstood the comment in question. It is said that Prophet Mohammed used to recite Tarafa's line whenever he felt that news was slow in coming. A. J. Arberry's translation of this line is better than Blunt's:

The days shall disclose to you things you were ignorant of,  
and he whom you never provisioned will bring you back tidings.

Blunt also claims that Zoheyr was brought into the Prophet's presence, and was recognized by him as the greatest of poets.<sup>1</sup> This is a confusion of two separate historical events. It was Zoheyr's son, Kaab ibn Zoheyr, who "was brought into the Prophet's presence" after the conquest of Mecca. The Prophet pardoned him and he composed a well-known poem in praise of the Prophet, after having attacked Islam in several poems, also well-known. On the other hand, it was Omar, the second Caliph, who used to admire the poetry of Zoheyr and to have a very high opinion of him, because Zoheyr was a wise moralist. In fact, his Moallakah contains a perfect code of ethics. (Lines 19-33 contain a good diatribe of the horrors of war and a sincere call for peace, while lines 46-62 contain the distilled

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1. W. S. Blunt, The Seven Golden Odes, p. 17.



wisdom of his long life experience, comments on fate, social behaviour and moral ideals).

The only author of a Moallakah to live in the days of Islam was Lebid; however, Blunt makes another mistake in his introduction to Lebid's Moallakah. This concerns the story of a poem Lebid was purported to have affixed to the Kaaba, in the early days of Mohammed's mission. The poem contained the following line:

Yea, all that is is vain, save one, Lord of all.  
and all sweet things deceive: they fail and flee and fade.

near which Mohammed is said to have affixed the second chapter of the Koran as a reply. This, we are told, made Lebid confess his inferiority and embrace Islam. Blunt seems to be leaning on Sir William Jones here.<sup>1</sup> Jones's version of the story is even more fantastic, for he goes on to claim that Mohammed used Lebid to defend Islam against the satirical attacks of "Amralkeis". Now, "Amralkeis" died in 540, whereas Mohammed was born in 570. The reliable history books available to us assert that Lebid composed no poetry at all after embracing Islam. The above mentioned line occurs in a poem of 50 lines, an elegy composed by Lebid on the death of Al-Nu'man ibn al-Mundhir, last king of Al-Hira. He did not affix it to the Kaaba, nor did Mohammed reply to it. It was Othman ibn Madh'oun, one of the very early Muslims, who replied. When Lebid recited the first hemistich of the line, Othman agreed with him; but when he recited the second half, he told him "Nay, you lie, the sweet things of paradise never fade". The story can be found in detail in Khizanatul Adab (The Cupboard of Literature) by Sheikh Abdel-Qader

1. Ibid., p. 24. Cf: The Poems and Essays of Sir William Jones, op. cit., pp. 248-9. Note that the second chapter of the Koran was revealed later, in Medina. When Omar, the second Caliph, asked Lebid to show him what verse he composed after Islam, Lebid copied this chapter and told Omar that "recitation of the Koran is better than verse".

ibn Omar al-Baghdadi (1030-1093, A.D.). Lebid's Moallakah is the only one with no political connotations. It is a beautiful pastoral written in an elegiac style similar to Thomas Gray's famous "Elegy". This style is impressively reproduced in J. D. Carlyle's verse translation of this Moallakah; Carlyle's stately quatrains show the influence of Gray's measured cadences. Lebid is the best of pre-Islamic poets in the field of nostalgic description of the beloved's abodes and evocative place names. It is extremely interesting to note Blunt's ability to recognize some of the places (line 18) which he himself had visited in 1879. This confirms the comments of Al-Zawzani, whose original Arabic edition Blunt used. Al-Zawzani claims that a traveller, based on the place names mentioned in Lebid's poems, can find his way across Arabia Deserta from Nejd to the Persian Gulf.<sup>1</sup>

Two more historical mistakes made by Blunt, in his comments on the Moallakah of Antar, should be rectified. Before Islam, it was the habit of the Arabs to deny their children from their slave-girls the status of legitimacy, and to enslave these children. Only when such a child performed an outstanding feat of heroism (as was the case with Antar) did his father recognize him as his own. Islam not only forbade this, but also gave the slave mothers their freedom immediately after the death of their masters. Both woman and child were then automatically considered free persons. Once the master had died, nobody was allowed to have intercourse with the freed mother unless he proposed to her and married her as a free woman with her freely given consent. Blunt claims that the

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1 Zawzani's Commentary on the Seven Moallakat (in Arabic) (Beirut, 1963), p. 90.

stigma of illegitimacy continued to stamp such children in Bedouin Arabia despite Islam, whose "humaner law ... has been powerless these to efface".<sup>1</sup> This is simply not true, and it does not apply to the Arabia which Blunt knew in 1879.

Blunt states that the romance of Antar was "written in the second century of Islam". He also contends that the story

bears the traces of its spurious pre-Islamic character in the jinns and other supernatural beings who constantly are made to intervene in the affairs of its hero. Nevertheless it is interesting as a record of the age in which it was produced, and still more as being the most important of the Oriental originals on which some of our own romances of the Middle Ages were founded.<sup>2</sup>

Here he leans on Terrick Hamilton, whose translation of Siret Antar (1819) he quotes a little later. The romance was not written in "the second century of Islam" i.e. the late eighth century A.D. It is rather the product of a much later era, the era of decline and stagnation. What was written in the eighth century was no more than a collection of 27 poems by Antar, edited and annotated by Al-Asma'i (740-828). These included the Moallakah of Antar and were incorporated in the Diwan of the six pre-Islamic poets, which was in turn produced in a recension with commentary by the Andalusian Muslim scholar Al-A'lam al-Shantamari (d. 1083 A.D.). This Diwan was published in 1870 by William Ahlwardt. Two centuries after Al-Asma'i, in the days of Al-Aziz, the Fatimid ruler of Egypt from 975 to 996 A.D., an imaginary story began to be woven around Antara. The process was begun by Yousef ibn Ismail as a means of occupying the minds of the people to turn them away from gossiping about a scandal in the

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1. Blunt's Seven Odes, op. cit., p. 31.

2. Ibid.

palace of Al-Aziz. Two more centuries were to pass before the romance began to swell into yet another huge folklorish saga at the hands of other narrators, most notable of whom was the Syrian poet, grammarian and lexicographer, Ibn el-Saigh (1247-1322).<sup>1</sup> It is to these later developments that "the jinns and other supernatural beings" owe their existence, and not to the classical, scholarly work of Al-Asma'i, who was the tutor of Al-Amin, Son of Haroun el-Rashid. Thus, the Romance of Antar is indeed an "interesting ... record of the age ... in which it was produced", but that "age" is the fourteenth century, not the eighth. The snowballing process continued, with many invented episodes and poems, full of all sorts of verbiage and colloquial vulgarisms similar to the contents of the Hilali saga and the Arabian Nights.

It is very strange indeed that several professional European Orientalists and "experts" should be "taken in" by this inferior story, the product of the age of stagnation in the history of Arabic Literature, and to confuse it with the real character and truly great poetry of the "Black Knight" of the sixth century. The list of these misled masters of learning starts with none other than Sir William Jones. As early as 1774, on seeing only volume 14 of Siret Antar, he declared, with his youthful enthusiasm, that it

comprises all that is elegant and noble in composition. So lofty, so various and so bold is its style, that I do not hesitate to rank it among the most finished poems.<sup>2</sup>

Then came the Austrian Joseph von Hammer - Purgstall, who, in 1802 considered it

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1. M. A. Hamdallah, op. cit., pp. 262-3.
  2. Sir William Jones, Poeseos Asiaticae Commentariorum (1774). Quoted by A. J. Arberry, op. cit., p. 153.

... very instrumental towards learning the manners, dispositions, and habits of the Arabs ... more interesting than the celebrated "Thousand and One Nights" ... a picture of true history ... a romance of chivalry ...; every part appertaining to history should be carefully collected.<sup>1</sup>

The famous Swiss traveller in Arabia, J. L. Burckhardt, wrote a glowing letter of encouragement to the Scotsman Terrick Hamilton, asking him to persist in his attempt to give an abridged translation, anticipating "the most complete success, and even a popularity equal to that so long enjoyed by the Arabian Nights to which (Sirat Antar) is in every respect superior".<sup>2</sup> Antar's fame spread to France, where the romantic Lamartine appended "Fragments du Poeme d'Antar" to his four-volume Voyage en Orient (1849), and to Scandinavia where, Professor A. J. Arberry tells us, the Norwegian C. A. Holmboe "compared" the Bedouin hero "with Bayard" in 1881.<sup>3</sup> In the East, this fantastic tale crossed into Russian Georgia, via Persia and Azrabaijan, to become one of the formative influences in Shota Rustaveli's thirteenth-century romance, The Lord of the Panther Skin.<sup>4</sup>

Back in nineteenth-century England, the spurious story was the subject of an unsigned 35-page article in The Journal of Sacred Literature (Jan. 1850), in which the writer tried to find parallels for "the military actions recorded in Scripture".<sup>5</sup> This article betrays the astonishing ignorance of the writer, who insists that Al-Asma'i, the great philologist, was "a poet" and attributes the

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1. J. von Hammer Purgstall, Fundgruben des Orientes (Vienna, 1802). Quoted by A. J. Arberry, op. cit., p. 154.
  2. A. J. Arberry, op. cit., pp. 155-6.
  3. Ibid., p. 165.
  4. Shota Rustaveli, The Lord of the Panther Skin, A Georgian Romance of Chivalry, translated by R. H. Stevenson (State Univ. of New York Press, 1977), pp. xviii, 6, 28, 54, 97, 130 and ns.
  5. "Antar: Illustrations of Scripture from the Ancient Bedouin Romance of that name", The Journal of Sacred Literature, No. IX, vol. V (Jan. 1850), pp. 1-35, (pp. 12, 14).

romance to him, claiming that he wrote it to please his patron, Al-Mamoun, son of Haroun al-Rashid, and to glorify the feats of a black knight, since Al-Mamoun was black, the son of "a female negro slave".<sup>1</sup> Al-Asma'i's patron was Haroun al-Rashid himself. He was banished from the court of Al-Mamoun, since he had been the favourite tutor of Al-Mamoun's brother and rival, Al-Amin; and so he returned to his home town, Basrah. However, Al-Mamoun was not black. His mother was not a negro slave, but an Aryan, white slave from Persia. Her name was Marāgil.

The chivalry of Antar may have served as a model for Europe's Mediaeval romances, as Blunt remarks. Here he seems to be echoing W. A. Clouston's bold claim:

It is far from improbable that the famous Arabian Romance of Antar furnished the model for the earliest of the regular romances of chivalry which were current in Europe during the Middle Ages; indeed a comparison of incidents with others found in the so-called Gothic Romances will ... lead to this conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, after this long tradition of European misconception and overestimation of an irrational tale, which some of the best "experts" have swallowed, Blunt cannot be blamed for making some comparatively minor mistakes. He at least showed some reservation in stressing the difficulty of disentangling the legendary from the historical aspects of this character, which he likened to Charlemagne and King Arthur. However, Blunt must have identified himself with Antar as he was translating his description of his horse in the thick of the battle (lines 65-69 of the Moakallah). This description, in which Antar exalts his thoroughbred Arabian to an almost human status, is

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1. Ibid., p. 3.

2. A. J. Arberry, op. cit., p. 165.

one of the noblest ever recorded in Arabic poetry:

There where the horsemen rode strongest I rode out in front of them,  
hurled forth my war-shout and charged them;-no man thought blame of me

Antar! they cried; and their lances, well-cords in slenderness,  
pressed to the breast of my war-horse still as I pressed on them.  
Doggedly strove we and rode we. Ha, the brave stallion!  
now is his breast dyed with blood-drops, his star-front with  
/fear of them!

Swerved he, pierced by the spear-points. Then in his beautiful  
eyes stood the tears of appealing, words inarticulate.  
If he had learned our man's language, then had he called to me:  
if he had known our tongue's secret, then had he cried to me.  
(p. 36)

Since every line of Arabic verse is a self-contained unit and represents an example of terse conciseness, it may be argued that Blunt's translation should have been better if he had used the heroic couplet, which is disciplined and taut. The reply to this argument is that the heroic couplet could have answered only the requirements of the beauty of form at the expense of the spirit, which is more important. As it stands, Blunt's rendering is so full of elevation and vigour that it is very close to the grandeur and vitality of the language of the original. Compared to his, Jones's version is but a pale echo which is bland, latinized and too urbane. Still adhering to the poetic diction of the Augustan Age, Jones toned down much of the virility and frank sensuality of the poems, so that his translation became both heavy and emasculated. For example, the Arab poets liked their women to be fat and corpulent, and never refrained from celebrating the beauty of their breasts, hips and posterior. Jones, disagreeing with this taste, translates lines 16 and 17 of Amru's Moallakah in a euphemistic way. "She discovers her slender shape tall and well proportioned ...". Blunt is bolder:

Waist how supple, how slim! Thou shalt span it sweetly;  
fair flanks sloped to thine eyes and downward bending.  
Broad her hips for desire, than thy tent door wider;  
(p. 39)

In his article "Harmonious Jones" R. M. Hewitt concedes: "No one who has met with Wilfred (sic) Scawen Blunt's Golden Odes will want to read a prose translation of the Moallakat" ...<sup>1</sup> The beauty of a woman's eyes, mouth and neck made Tarafa liken her to a fawn grazing in the valley. Jones's translation gives the impression of a real animal. Line 6 of Tarafa's Moallakah is rendered:

In that tribe was a lovely antelope with black eyes, dark ruddy lips, and a beautiful neck gracefully raised to crop the fresh berries of ERAC.

The word "Erac", which is not in the text, is taken from the footnote of the commentator, el-Zawzani. It is the name of a desert shrub or thorn bush. Thomas Moore mistook it for "Iraq" and spoke of "Erac's rocky dells", quoting Jones in a footnote in Lalla Rookh.<sup>2</sup> Blunt's rendering of the same line is not misleading at all:

Alas for the dark lipped one, the maid of the topazes  
hardly yet grown a woman, sweet fruit-picking loiterer!  
A girl, a fawn still fawnless, which browses the thorn-bushes.  
(p. 11)

Tarafa's epicurean philosophy of capturing life's pleasures before death overtakes man is a recurrent theme. These pleasures are mainly wine, women and war against the enemy:

Could all you my fate hinder? Friends, run we ahead of it,  
rather our lives enjoying, since time will not wait for us.  
And, truly, but for three things in youth's day of vanity,  
fain would I see them round me the friends at my death-bedding.  
(p. 13)

R. A. Nicholson's rhymed renderings of these and the following lines

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1. R. M. Hewitt, "Harmonious Jones", Essays and Studies, vol. 28 (1943), pp. 42-59, p. 43.
  2. The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore, collected by himself in 10 vols. (1840-1), vol. 7, p. 45.



in the Moallakah show his indebtedness to the "beautiful version" of Blunt. He is also indebted to Blunt's translation of the first eight lines of Amru's Moallakah, expressing the same attitude.<sup>1</sup> These lines are in fact comparable to the best of Omar el-Khayyam.

Rise, pour forth, be it mixed, let it foam like saffron!  
tempered thus will we drink it, ay, free handed.  
Him who grieves shall it cure, his despites forgotten;  
nay, taste it in tears, it shall console thee.

\* \* \*

O the cups that I quaffed in Baalabekki!  
O the bowls of Damascus, Kaisarina!  
Sad fate stands at the door, and uninvited  
takes us marked as his own at the hour predestined.  
(Blunt, p. 39)

A. J. Arberry's translation of these lines, although closer to the letter of the text, somehow loses the dramatic vigour and the sense of urgency:

The brightly sparkling [cups], as if saffron were in them  
whenever the mulled water is mingled with them,  
that swing the hotly desirous from his passion  
when he has tasted them to gentle mellowness;<sup>2</sup>

Spending money on wine was not considered shameful or extravagant. On the contrary, it was a sign of generosity and mature manhood - a source of pride equal to courage in battle. Here is Lebid (ll. 57-61):

Came I thus discoursing to his sign, the wine-seller's  
drank at the flag-hoisting, drank till the wine grew dear,  
Bidding up each full skin, - black with age the brand of it,  
pouring forth the tarred jars, breaking the seals of them;  
Pure deep draughts of morning, while she played, the sweet singer  
fingering the lute-strings, showing her skill to me.  
Ere the cock had crowed once, a first cup was quaffed by me:  
(pp. 28-29)

Much beauty is lost in William Wright's prose translation of these same lines:

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1. R. A. Nicholson, op. cit., pp. 108-9, 111.
  2. A. J. Arberry, op. cit., p. 204.

"... and how many a merchant's flag I have resorted to when it was reared and its wine was dear ... buying it dear in every black old skin or pitched jar ... I hastened to be before the cockcrow in getting what I wanted of it in the early morning ... (etc).<sup>1</sup>

Drinking was never associated with ribaldry or unseemly behaviour, but with honour and dignity. Antar is proud to be

Quaffing in goblets of saffron, pale-streaked with ivory,  
Truly thus bibbing I squandered half my inheritance;  
Yet was my honour a wide word. No man had wounded it.  
Since that when sober my dew-fall rained no less generous:  
thou too, [my beloved] who knowest my nature, thou too be bountiful!  
(pp. 34-35)

But the personal qualities of courage, generosity, chivalry and the like pale into insignificance when compared to the recurrent theme of exalting the glories of the tribe, stressing its power against the intrigues of its political opponents. This is most conspicuous in the two most politicised Moallakat of Amru ibn Kolthum (of the tribe of Taghlib) and el-Harith ibn Hillizeh (of the tribe of Bakr). It was between these two sister tribes that the fratricidal war of el-Bassûs was kindled, claiming a very high toll on both sides. It became the subject of yet another folklorish romance, the story of el-Zir and his adventures. Amru ibn Hind, King of Hira, had a finger in the intrigues which prolonged such destructive wars. This king was killed by Ibn Kolthum for a trivial insult which the latter thought was deliberately contrived to humiliate his mother. Here is a sample of the wild claims of the arrogant Ibn Kolthum (ll. 93-95, 96, 97, 102 and 103):

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1. Ursula Schedler, "A Prose Translation of the Mo'allaqah of Labid by William Wright", Journal of Semitic Studies, vol. 6 (1961) pp. 97-104 (p. 103).

Heads we toss of the proud, as you see a ball tossed,

\* \* \*

Feasters are we of men with the men that love us,  
slayers are we of men, the men that hate us;  
Rightful lords of the plain, to forgive and welcome;  
where we will we have pitched. Who has dared gainsay us?  
Still with ire we deny in the face of anger;  
Still with smiles we accede to the smiles of pleading.

\* \* \*

Lo, the land we o'errun, till the plains grow narrow,  
lo, the seas will we sack with our war-galleys.  
Not a weanling of ours but shall win to manhood;  
find the world at his knees, its great ones kneeling.

(p. 43)

Nor was this outburst empty rhetoric. Arab historians assert that but for the advent of Islam, Taghlib would have "swallowed Arabia". Their descendants continued to recite this poem till the days of the Abbasid Caliphate, when they were satirized by a poet from the rival tribe of Bakr:

That poem of Amru Ibn. Kolthum made Taghlib so complacent that they never thought of doing any good deed since; Content are they just to recite this poem, what a pity! They are never tired of boring repetition!

The tone of el-Harith, whose Moallakah was a reply to Amru's, is much quieter, as he likens the aloofness of his tribe vis-a-vis this hostile sabre-rattling to the secure dignity of a sturdy mountain:

High above them we live. Hate may not harm us,  
fenced in towers of renown, our unstained bright honour.  
Long hath anger assailed us, rage, denial;  
long hath evil prevailed in the eyes of evil.  
Nathless, let them assault. As well may Fortune  
hurl its spears at the rocks, at the cloud-robed mountains.  
Frowneth wide of it Fear. Fate shall not shake it.  
Time's worst hand of distress shall disturb it never.

(ll. 23-26, p. 46)

This rendering can stand proudly side by side with those of Sir Charles James Lyall, R. A. Nicholson and A. J. Arberry.

Amidst such passionate threats and war-cries in pre-Islamic



That whatso a man hath by nature, wit-wealth or vanity,  
hidden deep, the day shall prove it: all shall be manifest.  
For how many sat wise while silent, yet was their foolishness  
proved when their too much, too little, slid through their  
    mouth-slitting.

The tongue is the strong man's half, the other half is the  
    Heart of him:  
all the rest is a brute semblence, rank corporality.  
    (ll. 50, 51, 53, 54, 58-60, pp. 22-3)

This rendering compares favourably with that of Sir Charles James  
Lyll, which appeared nearly 20 years before Blunt's.

Although Blunt did not succeed in making these poems as popular  
as Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat, it is clear that a great deal of hard work  
went into these verse compositions. The mistakes, which we have dwelt  
on in detail in the previous pages, should not be allowed to detract  
from the true merit of this original effort. After the first edition  
of 1903, the Moallakat were never reprinted in English or any other  
European language. It says a great deal in Blunt's favour that the  
last translator of these poems, Professor A. J. Arberry, recurrently  
praises Blunt, comparing many samples of his translation to those of  
great, professional Orientalists from various European countries  
such as Lyall, William Wright, R. A. Nicholson, Sir William Jones,  
Levinus Warner, Anton Theodore Hartnam, Fr. Ruckert, Professor  
Francesco Gabrieli, Philip Wolff, Professor A. P. Caussin de Perceval,  
Joseph Dacre Carlyle, Sylvester de Sacy, Terrick Hamilton, Hammer-  
Purgstall, V. E. Menil, E. H. Palmer, and J. G. L. Kosegarten. Blunt's  
translation does not suffer by these comparisons. It was a success,  
although it did not achieve the popularity it deserves in Edwardian  
England, through no fault of Blunt's. It was certainly better than  
Sir William Jones's translations, although the latter received better  
attention in the late eighteenth century and influenced both the  
Romantics and the generation which followed. They, and in fact poetry  
in general, had a much greater response from the reading public of  
those Georgian and early Victorian days.

## CHAPTER V : BLUNT'S DIARIES

Blunt was a meticulously punctual diarist. The regularity with which he used to write down detailed accounts of the events of his day-to-day life is remarkable. This habit continued for over fifty years, and helped him, between 1907 and 1912, to issue his Secret History series, which consisted of five books dealing respectively with the problems of Egypt, India, the Soudan and Ireland in the 1880s. In all these books, described as 'Personal Narrative(s) of Events', he draws heavily on his daily memoirs; these entries can be fairly described as the backbones of Blunt's "Histories".

My Diaries (1919-20) was the first book that enjoyed a great deal of popularity during the writer's life time, although it was his last published book. It was extensively reviewed in both Britain and America. No other English memoirs make better reading. As a record of their time, these memoirs remain an important quarry of information which no student of late Victorian and Edwardian England can afford to ignore. They can safely be described as a barometer gauging the rapid social and political changes at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, not only in England, but also in Europe and the East.

This chapter will deal with the various aspects of Blunt's life as represented by his recorded social, political and literary activities. Blunt's motives will be analysed in order to do him justice on the one hand, and to understand him as a man and as a passionate advocate of certain causes and principles, on the other hand. Samples of his political and literary judgements will be examined, to show that he was alive to the major issues of his time. The book is not only a personal chronology of events in the historical sense; it is also full of candid

revelations which are both intimate and extremely interesting as a mirror of Blunt's age. It illuminates several aspects of the author's character, the various issues which appealed to his mind, drove him to act, or made him voice his opinions or take certain attitudes. These are reflected against the background of his times, which were both colourful and turbulent. The Diaries, which consist of nearly 900 pages and cover the period between 1888 and 1914, are in this respect a fascinating kaleidoscope, giving glimpses of Blunt as an angry rebel and a calm, patriarchal squire; a simple Bedouin Sheikh and a sophisticated political observer; a thundering Hebrew prophet and a gossiping, amorous man of the world; a romantic dreamer and a down-to-earth realist; a professed, stubborn unbeliever and a sympathetic writer on religion; a social lion and a world-weary recluse; a kind, genial host and a pessimistic misanthrope; a country gentleman who enjoys sport and an animal lover who hates man's cruelty. In all these capacities, Blunt's extreme passion was uncompromising. Some emphasis will be given to Blunt's character sketches and his opinions of the important personalities of the society in which he moved and acted; these pen portraits are important. They show Blunt as a man of Byronic calibre whose attack on the vanity and hypocrisy of his contemporaries in prose compares favourably with Byron's best satirical poetry in Don Juan. The weaknesses of Romilly, Castlereagh and Wellington have their parallels in Blunt's portrayal of Gladstone's fluctuations, Cromer's megalomania, Kitchener's thirst for blood in Africa, and Balfour's "Darwinian" justification of imperialism. Finally, this chapter will follow, as closely as possible, the large body of critical opinion in both countries where My Diaries appeared, in an attempt to give an objective assessment of this book, whose importance is attested by a

rich variety of attitudes.

The entries in My Diaries are narratives vigorously followed up with hot immediacy, complete (sometimes even scandalous) frankness, and a direct, personal and fresh style, with no decoration or careful choice of words. Although these entries are often full of diversions, discursions and irrelevant points, the reader can hardly help being absorbed by the sharp, masculine and pugnacious tone in which these narratives are presented to him, thus leaving an acute impact on his mind. A barrage of famous names can be seen to drop casually from Blunt's pen, while he is talking about the most intimate association with them. His use of first names can leave the reader baffled. We shall examine some samples later on. However, Blunt's own opinion of his Diaries before they were published seems to have been pessimistic. This is perhaps due to the bitter taste that was left in his mouth after the recurrent defeat of all the causes which he had championed, in addition to the hostility with which most of his other works, especially the political ones, were treated by both the literary critics of his day and the reading public at large. Perhaps he expected the Diaries to be greeted with the same antagonism to which he had become accustomed. In a moment of distress towards the end of the book, Blunt laments what he calls "my failure everywhere in life", and thinks that the memoirs are "slackly written" and thus "unworthy of survival".<sup>1</sup> Although they "filled [him] with despair", he did not destroy them because they were "full of things too important for me to destroy".

It was Sydney Cockerell who helped Blunt arrange his papers.

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1. My Diaries, p. 823.



He remained in his service as private secretary, then as a trusted confidant from April 1898 till Blunt died in September 1922. Blunt praised him from the very beginning, describing how Cockerell helped in saving his life during his serious illness that was nearly fatal. Again:

Cockerell is a treasure, arranging by books and getting me others ... [He] has been of the greatest use to me, arranging my papers and giving me new interests in life.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's grandson, the 4th Earl of Lytton, acknowledged Cockerell's services "with keen appreciation" as "helper and friend in every sort of need during the last twenty five years of Blunt's life". In his Memoir: Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, the Earl of Lytton testified that without Cockerell's "methodical industry the celebrated Diaries might never have been assembled in a form suitable for publication".<sup>2</sup>

My Diaries shows a man at war with many things that his age stood for. He appears as a lone figure who swims against the tide. His political writings reflect a consistent moral attitude prevailing throughout his life, regardless of the consequences. In order to see him in true perspective, it is necessary to understand the mainsprings of this attitude, Blunt's philosophy in life, and what factors influenced his mentality and gave him the concepts and values upheld and expounded in the Diaries. The best starting point is Blunt's concept of patriotism, because it is the pivotal question around which many issues converge, such as the attitude to history, politics, progress, civilization, industrialism, imperialism, justice, war and the sense of mission'.

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1. Ibid., pp. 293, 294.

2. The Earl of Lytton, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: A Memoir (1961), p. VI; cf: Wilfrid Blunt, Cockerell (1964), pp. 190-91.

In the last third of the nineteenth century, a number of writers began to promote the idea of the extension of British rule to new lands "untouched by civilization". Thus Sir Charles W. Dilke wrote that, in the "struggle of the dear races against the cheap", "Saxonism will rise triumphant" because its power earmarked it for "mastery". He considered it a duty that Britain should inculcate her principles of government among the dark-skinned nations, considering this necessary for the freedom of mankind.<sup>1</sup> James Anthony Froude declared that the British race "By its intellect, by its character, by its laws and literature, by its sword and cannon" is a major factor in "the development of the whole human race",<sup>2</sup> Kipling thought that Providence itself beckoned Britain to play the role of taking up the white man's burden. At first, this was also Blunt's view. During his early contacts with the East he genuinely conceived of a Providential Mission awaiting Britain in the Orient.<sup>3</sup> He called on Britain to "take Islam by the hand" towards a better future; but when he saw that Britain was "taking Islam" by the throat in 1882, the shock was so deep that it changed his whole outlook. He became a tenacious "Little Englander", with an obsessive hatred of the acts of "civilized humanity" against "uncivilized man".<sup>4</sup> Blunt was originally "a believer in tradition and the value of all that is ancient in our national institutions and creeds and moralities",<sup>5</sup> and even when reverence for these things was rapidly declining, he continued to be "attached in England to old-fashioned ways".<sup>6</sup> This anticipates G.K. Chesterton's understanding of patriotism

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1. C.W. Dilke, Greater Britain (1885), pp. 564, 565.
  2. J.A. Froude, Oceana (1886), p. 338.
  3. Secret History, pp. 9, 12. The Future of Islam, pp. 3, 195.
  4. My Diaries, p. 25.
  5. Gordon, p. x.
  6. W.S. Blunt, "Lord Randolph Churchill", NC, 59 (March, 1906), pp. 401-415 (p. 407).

as "a defined and declared preference for certain traditions and surroundings".<sup>1</sup> But an important quality distinguishing Blunt's patriotism from that of many of his contemporaries was his refusal to make it "figure as a cloak for baser passions or degenerate into the strident yelling jingoism".<sup>2</sup>

This subject seems to have been an important theme whose various aspects were dealt with by many writers, such as Herbert Spencer, Henry Sidgwick, J.M. Robertson, J.A. Hobson and, later, Lytton Strachey. Blunt never lacked the necessary "moral courage which strengthened a man to oppose in speech the folly of his fellow men whom he saw doing dishonour to that land".<sup>3</sup> He continued to stand firm by this principle, even when his attitude meant the loss of popularity among his countrymen; it was enough for him to be convinced that he was standing on sound moral ground similar to that described by Sidgwick.<sup>4</sup> To him, patriotism consisted of "love of country" not "love of more country".<sup>5</sup> He deeply abhorred the chauvinistic excesses of patriotic enthusiasm "whereby the love of one's own nation is transformed into the hatred of another nation",<sup>6</sup> and totally rejected the vulgarity of coarse patriotism "fed by the wildest rumours and the most violent appeals to hate and the animal lust of blood".<sup>7</sup> The Diaries are full of recurrent attacks on this unwholesome aspect which was becoming a universal phenomenon in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Here is an example:

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1. G.K. Chesterton, "The Patriotic Idea", in England: a Nation, Being the Papers of the Patriots' Club, ed. by L. Oldershaw (1904), p. 15.
  2. B. Dobree, The Broken Cistern (1954), p. 104.
  3. Gordon, p. IX. Cf: My Diaries, pp. 836, 845-6.
  4. Henry Sidgwick, Practical Ethics (1898), p. 93.
  5. J.M. Robertson, Patriotism and Empire (1899), p. 138.
  6. J.A. Hobson, The Psychology of Jingoism (1901), p. 1.
  7. Ibid., pp. 8, 9.

[According to Gerald Balfour] patriotism was the imperial instinct in Englishmen, who should support their country's quarrels even when in the wrong. This of course is not my view. Gerald has all his brother's scientific inhumanity in politics, and it is a school of thought distinctly on the increase, for it flatters the instincts of the strong by proving to them that their selfishness is right.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's experience enabled him to understand those "instincts" only too well and to detect and oppose their stirrings with sharp insight. In his quest for a type of "duly-adjusted patriotism" - to use Herbert Spencer's terms -, Blunt gave an interesting definition:

Patriotism is the virtue of weak nations and the vice of the strong.<sup>2</sup>

Although this attitude caused him a great deal of trouble and personal suffering, he never ceased to love his country "with an intimacy that no estrangement could permanently impair".<sup>3</sup>

The conditions of the world and the events of the last quarter of the 19th century gave him ample opportunity to comment. New Empires were being built, industrialization led to quick urbanization. The new Empires, together with the older ones, scrambled for the virgin lands of Africa to gain new markets, fields of investment and outlets for increasing populations. Colonial adventures and rivalries led to the growth of militarism, business enterprise and cosmopolitan finance. This in turn resulted in urban squalor and the ruthless destruction of the old traditional ways of life both at home and abroad. Blunt deplored this wave of avarice, which

... has usurped control over our life and honour ..., controls our press, manipulates our Parliament, and uses our ancient and honourable English name for its base un-English purposes.<sup>4</sup>

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1. My Diaries, p. 69.

2. Ibid., p. 305.

3. John Drinkwater, Patriotism in Literature (1924), p. 188.

4. Gordon, p. ix.

Throughout his Diaries, Blunt monitored the various machinations, intrigues and suspicious dealings of these financial and military circles in the fields of colonization, the later stages of the growth of the British Empire, the Jameson Raid, Um Durman, Fashoda, the Boer War, the division of Persia, the successive stages of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire by the fall of Tunisia, Libya and Morocco; then, the abyss towards which these events were inevitably leading - the First World War.<sup>1</sup> Blunt saw no acceptable justification for this aggressive European expansion at the expense of non-European nations and countries. He rejected the pretexts of philanthropy, civilization and similar dubious slogans coined to cloak these rude interventions with a semblance of moral righteousness.<sup>2</sup> He saw these operations as motivated by petty national jealousies in a race to acquire more colonies - a race in which even small European states participated in imitation of the big powers. This is the main subject which Blunt develops with bitter realism. He refers to the motive behind this movement as "the disease of our world hunger" and "the all-acquiring greed".<sup>3</sup> This foreshadows Bertrand Russell's account of the European adventures in South Africa being propelled by "the lure of gold and precious stones".<sup>4</sup> Blunt also refers to the need of the capitalists to monopolize new markets; but, in addition to the incentive of material profit, he exposes the various intrigues and diplomatic manoeuvres, together with the race jealousies and chauvinistic feelings which led to a series of compromises

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1. My Diaries, pp. 760, 762, 777.

2. Ibid., pp. 574, 598, 760, 762, 698, 348.

3. W.S. Blunt, The Shame of the Nineteenth Century, Privately Printed (Cairo, 1900), p. 2; cf: W.S. Blunt, Satan Absolved (1899), p. V.

4. B. Russell, Freedom and Organisation 1814-1914 (1934), p. 464.

and secret agreements at the expense of the peoples who were unable to stop the upsurging wave of a superior Europe.<sup>1</sup> He attacks the collusion between Britain and France to enable the latter to occupy Tunis, as a counter-balance for the secretly-concluded agreement which gave the former control over Cyprus.<sup>2</sup> He scoffs at the "Imperial interests" invoked to justify the aggression against the "happy and prosperous, and peaceable" states of Nigeria,<sup>3</sup> and the selfish motives which led Britain and Russia to divide Persia between them. Blunt called this agreement a "Persian robbery"; it made him coin a new word, as he accused both powers of "Cromerizing" Persia.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this deal was typical in a series of agreements that preceded and followed in both Asia and Africa - a division of spoils and spheres of influence to maintain some sort of balance among European Powers at the expense of small countries. He saw the French occupation of Morocco as a direct result of the English occupation of Egypt; so was the Italian invasion of Libya.<sup>5</sup> Where the Radicals criticized imperial rule on economic grounds, Blunt attacked it on moral and humanitarian grounds, dwelling on the drawbacks of foreign rule and the subjection of the natives to harmful influences alien to their culture and history. In this respect, Blunt was a true heir to the Byronic tradition of freedom, a man of action at a time when Nationalism became the "religion of the nineteenth century."<sup>6</sup> However, such Romantic feelings were on the decline towards the end of the last century, in the

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1. My Diaries, pp. 214, 461, 787. Gordon, pp. 97, 497, 498, 501, 502.
  2. W.S. Blunt, "Turkish Misgovernment", NC, vol. 40, pp. 838-45 (p.839).
  3. My Diaries, p. 461; cf: p. 214.
  4. Ibid., pp. 787, 791.
  5. Ibid., pp. 499, 509, 574, 777, 788, 831-2.
  6. Crane Brinton, The Political Ideas of the English Romantics (Oxford, 1926), p. 154.

sense that poets were no longer interested in practical, real politics, although they remained interested in the ideal of liberty, as we can see in Swinburne's early poems. They no longer considered it their duty to achieve their dreams in the field of political struggle, let alone the wish for martyrdom in the battlefield for the causes of others. In this, Blunt was living the Byronic role out of tune with the prevalent spirit of his time, although his ideals were valid and had a future value. He could not separate poetry and literature from practical political activity. Contrary to his contemporary men of letters, he cared about the sufferings of down-trodden nations, especially when these sufferings were inflicted by England. His was a sensitive soul, and he was very depressed with his failure to convince his countrymen with his opinions. Reviewing his life's work on behalf of the oppressed, he lamented at the end of 1913:

I realize how little I have accomplished, how little I have affected the thought of my generation in spite ... of the soundness of my view of things, and of some skill and courage in expounding it. I have made almost no converts in Europe, and I am without a single disciple at home to continue my teaching after I am dead ... [This] wounds me with a sense of failure and I despise myself the more for feeling it so strongly as I do. Why should I mind? I ask myself, and I find no answer.<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's "soundness of view" in diagnosing the ailments of his society, his criticism of secret diplomacy, and his scorn of officialdom and "Blue-Book" reports, were not appreciated by the Victorians, who considered him a fanatic in search of notoriety. Unlike his contemporaries, he was always ready to sacrifice social conventions for what he considered a nobler cause, i.e. the freedom of the oppressed peoples. He could never put up with the insincerities and double-standards of the elite, exclusive circles of Britain's top politicians, whose political ideals

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1. My Diaries, p. 836.

were the product of "public school" careers. Blunt was not brought up at Eton or Harrow. His political adversaries were, more often than not, old friends of his family, such as Dufferin, Balfour, Clanricarde, Malet, Colvin and Cromer; but he had a basic honesty which he was disappointed to find lacking in their private and public behaviour. He relished the exposition of their hypocrisies and giving details of their secret dealings, which were usually concluded in the cosy atmospheres of their social salons and country houses. This tradition, which lasted from the eighteenth century till after the first world war, was abhorrent to him; and he was well placed to know much about these dealings. He was actually living in the midst of the people who fascinated Henry James and about whom Anthony Trollope wrote so voluminously. He knew the top aristocracies in both the East and the West and felt easily "at home" in both societies. He was a keen observer of the human drama that was unfolding itself before his eyes; and he could not be easily deceived by appearances. He moved among princes, cabinet ministers, rich landlords, ambassadors, poets, notable Parliamentary leaders, religious reformers, famous thinkers, tribal chiefs, revolutionary rebels, reactionary émigrés, noble peers ... etc.<sup>1</sup> The great houses in England, Italy, France, Egypt and even Poland were open to him. He knew all the key figures in both the Liberal and Tory Parties, and was on intimate terms with most of them. In the East, he knew two Egyptian Khedives, Tewfik and his son Abbas II, and all the Nationalist leaders, in addition to the two great religious thinkers, Mohammed Abdu and Jamaluddin el-Afghani, and several prime ministers. He was on excellent terms with

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1. Ibid., pp. 66, 68, 145-6, 314, 316-18, 365, 375, 667-8, 690, 782, 821, 834.



the Bedouin Sheikhs from the Nile to the Euphrates. His neighbours in Damascus were the chief of the Syrian 'Ulema" (religious imams) and Sheikh Mijwel el-Mizrab, chief of Tudmur (Palmyra) and his famous English wife, Jane Digby (Lady Ellenborough). In Arabia, he knew the leaders of both rival families, Al-Rashid and Al-Saud. (In 1919, Blunt was visited by Feisal, future King of Saudi Arabia.) In India he knew all the leaders of the Muslim community and many of the Hindus. In addition to his ability to move behind the scenes as an insider in the "higher circles" of both worlds, he was one of the few people who could understand the undercurrent movement of history and to give, at times, such accurate interpretation of the various social moods, political motives and temperaments as to earn him the vision of a prophet, albeit a pessimistic one.

In this capacity, as an ardent anti-imperialist, he declared himself to be "one of the historians less bound to secrecy".<sup>1</sup> No "Official Secrets Act" could muzzle him. He argued that "...suppressing private conversations and refraining from assigning private motives for public action cannot be satisfactory" in writing history.<sup>2</sup> Thus he proceeded to give his readers some "secret linings" which "officials are inclined to omit and historians do not always know".<sup>3</sup> Shane Leslie, who wished he had been Blunt's son, legitimate or otherwise, observed:

Blunt had an eye for historic personages and speedy ink to bottle their words. He watched for great moments.

He knew their little fears, their little ambitions and larger suspicions and hates.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Secret History, p. 300.

2. My Diaries, p. 799.

3. Shane Leslie, Men Were Different (1937), p. 236; cf: Gordon, p. VI.

4. Men Were Different, pp. 234, 237.

Leslie thus concluded that history "has seldom been told with such individuality or indiscretion as in Blunt's Diaries" ...; and, although he did not approve of Blunt's way of "breaking conventions", he did not dispute his accounts, but rather confirmed their accuracy against the "falsehoods of Blue Books".<sup>1</sup> So did Sir Charles Rivers Wilson, who had initiated the ominous "Joint Note" of January 1882 secretly with the then Prime Minister of France, Gambetta.<sup>2</sup> Nothing shows the contradiction between Blunt's attitude and that of most of his prominent contemporaries better than his amusing report of Alfred Austin's dream or conception of heaven as a garden where the Poet Laureate would sit "to receive constant telegrams announcing alternately a British victory by sea, and a British victory by land".<sup>3</sup> This is how Blunt viewed such "victories" and the "gun-boat" diplomacy:

5 Nov., [1885]: Guy Fawkes' Day, the guy this year being King Thebaw, a sad-looking black monarch with a turban. This Burmese War is of a piece with all these wars: hungry commercial speculators making contracts with a dishonest prince, European intrigues, British remonstrances, official interference, tales to the prince's discredit, his subjects praying for British intervention, threats from Calcutta, appeal of the prince to his people, who strangely take his side in the quarrel, ultimatum issued, arrival of fleet, massacre of Europeans, bombardment, slaughter of natives, triumph of British arms, annexation of territory, pay, prize money, pensions, peerages all round, and so da capo.<sup>4</sup>

This view is an excellent illustration of Lytton Strachey's remark that "nothing sweetens love - even love of one's country - so much as a little common sense - and ... even a little cynicism".<sup>5</sup> Blunt believed that the rights of small nations in the East had priority over any other interests,

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1. Ibid., p. 240.

2. My Diaries, p. 793.

3. Ibid., p. 280.

4. Gordon, p. 502.

5. Lytton Strachey, Characters and Commentaries (1933), pp. 246-7.

or any considerations or causes the white Europeans claimed they were serving in their lands.<sup>1</sup> He had special sympathy with the coloured and black people,<sup>2</sup> whether they were Indians, Bedouins, or tropic Africans. He believed that the best service Europe could offer the latter was to leave them "severely alone", since they were "saved" from the raids of slave-hunters only to fall victim to a more crushing, systematic type of total slavery at the hands of these European "liberators":<sup>3</sup>

The work done in South Africa is sickening, and seems likley to lead to the destruction of the whole black race south of the tropics ... The 'rebels' are being blown up by dynamite in the caves of the Matoppo hills, and their chiefs shot in cold blood, and while all this is going on we are having meetings the whole of England over to denounce the Sultan because he is destroying the Armenians. Was their ever a nation like ours? Never, since the world began.<sup>4</sup>

Blunt's attitude in denouncing these and many similar atrocities becomes even more conspicuous when it is set side by side with the ideas of one of the most prominent travellers and explorers in Africa. Richard F. Burton wrote as early as 1863:

When children require the stick, we apply it; when adults misbehave themselves, we put them in irons; and if Africa, Western or Eastern, requires the twenty-four pounder and the gun-boat we ought not to withhold them from her.<sup>5</sup>

These ideas were taken up and acted upon by Europe during the scramble for Africa in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Social Darwinism was used to justify the division of spoils after a series of invasions which overwhelmed the black continent like a tidal wave.

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1. My Diaries, pp. 646, 650, 707.
  2. Ibid., pp. 68, 316-18, 690, 750.
  3. Gordon, pp. 97-98; India Under Ripon, p. 17; The Land War in Ireland, pp. 217, 299. See also Blunt's pamphlets, The Italian Horror and How to End it (1911), p. 3; and The Shame of the Nineteenth Century (Cairo, 1900), p. 2.
  4. My Diaries, p. 244; cf: Satan Absolved, pp. 39, 42.
  5. R.F. Burton, Abeokuta and the Cameroon Mountains, 2 vols., (1863), I, p. 282.

Burton, who called Darwin "our Aristotle", looked on with satisfaction as he wrote to philosophize brutal force as a "good" factor of "civilization" and "progress":

The sword and only the sword raised the worthier race to power upon the ruins of impotent savagery; and she carried in her train, from time immemorial, throughout the civilized world ... the arts and sciences which humanize mankind. In fact, whatever evil the sword may have done, she worked for the highest ultimate good.

Wielded by the Romans, it enthroned the Reign of Law and laid the foundation for the Brotherhood of Mankind. Thus, though it soaked the earth with the blood of her sons, the sword has been true to its mission ... the progress of society.<sup>1</sup>

Burton, together with Rhodes and Stanley and their ilk, were idolized as great heroes, brave adventurers and brilliant explorers; while Blunt, who was also a member of the Royal Geographical Society, looked down on them as nothing but "arch jingoes" digging for gold with the zeal of religious rituals - in order to use their discoveries to promote European expansion.<sup>2</sup> Blunt's attitude to these men was echoed later by G.P. Gooch and Bertrand Russell.<sup>3</sup> He was depressed to notice that, whatever the pretexts of the European colonizers in their incursions into the various countries of Asia and Africa, the result was invariably the same for the indigenous population, i.e:

... the occupation of their lands, the absorption of their wealth, the lowering of their self respect, the enslavement of their labour, and ultimately - in how many instances? - their entire destruction, body and soul.<sup>4</sup>

Blunt was trying to visualize a world whose international relations are based on moral virtue, magnanimity and mutual respect and toleration rather than force, plunder and military oppression. He enthusiastically joined such organizations as the "Peace and Arbitration Society" and the

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1. R.F. Burton, The Book of the Sword (1884), pp. xii, 280.
  2. My Diaries, pp. 216-17, 230, 421, 435, 517, 696; The Land War in Ireland, p. 219.
  3. G.P. Gooch, "Imperialism", op. cit., pp. 357-8; Bertrand Russell, Freedom and Organisation (1934), p. 464.
  4. The Shame of the Nineteenth Century, op. cit., p. 2.

"Non-aggression Society". He repeatedly attacked his age's tendency to worship force; and told Sir William Harcourt that, as a cabinet minister involved in one of the aggressive wars (the Matabeles campaign in East Africa), he was "in the position of the bishop who burgles a church". He records that Harcourt had said to him:

It used to be slaughter for the glory of the thing, but they [the British public] have given that up now, now it is slaughter for trade ... Oh, we are all burglars ...

When Blunt asked why the official press was allowed to preach up these wars and whip up frenzied support for them, Harcourt's candid reply was that "The papers are in the hands of the financiers".<sup>1</sup>

The ferocity of imperialism influenced Blunt's thought in two negative aspects. He became a pessimistic misanthrope protesting against man's apparent inability to muffle his savage instincts. He began to view the world as a merciless jungle that had no place for God or His justice.<sup>2</sup> He was saddened by the continuous growth of militarism in Europe, and he saw neither honour nor heroism in any war against the weak nations. In an entry written in 1898 he commented bitterly:

If the nations of Europe will only cut each other's throats in a Thirty Years' War there might be some hope for the world, but they are too cowardly for that. All they dare do is to swagger hideously, and talk about their honour ... and the military code of today recognizes every treachery and every baseness as lawful. What nonsense to talk about military honour! There is no such thing.<sup>3</sup>

He considered Italy's attack on Abyssinia "one of the most abominable of our abominable age", and was pleased with the Italian defeat at Adowa.<sup>4</sup> He was similarly happy with the failure of the Jameson raid

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1. My Diaries, pp. 115-116. Cf: The Land War ..., p. 170.
  2. My Diaries, pp. 70, 233, 346-7.
  3. Ibid., p. 289.
  4. Ibid., p. 207.

and the British setbacks at the beginning of the Boer War.<sup>1</sup> However, the overall picture which he presents in his Diaries is a grim one, with the shadows gradually darkening, towards the lurking nemesis of the 1914-1918 War. The closing scene of the last century appears ominous and foreboding as Blunt recalls the parallel atrocities of the Dark Ages when he views the harvest of 1900:

All the nations of Europe are making the same hell upon earth in China, massacring and pillaging and raping in the captured cities as in the Middle Ages. The Emperor of Germany gives the word for slaughter and the Pope looks on and approves. In South Africa our troops are burning farms under Kitchener's command and the Queen and the two House of Parliament, and the bench of bishops thank God publicly and vote money for the work. The Americans are spending fifty million a year on slaughtering Filipinos; the King of the Belgians ... is brutalizing the negroes to fill his pockets ... The whole white race is revelling openly in violence as though it had never pretended to be Christian. God's equal curse be on them all! So ends the famous nineteenth century into which we were so proud to have been born.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude made Blunt immensely unpopular; but he remained consistently on the side of the weak victims, raising his voice, sometimes completely alone, in protest against such atrocities as the massacre of 20,000 dervishes in the Soudan - an act accepted and justified by "a concensus of English opinion, civil, military, religious, Tory, Whig, Radical, High Church, Low Church, no church, financial and proletariat."<sup>3</sup> One of the particularly vicious atrocities which he denounced was the destruction of the Mahdi's tomb with dynamite, and the extraction of the skull from it as a personal souvenir for Kitchener.<sup>4</sup> Gordon's sister also condemned these atrocities, which Blunt associated with the execution of Joan of Arc and the suppression of the Indian Mutiny (pp. 296, 330, 448, 684, 774). Such actions, which indeed recall the worst aspects of

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1. Ibid., pp. 211, 218, 748, 333-4, 339, 341, 346.

2. Ibid., p. 376.

3. W.S. Blunt, "The Fighting in the Soudan", The Times of Sept. 10, 1898, p. 3.

4. My Diaries, pp. 313, 317, 320, 321, 324, 684.

Governor Eyre's heavy-handed policies in the West Indies, confirmed Blunt in his attitude against the Empire. To him, it was a "huge machine" of evil, used to grind peoples and races (pp. 212, 306). Its wars were waged by unscrupulous politicians with no moral controls or magnanimous ideal (pp. 243, 311, 499). He uses very terse, epigrammatical phrases to describe the Empire: "a gamble venture" (p. 429), "a cockney affair", (p. 290), "The imperial laurel is a crown of thorn" (p. 788); he sees the Diamond Jubilee as "a jingo of apotheosis" (p. 279). Unlike Kipling, Austin, Henley, Newbolt and the ageing Swinburne, Blunt neither accepted the "white man's burden" ideas, nor glorified the series of wars which added some five million square miles to the British domains in the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century. He considered such acquisition an element of weakness rather than proof of strength or greatness (p. 599). The vociferous expression of these opinions made Blunt extremely unpopular, but he did not care, and continued to attack his countrymen's complacency, in an attempt to bring home to the public opinion the injustice of subjugating weaker nations, the material and moral loss which these ventures entail in the long run, and the rivalries which could gain England powerful European enemies (pp. 285, 298, 416, 654). He warned that the recurrence of colonial wars would stifle England's traditional sense of honour and make vulgarity and self-worship a permanent feature in the once-noble English character (pp. 134, 212, 288, 310, 348, 429, 698, 713).<sup>1</sup>

Blunt was a strong believer in Burke's precept, "The principles of true politics are those of morality, and I neither do, nor ever will, admit

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1. Cf: J.R. Seeley, The Expansion of England (1883), p. 16; G.P. Gooch, "Imperialism", op. cit., p. 331; William Watson, Ireland Arisen, (1921), p. 12; W.S. Blunt, The Land War in Ireland, pp. 167-8; W.S. Blunt, "Turkish Misgovernment", NC, 40 (Nov., 1896), pp. 838-45 (p. 845).

of any other.<sup>1</sup> His problem, however, was that he was trying to preach this, in the heyday of colonial expansion, to an age fascinated with "official greatness", which he despised as an idol "made up of very small things, as a mountain is made up of a tumble of small stones" (p. 635). This attitude runs contrary to the racial theories of the anthropologists of the 1870s and 1880s, whose opinions were coloured with social Darwinism, which influenced the missionaries and even the anti-slavery societies. They all believed in the unquestionable superiority of Western culture and considered it their duty to spread it, by force if necessary, among the non-European nations. Blunt's rejection of such notions foreshadows the theory of cultural relativity of Franz Boas and Edward Tylor, which prevailed later. In fact, there was nothing new in Blunt's sympathy with the downtrodden, dark-coloured races, except perhaps the violence of his repeated attacks against their colonialist oppressors, whose "...dark Saxon madness and Norse rage" was "threatening conquest with an English face".<sup>2</sup> The evils of the "civilizing mission" of imperialism had been satirized, with far greater success, by Swift in the fourth journey of his Gulliver (1726). The sinister motives behind the cloak of "humanizing" the savages of remote lands were exposed by Swift with a subtle irony beyond Blunt's choleric temperament and fulminating rage. The Diaries, like his political poems The Wind and the Whirlwind, "The Canon of Aughrim" and "Coronation Ode", contain many prophecies of doom, written in an inflammatory style. The political scene, both at home and abroad, never lacked occasions which gave him ample chance to vent his indignation. On the collusion of Rhodes with Chamberlain in the Jameson

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1. Quoted by G.P. Gooch, op. cit., p. 331. Cf: H. Sidgwick, Practical Ethics (1898), p. 93.

2. A New Pilgrimage, p. 33; "Quatrains of Life", Poetical Works, I, p. 448.



raid he wrote:

The whole of our public life is rotten, and will remain so till we have received a serious defeat in war. The Queen is at the bottom of half the Imperialistic mischief we do abroad. She is pleased with the title of Empress, and likes to enlarge her borders. I should not be at all surprized if she was really on the Jameson affair with her Ministers ...

(p. 281)

He saw the Boer war as a "trap laid by Milner especially for Morley and the Radicals who stepped into it precisely as was intended". Again:

The only difference between Liberals and Conservatives in these cases is, that while both rob with the cry of "your money or your life", the Liberals would like the money given up peaceably, the others after a fight .... I do not believe in the possibility of any change of opinion until we have got a good beating ourselves...

(p. 328)

Blunt, who belonged to no political party or group was equally severe in his strictures against the politicians of his day, watching for their weaknesses and recording them with cynicism, heedless of any unpopularity that this exposition might incur. He called Rosebury "Minister of the Stock Exchange" - a reference to his family connection with the Rothschilds (p. 140). The same cynical tone characterizes his description of almost every prominent Victorian politician, particularly the "jingoists". Commenting on the death of Cecil Rhodes, for example, he said "... Rhodes was one of those of whom one always had to ask oneself "Quel intérêt peut-il avoir en mourant?" (p. 435). Another entry shows a touch of grim humour, concerning Lord Grey, the Foreign Minister whose policies Blunt attacked incessantly for many years:

I have been in bed with influenza, and in great desolation of soul, the subject of my delirium being Grey and the Garter he had just been given, and this worried me for two days and nights. I am better today, and begin to see things sanely.

(p. 794)

Another, more damaging reference to the internal dissensions of the

Liberal party at the turn of the century can be found in Blunt's report of Labouchere's assessment of these leaders:

If you were to take them all together ... and boil them in a pot, Campbell Bannerman, Asquith, Morley, Rosebery, and Grey, you would not get the worth of a mouse out of them.

(p. 430)

Blunt's attitude stands out in sharp contrast with his contemporaries, who cared very little about what was happening abroad; especially in the British domains; and in this respect he was a remarkable embodiment of the ideal envisaged by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who wrote in 1860:

... I dream of the day when an English statesman shall arise with a heart too large for England; having courage in the face of his countrymen to assert of some suggested policy, - "This is good for your trade; this is necessary for your domination; but it will vex a people hard by; it will hurt a people further off; it will profit nothing to the general humanity; therefore away with it! - it is not for you or for me". When a British minister dares speak so, then shall the nation be glorious, and her praise, instead of exploding from within, ... come to her from without, as all worthy praise must, from ... the populations she has saved.<sup>1</sup>

It is the lack of such magnanimity which Blunt deploras time and again throughout his Diaries. His emotional eruptions, his non-conformism, his earnest appeals for his countrymen to exercise restraint and cultivate the friendships of the weaker nations, his denunciation of the rising spirit of militarism, his call for urgent reforms in the colonies, were all motivated by a deep sense of right and justice on the one hand, and a noble, patriotic jealousy for the honour of England's name among the nations of the world, on the other. This makes his diaries relevant and puts him decidedly ahead of his time. In retrospect, this consistent, modern outlook makes Blunt appear as

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1. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Preface to her "Poems Before Congress", The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Six Volumes (1890), IV, p. 170.

a perfect Englishman today, in contrast to the "anti-English eccentric" man he was considered to be at the turn of the century. He wanted Britain to protect her reputation before a world public-opinion which "laughs angrily at our fine moral talk, and points contemptuously at Cyprus and Egypt hanging out of our coat tail pockets".<sup>1</sup> He spoke the language of the nationalist rather than that of the cosmopolitan financier. He really felt that the expansion of imperial responsibilities would tie England down as Gulliver was tied by those tiny creatures. While many reformers did a great deal of research on poverty and the internal social conditions of England, Blunt concentrated in his Diaries mainly on foreign policy (pp. 285, 298, 416, 654, 740). He sincerely believed that the colonies would not only create international frictions and jealousies, but would also strain England's own resources, sap its vitality, create vulgarity, corruption and what he called "gangrene of colonial rowdiness" (p. 212). To the jingoists who would put 'country, right or wrong' before the essential principles of justice, honesty and mercy, Blunt had a scathing reply:

What absurdity! One would think that England was a poor struggling nationality, oppressed by a strong neighbour, and in need of the help of all her sons, not what she is, the mill in which all the nations are being ground.

(p. 306)

His attacks were by no means confined to England and her foreign policies. Italy's invasion of Tripoli in 1911, for example, drew from him the same indignant protests, expressed in a series of letters, articles and cynical comments in the Diaries (p. 782). He called Italy "the harlot of Europe", who, having dried her tears "only yesterday",

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1. W.S. Blunt, "Turkish Misgovernment", NC, 40 (Nov. 1896), pp. 838-45 (p. 844).

plunged into these acts of flagrant aggression. He blamed Grey's policy of "neutrality" in this question and considered his attitude hypocritical, since he encouraged Kitchener (then Pro-Consul in Egypt) to prevent Turkish troops from crossing to Libya to confront this invasion. Grey was hoping to lure Italy away from her alliance with the central Powers in Europe. Blunt believed that "It is a maxim in law that an immoral agreement cannot be enforced; it is not binding either in law or equity".<sup>1</sup>

It was under this light that he saw - and judged - the series of secret agreements in which Grey involved his country throughout the decade which preceded the First World War, from the Anglo-French Entente of 1904 to the dubious "guarantee" of Belgian neutrality, which was invoked as the main reason for England's participation in that War. Many things in My Diaries may seem strange, but will become easily intelligible and consistent if Blunt's anti-imperialist attitude is taken into consideration. Almost alone among political observers he foresaw the lurking nemesis of the 1914-1918 holocaust, towards which Europe was drifting, even before the festering conditions of the Balkans began to erupt. As early as 1899, Blunt was exchanging views with Herbert Spencer:

He applauded what I have said ... of its being probably necessary that we should be first beaten and invaded here in England by a foreign enemy, and he thought it would be the best thing that could happen. "I am quite as pessimistic", he said, "as you are about the present, only I foresee a change in the remote future". "In the remote future", I replied, "it will be too late, everything that is interesting and beautiful and happy in the world would have been destroyed. The world will be inhabited then only by the ugly and dull, and miserable white races".

(pp. 317-18)

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1. W.S. Blunt, The Italian Horror and How to End it (1911), p. 5. Cf: My Diaries, where, commenting on the Pope's support of the invasion, Blunt uses the strongest terms to be found anywhere in his writings, ... "I can only say what I have never in my life said, or thought to say, 'To Hell with the Pope'". (p. 783).

Again, in 1903, Blunt records with approval the dire predictions of the dying Spencer:

He lamented the disappearance of 'right' from the range of modern politics in Europe and denounced the Transvaal war as an outrage on humanity. "There is coming", he said, "a reign of force in the world, and there will be again a general war for mastery, when every kind of brutality will be practised".

(pp. 480-1)

It is interesting to notice the resemblance between these words and those of Blunt's cousin, George Wyndham, who, as Balfour's Secretary, was an "insider" and one of Blunt's significant sources of confidential information, reflecting the intimate ideas of Britain's top politicians at the turn of the century. In the entry of May 28th, 1899, Blunt reports:

... George says that it is now simply a triangular battle between the Anglo-Saxon race, the German race, and the Russian, which shall have the hegemony of the whole world.

(p. 322)

It is ironic that such ideas were prevalent in the same year that witnessed the first general conference of "World Peace" in The Hague. Blunt's attacks on the Empire and its policies are expressed in a variety of ways; sometimes he uses scathing remarks and grim forebodings, and in some entries he uses philosophical meditation, while others are full of cynicism. He explains to the young Lord Ronaldshay that the term Empire "... means what the Roman Empire was, the subjugation of a number of races by a single race or a single man" (p. 755). He attacks militarism and its obsession with power, calling the German Emperor "the Apostle of European violence" and "War Lord" (pp. 416, 830). When Churchill was appointed to the Admiralty, Blunt "expressed the hope that if he bombards a town, it will be Naples or Messina, rather than Constantinople or Jeddah" (p. 782). This recalls another sardonic remark, written several years earlier on board a British

warship which had rescued Blunt at Suez, giving him a feeling that "after all the British Fleet has its beneficent uses and was intended for other things than the bombardment of Eastern towns" (p. 361).

Blunt was decades ahead of his contemporaries in his realization that it was impossible to exercise despotism and tyranny abroad and yet retain full respect for freedom and human dignity inside Britain itself. He considered Victoria's title of Empress as "a Brummagem innovation", and warned that imperialist expansion could lead to national ruin. It encourages the spread of some sort of slavery "in disguise", where the white man learns to live "in sloth" on the work of the natives. This in turn would deprive England of "the most virile men" who would find it easier to go and live in the colonies as a "short-cut to fortune", leaving the weak to multiply at home. He likened the British imperialists to the Spanish Conquistadores; and, like J.A. Hobson, Blunt rejected the pretexts of "divine mission" and "Manifest Destiny", as hypocritical slogans.<sup>1</sup>

As his voice continued to go unheeded over the years, making him one of the most unpopular men in England, Blunt began to cling desperately to anything that seemed to show signs of awakening in Asia and Africa. He wished the "Yellow Terror" could be true (pp. 151-2, 369). He saw that Asia, in order to stand up to the challenge of the West, should reorganize her life along the same lines of scientific progress, although this would cost her most of her dignified traditions (p. 788). He also began to call for revolts, armed struggle and violent retaliation as the only means of extracting concessions and regaining freedom from Europe's yoke, instead of using logic, peaceful protests

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1. J.A. Hobson, The Psychology of Jingoism (1901), p. 81. Cf: W.S. Blunt, The Shame of the Nineteenth Century (1900), pp. 2, 5, 6.

and appeals to mercy and humanitarian feelings (pp. 103, 609, 708, 738). Martyrs and sacrifices were necessary for the success of the nationalists everywhere.<sup>1</sup> As he grew old, he began to receive Oriental visitors from every country, particularly those whose causes he had championed, Egypt, India, Burma, Zanzibar ... (pp. 618, 635, 821, 823, 834). Blunt linked his future reputation with the success of the Eastern nations:

If, as I hope, they achieve their independence of Europe, I shall be acknowledged as a forerunner of their cause; if they fail, I shall fail.

(p. 618)

It was ironic that some of the most virulent attacks on Blunt's enlightened, far-sighted political attitudes and activities should come from his own daughter, Judith (Lady Wentworth). This is a sample:

He was completely at the mercy of Oriental deceit and Irish blarney and believed every woeful tale of oppression by the British Government, however fantastic. A born agitator, he became an ideal "bomb thrower" for every schemer who dared not throw his own explosives, and his house soon became famous as a hot-bed of conspiracy for the scum of every nation ...

... Hitler and Mussolini were amateurs compared to him!<sup>2</sup>

There is no need to reply to such passionate words. This assessment was not borne out by history. The "scum" Judith refers to included a number of the greatest leaders of reform and liberal movements of intellectual enlightenment the Muslim world had seen so far this century. Their opinion of Blunt is more accurate; and their appreciations of his efforts are only now being recognized as nearer the mark than the assessments of his detractors.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Blunt's Letter to the Egyptian National Congress, Paris (1910), pp. 2, 10, 11.
  2. Lady Wentworth, The Authentic Arabian Horse (1945), pp. 74, 76.
  3. Gordon, pp. 541, 547, 549; India Under Ripon, pp. 104-105; The Land War in Ireland, pp. 182, 272; My Diaries, pp. 821, 823, 834.

It is true that he was a poseur, but his ego is never obtrusive or vulgar. He finds pleasure in recording the rumours which surrounded his name both in the East and the West (p. 450), Cromer's complaints of his "intrigues", Kitchener's dissatisfaction with his conduct, the pain and trouble which his writings caused the official circles (pp. 108, 132, 726), Empress Eugéné's admiration of his books (pp. 706-707), the "revolutionary" aura that accompanied his name among the Italian aristocrats (p. 365). But these personal glimpses are neither dull nor boring; on the contrary, they make the Diaries more interesting and fascinatingly readable. The three main currents which run through the Diaries, namely, the political, the personal and the gossipy or anecdotic, merge and diverge to give colourful scenes depicting various aspects of life in the late eighteen eighties, the "naughty" 'nineties and the early years of the new century in England and other countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. Thus, despite the lack of concentration and the abundance of self-indulgence, these Diaries give the reader some lively images of the country house political network, new gossipy versions of the Mayerling tragedy, quick but fascinating glimpses of France's second Empire shortly before it vanished in 1870, a naturalistic picture of the Aristocracy of Poland before the War, the ruling classes' grapevine and how it functioned, interesting comments on Gladstone, Labouchere, Lord Lytton, the social stars of Blunt's own Crabbet Club (who were or became famous people in various fields), incisive remarks on the public figures in the world of letters, politics and high society.

Most of the young men who attended the annual meetings of the Crabbet Club figure prominently in My Diaries. They were amateur



poets and sportsmen, 'fresh from the universities', with Tory political leanings, 'bent on amusement' and 'had intellectual tastes'. They met in order to "play lawn tennis, the piano, the fool and other instruments of gaiety".<sup>1</sup> The constitution of this Club laid down that its aim was "the pursuit of pleasure and it should be devoid of any serious purpose".<sup>2</sup> A total of 72 prominent people participated in this "pursuit", on and off, over a number of years. Some members wrote about these gatherings, which used to take place in summer. George Wyndham, for example, described how Blunt used to "preside at Dinner(s) in the costume of an Arab Sheikh, and produce sonnets and shrewd observations on man and nature".<sup>3</sup> He also referred to a peculiar rule which maintained that "anyone becoming a Cabinet Minister or a Bishop ceases ipso facto to be a member".<sup>4</sup> Thus George Curzon was expelled after accepting the post of Viceroy in India in 1898; so was Lord Houghton when he became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Lord Esmé Howard of Penrith, George Leveson Gower and Ronald Storrs give accounts of the activities of this exclusive club, whose members "joined their host, Wilfrid Blunt, ... to contend in games, in talk, and in verse competition the prize of which was a Georgian silver cup".<sup>5</sup> These affairs figure in many entries of My Diaries (pp. 41, 42, 68, 72, 112, 145, 308, 375). Blunt's description of these events invariably glows with warm sentiments:

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1. J.W. Mackail and Guy Wyndham, Life and Letters of George Wyndham, I, p. 248.
  2. The Earl of Lytton, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: A Memoir (1961), p. 223.
  3. Life and Letters of George Wyndham, I, p. 248.
  4. Ibid. Cf: The Earl of Lytton's Memoir, op. cit., p. 224.
  5. Ronald Storrs, Orientalisms (1939), p. 29; Lord Howard of Penrith, Theatre of Life, 2 vols. (1935), I, pp. 72-75.

They were really brilliant meetings, with post-prandial oratory of the most amusing kind, and were productive of verse of a quite high order. ... deserving a place, I venture to think, in company with the best verse of a not serious kind, including even perhaps that of the Mermaid Tavern.<sup>1</sup>

(p. 42)

Other aspects of Blunt's social character appear through his association with another elusive society whose membership and activities were shrouded in tantalizing mystery. This group, which came to be known as 'the Souls' in the late eighteen-eighties, typified the spirit of the nineties that continued into the Edwardian Age and up to the outbreak of the War. The group can be considered as the best example of Late Victorian social elitism. It comprised a brilliant constellation of

intimate and devoted friends, of both sexes and all ages, who found intense pleasure in one another's society, and above all in one another's conversation. They included men and women of rare distinction and beauty.<sup>2</sup>

These included A.J. Balfour (who was their 'High Priest'), George Curzon, Harry Cust, George Wyndham, Lord and Lady Granby (Duke and Duchess of Rutland), Colonel Lawrence Drummond and his wife Kitty, Lady Windsor, Lady Brownlow, Gladys Ripon (Countess de Grey), the Earl and Countess of Pembroke, Millie Sutherland and her husband the Duke of Sutherland, Betty Montgomery (daughter of Sir Henry Ponsonby, Queen Victoria's Private Secretary), Lady Horner, Lady Desborough, Mary Elcho (Lady Wemyss), Lord D'Abernon, Margot Tennant (later to become Lady Asquith, wife of the Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith). According to Edith Finch, this set of dilettantes "was in its day a brilliant cynosure and survives in fin-de-siècle memoirs". The Souls attracted such prominent men of letters as John Addington Symonds,

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1. Samples of this verse can be found in Lord Lytton's Memoir, pp. 219-238.
  2. Lady Violet Bonham Carter, "The Souls", The Listener, 38 (Dec. 30, 1947), pp. 769-70 (p. 769).

Henry James, Oscar Wilde and, later, H.G. Wells. Mary Elcho's daughter, Cynthia, who married Herbert Asquith, had an intimate friendship with D.H. Lawrence. She is the heroine of his short story "The Ladybird". Instead of the fashionable pastimes of the age: hunting, gambling and horse-racing,

They all indulged with passionate zest in talk, in discussion, on every kind of subject - politics, religion, literature, art, scholarship, human relations, last night's play, or last Sunday's sermon.<sup>1</sup>

E. Wingfield-Stratford describes Blunt as one of the "lights" among these social magnets who were trying "to arrest the intellectual rot of the aristocracy".<sup>2</sup> Ronald Storrs describes the Souls as a "dazzling and much discussed company".<sup>3</sup> Lady Violet Carter (née Asquith) quotes an account of this "select Circle" in The World:

Its High Priest is Mr. Balfour and its Egeria is Lady Granby. Very few have been initiated into its mysteries. Certain intellectual qualities are prominent among the Souls and a limited acquaintance with Greek philosophy is a sine qua non.<sup>4</sup>

André Maurois observes that there were two poles of social attraction, that of Newmarket, centering round the Prince of Wales, and 'the Souls', who were "a group of cultured young men and women, of rather aesthetic tastes, bound together by a fine collective friendship".<sup>5</sup> This "collective friendship" is described by Margot Asquith, who devoted a full chapter in her Autobiography to "the Souls", where she gave particular stress to

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1. Ibid.

2. E. Wingfield-Stratford, The Victorian Sunset (1932), p. 241.

3. R. Storrs, Orientalisms, op. cit., p. 770.

4. Lady Violet Carter, "The Souls", op. cit., p. 770.

5. André Maurois, King Edward and His Times, translated by Hamish Miles (Pocket Edition, 1949), p. 93.

the loyalty, devotion and fidelity which we showed to one another and the pleasure which we derived from friendships that could not have survived a week had they been accompanied by gossip, mocking or any personal pettiness.<sup>1</sup>

'The Souls' belonged to the privileged 'Upper Thousand' who were leading a life of exquisite indulgence in the enchanted atmosphere of "sweetness and light" in the nineties and after, moving in a dreamy world of their own, intoxicated with success and prosperity as if they were in a fairyland not unlike that of the Arabian Nights. Following is a typical illustration - a scene in some country houses in late summer, where

a constellation of beauty moved in muslin and straw hats and yellow roses on the lawns of gardens designed by Lenotre, delicious with ripe peaches on old brick walls, with the smell of verbena and sweet geranium, and stately with large avenues, artificial lakes and white temples; ... we bicycled in the warm night past ghostly cornfields by the light of a large full moon.<sup>2</sup>

It was largely due to "the Souls", who were bent on showing that they were "different from their class contemporaries" that people of different political leanings and sympathies were brought together in such cozy atmospheres against the background of the tranquil beauty of the countryside, away from the tension and friction of public controversies and Parliamentary polemics. Before the Souls appeared on the scene, public figures from opposite ends of the political spectrum hardly ever "socialized" with each other; "but", says Margot Asquith:

at our house in Grosvenor Square and later in those of the Souls everyone met - Randolph Churchill, Gladstone, Asquith, Morley, Chamberlain, Balfour, Rosebury, Salisbury, Hartington, Harcourt and, I might add, jockeys, actors, the Prince of Wales and every ambassador in London.<sup>3</sup>

This new social phenomenon was noted later by Caroline E. Playne, who wondered:

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1. Margot Asquith, Autobiography, 2 vols., 1920, I, p. 174.
  2. Lady Violet Carter, quoting Maurice Baring's Puppet Show of Memory, "The Souls", op. cit., p. 769.
  3. Margot Asquith's Autobiography, I, p. 139.

Has any country at any time produced such a symposium of delight for mind, body and spirit as was provided by the great houses for the selected guests who came on short visits during the decades before the war?<sup>1</sup>

Blunt's Diaries show, particularly in the first section, which ends in 1900, that he plunged into this life with gusto; he was not only one of such "selected guests", but he also frequently played the host and entertained many prominent personalities in week-end parties, racing, shooting, dinners, Arab horse sales, poetry recitals, social evenings ... etc. His journal is literally full of entries describing these events; and he gives the impression of a man constantly on the move, with an agenda always full of busy engagements both in the city and in the countryside.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the very beginning of My Diaries records Blunt's extreme depression at the prospect of being "socially, as well as politically" ostracized by his friends and close relatives, not only because of what he calls "my 'unpatriotic' vagaries", but also because of the breach of confidence which he made by reporting in public that fateful private conversation with Balfour (then Secretary for Ireland) when they met in the country house of Blunt's cousin, Mary Elcho, one of the prominent Souls deeply in love with Balfour.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Caroline E. Playne, The Pre-War Mind in Britain (1928), p. 67.

2. My Diaries, pp. 55, 56, 66, 70, 72, 77, 154-6, 234-7, 281, 282, 314, 326, 375, 625, 667-8.

3. This conversation took place at Clouds House, Salisbury, at 5 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 4, 1887. According to Blunt, Balfour spoke of getting rid of John Dillon, William O'Brien and other Irish Nationalists by subjecting them to harsh treatment in prison under his then newly approved "Crimes Act". In Galway Goal, Blunt construed the confiscation of his overcoat as a fulfillment of Balfour's threats. He thus reported the conversation to the visiting justices on Jan. 13, 1888. This caused him "much social reproach", and the Wyndhams, his cousins, blamed him most severely. In an exaggerated form, the incident found its way to the press.

See The Land War in Ireland, pp. 303-305. Cf: Finch, pp. 232-3. See also Blunt's letter to The Times of March 23rd, 1888.

Before his imprisonment in Ireland in January, 1888, Blunt's political excesses were tolerated by his close friends and social associates in the 'higher circles' of the ruling classes. But when he came out in March, he found that this adventure, to which he refers as his part in "the Celtic quarrel", had left him almost completely isolated because his behaviour "had broken a cardinal convention - the strict separation of private from public life".<sup>1</sup> This dilemma offended his pride and deeply wounded his vanity.

All my relations and nearly all my intimate friends were in the Tory camp, and I had no natural footing in any other. With the exception of the Carlisles and the Harcourts, I was at home in none of the great Whig houses ...<sup>2</sup>

So, he decided to stop meddling in "English public life", at least for some time, and embarked on a long process of social rehabilitation to re-establish his position, because he was "a beaten man". In a way, the first part of the Diaries (1885-1900) can be considered a detailed record of his efforts in this respect, with some emphasis on his social and literary activities: "I occupied myself once more with my Arab horse breeding, I wrote verses and enjoyed my physical life in the green Sussex woods" (p. 2). The first lines in A New Pilgrimage reflect his mood of gloom and alienation at this time:

Care killed a cat, and I have cares at home,  
Which vex me nightly and disturb my bed.  
The things I love have all grown wearisome;  
The things that loved me are estranged or dead.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Finch, p. 257.

2. My Diaries, p. 1. In a letter to John Morley, Sir William Harcourt makes a humorous reference to Blunt:

We have had a few people off and on - Jews, Liberals,  
Unionists, infidels, and heretics ... We have also had  
some convicts like Wilfrid Blunt ...

See A.G. Gardiner, The Life of Sir William Harcourt, 2 vols., 1923, II, p. 133.

3. W.S. Blunt, A New Pilgrimage (1889), p. 3.

A man of society, with Blunt's restless nature, cannot put up with such a state of affairs or accept a lonely life with no friends. He soon found an outlet by re-activating the "Crabbet Club" under a new constitution. This, together with his association with "the Souls" seems to have satisfied both his literary talent and his amorous instinct. Thus we read:

As to my women friends, my prison adventures, I soon found, had done me no real discredit with them ... [This] episode was a title to romantic interest, which made it easy for me to resume my place and more than my place in society. Their kindness did me full amends, and for the next few years strewed my path with flowers ...

(p. 22)

In another entry, he describes the company of the Souls as "the most intellectually amusing and least conventional". These men and women were

bent on pleasure, but pleasure of superior kind, eschewing the vulgarities of racing and card playing, and looking for their excitement in romance and sentiment.

(p. 53).

Within this group, both Balfour and Blunt had ambivalent attitudes; and it is extremely interesting to compare them. In his autobiography, Balfour writes:

To me, the name of "Souls" seemed always meaningless and slightly ludicrous. It seems to imply some kind of organization and purpose, where no organization or purpose was dreamed of. It seems to suggest a process of selection, possibly even of rejection, by a group which, in so far as it had any separate existence, was a spontaneous and natural growth, born of casual friendship and unpremeditated sympathy.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this dismissive tone, it was Balfour himself who stressed the importance of the group. He told Margot Asquith in no uncertain terms:

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1. A.J. Balfour, Chapters of Autobiography (1930), p. 232.

No history of our time will be complete unless the influence of the Souls upon society is dispassionately and accurately recorded.<sup>1</sup>

The 'Souls' continued to play an important and complex part in Edwardian politics. André Maurois observes:

The Conservative ministry of 1901 was partly a ministry of "Souls", and the Liberal Cabinet of 1908 was presided over by Asquith, who married a "Soul" - Margot Tennant.<sup>2</sup>

In his Diaries, Blunt attempted to "complete" the official history of the period by recording, rather indiscreetly, "the influence of the Souls upon society". He continued to keep his journal, carefully written, "with an instinct to its future importance".<sup>3</sup> He collected information for his "Histories" from observations accumulated during his active years while no doors were closed to him wherever he happened to be. In the words of R.B. Cunningham Graham:

... years and travel, with an enormous store of miscellaneous reading, had made his mind a very storehouse of recondite information that he was always ready to impart.<sup>4</sup>

In this process, however, what was to Blunt's advantage as an unofficial historian, was, in his own words, the opportunity of always being

a deeply interested spectator behind the official scenes in London, as well as behind those of the Oriental world, and from time to time playing a small part myself in the drama ...<sup>5</sup>

This position was appreciated by Frederick York Powell, an admirer who occupied the post of Regius Professor of History at Oxford. He wrote to Blunt:

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1. The Autobiography of Margot Asquith, I, p. 139; cf: Kenneth Young, Arthur James Balfour (1963), p. 145.
  2. King Edward and His Times, op. cit., p. 93.
  3. Gordon, p. VI.
  4. R.B.C. Graham, "Wilfrid Scawen Blunt", The English Review, 35 (Dec., 1922), pp. 486-92 (p. 491).
  5. Gordon, p. vi. Cf: Ideas About India, p. xii.



I think you have many greater claims to the post I hold than I have, for you have been making history and preaching it, while I have only been researching in the far past.<sup>1</sup>

This enthusiastic judgement, however, was not shared by Blunt's contemporaries. In view of his attitudes, it was natural that he was either not taken seriously, or denounced as an impossible eccentric who "puzzled and exasperated the Foreign Office, the Irish Office, and the India Office". Proconsuls and Secretaries of State thus described him as "a pest".<sup>2</sup> The frankness of his Diaries embarrassed a number of his friends, especially those who held official positions and used to say one thing in their private talk, and quite another in their public statements. Seeing these intimate conversations repeated in print when Blunt published My Diaries created an outcry. Desmond MacCarthy reports one of these friends to have said, "After all, it was Wilfrid Blunt who started the cad's chorus".<sup>3</sup> Arthur Symons referred to the similarity between these Diaries and "certain famous confessions", presumably Rousseau's.<sup>4</sup> In fact, we have Blunt's own admission in one of his later entries:

It was reading Rousseau's Confessions about the year 1866 that first determined me to write mine and at the same time to have a more satisfactory life to make record of.

(pp. 660-661)

This he seems to have accomplished; and his memoirs are far from giving the same impression of "ugliness unredeemed" which he perceived in the second part of Rousseau's Confessions, as he had rather gloomily expected.

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1. Oliver Elton, Frederick York Powell, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1906), I, p. 180
  2. Shane Leslie, Men Were Different, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
  3. Desmond MacCarthy, "Shooting with Wilfrid Blunt", The London Mercury, 36 (May, 1937), pp. 21-25 (p. 25).
  4. A. Symons, The Café Royal, and Other Essays (1923), p. 54.

Nevertheless, Blunt's account of his life and times was not safe from "crudities" similar to those in the first part of Rousseau's Confessions, which he greatly admired; and he modestly admitted such "crudities of thought and expression".

As they stand, the published Diaries are only extracts from a larger, more detailed whole, which is kept at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, with his other papers, opened in 1972, fifty years after his death. The entries of the published book represent highlights of Blunt's life and depict his activities that are of a more public nature, as opposed to the private memoirs that cover the intimate details of his inner, personal or family life. Several entries are reported with brief hints, showing omissions and expurgations. For example, he dismisses the whole summer (and autumn) of 1890 because it "contained little of a political nature or that can be repeated here". He was having another casual, but passionate, affair at the time with Margaret Jane Talbot, wife of the military secretary at the British Embassy in Paris, heedless of the advice of the Ambassador, his old friend Robert Lytton.<sup>1</sup> Other "pleasures", including many affairs, were similarly relegated to his Secret Memoirs:

But this is not the place in which to describe the life we [the Souls] led, though it well deserves being eternalized in print. It harmonized well with my literary work.

(p. 53)

It is reasonable to assume that Blunt's Griselda owes its composition to the dangerous liaisons he has had with "the Souls". He broke their unwritten code of allowing their women members to have their men and prohibiting the men from having the women of their choice. He maintained desultory affairs and physical intimacies with at least

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1. Lady Elizabeth Longford, A Pilgrimage of Passion: The Life of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1979), pp. 283-84.

half a dozen "Souls". The Diaries contain some tantalizing hints about this sort of "life".

Thence (18th Aug., [1892]) on to the Glen, where I found John Addington Symonds in the house and where I stayed ten days with Margot [Tennant] and a number of young ladies, a very delightful time, of which my diary is full, but again this is not the place for it.

(p. 72)

Indeed it is not; for it contains a detailed description of how he deflowered the virgin Margot, future wife of H.H. Asquith.<sup>1</sup>

Such understandable discretion is by no means the only reason for Blunt's omissions. For example, he seems to have made it a habit not to publish accounts of his recurrent explorations, driving and camping tours, whether carried out in the desert or in the English countryside. Thus a camel journey, undertaken with Lady Anne from February 4th to the 26th, 1896 is "suited rather for a paper in the Royal Geographical Society", and so he does not transcribe it. And although he was at the time almost the "oldest member" of the Society and was able to draw a map of the route, he frankly said that this kind of information would never be given to the Society

because I have long convinced myself that it makes itself the precursor and instrument of European penetration and conquests against the wild races of mankind.<sup>2</sup>

(p. 217)

The only exception to this rule is the full account of his fateful journey across the Libyan desert in 1897.

Blunt's editing technique is not confined to omissions and abridgements, it also includes the bridging of some gaps through satisfactory descriptive passages that indirectly cover a lapse in time, vivid recollections of earlier episodes, revived in his mind by

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1. Ibid., pp. 297-8.

2. Cf: My Diaries, pp. 375, 519, 362.

certain occasions and so presented to the reader as a sort of flashback, and some explanatory remarks [usually in square brackets] looking forward into the future in the light of subsequent events or developments, especially in cases where a prophecy comes true and proves Blunt to have been right.<sup>1</sup> This last type of insertion is accompanied with some reflections occasionally mixed with cynicism or coloured with Blunt's usual little prejudices.

With these and other devices, including appendices, Blunt succeeds in preserving some sort of unity for his otherwise scattered, discursive and widely variegated memoirs. It is a unity which enables him to divide them into two large sections which he calls "The Scramble for Africa" (1888-1900), and "The Coalition Against Germany" (1901-1914); and each section is thus sub-divided into chapters, with titles taken from the predominant episode in each case.

In spite of the witty remarks, humorous comments and sober reflections which pervade Blunt's narrative, and in spite of the immediate, personal way of recording these events of his times with simplicity of style, intimacy of detail and casual way, the reader will find it more and more difficult to resist a certain feeling of unease. Behind the absorbing scenes, Blunt's firm hand exercises, through his editing methods, a rigid control, determining the angle of vision, the colours and the amount of revelation. The reader almost feels this hand pushing him, albeit gently and unobtrusively, in one direction, leaving little room for independent judgement. Although he says a great deal, he carefully leaves much unsaid, and makes himself invariably appear under the best of lights. Determined not to tell all, he remains the ultimate judge of what might be safely

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1. Ibid., pp. 53, 81, 113, 146, 172, 176, 252, 290, 331-2, 506, 507, 542-6, 654, 714, 726, 728, 753, 784, 820, 822.

let out and what should be withheld. The following sample will illustrate this point. The concluding paragraph at the end of the entry of July 17, 1894 reads:

This was the end of my London season, and the only extracts I can find in my diary at all of a public character, which was otherwise devoted to the social care of amusement and launching Judith in the world. It is a record especially of dinners that I gave, and which were for a moment rather the fashion with the Soul society at my rooms in Mount Street.

(p. 146)

This sort of editing gives Blunt away in more than one respect. He wants the reader only to know things "of a public character". One would tend to agree here with Newman I. White in wishing that Blunt "had acted upon Stevenson's dictum that it is no part of the duties of an editor to decide what may or may not be tedious to the reader".<sup>1</sup> The "social amusements" which he suppresses are surely more interesting than the bizarre funeral of his aunt, which he transcribes in full detail just because it has caught his fancy (p. 172). On the other hand, there is no mention of Lady Anne's participation in launching their daughter, while Blunt speaks of "my" London season. In fact, behind the scenes in these dinner parties, Blunt was pursuing yet another affair, this time with Lady Mary Galloway (née Cecil), half-sister of Lord Salisbury and aunt of A.J. Balfour. Ironically, she was a bearer of the Ottoman Order of Chastity, presented to her by Sultan Abdul-Hamid in 1889.

Blunt's recurrent marital infidelities have provoked a series of family quarrels since 1888; and this explains the conspicuous absence of any detailed accounts of his family life in My Diaries as a whole. We have to go to other sources to get a clear picture of Blunt the family man in his capacity both as a father and a husband. He always

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1. Newman I. White, "Wilfrid Blunt's Diaries", The South Atlantic Quarterly, 21 (Oct., 1922), pp. 360-364 (p. 361).

preferred to be called H.F. (Head of the Family) - an imitation of the patriarchal traditions of the East; and, according to his son-in-law, Neville Lytton,

He had a great sense of the reverence due to himself as a husband and a father ....

His love of nature inclined him to yield to his instincts, and to have, as it were, a new mate every spring.<sup>1</sup>

Neville Lytton's sister, Lady Emily Lutyens, says that Blunt used to "snub" and "scold" his wife in front of strangers,

... and yet I suppose Blunt has numberless devoted slaves. Lady Anne is one, Judith another, and many, many others who suffer from his tyranny and yet kiss his feet.<sup>2</sup>

This makes him a Byronic figure; and Lady Emily herself, like Clare Clairmont before her fall, became such a "slave" under his spell, and continued to love him for some time, even after discovering that he was trying to "seduce" her. That is why she spoke about him in terms of abuse and contempt sixty years later.

Even if we allow for exaggerated prejudices against Blunt, there will remain a great deal of truth in these accounts of his domestic behaviour. The entangled quarrels of the Blunts, however, are discussed more objectively by his grandson in his Memoir (1961) and by his cousin, Wilfrid Blunt, in Cockerell (1964). This last reference contains some revealing hints about Blunt's love affairs recorded in his Secret Memoirs. Cockerell, Blunt's private secretary, gives the names and initials of at least eight women. He also reports that Blunt "did not mind anything that he had done or written, however delinquent, being known, but that other persons involved have of course to be considered".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Neville Lytton, The English Country Gentleman (1925), p. 241.
  2. Lady Emily Lutyens, A Blessed Girl (1953), p. 258.
  3. Wilfrid Blunt, Cockerell (1964), p. 176.

Lady Wentworth's denunciations of her father's conduct in her book The Authentic Arabian Horse (1945) and her letters to him, published by her son, the present Earl of Lytton, reflect bitterness and alienation over a long period of time. Her advice to "everyone who wishes to glorify the Blunt scandals is to let sleeping dogs lie", because

I reserve in safe keeping [the British Museum] my circumstantial evidence as a counterblast to the Secret Memoirs.<sup>1</sup>

Lady Anne's bitterness in her diaries, however, is nowhere as virulent as her daughter's.

As a man of the world, Blunt was always an incurable gossip, moving from one group of people in 'high society' to another, like a butterfly. The Diaries reflect a man with a taste for scandal:

There are strange tales current of the goings on at C\_\_\_, where ladies were invited by the hostess, with express design upon their virtue. They were invited without their husbands, and given rooms next to those of their intended lovers ... I daresay there are pretty free doings at C\_\_\_ ...<sup>2</sup>

(p. 539)

Even at the age of 71, Blunt continued to enjoy balls and parties such as the one he reports in the entry of July 14, 1911. His comments reflect the spirit of the age in those fast-changing times. "It is not for me to find fault", he says, "and I suppose we enjoy our lives more". Yet, although he was having his fill of the pleasures of Edwardian society, he did not lose his keen vision. He was not confined to their world, but could see the clouds gathering on the farther horizons outside England. He saw the malady of his age; and with accurate, though pessimistic prophecy, he cried:

This sort of society cannot last, it will end in Bedlam.

(p. 625)

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1. The Earl of Lytton's Memoir, op. cit., p. 274.
  2. 'C' = Combe, and the hostess was Gladys de Grey, who "somehow managed to invite wives without their husbands and husbands without their wives, picking out the better of the two in each couple". See Anita Leslie, Edwardians in Love (1972), p. 203.

In her extremely interesting study of the social conditions which made Blunt give this and other no less sardonic remarks, Caroline E. Playne gives many illuminating examples of the feverish atmosphere that engulfed the actions and movements of the pre-war generation:

It was characteristically said by a woman who had lived in the full stream of life: "I cannot walk, but I don't mind being flung about" - flung, that was, from bus to bus, or hustled on tube railways; flung along all the time from engagement to engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Affluence seems to have caused the rich, who were enjoying the unprecedented "social power" of money, to become as heady, superficial and reckless as the upper class of the French society on the eve of 1789:

Never, in the recorded history of England, has the social power of money been greater; never has the pursuit of pleasure been more widespread and successful.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt's more comprehensive glance, however, incorporates the wider, European and Oriental scenes; and, in his sombre, meditative mood, he records in a foreboding entry that he perceives "the seeds of social decay so very visible among the Teutonic races, and the higher European civilization generally" (p. 718). An earlier entry portrays very vividly, though with a lighter tone, the European attempts to impose this sort of moral and social decadence on the patriarchal, deeply religious culture of the East. Hamouda Bey, brother of the Egyptian Mufti, Sheykh Mohammed Abdu, tells Blunt of a ball in Cairo, where women, "naked nearly to the waist" danced with strangers in the presence of their husbands. They were "the wives of some of our English officials", who included "Mr. Royle, the Judge of Appeal, before whom I had so often pleaded" and Lord Cromer himself.

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1. C.E. Playne, The Pre-War Mind in Britain (1928), p. 317.

2. Ibid., pp. 315-16, quoting Stephen McKenna's While I Remember, p.79.



Wine was served. Hamouda ran away, denouncing the Khedive, who also attended:

The Khedive calls himself a good Moslem. He says he never drinks wine and leads a respectable life ... and they tell me that the ladies of his household are allowed by him to look from behind a screen at all these abominations.

(pp. 454-5)

Blunt's reply is a good example of his cynicism. He told the naive, shocked Egyptian:

My dear fellow, you do not understand that this is our work of civilizing the East; wait another twenty years and you will see all the Cadi's [magistrates] of Egypt ... dancing with ladies even more naked than these.

(p. 455)

Blunt was one of the very few Englishmen who understood the social emotions of the Muslims. E.M. Forster learned a great deal from his writings. Hamouda Bey is similar to Dr. Aziz in A Passage to India. Both Blunt and Mr. Beck (the sympathetic Anglo-Indian official praised by Blunt)<sup>1</sup> may have served as the models of Fielding in Forster's novel, which was completed while Forster was reviewing My Diaries in 1921. Forster, who knew both India and Egypt, got some useful information from Leonard Woolf and Syed Mahmoud, the latter a great friend of Blunt's. This circumstantial evidence, which points to Blunt's links with the Bloomsbury circle, cannot be neglected. Added to Blunt's influence on Lytton Strachey, it shows Blunt's significance as a transitional bridge between the "Souls" and the 'Bloomsbury' group. The "Souls" were much more frivolous, less self-conscious, less 'highbrow', and had fewer sexual problems than the Bloomsbury group. The Empire interested and excited the "Souls", who were joyous in

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1. India Under Ripon, p. 156.

their optimism. Blunt was the only one who shared neither their optimism nor "patriotic" imperialism; and this makes him a precursor of the Bloomsbury group's attitudes.

Blunt's reflections and recollections are by no means confined to the field of politics. The Diaries depict the literary attitudes and activities that occupied his life and times in his most fertile years. He mixed freely with artists and men of letters, and was on fairly intimate terms with most of them. In 1911, when W.B. Yeats was seeking the support of Sturge Moore for the nomination of Blunt to the membership of the academic Committee of English letters, Moore replied, "I am not against Blunt; he is a horse-breeder, a calling which should foster insight".<sup>1</sup> One can learn a great deal from Blunt's interesting comments. He read all the time; and even his passing remarks provide fresh criticism of almost all the prominent writers of his time and of their work. In his review of My Diaries, Newman I. White rightly supports a suggestion that Blunt's literary reminiscences should be collected in a separate volume, asserting that

Such a step would undoubtedly be a service to lovers of Victorian Literature ... it would give the reader a considerably more cosy feeling of at-homeness in this particular field of literature.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt's tastes, outlook and judgements in the fields of literature and art reflect a highly individual temperament which is too independent to be pinned down to one tendency, current, group, convention or school of thought. He shared the aesthetic tastes of the Pre-Raphaelites, but not their dreamy escapism, nor their love of excessive decoration.

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1. Letter from T. Sturge Moore to W.B. Yeats (April 26, 1911) in: W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence, edited by Ursula Bridge (1953), p. 20.

2. Newman I. White, op.cit., pp. 362-3.

In poetry he loved the lyrical power and ballad qualities of Swinburne and Housman; but he also appreciated the intellectual dimension of Robert Browning. Although he was a materialist, he was deeply impressed by the spiritual glow in the poetry of Francis Thompson. He was no lover of imperialistic attitudes of condescension towards "the lesser races", yet he loved and enjoyed the realism and naturalistic style in the stories of Rudyard Kipling. He appreciated the wit, humour and intelligence of Shaw, but he deplored his Fabianism. He appreciated the grandiose products of Balzac's imagination, but not the fantastic creatures of Ouida's novels. Although he was a man of action, he hated Henley's swashbuckling. He identified himself in many respects with William Morris, for whom he had the warmest affection. The similarity of their circumstances drew them together; Blunt wrote in his journal in the summer of 1889:

We had both of us sacrificed socially to our principles, and our principles had failed to justify themselves by results, and we were both driven back on earlier loves, art, poetry, romance ...  
(p. 23)

Blunt was in sympathy with Morris's dreams of an ideal world, and he liked the Utopia of News From Nowhere, where 'the Blunts' and their house are given a place of honour.<sup>1</sup> Blunt claimed in another entry:

I fancy I may have influenced him in this.  
(p. 57)

Indeed Morris plays an important role in the growths of Blunt's thought. He reacted strongly against Morris's optimism. Morris thought mankind "the crown of things, in spite of man's destructive action and his modern craze of ugliness" (p. 229), but Blunt had a

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1. William Morris, News from Nowhere (The Kegan Paul edition of 1970), p. 141.

more pessimistic view of evolution. Also, Blunt did not think much of Morris's decorative art of design. He tried to prove to Morris that his aesthetic ideas in the field of applied art, together with Ruskin's theories, "have done more harm than good by their attempt to make English people love beauty and docare their architecture", and this had, in Blunt's opinion, led to "a slough of ornament" (p. 149). There are some illuminating personal touches which give glimpses of Morris's temperament:

He loved to engage in wordy warfare with the bargers [on the Thames] and had a strong vocabulary of abuse ...

When on the river he affected a rough manner ... and scorned to apologise. [He was rough like] a Norwegian Sea Captain ...

He was very dogmatic, with violent likes and dislikes.  
(p. 24)

But Blunt recognised Morris's warmth - "He had a strong and affectionate heart" (p. 23) - and noted that in his playful moods he was "very attractive" (p. 25). In spite of "intolerance of the conventional talk of society", Morris was, in Blunt's view, "a delightful companion" with those who "understood him and dared to argue with him" (p. 23). Blunt thought that Morris neither knew nor cared to discuss love, "much as he had written about it" (p. 25). His judgement of Morris's intellectual capacity is impressive:

... of all the great men I have been in close relations with; I reckon him intellectually the strongest. He had an astonishingly firm grasp of things, and an immensely wide range of knowledge. I never knew him deceived by a false argument, and he was difficult to overcome in discussion even on subjects his adversary knew the best.

(p. 25)

Blunt goes even further, considering Morris's death in 1896 as "a great loss for the world at large, for he was really our greatest man" (p. 240); and in another entry we learn that this admiration was shared

by W.B. Yeats, though not in such superlative terms (p. 724).

Superlative terms are also used in his assessment of Swinburne, "the greatest lyric poet of the English tongue ... and perhaps our worst prose writer". "Beyond being a poet", Blunt asserts, "he was almost nothing".

As a poet, however, he will live when nearly every other of our age is forgotten, for he was a prince of harmony and rhyme and created an entirely new kind of lyric verse.

(p. 656)

Nevertheless, Blunt attacked Swinburne's "ridiculous sonnet" in support of the Boer war, Blunt, who did not personally know Swinburne, concluded from Morris's testimony that Swinburne was "the most sensitive and jealous of men, and cannot bear the smallest criticism" (p. 229). As for Watss-Dunton, whose Aylwin was dismissed by Blunt as "a thing of the lowest order of childish melodrama" (p. 373), Blunt accused him of having used Swinburne "as an advertisement for his own literary trash" (p. 657). Blunt deplored the Queen's refusal to appoint Swinburne to the Laureateship after Tennyson, and had the poorest opinion of Alfred Austin, who was eventually appointed. He dubbed Austin, "the most absurd little cock sparrow of a man ever seen, and childishly vain of his talents", and marvelled at his appointment:

... for, with the exception of three sonnets, Austin has never written anything in the smallest degree good. His sole claim is that he has been a solid supporter of the Conservative Party in the press ...

Then he added, in a stoic tone:

He is better anyhow than Lewis Morris ... Watson, Dobson, Davidson and the rest of the sons of their own penny trumpets.  
(p. 212)

However, when Austin visited Newbuildings Place in 1900, Blunt noted with surprise:

He is an acute and ready reasoner, and is well read in theology and science. It is strange his poetry should be such poor stuff, and stranger still that he should imagine it immortal.

(p. 369)

Again, in 1908 (when Austin was 75) we learn from Blunt that the Laureate "takes himself very seriously now"; and we can imagine Blunt's cynical smile as he reports that Austin attributes "Salisbury's choice of him to his acknowledged position at the head of English Literature" (p. 627). On the other hand, A.E. Housman made a favourable impression as "a typical Cambridge Don, prim in manner, ... learned, accurate and well informed". Blunt praised A Shropshire Lad "on account of its ballad qualities and the wonderful certainty of his choice of exactly the right word". In spite of Housman's denial that his early verses were inspired by any "gruesome" episode in his life, Blunt reported his interest in "ghost stories" (p. 785).

The tragic story of Francis Thompson's meteoric life and posthumous fame is reported in detail, almost exactly as Blunt has heard it from Wilfrid Meynell, who discovered the poet and rescued him from poverty and opium. A great deal of biographical information can be found in several entries concerning Thompson; and, since Meynell himself left no record of the story, My Diaries remains a unique source in this respect.<sup>1</sup> Thompson spent several weeks on Blunt's estate shortly before his death. He is described as

a little weak-eyed, red-nosed young man of the degenerate London type, with a complete absence of virility and a look of raptured dependence on Mrs. Meynell which is most touching. He is very shy, ... good-hearted and quite unpretending.

(pp. 297-8)

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1. Viola Meynell, Francis Thompson and Wilfrid Meynell: A Memoir, (1952), p. 23.

These features reminded Blunt of "the face of a Spanish sixteenth century Saint" (p. 593). Both Meynell and Blunt were impressed by his ability to write "on the simplest subjects with unfailing wealth of thought and power of language" (p. 597). Blunt liked "The Hound of Heaven" and "Ode to the Setting Sun" and appreciated Thompson's "Depth of thought and feeling". In his final assessment, he expresses his belief in the security of Thompson's well-deserved "high position", not only because of "the excellence of his workmanship but because he is unique as a religious poet" (p. 615). Blunt proceeds to assert that no other religious poet since George Herbert can compare with Thompson. In this sweeping generalization, he tends to underestimate Newman and to ignore Coventry Patmore, to whom Thompson "owed much in style" according to Meynell. Although Blunt acknowledges Thompson's "wealth of imagery" and "elaboration of diction", he tends to attribute his genius to "sheer hard work" (p. 595).

Cockerell believed in the extraordinary nature of Thompson's poetic gift, and that he must have been the "instrument of a higher power"; but this aspect is not stressed by Blunt.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, he was not blind to the cult of the supernatural in the work of other poets. The young Yeats, like his colleague, George Russell (A.E.), interested Blunt as a "mystic".

Both believe in ghosts and fairies and the transmigration of souls, and have magic powers of seeing the future and of prophecy.  
(p. 291)

It was Lady Gregory who first introduced Blunt to this "tall, lean, dark, good-looking ... short-sighted" poet in 1898; and it was through Blunt that Yeats got the patent to establish the Abbey theatre, when

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1. Letter from Cockerell to Field Marshal Viscount Wavell, dated June 21st, 1944, in Viola Meynell, The Best of Friends (1956), p. 122.

Blunt's cousin, George Wyndham, was Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1904. In 1902, Blunt recorded a favourable judgement of Yeats's poetic capacities: "he is a true poet, more than his work reveals him to be, and he is full of ideas, original and true, with wit into the bargain" (p. 442). This judgement, however, became more reserved later on, when Yeats began to "take himself very seriously" after his return from America. Consequently, Blunt noted that

Though doubtless a man of genius, he has a strong touch in him of the charlatan, and his verse is thin stuff, not so good as his prose. Gilbert Murray is worth ten of him as a poet.

(p. 514)

In his dabbling in the occult, Yeats's description of the Judwalis is indebted to the portrait of the Sabi'a in Lady Anne Blunt's Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates.<sup>1</sup> Both Doughty and Blunt figure in Yeats's A Vision, the former as Michael Robartes and the latter as Mr. Bell, who was, like Blunt, a Foreign Office official in his youth and knew all the famous politicians, writers and artists of his age. Blunt also figures as William Bailley in Hilaire Belloc's novel Mr. Clutterbuck's Election (1908). Belloc was Blunt's friend and neighbour in Sussex and one of his most frequent visitors. Blunt, however, never took him seriously as a man of letters because Belloc used to look for "immediate applause in what he does. It is the snare of all brilliant talkers and facile writers" (p. 637).

Nevertheless, Blunt was usually charmed with "brilliant talk" and eloquence; and he always admired people with ready answers, like Wilde and Shaw.

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1. Lady Anne Blunt, Bedouin Tribes ..., II, pp. 194-7.



Shaw's appearance however, matters little when he starts to talk ... His talk is like his plays, a string of paradoxes, and he is ready to be switched on to any subject one pleases, and talk brilliantly on all.

(p. 550)

This makes Blunt declare him "a capital fellow". As a regular play-goer, he was keen to see Shaw's plays on stage. John Bull's Other Island, Man and Superman, Fanny's First Play and The Doctor's Dilemma are variously described in My Diaries as "most amusing", "roaring burlesque", "screamingly amusing" and "the wittiest ever put on stage". In another entry, Blunt is pleased to declare that "Shaw has certainly made an epoch on the English stage, using it also as a platform for his political fancies" (p. 522). But he does not identify himself with Shaw's Fabianism, because

It is socialism without the few humanitarian virtues which commonly go with it, without romance and without honesty of principle, only opportunism.

(p. 442)

One would not expect an anti-imperialist to admire anything produced by the advocate of the white man's burden; but Blunt was a man of paradoxes. Rudyard Kipling's The Second Jungle Book appealed to him, perhaps because he read it at a time when he was thinking of retiring from life to become a hermit in the desert, like Kipling's Minister who became a fakir. "It seems to me", wrote the world-weary diarist, "the only worthy ending of a public, perhaps of a *private life*; but it wants great physical courage to endure" (p. 216). Stalky and Co. was also admired because it has "vigour and wit, though it is brutal in its realism" (p. 373).

Mrs. Browning, whose poems he held in "highest admiration", disappointed him in her Letters, which he described as "poor literature", "lacking all wit", "gossipy" and "commonplace". Her "enthusiasms"

suffered from a "sentimental vulgarity" from which Browning himself "was not exempt". Blunt remembered Browning in his later years as "a gossip diner-out in London and teller of second-rate funny stories"; but in assessing Browning the poet, he acclaimed him as "a thinker of a very high order, the most intellectual poet we have perhaps ever had" (p. 373).

An example of the influence of pre-conceived ideas on Blunt's judgement sometimes can be found in the case of Ouida. He visited her in Italy in the spring of 1900; and was surprised not to find her "loud and masculine" as he expected; yet he persisted in his belief that "she can never have been a sensual woman, whatever passions she may have revelled in in her writings" (p. 365). Nor was he impressed by Meredith's novels, although he recognized some positive aspects in his style:

They contained, of course, a number of good things and the style was original and natural to the man, but as stories they had little point, and though he sketched his characters well at starting he had not the art to give them strong dramatic action, nor had he sufficient knowledge of human nature to make their doings credible.

(p. 660)

He did not know George Meredith very well. A visit to the old novelist in the summer of 1894 left Blunt with an impression which was not favourable; he found Meredith "a queer, voluble creature, with a play-acting voice, and his conversation, like one dictating to a secretary, a constant search for epigrams". Blunt felt that, with the exception of Modern Love and Love in the Valley Meredith's poetry was not "quite first rate" (pp. 143, 660).

In another entry, this adverse judgement is repeated, with some interesting elaborations:

The fine ladies in his novels ... are entirely fanciful. They do not exist in English, or any other feminine life, yet they have had a considerable influence on our modern ladies - who like to think themselves as he represents them. He has certainly had a great deal to do with their present sex emancipation ... To me they are wearisome to read of, because unreal.

(pp. 818-9)

Blunt's lack of interest in Meredith's characters is explained in another way, as he observes that "They are not comic enough to make one laugh, and not tragic enough to make one weep". Then he exclaims, with some indignation,

Yet I find people comparing Meredith with Shakespeare and all the heavenly host!

(p. 663)

This is a position which he reserved for Balzac, whose "great series of romances, Illusions Perdus, Splendeurs et Misères, and Vautrin ... show him the Shakespeare of novelists ...". As he saw it, Meredith's novels expounded "a theory of what life ought to be, not what life is", whereas Balzac

... runs through the whole gamut of civilized human nature from the highest to the lowest note, and his women are equal to his men. This is what distinguishes him from our novel writers ... from Scott and Thackeray, who was his special imitator, down to Meredith.

(p. 808)

An image of Balzac's criminal, Vautrin, presents itself to Blunt's mind when he recollects Richard F. Burton, as he knew him during his diplomatic service in Buenos Aires in 1867-8. Burton's fortunes at the time were at a low ebb. The resulting portrait illustrates Blunt's ability to make a simple sketch suggest deep impulses and hidden psychological traits:

He wore, habitually, a rusty black coat with a crumpled black silk stock, his throat destitute of collar, a costume which his muscular frame and immense chest made singularly and incongruously hideous, above it a countenance the most sinister I have ever seen, dark, cruel, treacherous, with eyes like a wild beast's. He reminded me ... of that wonderful creation of Balzac's, the ex-gallérien Vautrin, hiding his grim identity under an Abbé's cassock.

(p. 543)

Blunt is always a keen observer of people's appearances. His pictures are often caricatures, revealing prejudices against any man he does not like; and he creates the desired effect in a few, compact but sharp lines. W.E. Henley is but one of the victims thus portrayed:

He has the bodily horror of the dwarf, with the dwarf's huge bust and head and shrunken nether limbs, and he has also the dwarf malignity of tongue and defiant attitude towards the world at large. Moreover, I am quite out of sympathy with Henley's deification of brute strength and courage, things I wholly despise.

(p. 477)

In his wrath, satire, and touches of light humour, Blunt spares no one of the prominent men and women of his age, big or small, friend or foe. They are all suitable material for the character sketches that fill the Diaries. Thus we read that Queen Victoria is "pleased at the title of Empress, and likes to enlarge her borders", and that "...military blood sheddings are not displeasing to Her Majesty" because she has "a craze for painting the map Imperial red" (pp. 281, 329, 415). He repeats with approval the tales of Lady Tennant about Gladstone's grandfather having been a "baker" who sold "his bread at false weight" (p. 57). Gladstone figures as a senile old man, paying no attention to his listener but "... prattling on, talking of all things ... apparently without sense of their proportion and for things' sake ..." so that Blunt ends up with "the

mixed impression ... of disappointment at finding less than I should have found to worship" (pp. 73-4).

Cecil Rhodes is not only seen as the instigator of the Jameson Raid and the Boer War, but also as a "humbug", a "rogue" and "a gambler" who, after a number of gross blunders, was "unscrupulous enough to save most of his own money at the expense of war and ruin for everybody else". Rhodes's successes are seen by Blunt as mere strokes of luck that have nothing to do with any "supernatural intelligence" (pp. 435-6). Invoking the testimony of Sir William Harcourt, he describes Rhodes as an "astonishing liar" with a capacity to design big, long-range schemes, whose opportunism enabled him to win influence in high political circles through "buying up everybody by putting them on to good things on the stock-exchange" (p. 334).

Another "Empire-builder" who comes under attack is Henry Stanley, the explorer: "an evil-looking man with a hard squat face, more like a slave driver than a slave liberator".<sup>1</sup> This impression, recorded in Egypt in 1887, never changed. On reading Stanley's autobiography in 1909, Blunt indulged in some interesting observations concerning human nature, in an attempt to fathom the psychological motives and impulses that shaped Stanley's character and ruled his behaviour. He then condemned him as "a contemptible humbug" and a "rough lout" whose "base countenance" reflected a nature "more ignoble" than Burton's (pp. 696-7).

An enjoyable entry reflecting Blunt's capacity for characterization is the profile of King Edward VII. In contrast to the newspaper

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1. The Land War in Ireland, p. 219. My Diaries, p. 517.

accounts, whose hypocrisy made the late king appear as "a Solon and a Francis of Assisi combined", he gave his own portrait:

He had a passion for pageantry and ceremonial and dressing up, and was never tired of putting on uniforms and taking them off, and receiving princes and ambassadors and opening museums and hospitals, and attending cattle shows and military shows and shows of every kind, while every night of his life he was to be seen at theatres and operas and music halls ... [He] had come to have the popularity of an actor who plays his part in a variety of costumes, and always well .... His Bohemian tastes made him beloved at Paris, and he had enough of the grand seigneur to carry it off. He did not affect to be virtuous, and all sorts of publicans and sinners found their places at his table.... If not witty, he could understand a joke, and if not wise, he was sensible. He quarrelled with nobody, and always forgave... He was essentially a cosmopolitan, and without racial prejudice ... [He shares with Solomon] that knowledge of women which ... is the beginning of wisdom, or at least which teaches tolerance for the unwisdom of others.

(pp. 721-2)

Blunt also portrays characters through epigrammatic touches. Some of his remarks, although given in a very casual way, have a sharp flavour that lingers on and is not easily forgotten. Madame Rothschild, for example, is depicted as "a pathetic little woman in black ... in perpetual mourning for her departed beauty" (p. 78). In the same incidental way, he inserts little, amusing anecdotes of a personal nature. He reports Lady Salisbury's decision to pay no visits, in accordance with an advice she has received from old Lady Palmerston,

"So I never pay any ... except to the Foreign Ambassadors. Of course", she added, "I don't include those of the South American Republics or any others of the people who live up trees".

(p. 58)

Scenes, events and personalities from every country that Blunt visited or took an interest in will be found well represented in My Diaries. King Leopold II was "the greatest ruffian of all those sitting in the high places of the Earth" and "the history of the

Congo State will hand his name down to posterity as that of one of the most infamous among kings". "His death", Blunt notes with some contempt and cynicism, "has disclosed ... a secret marriage ... with a French girl who has borne him two sons more or less legitimate" (p. 699). Most historians would agree with this. Bertrand Russell concurs in seeing the Belgian King as having been avoided by other European monarchs "on account of both his cruelty to negroes and his kindness to ballet-girls".<sup>1</sup> Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany is described as "... an enormous talker without being exactly a good talker", whose "wild utterances and constant mistakes" made the Germans laugh at him (p. 469). Although Blunt considered Britain responsible for antagonising the Kaiser through participating in a "coalition against Germany", he recurrently condemned any rapprochement with Wilhelm (pp. 54, 417, 761). In one entry, he called him "a clever ass" (pp. 423-4); but when the Kaiser was ill in the summer of 1910, Blunt wrote:

Little as I love Wilhelm I should miss him at the present juncture. [His death] would leave the game in the East too entirely in English hands.

(p. 725)

Any agreement between any two European Powers at the expense of the East used to alarm and distress Blunt, whose concern for the future of the Eastern countries was a consistently upheld priority. The Kaiser's visit to London soon after the French aggression on Morocco in 1911 made Blunt suspect "a plot of peace". "It is easy for robbers", he explained in a sardonic tone, "to make friends over a

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1. Bertrand Russell, Freedom and Organization, 1814-1914 (1934), p. 456.

corpse, and Morocco is there ready to their hands" (p. 761).

The French, if surprised to learn from Blunt that their Emperor, Napoleon III, was "threatened with softening of the brain ..., having over-indulged himself with women", will be shocked by the claim that he "was not by blood really a Bonaparte" (pp. 81, 176). His extra-marital love adventures, together with those of his wife, Empress Eugenie, are recorded with the usual spicy relish which shows Blunt to have been an incurable gossip as early as 1870.

Blunt also attacked the American ex-president, Theodore Roosevelt, for his support of English rule in Egypt. Roosevelt is referred to as "a swine", "a buffoon of the lowest American type ... airing his fooleries" and "a kind of mad dog roaming the world" (pp. 713, 724). In an after-thought appended to the entry of 16th June, 1910, he deplores Roosevelt's influence on Grey's foreign policy. According to Blunt, this harmful influence was made possible through Grey's inability to cross any language barriers, since Grey was "ignorant of French and German", and could not thus respond to other influences from the continent (p. 726).

If it is necessary to treat Blunt's opinions, attitudes, and judgements concerning the major issues and prominent personalities of his time with reserve, it is necessary to exercise still greater caution in considering the judgements of his contemporaries on him, since no prophet is honoured in his own country. The Diaries show a man far ahead of his time, at war with many things that his age stood for. He appears as a passionate man pursuing his principles with ardent enthusiasm. It is this moral earnestness which coloured his vision, shaped his mentality and gave him his concepts and



values in the various fields of activity described in My Diaries. His pessimistic mood, in contrast to the complacent optimism of his age, was justified. Echoes of this mood recurred as he grew older and became more alienated and isolated at home, "a single voice against the world" (pp. 787-8). In a world that refused stubbornly to listen to him, he felt "weary of a useless struggle" (p. 788). He likened himself to Rousseau, Father George Tyrrel, and (perhaps more aptly) to the French Orientalist and diplomat, Count Gobineau, in their failure to get recognition from those whom they valued most. His family entanglements and frequent, dangerous illnesses exacerbated his depression and, at times, tinged his misanthropy with nihilistic inclinations. Here is a sample of his laments:

The things of this life seem very far away ... youth, love, ambition, vanity ... all hope, all fear, all wish to live or die. In these depths, the problem of a future life seems foolishness; God, heaven and hell, good and evil, duty of any kind, responsibility, words without meaning. Above all the heart is dead. Who is there that can help or heal? The good to us are as one with the wicked. There is no voice in all the world that can reach us or console. Only with the dead, those who have passed through the shadows where we stand, are we able to converse as equal to ourselves in sorrow.

(p. 525)

The idea of death continued to haunt him like a morbid obsession.

The Diaries are littered with detailed descriptions of deathbed scenes.<sup>1</sup>

To plead the cause of the downtrodden peoples in the heyday of aggressive imperialist expansion was a daunting task. The odds against such a school of thought were great. It was only natural that at the end of the day, the protagonist should feel "old and weary" and

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1. My Diaries, pp. 19, 75, 535, 536, 668-671, 741.

"useless in the face of an entirely hostile world" (p. 788). Blunt lived in a period when complacent Europeans based their philosophy on three foundations:

... the awareness of their higher material civilization, the belief in their higher moral system, and the application of a double standard of judgement.<sup>1</sup>

This gave rise to a "superiority complex" which made his age ignore the principle that

moral causes determine the standing and falling of nations no less than of individuals; that the spirit of Machiavelli is as disastrous in international as domestic affairs.<sup>2</sup>

It was precisely against such a spirit of opportunist hypocrisy that Blunt made a determined stand, facing the "mighty many" who professed to "take up the white man's burden" out of magnanimous, altruistic motives. He often scoffed at such pretensions, both in his prose and his poetry.

These Lords who boast thine aid at their high civic feasts,  
The ignoble shouting crowds, the prophets of their press,  
Pouring their flood of bald self-righteousness,  
Their poets who write big of the "White Burden". Trash!<sup>3</sup>  
The white man's burden, Lord, is the burden of his cash.

His alienated countrymen, including his own daughter, Judith, and P.G. Elgood, author of the article on Blunt in the Dictionary of National Biography, accused him of adopting the motto of "My country is always wrong". This harsh judgement needs revision, if only because all his prophecies have come true and the causes he advocated have been won. He was not against England, but against the

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1. Norman Daniel, Islam, Europe and Empire (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 480.
  2. G.P. Gooch, "Imperialism", op. cit., p. 331.
  3. W.S. Blunt, Satan Absolved, 1899, p. 43. Cf: G.P. Gooch, History of our Time, 1885-1911 (1911), p. 243.

schemes of her secretive politicians and speculators. He also opposed France's policies in North Africa, Belgium's atrocities in the Congo, Italy's aggressions on Ethiopia and Tripoli, Germany's massacres in China, America's intervention in the Philippines, Russia's plots in Persia, the Balkans and Central Asia. He was not, therefore, particularly anti-English; he did not single out England for his explosive wrath. But, as a man with a living conscience not much given to self-complacency, he could not tolerate any inequities, even when they were shown as "victories" for Christian civilization.

What can be registered to his disadvantage, however, is that in his dissent he knew no limits and repeated his attacks without practicing any control or self-restraint, unlike some other dissenters (William Watson for example). This gave his writings sometimes the appearance of undignified polemics. Nor did he always couple his criticism with constructive suggestions as positive alternatives to what was being denounced. He vacillated between calling on Europe to leave the Afro-Asian colonies alone and calling on the latter to adopt European ways in order to achieve progress and reform enabling them to stand up to the challenge of European encroachment. He did not want these ways to be introduced by European force and military occupation. When Blunt attacks imperialism on moral grounds, it is usually very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to refute his accusations. He is very well informed, and it is of no avail to ignore him under the pretext of his being just a passionate, subjective idealist. His analysis of the origins of the First World War comes very close to the conclusions of Sidney Bradshaw Fay, one of the best historians who dealt with this subject. Blunt's arrangement of the

chronological table of events at the end of his book shows very clearly how the war came as a result of the series of secret treaties which followed the Franco-German War of 1870, the rise of militarism, nationalism, economic imperialism and the jingoism of the popular press.<sup>1</sup> Blunt decided to publish his Diaries when the Versailles Treaty put the blame squarely on Germany, Austria and Turkey. Both volumes proved an immediate success and ran out of print, to be republished in America one year later (1921). Victorianism had advocates who gave the Diaries a hostile reception, but this did not reduce the popularity of the book. The TLS reviewer accused Blunt of being "unpatriotic", of not telling "the real truth ... about ... our recent national history" and of being "a cultivator of political abstractions with no enthusiasm for political work". The reviewer spoke disapprovingly of Blunt's indiscretions, "he is now more frankly revealing than before" and "gossiping maliciously, exchanging wit with the most brilliant men and women of his day". The reviewer then boldly asserted: "As a historical document, this diary has no very remarkable importance".<sup>2</sup> The only positive quality grudgingly granted by the TLS was to concede that the character sketches in the second volume were "the comment of an acute mind".<sup>3</sup> Less than twenty years later, at the height of the Battle of Britain, the TLS spoke, with a completely different tone, of Blunt's "delicious, malicious, pictorial diaries".

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1. S.B. Fay, The Origins of the World War, 2 vols. (New York, 1929), vol. 1, pp. vii, 1, 2, 34-48.
  2. "Diogenes the Epicurean", TLS (May 8, 1919), p. 249.
  3. "Mr. Wilfrid Blunt's Last Words", TLS (Feb. 5, 1920), p. 83.

That many of his claims have been satisfied is some proof that he was nearly right, though out of time. In some sort, then, Blunt can be numbered among the minor prophets ...

He retained to the end a youthful, unreasoned prescience, and his spear was never broken ...

He sang heroically, as befitting the challenging ways of a passionate, masterful personality.

He is one of a small but specially talented companionship, knight errants of causes .... They dip their pens in the sun glare ... [and] possess a singular power over image and allusion, a compulsion over language ...

The TLS writer then imagined Blunt as a modern Robin Hood "beautifully mounted on an Arab thoroughbred, as high-spirited and proud as his steed, challenging all comers, head aloft and beard abroad".<sup>1</sup>

The Athenaeum reviewer (who signed L.W.) admired Blunt's ability to describe "the great men ... whose portraits and conversation he sketches ... with a most fastidious and sophisticated pencil"; but Blunt was censured for humbling those famous men "in an unobtrusive way which is singularly effective".<sup>2</sup> L.W. praised Blunt's literary style:

There is art in these pages, the art of the elaborately simple, the art of - we use the word in no derogatory sense - a first rate poeticule.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Francis Toye in The English Review complimented Blunt's style in one short sentence concerning the 'clarity' and 'unpretentiousness' that make 'easy' and 'excellent' reading.<sup>4</sup>

Like Blunt's multivalent personality, the Diaries have many facets; but, strangely enough, this diversity of interests and activities is held

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1. "Blunt's Band", TLS (Aug. 24, 1940), p. 411.

2. "L.W.", "Lost and Other Causes", The Athenaeum, No. 4666 (Oct. 3, 1919), pp. 971-2 (p. 971).

3. Ibid.

4. Francis Toye, "An English Don Quixote", The English Review, 55, (Oct. 1932), pp. 558-9 (p. 558).

against him as a liability rather than an asset; and so Blunt, the Athenaeum reviewer tells us, "just falls short of achieving greatness". Blunt is thus made to suffer an adverse judgement when compared to Sir Richard F. Burton and to George Borrow. L.W. explains,

The reason is, we think, he is too much an artist. We get the impression that in Egypt and the desert he has one eye on Downing Street and the Mayfair Drawing-rooms, and in the drawing rooms he has one eye on the East and its false dawns.<sup>1</sup>

This point of view does not seem entirely objective or without prejudice, because although Blunt's faults were numerous, lack of logical consistency was not one of them. The wide range of subjects dealt with in the various entries that cover a period of 25 years, during which Blunt was always on the move, does not warrant an accusation of "incapacity of complete concentration upon or absorption in" these subjects. Far from being superficial, Blunt can in fact be accused of being indulgent (in the subjects that interest him) to the degree of obsession. Yet, L.W. seems to utter his well-chosen words slowly as he wisely observes:

For a knight-errant, to be completely successful, must keep both eyes fixed on the dragon: it is fatal for him to let one eye wander to the pretty ladies wringing their hands in or throwing flowers from the gallery.<sup>2</sup>

The unfairness of this gibe lies in the fact that it confuses two aspects of Blunt's character that should be taken separately. In his capacity as a political activist or agitator, Blunt never looked for admiration from the fair sex. It was as a romantic poet, a handsome squire, a charming society gossip and a lover of beauty that he approached women; and here he was successful, with many conquests to his credit, from the age of twenty-two onwards. He was often the pursued rather than the pursuer. He did not succeed in killing the "dragon" in the arena

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1. "Lost and Other Causes", p. 971.

2. Ibid., p. 972.

of politics because he was fighting alone against immense odds, while the sympathy of the audience was totally with the "dragon" or host of dragons, which received all the encouragement. Herein lies the paradox of Blunt's life. The TLS observed:

He was defeated in his political ambitions - perhaps because the Romantic hues of his political ideas expressed only a poetic emotionalism ... His liberal thought was confused by his natural Toryism, his democratic theories smothered by his aristocratic instincts.<sup>1</sup>

Forster gives a more sympathetic but well-balanced, objective assessment of Blunt's abilities and limitations. His explanation of Blunt's failure to achieve greatness is interesting:

He was sensitive, enthusiastic, and sincere, but he had not within him the fiery whirlwind that transcends a man's attitude, and sweeps him, whatever his opinions, into the region where acts and words become eternal ... [His] was the life of an English gentleman of genius, who ignored the conventions of his race and rank, but remained, in the best sense of the word, an amateur.<sup>2</sup>

However, Forster realized that the value of Blunt's ideals and attitudes would be better appreciated in the future, and that after the end of the British Empire, Blunt would be remembered as having been "a great statesman".

He is a failure now [1919] : and only those who know actively or imaginatively what failure is will understand his book (my stress).<sup>3</sup>

Ouida was fascinated by the romantic nature of Blunt as a man who "has always touched life at its most different facets";<sup>4</sup> but L.W. claimed that the sparkling radiance of these facets was blurred by an "occasional flicker of malice". Even after conceding that

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1. "Blunt's Band", op. cit.

2. E.M. Forster, Abinger Harvest, 1936 (Penguin, 1974), pp. 297-8.

3. Ibid., pp. 301-302.

4. Ouida [Marie Louise de la Ramée], Critical Studies (1900), p. 143.

"the political side of the diary is immensely interesting, and Mr. Blunt deserves all possible credit for tilting at the giants of imperialism", the Athenaeum reviewer hastened to add:

And yet, here too, as we have said, there is a slight dulness in the facet, a slight haze in the brilliance, which makes the reader a little doubtful whether it is really a genuine jewel or the purest water.<sup>1</sup>

To E.M. Forster, the "jewel" was genuine enough, and he saw this "malice" as

So much humour ... [stemming from] a charming good temper that flickers into all corners of life .... It is a wonderful gift, this of writing about one's fellow creatures as if they were alive; and so rare. The Modern novelist ... may well envy this perennial stream [of well-portrayed characters] where a comment occasionally splashes in but whose essence is the water of life.<sup>2</sup>

Forster puts his finger cleverly on the positive qualities which endeared Blunt to the oriental heart: friendliness, kingliness, championing the weak "in the right way". And although he appreciates the diarist's "wit, imagination, warmth of heart, courage, generosity, acuteness of judgement", Forster does not forget to lance the little bubbles of Blunt's vanity, which are admittedly "never obtrusive", but which have negative effects, weakening "the cumulative effect of the work".<sup>3</sup> Forster perceives how Blunt's old age gives the contents of the second volume a 'soberer garb' as Blunt proceeds in describing the life of a society gradually drifting towards the First World War. Forster's interpretation is more precise than that of L.W., who ascribes this sobriety to 'the inevitable stiffness' in 'the pen and the mind of the diarist'. However, the latter reviewer was more

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1. "Lost and Other Causes", p. 972.
  2. Abinger Harvest, pp. 298-9.
  3. Ibid., p. 303.



sympathetic with Blunt's attitude to the society of the Edwardian age, and with his presentation of this vanity fair. The second volume, L.W. noted,

is a wonderful observation post from which the philosophic historian can watch the mental, moral and material disintegration of a complex society. Mr. Blunt's entries ... are like little windows opening and shutting upon the scenes and upon the 'behind the scenes' of history ... one gets so vivid an impression of the characteristics of our age that one feels that one not only grasped its external appearance and the springs of its mechanism, but the very taste and flavour of it. Frankly the taste of it is most unpleasant.<sup>1</sup>

Describing Blunt's charismatic enjoyment of life, Arthur Symons observed that "His appreciation of the human comedy was immense; his own part in it was constant, considerable, and to himself always an excitement".<sup>2</sup> In the society portrayed in My Diaries, Blunt's handsome figure, good looks and charming conversation endeared him to the fair sex. He was "one of the finest looking of men" according to Lady Margot Asquith.<sup>3</sup> Lady Emily Lutyens saw him as "the handsomest man I have ever met, and ... the most physically attractive ... romantic enough to capture any woman's heart".<sup>4</sup> According to Lady Mary Currie, he had "the power of attracting and repelling in a greater degree than any man I have met in the course of my life".<sup>5</sup>

Blunt's deep insight into human nature and his understanding of all nuances of behaviour make his character sketches spring to life. This is a capacity which Forster notes with obvious admiration, not untouched by envy:

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1. "L.W.", "Woe for the Kings Who Conquer", The Athenaeum, No. 3685 (Feb. 13, 1920), p. 210.
  2. Arthur Symons, The Café Royal and Other Essays, 1923, p. 54.
  3. Margot Asquith, The Autobiography of, 2 vols. (1920), I, p. 8.
  4. Lady Emily Lutyens, A Blessed Girl, pp. 216, 228.
  5. Lady Mary M. Currie, "Are Remarkable Men Remarkable Looking?" NC, 56 (Oct., 1904), pp. 622-42 (p. 637).

Such knowledge of men, such opportunities of seeing them and such power of describing them - Boulanger, Herbert Spencer, Louise Michel, Riaz Pasha, Queen Victoria, Oscar Wilde ... the Grand Mufti, the Comte de Paris, the Poet Laureate, the Sultan of Johore, Lord Cromer, Francis Thompson, Mr. Asquith ... pilgrims and ambassadors, Cardinals and fellahin, Poles and Tunisians: all pass before us, and not as oddities but as recognizable human beings ... [Blunt's Diaries] leave a portrait gallery, invaluable for students and delightful for all.<sup>1</sup>

This view was corroborated by other writers and reviewers. Shane Leslie, who dubbed Blunt, rather humorously, as 'the chief public nuisance of his time' gave a complimentary assessment: "But for his Diaries he would be forgotten with all agitators whose fate is to perish with the dust they have stirred".<sup>2</sup> William Matthews described the Diaries as "controversial and outspoken, with good sketches of personalities ... a valuable anti-imperialist, critical record of his times".<sup>3</sup> A more enthusiastic comment came from the Irish writer, Padraic Colum:

Everyone writes memoirs, but only one man of our time has been able to write memoirs that have an heroic vein and scope, that Englishman of aristocratic family and Catholic stock who strove for the liberation of the people of Ireland and the people of Egypt and the self-determination of the Moslem world ..., Wilfrid Scawen Blunt.<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 1919, when A.E. Housman was "reading Wilfrid Blunt with a good deal of interest",<sup>5</sup> Joseph Conrad, who had received a copy of the first volume from Cockerell, expressed his suspicion of Blunt's antagonism to his age being nothing more than an "attitude". "All his indignations may be just", Conrad wrote, "but one asks oneself how much they are justified in that particular individual". Conrad censured Blunt on the grounds that there was

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1. Abinger Harvest, pp. 298-9.
  2. Shane Leslie, Men Were Different (1937), p. 236.
  3. William Matthews, British Diaries (University of California Press, U.S.A., 1950), p. 279.
  4. Padraic Colum, A Half-Day's Ride, or: Estates in Corsica (1932), p. 163.
  5. Letter to Grant Richards dated May 15, 1919, The Letters of A.E. Housman, ed. Henry Maas, (1971), p. 161.

'much of a mere society man' in him and that as a writer Blunt was only half-serious. Conrad, however, admitted that it was "very difficult not to have a liking" for Blunt.<sup>1</sup> A similar opinion was recorded by Lord Esmé Howard of Penrith (who at one time became a member of Blunt's Crabbet Club):

Like most strange and unconventional people, Wilfrid Blunt had a fascination for me, and it always amused me ... to praise him to Sir Edward Grey, to whom he was anathema ... I must admit I always had a sneaking inclination towards men of unusual type, like Wilfrid Blunt, whatever their faults may have been.<sup>2</sup>

Neville Lytton, on the other hand, had a love-hate relationship with his father-in-law, whose Diaries "... show up all that I disliked most in his character, humbug and insincerity, worldliness and even snobbishness". Yet, he admitted to Cockerell that Blunt was 'the great hero of my youth - somewhat like what Ruskin was to you'. But after praising the man, who 'oozed magnetism', his 'sense of adventure', his 'romantic conception of life' and his 'exquisite taste in art', Lytton cracked down rather harshly on Blunt's political opinions and his lack of sympathy for England during 'the huge tragedy of 1914-1918'. He accused him of having been 'monstrously selfish' and claimed that 'his whole attitude to life was from above to below'. These last charges were strongly denied by Neville Lytton's son, the present Earl of Lytton, who described them as 'blatantly untrue'.<sup>3</sup>

When the book sold out in England, and was reprinted in America (by Alfred A. Knopf, New York), Blunt was happily surprised; this was "an honour new to him", wrote Lady Gregory in the Preface, "for his work is not yet so widely known there as at home".<sup>4</sup> The critical response

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1. Viola Maynell (ed.), Friends of a Lifetime (1940), p. 324.
  2. Lord Lytton, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1961), p. 225. Quoting Lord Howard's Theatre of Life.
  3. Wilfrid Blunt, Cockerell (1964), pp. 188-9.
  4. Lady Gregory's Preface, My Diaries, p. vii. Cf: Blunt's letter to Samuel Chew in the latter's article, "Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: An Intimate View", The North American Review, 217 (May, 1923), pp. 664-675 (p. 668).

was most favourable. Robert M. Lovett, writing in The New Republic, considered the Diaries "a tapestry of the Victorian age, the design marked by recurring patterns and the whole glowing richly or somberly with the emotion which accompanied his every action".<sup>1</sup>

Lovett, who saw Blunt as an Englishman of the Renaissance, an Elizabethan who combined 'political with literary and religious and social interests' recommended the Diaries in his final assessment 'as a text book of the decadence of the Victorian age', because

On the one hand they give an unrivalled picture of the splendors of that age ... by one who was born to enjoy them - and on the other a study of the world, its hypocrisy, its lust for possession, its brutal sacrifice of the weak, and above all its incredible stupidity. They are a faithful record of the seed sown, of which today we are reaping the bitter harvest.<sup>2</sup>

Newman I. White likened Blunt to Shelley and to Byron 'without the Byronic vulgarity'. As a diarist, Blunt was compared to Samuel Pepys and Dorothy Wordsworth, the former having achieved better unity "by virtue of his longer entries and editorial method": But, since Blunt's entries were "possibly touched up in the light of subsequent developments", White believed that they lost "some value as a historical and personal revelation".<sup>3</sup> White cleverly recognized in Blunt's misanthropic utterances some echoes of Swift; "and yet, like Swift, he is a decidedly social creature, whose conversation and acquaintance are undoubtedly attractive".<sup>4</sup> White admired Blunt's ability to "differ as a gentleman", and gave this verdict at the end of his review:

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1. Robert M. Lovett, "The Victorian Götterdämmerung", The New Republic, 29 (Jan. 4, 1922), pp. 159-60 (p. 159).
  2. Ibid., p. 160.
  3. Newman I. White, "Wilfrid Blunt's Diaries", The South Atlantic Quarterly Review, 21 (Oct., 1922), pp. 360-4 (p. 361).
  4. Ibid., p. 363.

Not a very good Victorian, this Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, but a stout hearted idealist. If he has failed to affect the thought of his contemporaries, he has at least given posterity a set of diaries that will rank among the significant memoirs of his age.<sup>1</sup>

In an unsigned contribution to The New Republic of September 27, 1922, Blunt was compared to the famous naturalist William Henry Hudson (1841-1922), and his Diaries were associated with Hudson's admirable, autobiographical picture of his early life in the Argentine in Far Away and Long Ago (1918):

... Hudson and Blunt will live most in their immediately personal writings ... Both hated to see the fair face of [the] world insulted and destroyed by man.<sup>2</sup>

Again, Blunt was seen as an Elizabethan, not only in his heroic outlook or chivalrous qualities, but also as an observer of men in his social and national relations as well as his political environment and religious inclinations. The anonymous writer asserted that Blunt "received his inheritance through Burke, Swift, Milton, from Sir Philip Sidney".<sup>3</sup>

Ten years later, when My Diaries appeared in a single-volume, cheap edition, this opinion was echoed by another reviewer. Writing in the Fortnightly Review, Richard Church considered Blunt's romantic figure "a reincarnation of Sir Philip Sydney, born out of his time, and therefore embittered".<sup>4</sup> Church saw Blunt as "one of the last and most picturesque relics of feudal England", and the Diaries as

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1. Ibid., p. 364.

2. "Hudson and Blunt", The New Republic (Sept. 27, 1922), p. 114.

3. Ibid.

4. Richard Church, "A Modern Elizabethan", FR, 131 (July, 1932), p. 130.

one long lamentation over the vulgarization (especially by Liberals) of the English tradition and its sordid inflation into imperialism .... These diaries, packed with incident and thought, are too full to be called a book ... One just lives in them and emerges the wiser for the sophistication.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Francis Toye saw Blunt's political attitudes under adverse lights which gave them Quixotic features. Toye censured the diarist for passing "unjust judgements in plenty, notably with regard to the English in Egypt and the Italians in Tripoli".<sup>2</sup> He then asked a rhetorical question indicating his utter rejection of Blunt's view, without even referring to the moral consistency behind it. "Does one go to a passionate idealist for balanced judgement?" Toye exclaimed, in order to dismiss Blunt's "judgement" at a stroke. He preferred to see Blunt's support of the Irish Home Rule only in the light of the subsequent developments which led to the emergence of the I.R.A. Consequently, Blunt was condemned for cherishing "abstractions" rather than "concrete realities":

To Blunt, the most lovely things in the world were Liberty (with the biggest capitals) and horses.

Then, with a touch of malicious humour that only thinly disguises his own prejudice, Toye observed:

It is perhaps, not a mere co-incidence that two of the "oppressed nationalities" on whose behalf he went a-crusading were precisely those - the Arabs and the Irish - to whom horse is something of a fetish.<sup>3</sup>

The best reply to this prejudiced review is to quote Wilfrid Meynell's opinions of Blunt's "abstract ideals" which Toye found so repulsive.

In a letter to Blunt Meynell wrote:

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1. Ibid.
  2. Francis Toye "An English Don Quixote", The English Review, 55 (Nov., 1932), pp. 558-9 (p. 559).
  3. Ibid.

You have been in deed what England now is in word - the friend of small peoples, and you must take at least the comfort of finding lip-service given to the ideals that are yours. That they are Christian ideals, however imperfectly recognized as such, I am sure....<sup>1</sup>

Other, less enthusiastic assessments can be found in the following two samples:

His diaries and "Secret History" series, though no less biased than those of a Government Official, are of historical value.<sup>2</sup>

[His discussion of the Egyptian problem in My Diaries] forms a healthful corrective to the views set forth in such standard works as those by Milner and Cromer and can be neglected by no student of the Egyptian question.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the wide spectrum of opinions concerning Blunt and his Diaries. Even the adverse criticisms levelled at him were often mixed with admiration. Whatever the likes and dislikes of his critics, they were all unanimous in finding him interesting. As a "passionate idealist" who "touched life at its most different facets" (to use Ouida's words once more), he was bound to arouse both admiration and indignation in those who knew him, depending on the convictions, prejudices, sensibilities and weaknesses which he touched, irritated, challenged or awakened in them. He was always vociferous; and some of the subjects which he discussed were (and may perhaps remain) of a controversial nature. Yet, his personality was positive, electrifying and could not be ignored or slightly glossed over.

Sydney K. Mitchell tried to belittle Blunt when he considered him just

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1. Viola Meynell, Francis Thompson and Wilfrid Meynell: A Memoir (1952), p. 78.
  2. Edith Batho and Bonamy Dobrée, The Victorians and After (1938; rptd. 1950), p. 241.
  3. Sydney K. Mitchell, "British Policy in Retrospect", The Yale Review, 12 (N.S.) (April, 1923), pp. 664-8 (p. 667).

... a raconteur of tales, interesting to us and important because they happen to concern men who directed British policy, or who were prominent in the intellectual and religious life of the country.<sup>1</sup>

In order to have a more balanced assessment of the contents of the diaries of this remarkable man, who moved with equal grace in both the political and beau mondes, it is essential to supplement Mitchell's note with an important point, properly made by Arthur Ponsonby:

We have not in Wilfrid Blunt the diarist, notebook in hand, seeking the company of celebrities in order to jot down their bon mots. We have a man who himself attracted the men of the day; they sought his company and he observed them, noted their foibles and wrote down what they said. We have not our friend, the snob seeking out the aristocrats even if he could get no word with them, but the aristocrat whose peculiarities and wide interests brought men and women of all calibres to his doorstep while he took stock of them.<sup>2</sup>

The assessment of Frank Harris, also carries conviction:

He knew everybody in England that counted, and, so far as my knowledge of literature went, his judgement seemed admirably correct.<sup>3</sup>

... as a book, it [My Diaries] may live with the Greville Memoirs, although it does not give the best of Blunt.<sup>4</sup>

Blunt's was distinctly a liberating influence, and one was always conscious in him of high standards and ideal aims: a charming personality.<sup>5</sup>

This "charming personality" retained its magnetism till the end.

Recalling his visit to the ageing squire in his "Elysian hermitage" in the summer of 1919, Siegfried Sassoon wrote:

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1. Ibid., p. 668.
  2. Arthur Ponsonby, More English Diaries (1927), p. 242.
  3. Frank Harris, Contemporary Portraits, Fourth Series (1924), p. 18.
  4. Ibid., p. 29.
  5. Ibid., p. 31.



It had not occurred to me before that an old man might be young and adventurous in spirit. This penetrating impression I had instinctively divined from his face, and it has since been confirmed by what I have read in his printed Diaries.<sup>1</sup>

Mary Colum was so impressed by Blunt's grand-scale "imperial gossip" that she likened his Diaries to the Mémoires of Louis de Rouvroy, Saint Simon, and the Annals of the Roman historian, Tacitus, asserting that Blunt "knew all the people who made the history of his time as well as most of those who made the poetry".<sup>2</sup>

When put together, these testimonies and estimations will enable us to endorse Philip Guedalla's judgement that

The diary of Mr. Wilfrid Blunt, reinforced by his later comments and explanations ... deserves a better fate than that evisceration by hasty journalistic persons in search of anecdotes about well-known people which is the normal destiny of reprinted journals,<sup>3</sup>

and to conclude positively with him that Blunt's journal is "the fine and enduring presentation of a fearless and honourable career".<sup>4</sup>

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1. Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey, 1916-1920 (1945), p. 154.
  2. Mary Colum, Life and the Dream, 1947 (First published 1928), p. 183.
  3. Philip Guedalla, Supers and Supermen (1921), p. 228.
  4. Ibid., p. 230.

CHAPTER VI : BLUNT'S BELIEFS: EVOLUTION, RELIGION AND POLITICAL REVIVAL

Blunt's religious and intellectual experience is a spiritual odyssey of almost epic proportions. Religious questions never ceased to haunt him from the tender age of thirteen (when he was converted into a Roman Catholic through the pressure of his mother, who had been converted by Cardinal Manning), till the end of his life.

In following the chart of his religious faith, vacillation, apostasy, doubt, crisis of thought, material monism, superstition, this chapter will deal with Blunt's creative writings, in both prose and verse, which describe these different aspects. Particular attention will be paid to three important works, namely Proteus and Amadeus, (1878), The Future of Islam, (1882) and Satan Absolved, (1899).

Although he lived at odds with his age in more than one field, Blunt was the product of this age in matters pertaining to religious faith, the metaphysical questions and the big battles between science and the old certainties of the Christian concept of the hereafter. This battle shook and impaired the greatest minds of the nineteenth century. Blunt found himself in the middle of it, called upon to take one of the two conflicting sides, when he was still at the young age of 20.

In his "autobiography till 1857" he told his wife, referring to the incident of his baptism into the Catholic Church in 1853, that he vowed "never to touch holy water with the end of a barge pole."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, his education in two staunchly Roman Catholic schools at Oscott and Stonyhurst seems to have "disciplined" him to the degree

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1. "The Wentworth Bequest", B.M. Add. MSS. (No. 54069).

that, looking back at those early days, he asserted: "If I had stayed at Stonyhurst I would have become a Jesuit".<sup>1</sup> Remembering his days as a schoolboy at St. Mary's School, Oscott, where the Church became his "guardian", clothing him "in her mood", he wrote:

No sound, no voice within that sanctuary  
Told me of common evil. Unsubdued  
And vast and strange, a thing from which to flee,  
The world lay there without us. We within,  
Fenced in and folded safe in our strong home,  
Knew nothing of the sorrow and the sin.<sup>2</sup>

Much later, while meditating his past life, Blunt was to testify:

"The Jesuit novitiate is the most mentally crushing process ever invented", and to sympathize with Count Paul Hoensbroech's description of the harrowing rigours of the *society* in his book entitled Fourteen Years a Jesuit.<sup>3</sup>

Blunt's unquestioning belief, inculcated by his Jesuit tutors and confessors, received a shattering blow when he was at Frankfurt early in 1861, where everybody was discussing the religious implications of the then newly published Origin of Species. He wrote to his confessor seeking permission to read it, but this was denied him. However, he read it, with the result that he immediately lost what he called his "intellectual innocence". He became a materialist to whom Matter was the Eternal, Self-existent Thing, while God became suddenly "an unnecessary hypothesis".<sup>4</sup> The ease with which scepticism occupied his mind to replace the certainties of his old faith shocked him; and he was unhappy. His heart, his unreasoning, innermost feelings and instincts refused to follow his cold, calculating intellect. The new philosophy

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1. Ibid.

2. W.S. Blunt, "Esther", XXIII, The Poetical Works, 2 vols. (1914), I, p. 14.

3. My Diaries, pp. 784-5.

4. Ibid., pp. 644-5.

of "Matter-God" and "Mind an accident of Matter" was discussed by Blunt in a paper he wrote for Count Usedom in private, as an answer to an article in the German newspaper Die Zeit. This early work by Blunt contained what he claimed to be the seeds of materialist Monism, thus forestalling the philosophical doctrine of Haeckel, who had "published nothing" in 1861.

This conflict between the young man's reason and emotion also produced some of his earliest poems. These reflect the fluctuations of his mood, brought about by this devastating psychological earthquake. Some of them are touching, charged with deep emotion; others are dull and ponderous. A number of these autobiographical poems appeared in his Sonnets and Songs by Proteus, (1875), but were deleted from all subsequent editions, including the last two volumes of Blunt's Poetical Works, (1914). This gives them some significance, in the sense that they throw some light on Blunt's inner life at a time of deepening crisis, and, as such, deserve to be quoted. In "Faith's Apostasy", for example, the poet deploras faith's defeat:

O Faith, I could pardon thee  
That thy old vows are dead:  
Cruel knowledge bade thee flee;  
At her solemn mockery  
Faith turned pale and fled.<sup>1</sup>

Love and hope also ran away, leaving the desolate poet crying:

What is God? a law, a fate  
Too old for love, too strong for hate?  
Man? the prisoner of his power,  
An outcast on an iron shore  
Forgotten, famine-struck and sore.<sup>2</sup>

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1. W.S. Blunt, Sonnets and Songs by Proteus, (1875), p. 54.
  2. Ibid., p. 56.

This "famine" is spiritual. Another poem shows the perplexed youth seeking aid and succour from the very God whose existence he had denied. In "A Prayer", Blunt supplicates in despair:

Lighten our darkness, Lord,  
And with thy flaming sword  
Sever the webs that hide from us the light;  
Have we not sought in tears  
Some ransom for our fears,  
Some thread of truth to guide us in this labyrinth of night.<sup>1</sup>

Although man "has unmade the God which he had made", he remains, despite the huge increase and development of his knowledge, puzzled before the simple riddle of his birth, and powerless before death - which is the end of everything, the total ultimate sum. Death is suddenly shorn of the golden hope of resurrection and everlasting life in the hereafter, and herein lies life's "unwritten Tragedy"! He was appalled at the prospect of nothingness replacing God, and all his feelings of self-respect and human vanity suffered accordingly. In another sonnet, given the title "The Pride of Unbelief" in subsequent editions, he moans:

... I, but yesterday  
Was God's own son in his own likeness bred.  
And thrice strange pride! who thus am cast away  
And lost and scorned and disinnerited.<sup>2</sup>

The last line seems to have been so precise in describing Blunt's feelings at the time that it was echoed in the first letter (concerning faith) which he addressed to Dr. Charles Meynell, his old tutor, some fifteen years later, in 1876.<sup>3</sup> There are other, vague references to this crisis in Blunt's autobiographical poem "Quatrains of Life", which is an imaginative retrospect recapturing aspects of that early

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1. Ibid., p. 107.

2. Ibid., p. 58; "The Pride of Unbelief", Poetical Works, I, p. 84.

3. W.S. Blunt and Dr. Charles Meynell, Proteus and Amadeus: A Correspondence, edited with an Introduction by Aubrey de Vere, (1878), pp. 5-6.

period.<sup>1</sup> But the most important poem, which describes the young man's crude attempt to solve the problem by some sort of compromise is the one entitled "Body and Soul". This poem, sub-titled "A Metaphysical Argument" was written on July 16, 1861, in Blunt's black-covered note book, now in the possession of Mr. C.E. Blunt. The poem, which is given a prominent place in the second volume of Blunt's Poetical Works (pp. 69-73) had a sequel in the manuscript, dated August 1861. This sequel is entitled (in Blunt's hand) "a dream in which perhaps is portrayed the fatal fight between body and soul". For some reason, Blunt detached this sequel and published it among other lyrics under the title "The Soul's Mutiny", in the volume entitled Esther ... (1892). In the Poetical Works of 1914, he again separated it from where it originally belonged and put it among his "Love Lyrics" in the first volume (pp. 146-8). The two poems, however, must be read together in order to give a complete picture of Blunt's state of mind at the time. "Body and Soul" is a dull dialogue written in the form of a parable where both body and soul are personified, coming before the court of man, each putting its case for sovereignty and domination of the other. The soul claims priority because of her divine source, her affinity with fire and the wind as a pure "simple essence" which is immortal and "unchanged while all beside / Change and decay". Though fallen, "exiled by Fate / From her old home Eternity", the soul demands to be given custody of the body in the name of faith:

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1. W.S. Blunt, "Quatrains of Life", Poetical Works, I, pp. 419-425.

Or is faith nothing? O I feel  
Pity for this poor thing of dust;  
And that is why I bid him kneel  
And be ennobled, for he must  
kneel first before his queen in trust.<sup>1</sup>

The body wants no such bondage. Using the theory of Evolution, it takes back its ancestry to the hazy beginning of Time, developing "From form to form, from age to age". It refuses the soul's allegations of having sublimer birth, and claims that "Soul came later". It claims that both of them came from "old Matter". Man then gives judgement, which is an unconvincing compromise asking both litigants to "work ... together as friends", advising them:

Learn this; alone ye nothing can  
Yet both together ye make man.<sup>2</sup>

This compromise, however, proves unworkable in the sequel. "The Soul's Mutiny" is a powerful poem written as an allegorical dream. The soul is portrayed as a majestic "mighty woman" ordering the crew of a galley. Everything works smoothly under her command until she is defied by "a slender child" who whispers to the sailors "In honied words which I had wished to learn". Everybody refuses to work, leaving the ship adrift. The angry queen looks at the mutinous boy who dared to "dispute her old mastery":

And yet nor anger nor proud looks might quell  
The fearless eyes which smiled out mutiny,  
Till her own heart seemed stricken with the spell.<sup>3</sup>

Unable to put up with such a mischievous challenge, the queen burns the ship, to let "the traitors perish in their shame":

The ship went down, and a sad cry arose,  
Stifled with smoke and rushing waters in.  
The silent stream, as heedless of men's<sup>4</sup> woes,  
Went on its way as they had ever been.

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1. W.S. Blunt, "Body and Soul", Poetical Works, II, pp. 70-71.
  2. Ibid., p. 73.
  3. W.S. Blunt, "The Soul's Mutiny", Poetical Works, I, p. 147.
  4. Ibid., p. 148.

The heedlessness of the stream represents nature as a blind force, which is neither created nor controllable by an independent Creator. Blunt continued to suffer from this dichotomy of body-soul conflict for the rest of his life. He sometimes describes it as "the malady of the age in which I was born",<sup>1</sup> or the "contest between the stubbornness of reason and the soul's desire for an unreasoning belief".<sup>2</sup> Till the very end, he was never able to reconcile his agnostic materialism with unreasoned faith or the creed of renunciation which denounces the pleasures of the earthly flesh. He could not accept the logic of materialism with indifference or settle down happily with it. He continued his painful search, complaining of the material world's inability to satisfy the needs of his soul. He cries in anguish:

We ask for wisdom. Knowledge first of all  
Demands our vows from her high pedestal.  
We wish ourselves in act as wise as gods,<sup>3</sup>  
Nor even in age dare quite our oath recall.

This cry is recurrent in the works of Blunt, to whom God has become a shadowy figure, a remote, indifferent power:

For He heareth not, nor seeth. As we to the motes in our blood,  
So is He to our lives, a possible symbol of power, a formula  
half understood.  
But the voice of Him, where? the hand grip, where? A child's  
cry lost in a wood.<sup>4</sup>

Blunt was neither like the atheist Swinburne, nor the Puritain Andrew Marvell. Although he could testify with the former that the goddess of the earth, Hertha, is the supreme source of eternal life and the producer of the drama of change, death and development, he could not

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1. W.S. Blunt, The Land War in Ireland (1912), p. 178.
  2. W.S. Blunt, Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt, Part II, India (1907), p. 17.
  3. "Quatrains of Life", Poetical Works, I, p. 423.
  4. "The Widsom of Merlyn", Poetical Works, II, p. 469.



completely reject the teachings of traditional religion; nor could he cry with Swinburne at the end of the latter's "Hymn of Man": "Glory to Man in the highest, for Man is the Master of things". Far from being "Master", Blunt saw man as a "lost child" in this huge universe. Far from glorifying man, Blunt considered him as the only blemish in an otherwise beautiful and peaceful world. On the other hand, the soul scores a resounding victory in Marvell's poem, entitled "Dialogue Between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure". Marvell uses military language (derived from the atmosphere of the Civil War), where the soul is portrayed wearing an "immortal shield" whose power is matched by the soul's indestructible resolution to resist all the temptations of sensual pleasure. Blunt's language is a philosophical dialectic, using the jargons of scientific and geological theories that were circulating in the second half of the nineteenth century.

While Blunt's crisis of faith was at its height, news came that his sister, Alice, had decided to become a nun. Stunned and infuriated, he rushed back to England, and, after some difficulty, succeeded in dissuading her from such a scheme. In this he was supported by his aunt, Lady Leconfield, against his devout Catholic brother, Francis, who later endowed the Capuchin fathers with their friary at Crawley, near Crabbet. Blunt considered this as a triumph against the Church. From then on he stopped going to Mass and "turned his back on heaven", as it were, although he had ended his philosophical paper, only a short while before, with this earnest plea:

For God's sake and His recognition among men, let us avoid the Natur-Forscher and hold fast by our eternal unreasonable consciousness of a Father who is in Heaven.

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1. My Diaries, p. 645.

For some time he tried to make the interest of his diplomatic career fill the gap; but there was no let-up in his acute crisis of thought. In despair, he decided to make another bid to go back to the fold of Christian believers. When he was transferred from Frankfurt to Madrid in the summer of 1862, he was given a few weeks' leave. This he decided to spend in a spiritual retreat at the house of the Redemptorists in Clapham.

There in the garden, while the thrushes sang.  
I listened to his prayer with a mute pang.  
That man of God who argued with my soul,<sup>1</sup>  
And still the vesper chorus rang and rang.

Blunt was seeking "divine guidance", some tangible sign to manifest the existence of God. The internal voice of his conscience spoke to him of "feasts less vain than the world's food" and "Of heavenly things in that calm brotherhood". He spent the days in study and contemplation. Reading St. Augustine's Confessions, he listened intently, half-expecting to hear the voice Augustine had heard. But his reason, with its "cruel logic" was never appeased. He even longed to taste the pleasures of sin which Augustine enjoyed before repenting and leading a life of chastity. One of the fathers, unable to convince Blunt with arguments, offered to throw himself down the huge tank, to die in his sin, if this would win Blunt to the camp of the faithful believers. Recalling this remarkable incident Blunt wrote:

For lo, he said, "thus near us lies the end;  
A step - no more - may mar our lives or mend.  
This side a little, and hell gapes for us;  
On that side Heaven holds out strong hands, a friend.

"And he who fears is wise. Oh look" he cried,  
"Here in this pool lies Death with its arms wide.  
Speak. Shall I buy you life at cost of mine?<sup>2</sup>  
Nay; I would drown, though in my sin I died".

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1. "Quatrains of Life", Poetical Works, I, p. 421.
  2. Ibid.

But no divine light or grace came. Blunt, like Adam, went out of the "heaven" of that Catholic haven, as a staunch materialist, but unhappy after having tasted the "forbidden fruit" of knowledge. This experience was by no means unique, and this was not the last time that Blunt should seek the protection of traditional religion, or crave to believe in religious teachings about the existence of an everlasting life in the hereafter, in the world beyond the grave.

Having thus shed these metaphysical aspects of religious conviction, Blunt began to feel "ashamed" of his virtue, and to crave for the satisfaction of the needs of his body. He indulged in gambling, womanizing and bull-fighting in Madrid. However, his first "grande passion", Catherine Walters, entered his life only a year later, in Paris, in the summer of 1863. For two or three years he was satisfied with this sort of human love as a substitute for theology and the tangled philosophical problems concerning the divine love. Still, the questions raised by his crisis of faith did not go away. They became dormant, relegated to the background as the young, handsome poet indulged his carnal desires, and tried to have an active social life.

The years which can be singled out as important landmarks revealing the highlights of a pilgrim's progress in Blunt's religious thought are 1861-2, 1876-8, 1886 and 1897-9.

By the time his thoughts began to turn to religion once more in 1876, much water had run under the bridge of his life. He had been through an acute emotional turmoil after the passionate affair with "Skittles" (Catherine Walters); he had married Byron's granddaughter, Lady Anne Isabella Milbanke Noël; he had withdrawn from the diplomatic service; he had lost both his sister and brother in the same year (1872); he had indulged in an almost interminable series of love affairs,

including "the longest love of my life" with Maria Margaret (Minnie) Pollen; he had tried several times to beget a male heir to the estate which he inherited from his older brother, but in vain. His only child that lived was a girl. He was not only susceptible to sexual temptation, being a handsome man whose looks made the ladies of high society seek him out; but it seems that he was seeking to quench a thirst for vague, spiritual needs, in addition to the mere physical gratification of his natural urges.

Be that as it may, he decided to "lead a better life," a "vita nuova". He wrote a sonnet declaring this intention:

I am tired of folly, tired of my own ways,  
Love is a strife. I do not want to strive.  
If I had foes I now would make my peace.

. . .

I would repent in sackcloth if needs be.  
I would serve God and expiate my sin,<sup>1</sup>  
Abjure love and thee - ay, even thee.

During 1876 and 1877 Blunt exchanged a number of letters with his old Oscott tutor, Dr. Charles Meynell, whom he also visited and had direct, personal dialogues with. It was this correspondence which resulted in a book published anonymously as Proteus and Amadeus: A Correspondence, (1878). The pseudonyms were apt, Proteus being as changeable as Blunt's moods and Amadeus (the name adopted by Meynell) meaning the one who "loved God". In this dialogue, Blunt plays the role of the honest doubter who is serious of purpose, and who wishes to reconcile his scientific knowledge to the revealed faith of Scripture, while Dr. Meynell tries to argue, through philosophy and logic, the inevitability of the existence of God. Cardinal Newman was very much interested, and wanted to do the editing himself. Blunt

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1. "Gods and False Gods", LXXXII, Poetical Works, I, p. 79.

visited him at Edgbaston for this purpose. The job of editing the letters and writing an introduction, however, finally fell to Aubrey de Vere. Newman wrote a glowing review of the book and published it, unsigned, in the Guardian of July 17, 1878 (pp. 1002-1004). The book is the only published work by Blunt which reveals, with much candour and serious dignity, the innermost private thoughts and feelings of the poet at this particular period of his life. The arguments used by both correspondents may sound old fashioned to the modern reader; but they reflect the deep interest, concern and anxiety which surrounded this important subject in the minds of the Victorians, even after the big rhetorical battles between Darwinism and the Church had subsided.

In this correspondence, "Proteus" holds Amadeus responsible for his errors and miseries because it was Amadeus who first taught Proteus to think, "and surely thought is at the root of all evil" (p. 3). He then urges Amadeus to "do something towards saving a soul you have brought so near perdition". Proteus goes on to ask his tutor to "throw the light of Christian philosophy" on certain fundamental questions, "involving life and death to my soul". He likens himself to a noble heir who discovers suddenly that the registers of his family are forged, that he is the son of a gypsy. He leaves the mansion to become a highwayman till he is caught. How can his faith in the nobility of his origin be restored? (p. 5). Proteus concludes his first letter with a desperate plea:

... I would give everything I possess for a reasonable excuse to abandon reason, or better still, to find a cure for my madness in reason itself, a hair of the dog that bit me.  
(p. 6)

The two main questions for the discussion are proposed by Proteus in his second letter:

1. Is there a reasonable probability (apart from the teaching of the church) of the existence of a personal God, just and merciful, who rules the world?
2. What are our chances of a future life?  
(pp. 7-8)

It is obvious that, although materialistic in his arguments, Blunt's sympathies are as far away from atheistic Darwinism as could be. He exclaims:

If I could fall in love with unbelief as many do, I should be happier, and perhaps should find comfort in martyrdom for Truth's sake.

(p. 8)

Proteus expresses his great respect for the Roman Catholic Church and reverence of the Jesuits who educated him; but he seeks help in facing the questions posed, which must not be answered with the repeated cry "these things are too terrible. They cannot be true" (p. 10).

Amadeus, the believer, uses the well-known arguments of design and diversity, relying heavily on Paley, in an attempt to prove from the structure of external natural things that there must be a creator. He also uses the subjective argument that belief in God is innate at the depth of human nature. "Newman says that he believes in God for the same reason that he believes in his own existence" (pp. 12-13), Meynell says, referring to Newman's Grammar of Assent. Then he appeals to the theory of causation, ignoring Kant's assertion that nothing that exists in this world should be used to prove what exists outside this world.

Amadeus uses the variety in species to prove that God is personal:

How He seems to revel in the infinite resources of his inventiveness!  
How many countless variations of melody in one simple theme, in this Divine Artist.

(p. 16)

From this variation, to which he gives examples (100,000 varieties of humming birds), Amadeus concludes that God is individual, intelligent

and free. "God is personal if Turner or Beethoven be personal" (p. 17). In fact, this is a concept from neo-Platonic philosophy which found its way into Christianity in the days of Augustine. It was elaborately discussed by Leibniz in Theodicy (1710):

The divine purpose in creating, which is to manifest God's goodness beyond the borders of his own being, is better served by the production of a richly varied realm rather than only of a single type of existence.<sup>1</sup>

Amadeus also resorts to Biblical quotations from the Old Testament to support this argument of variety, in which, he believes, God seems to appeal even to the sense of humour "with which it pleased Him to endow the minds of men" (p. 17). Then he speaks of the human conscience, which is pleased with the good deed and saddened with the bad, as something that God has implanted in the heart. As for God's justice, he does not want to question God's judgements as Jeremias has done, because he knows that, compared to God, he is a mere child, whose knowledge does not extend to "the whole state of the case" (p. 19). Then he declares that the voice of man's conscience must be coming from God. Amadeus's first letter began with a stress on the point that "If there was an epoch when there was nothing, there would be nothing now" (p. 14). He concludes: "I say that there is more than a reasonable probability that there is a God" (p. 20). He even resorts to a mystic notion: "there is an infinite craving in the heart of man which only God can satisfy", and Augustine's "All things are restless, until they find their rest in Me". (pp. 20-21).

Blunt's plan in this correspondence included a sketch of his religious and spiritual experience, with an attempt to solicit a

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1. John Hick, Evil and the God of Love, (Fontana, 1968), p. 161.

similar report from Meynell in order to compare notes, as it were, with the experiences of saints in the early history of the Church. Then comes the discussion of evidence in the material world, followed by the metaphysical arguments. Blunt says in one of his "Proteus" letters that in his childhood and boyhood he did not feel seriously his "relations with the unseen world". Instead of being afraid of ghosts, for example, he was afraid of snakes, robbers, wolves and other material fancies. (p. 22). His subjective discovery of "God's government of the world" came later, under the influence of Father Carter at school. He became his spiritual father, just as Meynell became his "intellectual father" (p. 24). He describes his shock at the discovery of "other" Christians, the Protestants in Switzerland, who had fundamental differences of dogma, and how this made him think seriously of the existence of "more faiths than one". (p. 26). He then admits:

I devoured eagerly much miscellaneous infidelity, such as one finds in newspapers and magazines. I was sorry for such indulgence ... and confessed it regularly as a sin.  
(p. 26)

These "infidelities", read without permission, included Essays and Reviews, Vestiges of Creation and the Origin of Species, "the last a work which had more influence on me than any other in forming my opinions" (p. 27). This was the beginning of his indulgence "without reserve in ... intellectual debauch", "and before long, from looking on God as my enemy, I began to disbelieve in his existence at all" (p. 28).

When this "alternative of God or nothingness" dawned on him, he was "appalled"; the shock almost paralysed him, and he did not dare go riding in the countryside for fear of breaking his "miserable neck".



However, his love affairs diverted him from such morbid brooding for at least three years (1863-66). He was so much absorbed that he disagreed with "Amadeus", who believed that no human love can possibly satisfy the deep yearnings of the soul. Indulging in carnal pleasures, he felt himself "walking some cubits high above the ground", because "As long as I was in love, my love sufficed me". (p. 29)

This is, perhaps, one of the most important keys in understanding Blunt's temperament. In the long series of love affairs filling more than half a century of his life, and in his gypsy-like travels, and in his endless political quarrels, there lurks a deep spiritual thirst, a fever, a search for complete fulfillment which makes him a latter-day "Wandering Jew". The worldly pleasures were merely temporary sedatives which dimmed his sense of spiritual void, but never stopped his melancholy search. He complains:

But still the same darkness encloses me. I cannot find God ... There is no feeling in my soul of the existence of a being with whom she spiritually can converse, or whom she can believe to be listening to her prayers. (p. 29)

He then states that the theory of evolution, supported by the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century, is "the solution of the chief riddle of the earth, the existence of man". It is this doctrine which revealed faith must contend with, since "it would be unwise to rely entirely on the proofs of God's action ... which sufficed our fathers". (p. 32)

Taking up the well known "watch" argument, Blunt (Proteus) asserts that a study of this instrument leads to the conclusion that it is "a work of human intelligence bearing the stamp of the mind's ways of acting". But he admits that he fails to see the analogy with the

universe, whose "countless bodies of fire" with their endless revolutions "present no meaning, no purpose, no design". (pp. 36-38) This apparent lack of purpose in both the living and inanimate worlds is a nagging problem which, he feels, cannot be explained away by saying "God's reason is not our reason, His justice not our justice, His mind not our mind". (p. 39) He exclaims, with agony, rather than arrogance:

I confess that, if it can be shown that evolution is a baseless fabric, void of credibility, I will throw science to the winds, and worship God in nature as David and our fathers did.

(p. 40)

To Blunt, the similarity in structure in the animal world denotes consanguinity, and this precludes design. Although Blunt illustrates this point with several examples, he admits his failure to interpret the beauty and variety of flowers, and the failure of the evolution theory to account for the similarity between a leaf and a butterfly (pp. 42-43). Instead of seeing in the organic world the mind of a Creator at work, he contends that the question is "no longer an intellectual alternative between accident and design, but a physical problem susceptible of historic proof" (p. 41). But the "proof" which he proceeds to submit, on behalf of the evolutionists, is itself no more than a hypothesis:

... matter, under certain chemical conditions not yet understood, has at some previous time acquired, if it may not still be acquiring, in addition to its ordinary qualities ... a new accidental quality called life.

(p. 43)

This idea is as old as ancient Greece, if not older. We find its origins in the speculative theories of Heraclitus, Democritus, Epicurus and Aristotle.<sup>1</sup> Empedocles also believed in spontaneous generation and natural selection; the idea is also present in

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1. Lionel Stevenson, Darwin Among the Poets, (New York, 1963), pp. 18-20.

Lucretius's De Rerum Natura.<sup>1</sup> Some Muslim philosophers discussed similar speculations in the Middle Ages. They include Abu Bakr ibn el-Tufail, Ibn Bajeh (Avempace) and Ikhwan el-Safā (The Brothers of Purity). In chemistry, the transmutability of metals was a basic assumption, imbued with certain ritual occults and supernatural, mystical elements. Through animism, the ancients "believed in a life-force or vital principle permeating all nature, manifesting itself in a graduated scale of being".<sup>2</sup> However,

The long-term significance of this movement was that in the nineteenth century it supplied the conceptual framework for experimental sciences like physics and chemistry, and later, the model for all experimental science, including geology and biology.<sup>3</sup>

Blunt is not interested in how this power of life and reproduction was acquired by matter. He adopts the Darwinian principle of the struggle for survival, stressing that "all that I have seen [in 15 years of travel up to 1876] has corroborated and exemplified it, with the single exception ... of the variety and beauty of flowers" (p. 45). Writing in 1876, Blunt notes that the evolution theory had become acceptable to "three out of every four" people, and "nearly all the scientific world". As for the law of natural selection in the organic world, he insists that it is fortuitous, with no deliberate mental process, but a mere natural adaptation of means to an end, since nature's processes have "no mathematical proportion in the world of living organisms", nor "pictorial imitation" stemming out of aesthetic considerations (p. 47). He finds beauty a phenomenon which is unaccounted for in these "natural" laws and processes:

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1. Ibid., p. 20.

2. Ibid., p. 22.

3. James Richmond, Faith and Philosophy (Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), p. 33.

Are the trees, grass and flowers conscious of their own beauty?  
No! This is a riddle which no Darwin has yet read.

(p. 49)

Then he repeats his questions about "a general purpose", "a conscious will working ... towards a definite end", but admits that he "can find no answer to these questions out of Revealed Religion" (p. 50). To him, the living creatures, including man, are too "insignificant" to have "merited an elaborate design" in the Universe; and, since he sees no purpose in this life, he wonders why man should struggle for a world to come. Even beauty, which has puzzled him, finds a materialistic interpretation as "a condition of matter which our senses have learnt to appreciate" (p. 52). Instead of perceiving the hand of God behind the consistent harmony of things, he says "it would be more consistent to give each of the stars its God" (p. 53).

Carrying his argument along these lines, Blunt cannot see in nature any sign of God's justice and mercy. All he can see is the ruthless law of the jungle, which makes him deduce that nature is not "cruel" but "careless" and totally indifferent. This aspect of Darwinism distressed Blunt in the same way that it had distressed both Tennyson and Newman. He gives extensive quotations from Newman's Apologia, where "The sight of the world is nothing else than the prophet's scroll full of 'lamentation, and mourning and woe'". This state of affairs inflicted upon Newman's mind "the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution". But, while Newman found his subjective solution in faith, in "this voice speaking so clearly in my conscience and my heart", Blunt could hear no such voice (pp. 55-56). This question tormented Blunt; in fact, it continued to rankle deep in the Victorian conscience. Many lines in Blunt's poetry echo Tennyson's bewilderment in In Memoriam. Blunt denounces materialism's real threat

to faith:

Unblest discovery of an age too real!  
They needed not the beauty of the earth,  
Who held heaven's hope for their supreme ideal,  
And found in worlds unseen a better birth.  
What to the eyes of faith were the hills worth,  
The voiceless forests, the unpeopled coasts,  
The wilderness void of sentient mirth?  
In death men praise thee not, Thou Lord of Hosts!<sup>1</sup>

Blunt occasionally identifies himself with the devout believers who turn away from the consequences of atheism. Like Newman, the "Canon of Aughrim", Blunt's portrayal of Dr. Duggan in a poem with this title published in In Vinculis, found solace in believing that the wrongs of this world will eventually be righted; he could not bring himself to believe in social Darwinism and its savage principle of "Might is Right":

Only I dare not believe it. I hold the justice of Heaven  
Larger than all the science, and welled from a purer fount;  
God as greater than Nature, His law than the wonders seven,  
Darwin's sermon on Man redeemed by that on the Mount.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude comes near to that of agnostics such as J.S. Mill and George Eliot. These beliefs in the moral value of the Sermon on the Mount brought them close to ideas of the Broad Church which were represented by Jowett and the contributors to Essays and Reviews.<sup>3</sup> Although Blunt accepted the theory of evolution, he was very indignant at the attempts of the imperialists to utilize it in the field of sociology and anthropology to prove the white man's "superiority" and "fitness to survive" in an unequal battle. Under this pretext, imperialists, of whom Balfour was one among many, tried to justify the slaughter of black Africans; Blunt was disgusted with

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1. W.S. Blunt, A New Pilgrimage (1889), p. 24.
  2. W.S. Blunt, "The Canon of Aughrim", Poetical Works, II, p. 252. Cf: My Diaries, pp. 346-7, for a reference Blunt's rejection of Nietzsche's "Doctrine of Force".
  3. A.O.J. Cockshut, The Unbelievers (1964), pp. 151, 153, 154.

this misrepresentation of Darwinian ideas.<sup>1</sup> His hatred of imperialism later developed into the misanthropy expressed in Satan Absolved. He could not countenance the white man's havoc in Asia and Africa; developed further, his ideas led to his condemnation of man as the only mischief maker in the Universe.

Blunt's dilemma, which he shared with the agnostics of the second half of the nineteenth century such as Huxley, Tyndall and Haeckel, was that, the rejection of Christianity and theism produced no alternative, comprehensive and consistent system of ethics to replace it. Blunt's attacks on imperialism were launched on moral grounds. Man's emotional behaviour, conscience and innate sense of honour and virtue usually involve abstract, metaphysical and philosophical principles whose explanation falls beyond the laws of mechanical physics and evolutionary biology. Blunt wanted to be a moralist preaching virtue to a society which believed in opportunist utilitarianism; yet he himself remained a staunch materialist, not believing in the rewards of virtue in a future life. In one of Proteus' letters to Amadeus, Blunt boldly gives Matter almost all the attributes that theologians usually reserve for God. Matter is described as eternal, infinite, all powerful, all just, wise and beautiful (without being aware of its justice, beauty, or wisdom) (pp. 56-57). The trouble was not here, since St. Augustine and other church fathers argued that it mattered little just how creation had occurred. The point of friction was in carrying over the assumptions of natural science to the field of social science.

Another point of controversy stemmed from the insistence of

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1. My Diaries, pp. 69-70.

the 'fundamentalists' on the literalness of the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, buttressed by the belief that the Creation was six thousand years old. In Proteus and Amadeus, Dr. Charles Meynell (Amadeus) avoids this issue. He rather stresses the limitations of man's knowledge and urges science to be modest because its new discoveries do not warrant sweeping generalizations, since there are so many more unknown things in the univers:

Science professes to explain to us the Book of Nature; and behold ... the Book is written in cypher, which seems ... unmeaning at first sight ...

(p. 62)

He then argues that the natural laws of the solar system are not inherent in the heavenly bodies, but imposed on them ab extra:

The material comes from the sun; but whence their laws, revolutions, beauty and proportions? Could the sun of itself have projected them mathematically?

(Meynell's stress; p. 66)

Nevertheless, Meynell concedes two main premises of the theory of evolution: the great length of geological time and the derivative, rather than immediate creation of the species. He thus interprets the 'six days' figuratively (pp. 68-69). Basing his arguments on Origen, Augustine, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, he claims that Faith accommodates the doctrine of evolution through a law formulated by God:

He conferred forces on the elements of earth and water, which enabled them naturally to produce the various species of organic beings. This power ... remains attached to the elements throughout all time.

(pp. 71-2)

But when it comes to man's ancestry, Meynell asserts the supernatural origin of man, not only because he has a soul, but because the law of natural selection cannot account for "the brain, the hand, and the human voice, the distribution of hair on the body, and the absence of the prehensile foot" (p. 73). Man is thus exempted from this law, which is

"not the only account of the origin of species" (p. 74). Conceding, in another letter, that Natural Selection "throws a flood of light" on numerous curious facts, "Amadeus" proceeds to contend that this doctrine is flawed, since it "does not explain the instinct of animals, nor ... the beautiful in natural objects [nor] ... the infertility of hybrids" (pp. 76-77). Moreover, it explains "how the individual is preserved, but not ... how he is produced" (Meynell's stresses). The reproductive system itself is contrived rather than fortuitous. He also gives the cases of the hunting spider, the whale and the kangaroo as *illustrations* of the retention of primitive organs that should, according to the law of natural selection, have disappeared long ago. Then, leaning on the authority of Dr. Mivart's Genesis of the Species, Amadeus concludes that the world "has developed" and that "the human race is a witness of an exceptionally stable and unchanging condition of things" (p. 84). Two separate letters are devoted to the arguments of the animal instincts and the beauty of natural things as two phenomena which can neither be ignored nor accounted for by the Darwinian theory of evolution. A distinction is made between the beautiful, the useful, the beneficial, the agreeable and the fit, and thus Blunt's tentative definition of the beautiful as "what is agreeable to the senses" is contested (pp. 109-112). The perception of the beautiful is shown to be an intellectual rather than merely sensuous act. In other words, "colours, forms and sounds are not so much beautiful in themselves as rather the vehicles ... by which certain spiritual attributes are suggested to our spirit" (p. 116).

As for the moral attributes of God, Dr. Meynell sees them in man's yearning for "peace and satisfaction of heart" and "the inward sanctions of conscience". Pain and vice in this world make man appreciate



happiness and virtue even more. Like John Donne, Meynell proceeds to assert that man's body is not himself, not his personality, although it is his. It is the self which experiences "different feelings, desires, fancies, affections, wishes, hopes, thoughts, fears, regrets" (p. 128). Like Newman, Meynell asserts: "there is a voice within the secret chamber of the heart which cries aloud Non omnis moriar more eloquently than rhetoric itself". He concludes that this voice, which tells man that death of the body is not the end, since the soul is immortal, must be the voice of God (p. 130).

In the final letter, Meynell takes up Blunt's "Matter-God" and refutes the suggestion of spontaneous generation by proving that matter has no spontaneity, that "there is a gulf between the animate and the inanimate" (pp. 156-7). Belief in fortuitous evolution precludes the existence of law in the natural world; and, since laws do exist and can be observed, "I must postulate an infinite Mind, aided by an infinite Hand, to devise and effect the inscrutable evolution of the universe; and we are once more in theism" (p. 155). Furthermore, belief in a Godless world will eventually pose some dangerous questions:

Why cherish we our sickly children - the epileptic, the idiot, the consumptive, the halt and hump-backed? Why tolerate the unseemly childishness of age? ... Perish the sickly sentiment of relatives who would keep these living corpses above ground because, forsooth, they love them! Back with them into their sun-dust out of which they made so sinister an evolution ... ! What! This world is for youth! Shall our cups and songs be tainted with memories of the charnel house!

(p. 151-2)

Indeed, this was the attitude of social Darwinism, which was invoked in the last two decades of the last century, in order to support imperialism and the suppression of the "lesser races" in Asia and Africa. It was also the attitude of Hitler, who claimed for the Germanic race the qualities of Nietzsche's "Superman". Blunt found

this "anthropological" aspect of Darwinism especially abhorrent.<sup>1</sup>

However, it emerges from the text that he was only half-convinced by Meynell's metaphysical arguments on behalf of theism. He continued to proclaim his atheism, although he conceded Meynell's point on the natural laws as incompatible with blind co-incidence and fortuitous chance (pp. 163-4). He insisted in doubting whether God ruled the universe, and remained skeptical about the existence of a future life where all wrongs will be redressed. He appealed to his poem "Body and Soul" and denied that souls remain immortal after the death of the bodies, testifying that he "had seen" the soul of someone whom he loved die together with the deceased's body! (p. 171).

Blunt was no rationalist; and he felt no enthusiasm for his materialist convictions, although enthusiasm was the most important characteristic of his nature. Materialism was "the malady of the age in which I was born, and it hindered and disconcerted me".<sup>2</sup> The mental anguish which appeared in the works of major Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Arnold found its way to his poetry. His feeling of this spiritual void was always keen. He considered himself "A spirit vexed with more discordant parts",<sup>3</sup> "Sad child of doubt and passionate desires",<sup>4</sup> and "a lost soul grown old in its dismay".<sup>5</sup> Even the grandeur and beauty of nature became less impressive as he perceived in the elements an oppressive sense of callous indifference. On the Alps, for example, he cries:

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1. Ibid., pp. 346-7. Blunt dwells on this subject, giving a detailed account of what amounts to be his politico-religious credo, in The Land War in Ireland, pp. 296-301.
  2. The Land War in Ireland, p. 178.
  3. A New Pilgrimage, XXXV, p. 37.
  4. Ibid., XXIV, p. 26.
  5. Ibid., XXXIX, p. 41.

The mountains which we have loved have grown unkind,  
Nay, voiceless rather. Neither sound nor speech  
Is heard among them, nor the thought enshrined  
Of any deity man's tears may reach.<sup>1</sup>

He continued to complain that the world was not responsive to the needs of his soul, and that, in the face of man's inquisitive reason, God gave no "word or sign / ... to our rebel hearts of things divine".<sup>2</sup> These ideas are repeated in his poetry with the insistence of a child who would not be denied.<sup>3</sup>

Blunt hoped to find a cure for his spiritual as well as physical ailments in the East, which he saw as a world of peaceful reverence and serious faith, with no place for cynicism, ridicule or intellectual scepticism. Blunt's Eastern sympathies and inclinations cannot be fully understood without considering the impact of Islam on him.

Contrary to other Victorian travellers, such as Burton, Palgrave and Doughty, Blunt did not approach Islam with the hostility of someone who had already got a "superior" creed, learning, or race. Burton, for example, called for the occupation of Egypt, "the most tempting prize which the East holds for the ambition of Europe, not excepted even the Golden Horn".<sup>4</sup> Doughty called on the Christian countries to fulfill their mission by occupying "the Islamic heart of Mecca".<sup>5</sup> He also claimed:

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1. Ibid., XXIX, p. 31.
  2. Ibid., XXXIV, p. 36.
  3. "Quatrains of Life", Poetical Works, I, p. 423, "The Wisdom of Merlyn", ibid., II, p. 469.
  4. R.F. Burton, Narrative of a Pilgrimage, I, pp. 112-14.
  5. C.M. Doughty, Travels in Arabia Deserta, II, p. 53.

The nations of Islam, of a barbarous, fox-like understanding, and persuaded in their religion that "knowledge is of the Koran", cannot now come upon any way that is good.<sup>1</sup>

Such astonishing prejudice, which harks back to the days of the Crusades, also characterizes the writings of W.G. Palgrave, who sees Islam as a dark force of obscurantism. He asserts:

When the Coran and Mecca shall have disappeared from Arabia, then and then only, can we expect to see the Arab assume that place in the ranks of civilization from which Mohammed and his book have, more than any other cause, long held him back.<sup>2</sup>

Blunt's views of the national and religious conditions of the region were not coloured with any such preconceived ideas. Palgrave considered "narrowness of mind, frightful corruption ..., extinction of morality ..., convulsive fanaticism alternating with lethargic torpor, transient vigour, followed by long and irremediable decay"<sup>3</sup> as inherent qualities of Islam, both as a religion and as a system of government throughout its history. Blunt made no such sweeping generalizations. He did not ascribe the cultural decline to the nature or the teachings of Islam itself. On the contrary, he was fully aware of Islam's past glory and its potential future as a constructive moral force. When he wrote The Future of Islam, he was in contact with the liberal current of intellectual enlightenment in the Islamic world. He studied Arabic in Cairo at the hands of Mohammed Khalil, whom he describes as a broad-minded, tolerant scholar. His acquaintance with Mohammed Abdu, one of the most prominent leaders of progress and reform, ripened into a warm friendship which lasted for a quarter of a century, till the death of Abdu in 1905.<sup>4</sup> Abdu, who became the Grand Mufti of Egypt, was described by Blunt as "the ablest and most honest man", "the best and wisest and most

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1. Ibid., I, p. 101.

2. W.G. Palgrave, Narrative of a Year's Journey, I, p. 175.

3. Ibid., I, pp. 435-6.

4. Secret History, pp. 98-99.

interesting of men", whose strength of intellect and moral character made him "the leader of a movement of social reform and ... the intellectual head of a political revolution".<sup>1</sup> Blunt described Islam as "the purest creed the world has ever known" and said that he "learned . . . to believe in God" among the Muslims.<sup>2</sup> In fact, although Islam continued for many years to be seen by Blunt as a possible solution to his religious crisis, he never professed it. However, he embraced the cause of progress, liberty and reform in the Islamic world. The Future of Islam, which he conceded was written "in haste", shows deep insight into the nature of the problem and tries to point the way forward towards political and moral resurgence. He tried to advise Britain as to the best policy to bring these reforms about. He envisaged Britain, a little naïvely, perhaps, as the "advisor and protector" of the Islamic world, working magnanimously and altruistically to achieve social and political revival. He was still unacquainted with the schemes of enterprising imperialism, which came to him as a rude shock in 1882.<sup>3</sup> At this stage he did not think of Britain as an oppressive force seeking expansion for selfish gain. He only maintained that, since Islam was a moral force in some regions vital to Britain, there was a historic opportunity "to a degree never yet presented to any Christian Government" to play the role of "the guide and arbiter of Asiatic progress".<sup>4</sup> He wanted England to cultivate the friendship of the Muslims by retaining her image in their eyes as an unprejudiced, tolerant power with no bloody accounts to settle, a power "able to treat their religious and political opinions in a humane and liberal spirit, seeking of them practical advantages of trade rather than conquest".<sup>5</sup> Only in this

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1. My Diaries, p. 338. Secret History, p. 105.

2. Gordon, p. 362. India Under Ripon, p. 74.

3. W.S. Blunt, The Future of Islam, (1882), pp. 175, 191, 194, 203-4, 211, 214.

4. Ibid., pp. 3, 6, 192, 195.

5. Ibid., p. 192.

capacity,, as a friendly power, did Blunt aspire, in 1880-1882, to see England "exercise paramount influence" on all the affairs of the Islamic world.

The prospects of reform could only be promoted from within this vast area. What was needed, he felt, was an enlightened leadership to take the initiative, to work according to a well-conceived plan. This could not come from the Ottoman Caliph, because the Ottoman Empire was "too far gone on the road to death for heroic treatment to be ventured on".<sup>1</sup> As for the Sultan, Blunt found him "constitutionally adverse to intellectual effort" and "fortified behind a rampart of dogmatic faith".<sup>2</sup> Who then should lead the movement of reform? At first, Blunt thought that the Sherifs of Mecca were the best candidates; and so he went to Jeddah in the winter of 1880-1881, to study Islam and acquaint himself thoroughly with the modern trends of Islamic thought, intending after that to take a closer look at the Wahhabi movement in north-eastern Arabia. Jeddah was the port of Mecca, where Muslims from all parts of the world meet, where divine and worldly affairs are freely discussed, and where Europeans can mingle freely with the Muslim masses. It seems that he had envisaged a gradiose scheme whereby he would bring home to the English authorities the importance of adopting the cause of freedom and rejuvenation in the world of Islam, and to the Muslims the sympathy and goodwill of Britain, to encourage their hopes and aspirations. In this, he stands as a yet unrecognized forerunner of T.E. Lawrence and H. St. J.B. Philby. In 1880, however,

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1. W.S. Blunt, "An Indo-Mediterranean Railway", FR, 26 (Nov. 1, 1879), pp. 702-15 (p. 703).
  2. The Future of Islam, pp. 73, 158.

the Foreign Office looked upon him "more as a visionary than anything seriously likely to affect the official view of Eastern policy".<sup>1</sup> In Jeddah, he heard the story of the British captain who abandoned a ship full of pilgrims "in a fit of panic ... without any substantial excuse". His reference to this case, Graham Greene suggests, contributed to Conrad's portrait of Lord Jim.<sup>2</sup> Blunt's visit had to be cut short because he went down with malaria.

Continuing his journey to the north, he visited Damascus, and contacted the old Algerian warrior, Emir Abdel Kader, whose opinions were similar to Blunt's in the fields of reform and the restoration of an Arabian Caliphate. Blunt thought him a suitable candidate for this high post.<sup>3</sup> In Egypt, however, he found a revolution near at hand, and had to modify his opinions again, to consider the Arabi movement as the long awaited spark of hope that would kindle the moral and political regeneration of the world of Islam. He decided to throw in his lot with this movement, saying that it mattered little where the regeneration began, and by whom.<sup>4</sup> Abdu was a supporter of the revolution; and Blunt's ideas of reform in The Future of Islam show the influence of Abdu, but only up to a certain point. They agree, for example, that reform must come from within, and that the partial changes imposed under the violent pressure of Europe were but reluctant concessions extracted from the Sultan in 1839 and 1869. "All changes so attempted must fail in Islam because they have in them the inevitable vice of illegality".<sup>5</sup> But

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1. Secret History, pp. 96, 107.

2. The Future of Islam, p. 30. See also Graham Greene's letter, entitled "Lord Jim", to the TLS (Dec. 6, 1974), p. 1389.

3. Secret History, pp. 118-119.

4. Ibid., p. 58. The Future of Islam, pp. 88, 116, 159. Cf: "The Egyptian Revolution", NC, 12 (Sept. 1882), pp. 324-46 (p. 328).

5. The Future of Islam, p. 78.

while the drift of Blunt's argument implies that the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire is both inevitable and desirable, Abdu and his circle never went that far. The concept of the umma as identical with that of the "nation" in the modern sense belongs to Blunt, not Abdu. The traditional meaning of this term is that the Muslims all over the world constitute one community, regardless of the existing political units or entities. It is Blunt's modern concept which underlies his idea of separating the secular and spiritual authorities. He called for a spiritual figurehead to replace the Sultan in an Arab metropolis, leaving to the laity the task of administering the worldly affairs in a number of small, federated states,<sup>1</sup> that would replace the declining Empire. This poses the question of whether Blunt expounds a correct interpretation of the various Muslim schools of thought and their attitude to the Caliphate question. There are some misconceptions; these resulted from the haste in which the book was written.

Thus, for example, Blunt claims without foundation that the Sunites treat the other sects, particularly the Shi'ites, as "heretics".<sup>2</sup> True, there are some extremists who are treated as such by both the Sunites and Shi'ites. Abu Ḥanifeh, one of the great four Sunni Imams, was a pupil of Ja'afar el-Ṣādeq, one of the greatest Shi'i Imams. Moreover, the association between the leaders of the Hanafi School and those of the Zeidi Shi'ites is well known in the history of Islamic Fiqh (religious jurisprudence). Nor are the Wahhabites "a new school", as Blunt claims. They belong to Imam Aḥmed ibn Ḥanbal, founder of the fourth school of the Sunites. They were, however, as Blunt rightly points out, radical reformers; this is one reason why the Ottomans

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1. Ibid., pp. 190, 214.

2. Ibid., pp. 14, 35.



cast certain doubts upon their faith; that is, the motive was political.<sup>1</sup> The "few followers" of the Hanbalite school should not detract from its significance as one of the four recognized schools of orthodox Islam. The "small numbers" are due to historical reasons; the Ḥanbalites were persecuted in the days of Al-Ma'moun ibn Haroun el-Rashīd. Blunt's comparison of the Muslim schools to the high, low and broad Churches is inadequate. The doctrine of all the schools is fundamentally the same, derived from the Koran and the actions and traditions of the Prophet as recorded in the authenticated books of Ḥadīth. They differ in some minor points pertaining to the practical application of the Shari'ah; and these differences do not include the creed, the Akīdeh. The equality which accounts for the success of Muslim missionaries in black Africa is not, as Blunt puts it, "a bribe in the hand of the preacher of the Koran".<sup>2</sup> It is rather a fundamental principle in the teachings of Islam. Allah says, "The believers are but brotheren", (Koran, 49 : 10). Prophet Mohammed said: "People are as equal as the teeth of a comb".

Blunt's most serious mistakes, however, concern the questions of authority and succession in Islam. He claims that Mohammed fled to Medina because he was "a pretender to authority", as a "prince of the princely house of Koreysh".<sup>3</sup> In fact, the opposite is true. Mohammed was a poor orphan; and "authority" was offered to him on a gold plate by the leaders of Koreysh, provided that he should stop preaching Islam. His rejection of this offer is well known in all history books. His words were, "By God ..., if they were to put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand so as to make me quit this mission, I would never quit it till it prevails or I perish in the attempt". As for the

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1. Ibid., pp. 42-3.

2. Ibid., p. 26.

3. Ibid., p. 55.

succession, Blunt would have us believe that Mohammed stipulated that his successors should be exclusively from Koreysh.<sup>1</sup> Had this been true, the Ansār, who were non-Koreyshites, would not have met in Saqīfat Beni Sā'ideh to elect a successor from among themselves.<sup>2</sup> Blunt gives no authority to support his claim, which contradicts a famous saying by the Prophet: "I call upon you to fear Allah the Almighty and to obey your leader even if he were a black slave ...". The first four Caliphs were not "inspired saints".<sup>3</sup> They all admitted their fallibility and sought the advice of their fellow-companions of the Prophet.

Islam is a religion for all mankind, not only for the Arabs; and as such, it carries within it the elements of survival. The reason for its survival is not that it is "most distinctly national", nor that it is "the codification of the Semites' custom".<sup>4</sup> The only sources of codification were the Koran and the Sunnah (acts and sayings of Prophet Mohammed). No customs, Semitic or Hellenic, were incorporated in the process, which was completed before the end of the second century of the Muslim calendar (the first half of the ninth century A.D.). Islamic law, therefore, was not "a confirmation of the common custom of Arabia, ... based upon existing rules of right and wrong".<sup>5</sup> The canon, the creed, on which these laws are based, is not the result of any certain circumstances or given environments; it is rather a comprehensive, universal message containing a set of principles acting as a framework, or guidelines within which laws can be enacted in a flexible way to answer the needs of any society in whatever stage of civil, economic, political or social development.

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1. Ibid., pp. 52, 118.

2. This meeting did not take place in the house of Omar ibn el Khattāb, as Blunt wrongly states, (Ibid., p. 58).

3. Ibid., p. 53.

4. Ibid., pp. 142-3.

5. Ibid., pp. 154-5.

Despite these faults, The Future of Islam had a considerable impact on the Muslim public opinion; and Muslims in the Indian sub-continent responded to its sympathy with their aspirations. Blunt's ideas were well received and enthusiastically discussed wherever he went in the sub-continent.<sup>1</sup> Thus Blunt's ideas, an amalgam of political, evolutionery and religious elements, exercised a lasting influence on the modern world. Indirectly, the book led to an improvement in Britain's treatment of the Indian Muslims at the hands of Lord Randolph Churchill, who occupied the India Office in Salisbury's Government. In a disenchanted mood, Blunt described this

as a counterpoise to the Congress movement of the Hindus; and gradually the idea expounded by me in The Future of Islam has come to be<sub>2</sub> adopted as the Government's own and used to its own purposes.

The influence persisted in the British Government's dealings with Sherif Hussein ibn Ali of Mecca in 1916. In fact, Blunt was urged, during the early days of the War, to republish his book, but he refused.<sup>3</sup> Its prophetic value had been recognized by George Tyrrell, a prominent Catholic Modernist, who wrote to Blunt in 1908:

It makes one think furiously, you would have been God the Father had you foreseen all that has happened since you wrote it; ... Islam as less committed to a complex dogmatic system could "modernize" more easily than the Papacy.

The astonishing pervasiveness of Blunt's work extends into the Islamic world itself. His unmistakable fingerprints can be easily recognized in the writings of Abdel-Rahmān el-Kawākibi (1849-1902), one of the most revered pioneers of reform in Syria. He was the head

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1. India Under Ripon, pp. 62-4, 112, 119, 123-6, 158.
  2. Ibid., p. 231.
  3. Edith Finch, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1938), p. 346.
  4. My Diaries, pp. 640-1.

of the Sherifs family in Aleppo; and occupied many positions, as a journalist with a fiery style, a member of the education and finance committees of Aleppo, a manager of the official press, director of the chamber of commerce, and manager of the agricultural bank. Persecuted by the Turkish authorities and prevented from introducing any modern reforms, he migrated to Egypt in 1899, where he published an explosive book on the future of Islamic reform entitled Umm el Qura (The Mother of Cities), one of the traditional names of Mecca. There is no documentary evidence that he met Blunt; but this seems very likely, since he used to frequent Abdu's circle, and was a close friend of Rashīd Riḍā, Abdu's disciple and successor. There can be little doubt that he knew Blunt's book. His diagnosis of the ailments of the Muslim world and the possible remedies were identical with Blunt's: moral, political and educational decline, narrow-minded dogmatism, Turkish despotism ... etc. Like Blunt, he concentrated on the necessity of moral and educational regeneration, and called for the restoration of the Caliphate to the Arabs.<sup>1</sup> Al-Kawākibi, who knew no English, could by this date have read the Urdu version of The Future of Islam. Al-Kawākibi first published his book as articles in al-Manār, the paper which was agitating for reform under the editorship of Rashīd Riḍā. Before the last article appeared, in February 1903, Al-Kawākibi was dead; probably poisoned by the spies of Turkey in Cairo.

Umm el-Qura was written in the form of minutes of an imaginary secret society called the "Society of Islamic Renaissance", whose imaginary members are given attributes and private cipher rather than names. Like Blunt, Al-Kawākibi shows a bias to the Arabs at the expense of the Turks, whom he contemptuously calls Rûm (Byzantines).

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1. Complete Works of Abdel-Rahman el-Kawakibi, ed., by Mohammed Amārah (in Arabic) (Cairo, 1965), pp. 300-1. Cf: The Future of Islam, pp. 100-101.

Like Blunt, the Syrian reformer earmarks Arabia as the seat of the coming religious and political revival. His praise of the pride and independence of the Bedouins was highly unusual among the Muslim writers, who looked down on the desert inhabitants as wild, faithless pagans. This new, eloquent idealization of Bedouins sounds as an echo of Blunt.<sup>1</sup> Like Blunt, Al-Kawākibi also sees the future Caliph as a spiritual, and not temporal king. Like Blunt, Al-Kawākibi calls for the exercise of independent judgement in religious matters (Ijtihād). The general weight of Al-Kawākibi's argument inclines towards a theory of Arab nationalism. In fact, secret societies organized along the lines drawn in Umm el-Qura began to spring up and became extremely active before the War, particularly when the repressive policies were intensified by the chauvinist Young Turks.

Blunt admired the Muslims' adherence to their faith, which required "so little intellectual subtlety to reconcile it with possible truth". Yet, he was saddened by his inability to embrace this faith; he could not "pronounce publicly words to which my intellect could not wholly subscribe".<sup>2</sup> He expressed his admiration of this faith in Allah as he saw it practised in the desert:

His name was on their lips, a living name.  
His law was in their hearts, their pride in shame.  
His will their fortitude in hours of ill  
When the skies rained not and the locusts came.<sup>3</sup>

Writing later, as an old, world-weary man, he remembered those days with nostalgic melancholy, wishing that he had become a Muslim:

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1. Al-Kawakibi, pp.302-304; The Future of Islam, pp. 101-103.
  2. W.S. Blunt, Secret History . . . , Part II: India (1907), pp. 17, 18.
  3. "Quatrains of Life", Poetical Works, I, p. 446.

The subtle wonder of the desert came  
And touched my longing with its breath of flame.  
I too, methought, sad child of a new age,  
Would learn its mystery and inscribe my name,

Clothed in the garments of its ancient past,  
My race forgotten and my creed outcast,  
On some lone pile whence centuries look down  
On days unchanged the earliest with the last.

. . .

There would I stand in prayer, with unshod feet  
And folded arms, at time's true mercy seat,  
Making my vows to the one God of gods  
Whose praise the Nations of the East repeat.

. . .

And thus I might have lived - and died, who knows,  
A Moselm saint, on those high mountain brows,  
Prayed to by alien lips in alien prayer  
As intercessor for their mortal woes.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its prophetic sympathy, Blunt's text here carries further misconstructions. Apart from the fact that a good Moslem never prays to any saint for intercession, it is doubtful whether Blunt's life - style would qualify him for canonization in any religion. However, the wish expressed in these lines stemmed from the influence of some superstitious customs which he had observed, and respected, among some Muslims. He even used to participate in such "religious" festivities as the Mowleds, usually held to commemorate some "saints" in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> His credulity is stretched to a degree astonishing for a materialistic sceptic as he reports, with no comment, the claim that the Mediaeval French Crusader, St. Louis (Louis IX), was considered a saint by the Tunisian Muslims. Blunt visited the cathedral and monastery named after him near the site of ancient Carthage.<sup>3</sup> Another, more positive, Islamic influence on Blunt was his abstention from drinking alcohol and eating pork from 1883 onwards.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., pp. 442, 443, 446.

2. My Diaries, p. 457.

3. Ibid., p. 154.

4. The Land War in Ireland, p. 341; "The Little Left Hand", Act II, Scene IIV, Poetical Works, II, p. 424.

Blunt's political and geographical vision remained persistently coloured by his early interest in religion and evolutionery theory. He admired the faith of simple people wherenver he saw them practice it earnestly. When he saw the Asr (afternoon) prayers in the grand Mosque of St. Sophia in Istanbul, for example, he exclaimed sadly "I wish I could have joined in this".<sup>1</sup> In Ireland, he considered the Irish clergy and people the "best representatives of Christianity in Europe".<sup>2</sup> It was in Ireland, with its closely-knit community life, where "The old are well looked after, and there is no workhouse", that Blunt was "reminded of a Bedouin camp". Attending a service in a very crowded "religious retreat", with "men, women ... three cows ... some fowls [and] the priest's horse", he was so impressed that he exclaimed: "I have witnessed no such great faith anywhere - no, not in Arabia!"<sup>3</sup> Although he had lost faith in a future life that "should outlast the brief accidents of the terrestrial globe", he continued his Odyssey in a search for a "solution of the chief riddle of the earth, the existence of man", constantly suffering from the "contest between the stubbornness of reason and the soul's desire for an unreasoning belief".<sup>4</sup> He explained his feelings at length inside an Irish Cathedral in May 1886:

I feel as if I could live with pleasure the rest of my life in a quiet place of prayer like this. All my instincts, all my wishes, all my sympathies are with religion and religious practices. No one in the world loves priests and pious people as I do, or would love better to believe without a doubt. They do not suspect here my inconsistency. How should they?<sup>5</sup>

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1. Gordon, p. 313.
  2. The Land War ..., p. 178.
  3. Ibid., p. 54.
  4. Secret History, Part II, India, pp. 16, 17. cf: My Diaries, p. 626.
  5. The Land War..., p. 103.

His adventures in Ireland, where he was often in the company of Irish Catholic priests, together with his reading of Rossetti's translation of Italian Renaissance poets, made him decide to go on a "New Pilgrimage" to Rome. This was yet another attempt to reconcile himself to religion, to "the life contemplative". He was 46, and again he stood at a crossroads:

I found myself disgusted with the emptiness of life's ordinary things, and entertained for a while a serious thought of retiring altogether from the world as dervish, monk, or hermit, notwithstanding the fact that I lacked the essential quality of a distinct religious faith.<sup>1</sup>

He visited Cardinal Manning, who praised his decision: "You will get back there, into the rut of the centuries, and it will do you good". A cynic would doubt the sincerity of such a decision and find ample proof of Blunt's weakness before the pleasures of the flesh. However, the idea of retiring to lead the life of a recluse was a recurrent, if ephemeral, obsession with him:

There was a time when I should have looked to the East for a retreat, but the East has come to be to me an irritant, and Rome will suit me better.<sup>2</sup>

It did not; although he had a private audience with Pope Leo XIII, who found it very interesting that an Englishman should "love the Irish". The fit of ascetic piety, which filled his eyes with tears, proved short-lived; and the material world with its affairs, both political and amatory, soon claimed him again. He ended his autobiographical New Pilgrimage with a sad cry:

O Rome, thy ways are narrow and aspire  
Too straitly for the knees of this halt age.<sup>3</sup>

But, at the same time, Blunt deplored the new spirit of commercial and industrial "progress" in Italy, because it had destroyed "their

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1. Ibid., p. 177.

2. Ibid., p. 180.

3. "A New Pilgrimage", XL, Poetical Works, I, p. 319.



simpler life of joyous superstition with its religious functions, its processions and its wayside shrines".<sup>1</sup> These new tendencies, in Blunt's view, amounted to some sort of "apostasy" similar to that attacked by the Oxford Movement in the 1830s. This attitude also reflects Blunt's love of the Middle Ages, of old traditions and rural simplicity. He was fascinated with Newman's "simple life of piety and cheerful unselfishness". According to Blunt,

The lives of monks and nuns are alone in some accordance with the life of Jesus. All the rest of Christianity is an imposture and an impudent negation of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, this sort of life was obviously unsuitable for Blunt, the man of the world, the social lion, the political controversialist; but he continued to idealize it. This was one of his life's many paradoxes. In the 1890s he continued to take long journeys deep into the deserts of Egypt "where one is absolutely cut off from communication with the civilized world ... as if one were in a different planet".<sup>3</sup>

Ignoring the fact that there is no "monasticism" in Islam, Blunt continued to toy with the idea of retreating from the world and spending the rest of his life in the desert. From 1894, when he visited his cousin, Terence Bourke, in Tunis, this became an obsession. He began to make plans to go to Siwah, the Senussi stronghold in the desert of Tripoli, where he hoped to become a Muslim, finding, perhaps

... something of the better tradition of Islam I had been so disappointed of in the more civilized Mohammedan lands, and possibly that true desert hermitage I had so often dreamed of.<sup>4</sup>

This major trip, started "in the highest of spirits" in February 1897, was one of the greatest fiascos in his life. A detailed description

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1. The Land War ..., p. 178.
  2. My Diaries, p. 338.
  3. Ibid., p. 125.
  4. Ibid., pp. 247-8.

of it is given in My Diaries (pp. 248-275). In spite of all his preparations, such an adventure was doomed from the very beginning. Contrary to both his habits in previous journeys and his own better judgement, he followed some dubious advice and assumed a false personality, consulted unreliable people, got contradictory letters of introduction sent to the Senussia leaders, one containing his false name, which in turn, was different from the one he actually assumed; while the other revealed his real identity and his intention of professing Islam and following the Senussia Tarīk (the Sufi religious order). To make matters worse, he did not follow the prescribed route; and his desert guides may have, intentionally or otherwise, led him into a trap. Blunt had long been fascinated with the Senussia. This is a sample of his speculations, made as early as 1881:

In Tripoli there is indeed a saint of very high pretensions, one known as the Sheykh Es Snusi, who has a large religious following, and who has promised to come forward shortly as the Mohdy or guide expected by a large section of the Sunite as well as the Shiite Mussulmans. Next year he will attain the age of forty (the legal age of a prophet), and he may be expected to take a prominent part in any general movement that may then be on foot. But as yet we know nothing of him but his name and the fact of his sanctity, which is of the Wahabite type. Moreover, even supposing all that may be supposed of a possible success, there yet lies Egypt and the Suez Canal between the Barbary State and Mecca, so that I think we may be justified ... if we treat North Western Africa as out of probable <sup>1</sup> calculations in considering the future of the Caliphate.

However, the fall of the Arabi movement and the confinement of the Mahdists to the Sudan, seem to have tempted Blunt to bring the Senussia into such "probable calculations". The name he assumed, Şaqr ibn Zeydoun el-Hilālī, reflects his admiration of Beni Hilal,

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1. The Future of Islam, pp. 112-113.

whose triumphant migration to North Africa he wanted to imitate. Disaster struck on the last day of February, when Blunt and his "Bedawin" were attacked by a host of Senussi followers. He was severely beaten, threatened with guns, stripped of all his possessions, grabbed, and insulted in Berberi - a language he did not understand. Things would have become worse had he shown any resistance. From his past experience in Nejd, as well as from reading Doughty, he knew better. He remained passive and put himself under the "protection" of one of the leaders of this mob. It was with great difficulty that he convinced the Sheikhs of his innocence of the odious charge of espionage when he was dragged before them. He was allowed to leave, and, disheartened and fully exhausted in body and in soul, he reached Cairo after "the ides of March". Twenty years later, Sir James Rennell Rodd was to record what he claimed to be the Senussi side of the story. According to this account, the Senussi knew of Blunt's mission in advance, from agents in Cairo. So, as Blunt was approaching the oasis, the Sheikh "suddenly became silent and assumed the aspect of one in a trance". Then he told his breathless followers of his vision: "I smell the flesh of the accursed. He is approaching the sacred oasis!" To the question of whether "the accursed" should be killed, the Sheikh replied in the negative. In this way the population went out to meet the traveller, "while the Senoussi sheikh greatly enhanced his reputation as a prophet inspired".<sup>1</sup>

Be that as it may, it was a harsh lesson for Blunt; it was a major setback to his hankering after a secure belief. He concluded his account of this unfortunate episode with a bitter comment:

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1. Sir J.R. Rodd, Social and Diplomatic Memories, Second Series: 1894-1901 (1923), pp. 74-75.

I had made myself a romance about these reformers, but I see that it has no substantial basis, and I shall go no further now than I am in the Mohammedan direction. The less religion in the world, perhaps, after all, the better.<sup>1</sup>

Some of this bitterness spilled over in his most explosive politico-religious poem, Satan Absolved, two years later. This Faustian work was first suggested to Blunt by Herbert Spencer, to whom it is dedicated. Spencer, alarmed at the unprecedented upsurge of jingoism, wanted to open the eyes of his contemporaries to the ugliness and the dangers of their ruthless policies of avarice and colonialism. Having read The Wind and the Whirlwind, together with Blunt's angry letter to The Times of September 10, 1898, in condemnation of Kitchener's attack on Um Durman, Spencer wrote him a letter suggesting the idea and the broad outline of the poem.<sup>2</sup> The poem was to take the form of a dialogue in Heaven, where Satan would complain to God that Man had surpassed him in wickedness; and that Satan deserves forgiveness because he does not profess piety as the hypocrites of mankind do. The poem was at first entitled Satan in Heaven; this was subsequently changed to Satan Absolved.<sup>3</sup> The manuscript, now in the possession of Mr. C.E. Blunt, shows that the author wanted to call it a "drama", then deleted the word and wrote A Victorian Mystery instead. This was, perhaps, a belated reply to the title of an article anonymously contributed to Blackwood's Magazine, (July, 1882) by Laurence Oliphant: "The Great African Mystery". In this article Blunt was ridiculed and called "Wilful Grunt" for his support of Arabi against Malet; Gladstone's initial reluctance to use force in Egypt earned him the name of Sadstone. Spencer did not want the public to know that

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1. My Diaries, p. 276.

2. Ibid., pp. 410-411; cf: D. Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer (1908), pp. 411, 450.

3. My Diaries, p. 300.

the poem was his idea, "on account of odium theologicum and the injury it might do to the spread of his philosophy".<sup>1</sup> Blunt considered it "not very courageous" of Spencer to leave him alone in the coming battle. In anticipation of this, the poet wrote a preface in which he asserted his right to attack "the hypocrisy and all-acquiring greed of modern England [as] an atrocious spectacle - one which, if there be any justice in Heaven, must bring a curse from God, as it has surely made the angels weep".<sup>2</sup>

Satan Absolved is a savage attack on the Church, the State, the Anglo-Saxon race, the white man and mankind in general. It is a rhetorical, misanthropic diatribe full of spleen, a mixture of satire, moral outrage, pessimistic denunciation and apocalyptic utterance, representing the climax of what Blunt called "my individual protest against the abominations of the Victorian Age".<sup>3</sup> Its pessimistic tone anticipates Eliot's Waste Land. The main abominations attacked are imperialism, industrial squalor and pollution, and man's cruelty to the animal world and to the less developed countries and races. The timid angels dare not tell the complacent Lord of the Earth's suffering, inflicted by Man. Satan volunteers to shake the self-assured Lord out of this complacency, and to question his wisdom in creating such a destructive being as man. Man's lack of pity, Satan claims, deserves the vengeance and wrath of the Lord. Blunt was as pessimistic as Hardy in his views of the world; but, while Hardy considers man as the helpless tool in the hands of blind, external

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1. Ibid., p. 326.

2. Satan Absolved (1899), pp. v-vi.

3. My Diaries, p. 321.

powers, Blunt considers man evil by nature, and deliberately vicious and calculatingly depraved. Modern man is the symbol of moral bankruptcy. In one speech after another, Satan brings these unpleasant facts home, and his eloquent rhetoric occupies the largest part of the poem. As in Goethe's Faust, action, or rather the dialogue, for there is little action, takes place in an ante chamber in Heaven. This place is described in such naturalistic terms as to become a typical Victorian chapel or parlour:

How sweet in truth Heaven is, its floors of sandal wood,  
Its old world furniture, its linen long in press,  
Its incense, mummeries, flowers, its scent of happiness!  
(p. 1)

In fact, there is nothing supernatural about God, Satan or the Angels. The latter are so realistically portrayed that they reflect the familiar features of peers in the House of Lords, members of Victorian political parties, unwilling to present their leaders with unpalatable truths which might shock them or disturb their complacency:

No Seraph of them all  
Save I this day each year, has dared to cross Heaven's hall  
And give voice to ill news, an unwelcome truth to Him.  
Not Michael's self hath dared, prince of the Seraphim.  
(p. 2)

Satan, on the other hand, is portrayed as a noble hero, full of pride, with right and justice at heart. He even comes as an honest litigant on behalf of the Angels, to air their grievances against man before the Lord:

The Lord is a just God. He will rejudge this case,  
Ay, haply, even mine. O glorious occasion  
To champion Heaven's whole right without shift or evasion  
And plead the Angel's cause!

(p. 5)

Satan's character dominates the whole poem. His brutal frankness in declaring unpopular truths about man is of the type practised by Blunt himself. For example, God lives in blissful ignorance of men's secret lusts, accepting their lip service, till Satan exposes everything:

Lord God, if Thou but saw the pagan hearts they hide,  
The base greeds of their being, the lusts undenied,  
The Mammons that they worship!

Man's great sin is the destruction of the Earth's beauty in the name of progress:

The smoke of their foul dens  
Broodeth on Thy fair Earth as a black pestilence,  
Hiding the kind day's eye. No flower, no grass there groweth,  
Only their engines' dung which the fierce furnace throweth.  
Their presence poisoneth all and maketh all unclean.  
Thy streams have made sewers for their dyes aniline  
No fish therein may swim, no frog, no worm may crawl.  
No snail for grime may build her house within their wall.

(p. 38)

Today, these words sound relevant indeed; the progress of science and modern technology has brought a general awareness of the dangers to natural environment and ecological conditions. Man is seen as a "bare buttocked ape" who destroys animal life mercilessly and for sheer, wanton pleasure. Today's conservationists and animal lovers echo the attitude expressed in the following lines, describing man's perfidy:

The wise amorous seal  
He flayeth big with young, the walrus cubs that kneel  
But cannot turn his rage, alive he mangleth them,  
Leaveth in breathing heaps, outrooted branch and stem.

(p. 44)

Satan also reports that the white man has become a subtle, power-thirsty creature who is ambitious to replace God (pp. 34, 36, 37). Christianity is used only as a disguise; even the virtue of charity is not practiced except as means to further Europe's schemes of selfish gain (pp. 35, 36),

to establish kingdoms on this earth, kingdoms that do not recognize God's authority:

From this wild bitter root of violent lust and greed  
New Christendom upsprang, a pagan blood-stained creed,  
Pagan in spite of Christ, for the old gods cast down  
Still ruled it in men's hearts and lured them to renown,  
Ay in thy name, Lord God, by glamour of the sword.

(p. 32)

Satan's grim report is not without touches of wit and humour, directed mainly against the missionaries and traders of Europe in other parts of the world. The missionaries wanted the men of other races to have one wife and three Gods instead of three wives and one God, while the traders tempted them with rum:

We will make you men, soldiers to brawl and fight,  
As all good Christians use, and God defend the right.  
The drink will give you courage. Take it. 'Tis the sign  
Of manhood orthodox, its sacramental wine,  
Or how can you be worthy your new Christian creed?

(p. 41)

Satan's assertion that the motive of his sin was his "great love" and "excess of zeal" has its parallel in Blunt's case; his violent attacks on the unacceptable aspects of imperialism were motivated by similar love and zeal for his country.

Unlike the strong character of Satan, the Lord presented in this poem is a shaky puppet, completely isolated from His creation, undignified, yet boastful, and has a singular lack of prevision. He admits his "mistake" in making man the master of Earth; He is at a loss on how to redress the balance. Satan volunteers to be incarnated, not as man, but as one of the weakest tiny insects, and to die, not to redeem man, who is "past redeeming", but to save the name of God's justice, which has been "foiled". The poem has many weaknesses. It lacks compact form and artistic control; it is full of prolix rhetoric, repetitions and unconvincing portrayal of characters. The exception is



Satan. One of his many rambling speeches takes one fifth of the whole poem (pp. 33-43). Blunt fails to sympathize with man as an imperfect creature and only unleashes his anger to sweep almost everything. The subject is not treated with the grandeur and dignity it deserves. Nevertheless, there are some beautiful passages, full of energy and effective imagery, such as the colourful description of the world, full of life, in its primaeval days (pp. 17, 46). The rhymed Alexandrine is handled in masterly ease, and moves gracefully from one couplet to the next.

The appearance of Satan Absolved coincided with the British reverses in the first stages of the Anglo-Boer War; and this resulted in Blunt being subjected to savage attacks in the press. A reviewer in The Athenaeum charged:

Mr. Wilfrid Blunt has written a great deal of verse which does all it can to avoid being poetry, often with success. Occasionally the verse becomes poetry in spite of itself ... each new book was weaker than the last.

The reviewer also accused Blunt of being an imitator of George Meredith, and a bad one at that. The Times, while conceding that a great deal of the indictment in the poem was true, accused Blunt of seeing the Anglo-Saxon race as consisting "entirely of robbers, murderers and Pharisees" or living "at least wholly under their control".<sup>2</sup> The Daily Chronicle attacked Blunt's irreverence and considered his treatment of the subject "pseudo-Christian", particularly his portrayal of God as an ignorant Lord worse than "Zeus or Jupiter". After finding Blunt's art inferior in comparison to a number of poets, the paper concludes:

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1. "Satan Absolved", The Athenaeum, No. 3762 (Dec. 2, 1899), pp. 752-3. (p. 752).
  2. "Books of the Week: Recent Verse", The Times (Dec. 23, 1899), p. 4, col. 1.

It is as yet too early a day for poets to twist and turn Christianity to the uses of their own sweet will, as though it had departed to the limbo of extinct religions, whence they might fetch it forth for occasional aesthetic purposes.<sup>1</sup>

In America, where Satan Absolved was published simultaneously, the reception was mixed. Literature considered the poem "offensive" and attacked Blunt's "silly tirades", "utter puerility of conception", "crude profanity" and "frank excursions into the absurd". It contrasted the power and dignity of Goethe's Faust and Byron's Cain and Heaven and Earth with the "vulgarity" of Satan Absolved; and found it was a "Victorian Mystery" that Blunt "should have written and put his name" to such a poem.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, The Bookman, although puzzled by Blunt's choice of Satan to express his "humanitarian sentiments", was more sympathetic; "we freely admit the abundance of vigour and of wholesome truth in Satan Absolved. It cannot be popular reading just now - and for that very reason it is the more timely". The Bookman concluded that the poem "makes a strong appeal not to call our ... desire for more elbow-room in the world by the sublime names of Civilization or of Mission".<sup>3</sup>

Despite the unpopularity Blunt incurred, there were some friends who privately expressed their admiration. These included Mallock, Kegan Paul, Frederic York Powell, Frederic Harrison, George Tyrrel and Wilfrid Lawson.<sup>4</sup> William John Evelyn wrote to the author on November 2, 1899:

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1. "Mr. Blunt's New Poem", The Daily Chronicle (November 10, 1899), p. 4.
  2. "A Victorian Mystery", Literature, vol. 5 (November 4, 1899), p. 435.
  3. "Satan Absolved", The Bookman, vol. 17 (Jan. 1900), p. 125.
  4. My Diaries, pp. 334, 335, 329, 308-9, 345, 367.

Would that the poem, with your prefatory observations, might induce some of our countrymen to pause and reflect! But perhaps nothing but a disaster will bring about such a result.<sup>1</sup>

Ouida also praised the poet's exposure of "the ... brutality, and averice of man, clothed and cultured, against man primitive and helpless". She considered this poem "a just and generous indictment; heroic in its courage, ... vigorous in its eloquence".<sup>2</sup>

Blunt's inability to reconcile the injustices of the world, which he felt so deeply, with the existence of a just, loving and ruling God remained the central, disturbing dilemma. His materialistic agnosticism made him conclude that God was helpless, as long as he allows this state of affairs to prevail without striking instantly at the oppressors and wrong-doers:

How is the cauldron of thy wrath the deepest,  
Cold on its stone? No fire for it thou heapest.  
Thou in the old time wert a jealous God.  
Thieves have dishonoured Thee. And lo, Thou sleepest.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, he did not become an atheist. Nor did he turn his back completely on religion and religious affairs. His son-in-law, Neville Lytton, testified:

He was entirely unlike Shelley, who had no fear of death or damnation and no belief in the Church's code of morals. He never could shed the effects of his Roman Catholic upbringing.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of his attitude to faith is a streak of superstition which remained with him till the end, paradoxical as this may seem in a self-confessed materialist. He believed in the supernatural powers of saints and holy men, of whatever denomination. This streak became more pronounced whenever he was cured from a severe sickness. There were more than fifteen major occasions of potentially terminal illness in his life. A significant

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1. W.S. Blunt, "William John Evelyn: A Memoir", in Helen Evelyn's The History of the Evelyn Family (1915), p. 275.
  2. Ouida, Critical Studies (1900), pp. 152, 155.
  3. "Quatrains of Life", Poetical Works, I, p. 449.
  4. Neville Lytton, The English Country Gentleman (1925), p. 241.

example is his visit to St. Winifred's well at Holywell in Wales in April 1898, when he was in a critical condition:

I believe in St. Winifred and her Well, and include her in my canon prayer as my patron saint, which I have a right to do, seeing that I was named after my great-grandmother, Winifred Scawen.<sup>1</sup>

In the Libyan desert, he passed by a well called Rayyan, also with "miraculous virtues", cold by day, hot by night, bubbling up at the bidding of travellers "so fast that you can water 200 camels in the afternoon".<sup>2</sup> When the ship he was boarding ran aground in the Gulf of Suez in March 1900, he listened to the women praying to Syed el-Bedawī of Ṭaṇṭa (a well known Muslim Sufist); he said his "usual prayers to the dead and to St. Winifred, ... a superstition which quiets my mind". He also read the Gospels; but when the military vessel which rescued him was struck with a storm he was so terror-struck that he made his profession of faith, as a Muslim, in a vivid dream. (He had taken a heavy dose of morphia on board the previous ship.)<sup>3</sup> When he was severely ill during his visit to Arabi in Ceylon, he believed that Arabi cured him by giving him a hejab (charm or talisman); and when his cousin, George Wyndham, was going to the Sudan, he asked Jamal-ed-Din to give him one as a protection.<sup>4</sup> The touch of Newman's hand cured a raging toothache "and I felt a miracle had been wrought".<sup>5</sup> He also believed in omens. When he was in India, the news of the Mahdi uprising co-incided with the appearance of a star near the moon, which Blunt interpreted as the rising star of the Mahdi. He believed in the evil eye; and, as a protection, he kept some blue beads, which he had got from Arabia, in his home at New Buildings.

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1. My Diaries, p. 293.
  2. Ibid., p. 253.
  3. Ibid., pp. 355, 362.
  4. Gordon, p. 376. Finch, pp. 180-181.
  5. My Diaries, p. 338.
  6. Ibid., p. 519.

Religious problems and affairs never ceased to interest him and arouse his curiosity and comments. He rejected the Buddhists' belief in the transmigration of souls.<sup>1</sup> He commented on a "secret plot, supported with much money, for the dissemination of Masonic ideas among the French priesthood".<sup>2</sup> He was happy to read that Lord Stanley of Alderley was buried as a Muslim.<sup>3</sup> He explored the new ideas of the Modernists in the Catholic Church and encouraged them.<sup>4</sup> Some of the leaders of this short-lived movement at the turn of the century became his close friends, for example, St. George Mivart and Father George Tyrrel. Commenting on the writings of the former, he said:

If, forty years ago, I had found a Catholic writer equally bold, I should have been saved from much infidelity, but now it is too late.<sup>5</sup>

He continued to maintain that there can be no compromise or reconciliation between "the logic of science and belief in a divine revelation on Church lines".<sup>6</sup>

In 1911, he was depressed by the impending doom of the Ottoman Empire as he saw Italy grab yet another part of the Muslim world. He forecast that the Ottoman Empire will be partitioned, a little sooner or a little later.

There are too many hungry wolves in Europe to be satisfied with less, and it is thirty years since I began the battle. I feel inclined to say with Pitt: "Roll up the map of Islam".<sup>7</sup>

In one of his last letters to Lady Anne, Blunt wrote:

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1. Ibid., pp. 510-11.
  2. Ibid., pp. 518-19.
  3. Ibid., p. 495.
  4. Ibid., pp. 75-6, 83.
  5. Ibid., p. 345.
  6. Ibid., p. 626.
  7. Ibid., p. 778.

I had not satisfied my eagerness for what this life could give, nor did I believe in another or in any supernatural world beyond our sight. Later in Egypt and India, my sympathy with the Mohammedans led me to believe with them in the divine government of the world, but events did not justify their faith and the evil proved stronger than the good. I tried again in Ireland and at Rome, and for a moment I thought I had succeeded ...<sup>1</sup>

Then he asserts his inability to believe. When he saw Alfred Austin "leaning once more" towards Catholicism in his old age, "though he does not believe in any religion", Blunt said, "For me, as I get older I care less".<sup>2</sup> In accordance with his will, he was buried without any ritual or ceremony, wrapped in an Oriental carpet. Thus ended the turbulent life of an honest doubter whose doubts tormented him, leaving an advice written in old age from his own experience, which was a long, arduous odyssey:

Cast not loose thy religion, whether believing or no.  
Heavy it is with its rule, a burden laid on thy back, a  
sombre mask at the show.  
Yet shall it cloak thee in days of storm, a shield when life's  
whirlwinds blow.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The Wentworth Bequest, B.M. Add. MSS. (No: 54108).
  2. My Diaries, p. 627.
  3. "The Wiscom of Merlyn", Poetical Works, II, p. 465.

## CONCLUSION

As this thesis has shown, Blunt's stature as a poet has been underestimated, neglected and misinterpreted for many decades, although his contribution to English letters, both as a writer of original verse and as a translator of Arabic poetry, is important enough to secure him a prominent place in the history of late Victorian literature. Yet, he was understood by the new generation of poets, Pound, Yeats, Aldington. They admired him as a pioneer in the field of poetic technique, in which he was a fearless innovator, vigorously experimenting to enhance the capacities of poetic expression, and the progressive attitudes that eventually shaped modern poetry and modern critical thought. Although he valued tradition and assimilated it, he remained a highly individual writer whose cultured, artistic taste refused to conform with the norms of critics who remained fettered with many outdated conventions. As a consequence, many students of English literature in the period between 1880 and 1920, do not seem to be aware of Blunt's impact as a man considerably ahead of his time. As a social rebel in an age of hypocrisy, he can, it is argued here, be given the credit of foreshadowing the spirit of many of Bloomsbury's attitudes; any assessment of the 'Bloomsbury' group should associate their ideas with those of Blunt as an important Victorian antecedent.

In the political field, his sincerity, sympathy, honesty, keen sense of justice, and accurate foresight make him tower above many an "expert" or professional careerist among his contemporaries. History has vindicated him by making his prophecies come true; indeed the best advice one can give to the makers of England's

foreign policy is to read him, since his writings are no less relevant today than they were half a century ago. In the light of the new revelations in Count Tolstoy's recent book, The Victims of Yalta, Blunt's support of the weak against the secretive dealings of the strong predators and their double standards can be appreciated even more, since it was precisely against such "bargains" that he fought for forty years. His influence on the leaders of social and religious reform in the Muslim world was lasting and profound. Of all his books, out of print for the last seventy years, only The Future of Islam has recently been reprinted in England, following a reprint in Pakistan in 1975. The upsurge of interest in Islam reflects the new awakening of the Muslim countries, brought about by the spiritual bankruptcy of Western materialism and Russian communism. Many leaders of the new movement of rejuvenation and self-assertion in the Islamic world are grandsons of Blunt's friends, who led a similar revival at the turn of the century, but were suppressed by Europe. Already there are calls to suppress the new movement by military force. This reflects the persistent prejudices which Blunt denounced. It has become beneficial and constructive for England to invoke Blunt's name and revive his memory in any future dealings with the Muslim countries and the newly emancipated third world. Blunt's attitudes can serve as an antidote against the bitter residues in the hearts and minds of the people of the developing countries. The names of Balfour, Churchill, Disraeli, Gladstone, Salisbury and Rhodes will never create a warm response in England's previous colonies; but Blunt's name can serve as an "Open Sesame".



Despite a number of studies, the distorted and sensationalized image of this graceful yet serious Victorian hero has persisted in recent years. A just appreciation of Blunt calls for an understanding of him as a man of purposeful and coherent attitudes, and as a man of high literary and artistic inventiveness. It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to the correction of many mistaken notions which have prevailed for a long time and to the consolidation of Blunt's reputation as the acknowledged forerunner of both writers such as Yeats, Pound, E.M. Forster and Lytton Strachey, and of political figures such as St. John Philby and Lawrence of Arabia.

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Unless noted otherwise, the place of publication is London in this Bibliography and in all footnotes.

### Abbreviations:

Add. MSS = British Library Additional Manuscripts

BM = British Museum (British Library)

FR = Fortnightly Review

NC = The Nineteenth Century

TLS = The Times Literary Supplement

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May Morris Papers

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The Wentworth Bequest

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The Wilfrid Scawen Blunt Papers

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