Orientalism and the American Romantic imagination: The Middle East in the works of Irving, Poe, Emerson, and Melville

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Orientalism and the American Romantic imagination: The Middle East in the works of Irving, Poe, Emerson, and Melville

Kleitz, Dorsey Rodney, Ph.D.
University of New Hampshire, 1988
ORIENTALISM AND THE AMERICAN ROMANTIC IMAGINATION:
THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE WORKS OF IRVING, POE,
EMERSON, AND MELVILLE

BY

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A.B., Bard College, 1973
M.A., University of Virginia, 1981

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

December, 1988
For Sandra, Kef, and Wild Goose Chase

Does every riddle need an answer?
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation had its start during two years when I was teaching and traveling in the Middle East. I realized then that possibly because of that region's special importance to Western culture, because it is the source of so much that we value, it is virtually impossible for us to see it objectively. Later, after returning to the United States, I had the good fortune to attend "The Orientalists: From Delacroix to Matisse," an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art. The issues it raised about the nineteenth-century's fascination with the Orient, coupled with the richness of the paintings themselves, sparked me to examine the work of nineteenth-century American writers to find out what role the Orient played in their creative lives. The result of that examination is in your hands.

Though it may not be apparent from the text, my greatest intellectual debt is to Edward Said, whose tough, elegant, and arabesque book, Orientalism, startled me into questioning the West's perception of the Middle East. No other critic, I think, has presented the case of Orientalism more strikingly.

David Watters has overseen this project with Sphinx-like persistence, posing questions and pushing points which never failed to improve my work. I only wish that dissertations could always reflect the excellence of their directors.

iii
My wife's unfailing patience, critical insight, and good humor have sustained me throughout this project. It is she, who, with her archaeologist's attention to detail, always encouraged me "to see," not "walk on."

To my mother and my family I owe special thanks. It is certain that without their support and optimism this project would never have been completed.

Numerous friends have helped me in my work simply through the quality of their friendship and their respect for the creative imagination. To all of them I owe more than acknowledgments can reveal.
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ABSTRACT

ORIENTALISM AND THE AMERICAN ROMANTIC IMAGINATION:
THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE WORKS OF IRVING, POE, EMERSON, AND MELVILLE

By

Dorsey Rodney Kleitz
University of New Hampshire, December, 1988

During the nineteenth century, the Orient—what we now call the Middle East—was an object of fascination for American writers and artists. Many of them made the pilgrimage to the Holy Land and traveled down the Nile. Among the American Romantic writers, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville were interested in and wrote about this region. This dissertation examines the importance the Orient had for these four writers in the context of the general nineteenth century hunger for Romantic experience.

Chapter one looks at the background of American Orientalism. The discussion includes a brief examination of the travel writing of John Lloyd Stephens, George William Curtis, and Bayard Taylor, as well as a discussion of American Orientalist art. Chapter two focuses on Oriental elements in the writing of Washington Irving. Particular attention is paid to The Alhambra and the central role Irving's sojourn in the ruined Moorish palace played in his creative life. Chapter three examines Edgar Allan Poe's arabesque aesthetic as an
organizing principle in his writing. "The Domain of Arnheim" and "Landor's Cottage" are discussed in detail. Chapter four centers on how the Persian poetry of Saadi and Hafiz informed Emerson's own poems and gave him an original way of writing about the American landscape. Chapter five looks at the role the Orient played in Herman Melville's lifelong search for spiritual fulfillment. Melville's *Journal Up the Straits* and *Clarel* reveal the deep disappointment and disillusionment he felt when he visited the Holy Land. None of these writers had a stereotypical view of the Orient. For all of them, the Orient had a specific personal value.

The emphasis of this dissertation is not on Oriental sources for specific works written during the nineteenth century, but on the underlying importance the Orient had for some of the major writers of the American Renaissance. Throughout the dissertation, whenever possible, relevant Orientalist artwork is discussed. Paintings by Thomas Cole, Frederick Edwin Church, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Elihu Vedder, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Luc Olivier Merson are related to various literary works to show the depth and complexity of American Romantic Orientalism.
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CHAPTER I
THE LAND SIGHTED

I.

In the following pages, I will examine the influence of the Orient on the imagination and work of Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville. The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, to give a clear understanding of the background, nature, and scope of American Orientalism. Second, to critically examine the ways in which four of the major Romantic writers in the United States experienced and recreated the Orient in their individual works. Although this region was an object of fascination and study during the nineteenth century, the inspiration it gave to the American Romantic imagination has not, until now, been carefully explored.

Recently, Edward Said's excellent book, Orientalism, focused attention on Orientalism by exploring the politics--both past and present--of that subject. Literary studies of Orientalist topics which are closely related to mine include Mukhtar Ali Isani's "The Oriental Tale in America Through 1865: A Study in American Fiction" (1962), Patricia Clark Smith's "Novel Conceptions, Unusual Combinations: The Arabesque in Poe" (1970), Ahmed Mohammed Metwalli's "The Lure of the Levant. The American Literary Experience in Egypt and the Holy Land: A
Study in the Literature of Travel, 1800-1865" (1971), and Hassan Mekouar's "Washington Irving and the Arabesque Tradition" (1977). All of these are unpublished dissertations and none of these attempts to explore the underlying importance of the Orient to the American Romantic imagination. The four writers I will examine, Washington Irving, Edgar Allen Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville, have been chosen to suggest the range of responses that major American Romantic writers had to the Orient, as well as to cover the entire American Romantic period. In my discussions I attempt to bring in relevant art work when possible. The purpose of this is not only to indicate connections between nineteenth-century art and literature, but also to give a fuller definition of American Romantic Orientalism. My emphasis is not on points of contact between literature and art, but on points of similarity in the imaginations that created the various works.

"Romantic" as used in this dissertation refers to the nineteenth-century attitude which, to varying degrees, emphasized innovation and intuition over tradition and reason, and favored the exotic and far away over the commonplace and close-to-home. By "Romantic imagination" I mean the imagination of the Romantic writers and artists as it manifested itself in their works and lives.

Orientalism is a difficult term to define. Simply put, anyone who writes about or researches the Orient is an Orientalist, and what they do is Orientalism. In what follows,
however, Orientalism is a way of thinking about the Orient which takes as its starting point the distinction between Orient and Occident. It is a kind of cultural discourse between East and West which attempts to identify and understand the Orient's special place in Western experience. If the approach seems overly dualistic, it is only because historically, for better or for worse, the West has viewed the Orient this way, as a kind of mysterious, inscrutable Other. In a sense, Orientalism is the study of the fact and the illusion of this Other.

The Orient I am concerned with here is not the Far East of China and Japan, but the Orient of the nineteenth century: Turkey, Persia, the Holy Land, and North Africa. It is the area roughly equivalent to what we now call the Middle East. The term "Middle East" wasn't coined until 1902 when the American historian A.T. Mahon used it to distinguish the area of the eastern Mediterranean from the Far East. Before 1902, the terms "Orient" and "Near East" were used synonymously to describe this region.1 Because of its long history of contact with the Orient, Greece has certain Oriental traits and had a similar allure to nineteenth-century travelers, but the notion of "Classicism" is so tied up with the cultural heritage of the West that it puts Greece beyond the pale of Orientalist

Finally, however, to Westerners the Orient has always been more than simply a geographical location; it is the source of our religions and the birthplace of our civilization, and because of this it has been the destination of pilgrims for hundreds of years.

In the rest of this chapter, I shall examine some of the facets of the nineteenth-century American fascination with the Orient. Specifically, I will discuss some of the political, religious, literary, and artistic concerns which to varying degrees informed the views of Irving, Poe, Emerson, and Melville.

II.

During the early years of the Republic, American interest in North Africa and the Middle East was slight and largely economic. But beginning with Napoleon's conquest of Egypt (1798) and the Barbary Wars (1801-1815) between the United States and the Barbary States (Morocco, Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis), contact--both political and cultural--increased tremendously.

The Barbary Wars, or Tripolitan Wars, were a series of naval expeditions against North African countries which preyed on American vessels in the Mediterranean and occasionally

\[^2\] For a detailed discussion of Oriental influences on Greek art and architecture see John Boardman, The Greeks Overseas: Their Early Colonies and Trade (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980).
enslaved the captured seamen. In 1801 the United States government sent four ships to protect American merchant vessels, negotiate with governments, and seek official commercial relationships with North African states. Over the years, as problems continued, the number of ships was increased. Finally, in 1815 Stephen Decatur won a decisive victory against Algiers. The incidents leading up to the Barbary Wars furnished the theme for the earliest American Orientalist literature including Susanna Rowson's comic opera Slaves in Algiers (1794), Royall Tyler's picaresque novel The Algerine Captive (1797), and John Howard Payne's dramas Ali Pacha (1824) and The Fall of Algiers (1825). All of these works are quite nationalistic and portray the North Africans in fairly stereotypical roles as exotic, scheming pirates. In 1842 Payne was actually posted in North Africa. The author of "Home, Sweet Home" was appointed American consul at Tunis where ten years later he died alone in virtual obscurity. Payne thus has the distinction of being the first American literary figure to actually write about and reside in an Islamic country.


4 In the context of this study, it is worth noting that Payne appeared opposite Poe's mother in Romeo and Juliet. He was also good friends with Irving and collaborated with him on several plays.
In 1821 the Greek revolt against Ottoman rule again focused attention on the Mediterranean. Americans followed closely the events in Greece. Committees were formed in the United States to raise funds for the Greeks, and Americans sympathetic to the Greek cause accompanied provisions which were sent over. Edward Everett, Professor of Greek Literature at Harvard and editor of the North American Review considered the struggle a crusade and wrote forcefully about it. Lord Byron, the most famous literary sympathizer in the battle for Greek independence, was, of course, not American. But his personal devotion to the Greek revolt did much to publicize the Greek cause and is symptomatic of the extent to which Oriental politics was affecting the West.

The Greek struggle for independence was only one manifestation of the larger century-long decline of "the sick man of Europe" -- the Ottoman Empire. When Napoleon's flagship, the Orient, appeared off the coast of Egypt in 1798, Egypt and most of the Orient were part of the Ottoman Empire. Though the French occupation of Egypt only lasted until 1801, it proved to be a harbinger of future Western interventions in the region and of the colonization of North Africa. American Romantic Orientalism must be studied against the background of the European rivalries to control and colonize parts of the

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Edward Everett, "The Affairs of Greece," North American Review 17 (October 1823), p. 420. Everett taught Emerson at Harvard and was one of his early heroes.
toppling Empire. The unearthing of the Rosetta stone in 1799 during Napoleon's expedition, and the decipherment of its hieroglyphic script by Jean Francois Champollion in 1822-24, symbolize the opening up of the Orient as an object of fascination for the Western Romantic imagination.

III.

One of the most important aspects of American Romantic Orientalism is its complex religious background. The majority of visitors to the Orient in the nineteenth century, whether they were writers, artists, or simply tourists, were also pilgrims whose journey was not complete without a visit to the Holy Land. The New England Puritans believed they were carrying out a divine plan in clearing and settling the New World. It was common Puritan practice to interpret their trials and tribulations as nothing less than a reenactment of the biblical struggles of the Old Testament peoples, struggles which took place in the Holy Land. For the Puritans, then, the New World they were attempting to civilize was a metaphor for the biblical world of the Orient. Clearing the land and

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7 For an excellent study of the importance of the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics to the nineteenth-century American literary imagination, see John Irwin, American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
planting crops—taming the wilderness—was a way of spreading the gospel.8

By the nineteenth century, religious beliefs in New England could not be constrained by the vestiges of strict Puritanism. The Orient was no longer simply an imaginary biblical landscape providing spiritual inspiration for Christians. Palestine could actually be visited and the sites of the Bible scientifically studied. In 1838 Edward Robinson, a tireless Biblical scholar, arrived in Palestine with the object of examining specific sites to sort out Biblical fact from fiction. Three years later he published his findings in Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea, a monumental work which became the foundation for so-called "scientific" biblical studies in the field.

Another book which covered some of the same ground and reached a wider audience was William Thomson's The Land and the Book: or, Biblical Illustrations Drawn From the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery of the Holy Land (1859). The Land and the Book was extremely popular and was an invaluable source of information for Herman Melville when he came to write Clarel, his major Orientalist work. Robinson and Thomson traveled together in the Holy Land, but they had different objectives. Richardson wanted to ground Christian truth in the

observable reality of the Holy Land, while Thomson assumed the historical validity of the Bible and interpreted the physical remains of the Holy Land according to Scripture. Thomson's approach was the main intention of historical Christianity.9

Historical Christianity was a critical issue in New England where Andrews Norton, Unitarian scholar and head of the Harvard Divinity School, published *The Evidence of the Genuineness of the Four Gospels* (1838), a work claiming to objectively examine the truth of the New Testament. The controversy over historical Christianity fueled Emerson's "Divinity School Address," drove a wedge between the Unitarians and the Transcendentalists, and indicates the turn the American view of the Orient was taking.10 The Orient was, to be sure, the Holy Land, but it was also a real place inhabited by real people speaking unusual languages and having a long history. The religious inspirational value of the Orient was tempered with a more scientific empirical curiosity.

Parallel to the development of interest in scientific and historical Christianity was the rise in the study of comparative religion. Zoroastrianism and Sufism in particular

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became popular subjects to explore and to contrast with Christianity. The frequent allusions to Zoroastrianism in *Moby Dick* and the profound effect the Sufi poets Hafiz and Saadi had on Emerson's poetry attest to the impact that Oriental religions had on American Romantic writers.

IV.

Another central influence on nineteenth-century American Orientalism is the rise of Orientalism in Europe. Despite a sincere desire for a uniquely American culture, the United States during this time still took most of its intellectual instructions from abroad. In many instances, American Orientalists followed in the footsteps of Europeans, particularly the British. The wave of Orientalist literature by Lord Byron, Thomas Moore and others which swept Europe in the first quarter of the century was eagerly read by Americans. Perhaps the greatest single influence helping to create Orientalist literature both in Europe and the United States was *The Arabian Nights*.

*The Arabian Nights* is the most famous representative of Arabic literature in the West. Indeed, it is so well-known that today we regard it virtually as a Western text akin, possibly, to *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. The edition most nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans read was based on a French version translated by A. Galland from 1703 to 1713. Galland almost singlehandedly introduced *The Arabian Nights* to the
West. The popularity of the tales of Aladdin, Sinbad, and Ali Baba spread rapidly throughout Europe inspiring numerous imitations, stage adaptations, and collections of tales from other far-flung parts of the world. Virtually every major writer of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was influenced to some degree by *The Arabian Nights,* and anyone writing Orientalist literature was obliged to allude to it. At the start of *Nile Notes of a Howadji,* the American travel writer George William Curtis stated the case in typical Romantic rhetoric:

> I know you will ask me if an Eastern book cannot be written without a dash of *The Arabian Nights,* if we cannot get on without Haroun Alrashid. No, impatient reader, the Eastern hath, throughout, that fine flavor. The history of that Eastern life is embroidered to our youngest eyes in that airy arabesque.12

What Curtis and others lost sight of was that *The Arabian Nights* is fiction. As appealing as it may have been to see life in the Orient as a romantic, fabulous, never-ending *Arabian Nights,* this view did more to create the Orient than to accurately describe and elucidate it. For writers of fiction, of course, this may not have been a problem, but for American writers with a more historical bent, such as Washington Irving,
The Arabian Nights became a lens which colored and modified the past in subtle ways.

After The Arabian Nights and the Bible, the text most responsible for shaping Western views of the Orient is the Koran. George Sale's translation of the Koran is considered the most famous translation of that book. Originally published in 1734, it went through numerous editions in England and America. The "Preliminary Discourse" and extensive notes throughout gave English speakers access to vast amount of Oriental lore and legend. In the notes, Sale, a respected Orientalist, tried as much as possible to let Arab commentators speak for themselves. His relative objectivity in this regard countered, to some degree, the influence of the "airy arabesque" of The Arabian Nights.

The two central figures in British Orientalism as it influenced American writers are Lord Byron and Thomas Moore. Byron, of course, was the most popular literary figure of his age. He didn't simply write about the Romantic life, he lived it. The Orient was important for Byron throughout his literary career. His Oriental tales ("The Giaour," "The Bride of Abydos," "The Corsair," and others) published in 1813 and 1814 are full of adventure, intrigue, and exoticism, and they became instant literary hits. The fact that Byron committed himself to the Greek cause of independence and died fighting for that cause must have brought home the fact to his readers that the Orient didn't just exist in his Romantic verse tales.
Thomas Moore was a friend of Byron, but his brand of Orientalism is quite different. His Lalla Rookh (1817), a series of four Oriental tales in verse, was even more popular than Byron's Oriental tales. William Russell Smith, the Southern writer and editor, commented:

"Of all the books of poetry appearing during my time, in the depth of its impression on my sensiveness, and its hold upon my heart, I may say that "Lalla Rookh" was the book. It was a "thing of beauty and a joy forever." "The Light of the Harem" glowed in every cottage, and flashed on every center-table. The book was the pocket companion of the boys and the bosom darling of the girls."\(^{13}\)

Unlike Byron, Moore had no personal and political interest in the Orient and he never visited it. It was the passion for the Orient and things Oriental which had seized the British imagination that persuaded him to attempt a long Oriental poem. Since Moore knew little about his subject, Lalla Rookh required painstaking research and, possibly taking a cue from Sale's Koran, was published with copious notes to give it an air of authenticity. Byron's Oriental tales, and Moore's Lalla Rookh established the Orient as a setting available to British writers, and they reveal the dramatic effect the rise in internationalism was having on the Romantic literary imagination.\(^{14}\) Both Byron and Moore were as immensely popular in the United States as they were in Europe. Byron's poems

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were Ralph Waldo Emerson's introduction to contemporary British poetry; he read them eagerly and later carried a volume of Byron's work with him on his European pilgrimage.15

V.

The American educational system had much to do with shaping the nineteenth century image of the Orient. Schools, colleges, and universities built their curriculums around the classics and religion. For younger students, the famous McGuffey Readers included Oriental tales based on *The Arabian Nights*, and the enormously popular Parley's Cabinet Library contained *Lights and Shadows of Asiatic History* (1844) as well as a similar volume on African history. Occasionally, in an attempt to entertain readers while instructing them, "Peter Parley" would send a fictional character on a journey. *The Travels, Voyages, and Adventures of Gilbert Go-Ahead in Foreign Parts* (1856) takes the hero on a tour of Eastern lands.16 The *Travels of Gilbert Go-Ahead* was, in fact, a child's version of what was rapidly becoming one of the most important genres of the century: travel writing.


The increase in the Western military and commercial presence in the Orient was accompanied by an increase in the number of Western travelers visiting Egypt and the Holy Land.\textsuperscript{17} By the 1860s, the popularity of tours to North Africa and the Levant, organized by such well-known companies as Thomas Cook, came to rank second only to the European Grand Tour. The Romantic thirst for exoticism was partially satisfied by the enigma of the Sphinx, the divine aura of the Holy Land, and the lure of Islamic mysticism. Two of the writers discussed in this study actually traveled to the Orient. In 1856 Melville made a pilgrimage to Palestine and visited a number of Holy sites; in 1876 Emerson, accompanied by his daughter, traveled down the Nile to Aswan. Though Irving never visited the Orient, his sojourn at the Alhambra and in the environs of Granada provided him with a solid knowledge of Moorish life.

Some of the earliest reports on the Orient in the nineteenth century are found in travel writing. In the United States, the rise of Romanticism coincides with the growth in the popularity of travel writing.\textsuperscript{18} Certainly there were

\textsuperscript{17} For an excellent short history of Americans in the Orient to the 1850s see David H. Finnie, Pioneers East: The Early American Experience in the Middle East (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967). Appendix III of Finnie's book is a useful bibliography of early publications by Americans relating to their activities in the Middle East.

travel narratives written before the 1800s, but during the nineteenth century travel literature came into vogue and developed a new richness and complexity. At its best, Romantic travel writing is a hybrid literature where the writer regards the act of composition not simply as a factual report of a journey, but as a re-creation of a journey based on real experiences freely colored by the author's imagination.

Three of the most important Americans to visit the Orient and publish accounts of their travels are John Lloyd Stevens, George William Curtis, and Bayard Taylor. The development from Stephens to Taylor clearly shows the increasing presence of the author in the text, a growing subjectivity, and how, finally, the travel narrative can become secondary to the journey's effect on the writer's sensibility.

John Lloyd Stephens was primarily an explorer with a keen power of observation. His Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land (1837) has an unaffected freshness and was an early standard of American travel literature on the Orient. Poe gave it a glowing review, Emerson knew it, and Melville wrote of Stephens in an important passage in Redburn. Van Wyck Brooks went so far as to call Stephens the greatest American Travel writer. Stephens's book was unique in that


it appealed to both a popular and intellectual audience. He avoided "speculations on the rise and fall of empires," and tried to accurately report his experiences without excessive embellishment.

George William Curtis joined the Transcendentalists at Brook Farm, helped Thoreau build his cabin at Walden, and later became an editor at Harper's. *Nile Notes of a Howadji* (1851) and *The Howadji in Syria* (1852) are colorful, sensuous descriptions of his Oriental experiences. Unlike Stephens's *Incidents of Travel*, Curtis's books have a distinctly Romantic literary tone. For Curtis, the Orient was useful as an untapped source of poetic inspiration. "No region is so purely the property of the imagination as the East," he claimed. He believed that more could be learned from the romance of the Orient than from its history. Possibly through Emerson, Curtis was introduced to the Persian poet Hafiz. He prefaced *Nile Notes of a Howadji* with a reference to Hafiz:

> When the Persian Poet Hafiz was asked by the Philosopher Zenda what he was good for, he replied: 'Of what use is a flower?' 'A flower is good to smell,' said the philosopher. 'And I am good to smell it,' said the poet.

And in *The Howadji in Syria* he acknowledged his debt to The Arabian Nights and Hafiz:

---

The Arabian Nights and Hafiz are more valuable for the practical communication of the spirit and splendor of oriental life, than all the books of eastern travel ever written.23

The emphasis on "spirit and splendor" at the expense of fact fairly accurately sums up Curtis's approach to the Orient. He had little interest in the Biblical geography which so absorbed Robinson and Thomson. For him, the Orient was an exotic foreign setting he could use to establish his literary reputation.

Though Bayard Taylor supported himself as a journalist and travel writer, he considered himself a poet first and foremost. His A Journey to Central Africa (1854) and The Lands of the Saracen (1855), both based on a trip he took to the Orient in 1854, were hastily written for public consumption and to establish his reputation. Taylor was deeply affected by Irving's Alhambra and the example he set as an American abroad. By dedicating The Lands of the Saracen to Irving, Taylor placed himself in the tradition of American Orientalist travel writers.

The real product of Taylor's sojourn in the Orient, however, was the best-selling Poems of the Orient (1855), a collection of Romantic, lyric impressions of Oriental life. Though these highly sentimental poems are rarely read today, when Poems of the Orient first appeared, it met with astonishing success. Richard Henry Stoddard claimed Taylor had

"captured the secret feeling of the East as no English-writing poet but Byron had."24 And James Russell Lowell told Taylor, "I cannot help twitching off my cap to fling it up with the rest."25

It is evident that Romantic travel books weren't simply guide books. They not only told readers what there was to see, but they also told them how to see. Some writers, including Bayard Taylor, had a strong interest in pictorial art and would either create the illustrations themselves or invite artist friends to do them. Illustrations gave a visual rendering of a specific part of the text and also could add information to enhance the text. The interaction between illustration and text became an essential element in defining the Orient for Western readers.

A good example of this is in Bayard Taylor's *A Journey to Central Africa*. It was not unusual for Western authors to include illustrations of themselves in native costume in their books. Visually, this made them appear part of the culture and gave them the authority of the local inhabitants. Depending on the author, however, and whether the text was intended primarily for edification or entertainment, these portraits could have an almost theatrical effect.


In _A Journey to Central Africa_, Bayard Taylor includes himself in a number of illustrations. One of them, at the beginning of Chapter XV, clearly reveals how Taylor approached his role as author and guide (Fig. 1). The illustration titled *The Tent-Door at Abu Hamm ed* depicts a landscape with three camels, the Nile, some palm trees and mountains in the background, seen through a tent door. In the foreground and to the left, at the inside edge of the tent door, we see someone dressed in Egyptian dress, sitting on a carpet and smoking a long pipe. From other illustrations in the text, and from evidence in the text itself, the figure with the pipe can be identified as Bayard Taylor. In his position, Taylor is not simply part of the scene, but he acts as an interlocutor between the viewer and the Egyptian countryside. It is through Taylor and the tent door that we see Egypt. The tent door is like a curtain opening on to a stage. The prominent placement of the long-stemmed Oriental pipe with its smoke rising into the scene adds to the exotic tableau. It is the magician's wand and puff of smoke causing things to appear and disappear, clouding the line between fact and fantasy. The pipe is Taylor's trademark. In his books of Oriental travels, whenever someone is pictured with a pipe, it is usually Taylor.

Four chapters later, another illustration, *Moonlight on the Ethiopian Nile* (Fig. 2), reinforces Taylor's role as the magician who controls the action. Here Taylor is the center of attention. His Egyptian companion gestures to him saying,
With permission given, and pipe loaded and lit, the tale begins. The tale, modeled on The Arabian Nights, allows Taylor to revel in Oriental Romance. The chapter ends with the author's evaluation of Oriental Romance and Oriental literature in general.

VI.

The rise of American Orientalist painting follows closely the rise of Romantic Orientalist literature. During the nineteenth century a small but important number of American artists visited Egypt and the Levant and recorded their experiences in sketch books and on canvas. Often, the scenes the artists painted were scenes which had initially become known through texts. The artists were thus presenting the public with visual confirmation that what they had read about was true, and they were also giving personal interpretations of their own experiences.


Many of the artists who painted the landscape of Egypt and the Levant began by painting vast New World landscapes. Indeed, in some respects the allure of the Old World was not so different from the allure of the New World. In *Nile Notes of a Howadji*, Curtis comments, "Columbus sailed out of the Mediterranean to a new world. We had sailed into it, to a new one.... When we reach one end of the world, the other has receded into romantic dimness, and beckons us backward to explore."28 And in *Howadji in Syria*, Curtis spends two pages discussing the similarities between the "Orientals" and the American Indians. "Have we sailed so far," he concludes, to stand in the balcony looking over the Arabian metropolis, and smiling with the Prophet at its splendor and opulence, to discover that our musings are the same as in the crest of a primeval pine, or on the solitary mound of a prairie?29

Probably the most famous American artist to tour the Orient was Frederick Church. Church began painting large landscapes of the West, but like Melville, after he made his reputation he traveled to the Orient and was profoundly affected by the experience.30 His journey there in 1867 resulted in a number of celebrated paintings, including *Jerusalem* and *El Khasne, Petra*, (Fig. 3) as well as in the inspiration for Olana, his "provincialised Persian villa" in


Hudson, New York. Although they are very different works, one
an illustration for a popular travel book and the other a major
painting, compositionally, El Khasne, Petra, which hangs in
Olana, resembles Taylor’s Tent-Door (Fig. 1). The pink facade
of the mysterious rock-cut building is seen from the defile
leading to it.31 The shadowy rough stone surfaces on either
side form a narrow frame. Though it is more subtle in Church’s
painting, in both works the artists have chosen a perspective
which controls the viewer by creating a stage-like setting for
the scene. The artists isolate their subjects and present them
more dramatically, thus lending an aura of theatricality to
their Oriental subjects.

Church is frequently associated with Fitz Hugh Lane,
Martin Johnson Heade, John F. Kensett and Sanford Gifford as
part of the luminist movement in American painting. Luminist
paintings present the beatific, spiritual aspect of nature by
emphasizing water, sky, and light within a broadly horizontal
composition. In 1869 Sanford Robinson Gifford followed Church
to the Orient and sailed down the Nile. Several paintings were
inspired by the trip, including On the Nile (Fig. 4), completed
in 1872. In its stress on water, sky, and light the work is an
excellent example of a luminist painting set in the Orient.

31 The rock-cut building is an example of Orientalized
Classicism. While the actual motifs on the facade are
Classical, the building is in the tradition of rock-cut
monuments with elaborate facades that were executed by the
Phrygians in Anatolia. See Brunhilde Ridgway, The Archaic
Style in Greek Sculpture (Princeton: Princeton University
Press), p. 188.
Recently, luminism has been studied as an artistic manifestation of Transcendentalism. According to Barbara Novak,

though much nineteenth-century nature painting in America was to some extent touched by Transcendental attitudes, luminism was the most profound expositor of transcendental feelings toward God and nature and God as nature.\(^\text{32}\)

In "Emerson and the Luminist Painters: a Study of Their Styles," Gayle Smith draws parallels between Emerson's writing and luminist painting.\(^\text{33}\) In this context it is interesting to compare a passage from the 1876 journal Emerson kept when he traveled down the Nile with Gifford's *On the Nile*. Emerson writes:

> Egypt is the Nile and its shores. The cultivated land is a mere green ribbon on either shore of the river. You can see, as you sail, its quick boundary in rocky mountains or desert sands. Day after day and week after week of unbroken sunshine, and though you may see clouds in the sky, they are merely for ornament, and never rain. The Prophet says of the Egyptians, 'It is their strength to sit still.'\(^\text{34}\)

Emerson's description, while fairly prosaic, is not only a fair description of *On the Nile*, but, it can almost stand on its own as a luminist text. Water, sky, light, and the horizontal shoreline of the Nile dominate, with the final line throwing everything into spiritual relief.


The visionary painter Elihu Vedder visited Egypt in 1889, but this was after he had already completed several Orientalist works including his haunting, *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (Fig. 5). Other American painters, such as Church's teacher Thomas Cole and the painter/sculptor William Rimmer, included Oriental elements in their work but never made the pilgrimage to the Orient. In my chapter on Poe, I discuss the Oriental and arabesque elements in Cole's *Youth* (Fig. 6) from his *Voyage of Life* series, and the Oriental architecture in Rimmer's *Flight and Pursuit* (Fig. 7). The fact that Oriental motifs appear in the work of these artists attests not only to the popular appeal of such images but also to effect that the Orient on these artists' world views.
CHAPTER II

WASHINGTON IRVING IN THE COURT OF LIONS

I.

When Washington Irving entered Spain in February 1826 he was a forty-two-year-old bachelor whose career was at a crossroads. Although The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (1819) had made him the first internationally acclaimed man of letters from the United States, his work since then had been poorly received, clouding his literary future.

Irving's reasons for moving to Spain were both practical and personal. Practically, Irving needed a job. Alexander Everett, the United States Minister in Madrid had offered him a post at the embassy and suggested Irving keep his literary hand in practice by translating a new biography of Columbus by the Spanish scholar Martin Fernandez de Navarrete.1

Personally, the reasons for going to Spain were far more complex. Irving was a wanderer and searcher. The death of his fiancee, Matilda Hoffman, in 1808 and the failure of the family business in 1818 cut him loose from a more settled life. Sailing from the United States in 1815, Irving spent the next ten years writing and traveling in England, France, and Germany. In "The Author's Account of Himself" at the start of

The Sketch Book, he commented, "It has been either my good or evil lot to have my roving passion gratified."² And he quoted from Lyly's Euphues:

'I am of this mind with Homer, that as the snailie that crept out of her shell was turned eftsoones into a Toad, and thereby was forced to make a stoole to sit on; so the traveller that stragleth from his owne country is in a short time transformed into so monstrous a shape that he is faine to alter his mansion with his manners and to live where he can, not where he would.'³

Thus, the chance to explore Spain was something Irving was not able pass up. Spain meant new people, new cities, new landscapes and, with luck, new inspiration. Once again his roving passion would be satisfied.

Looking back, Irving's decision to go to Spain seems providential. His seven year residence there included the happiest and most productive years of Irving's entire writing career, resulting in The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus (1828), The Conquest of Granada (1829), Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus (1831), The Alhambra (1832), Mahomet (1849), and Mahomet's Successors (1850).

Indeed, during the last half of his life Spain and topics related to Spain were the main focus of Irving's literary work.

But what made Irving's Spanish sojourn so special? Why did those years give him so many happy memories? At the heart of Irving's Spain--what seems to have interested him the most--was

³ Ibid., p. 8.
the legacy of the Moors who had occupied the Iberian peninsula from the eighth to the fifteenth century. The exotic, Oriental stamp they left on the Spanish landscape, and the tales and legends by which they were remembered fascinated Irving. In the history of the Moors in Granada, Irving found a metaphor for some of the events in his own life which had led him to the Alhambra.

Perhaps the high points of Irving's stay in Spain were the two visits he made to Granada in 1828 and 1829, visits which inspired his "Spanish Sketch Book," The Alhambra. Granada was the pearl of the South, a city of legends. It was here the Moors had built their most luxurious palace, the Alhambra, and it was here they had made their final stand against the Christians before being pushed back to North Africa. Granada and the ruins of the Alhambra were potent symbols of the past glories of the Moorish conquest of Spain. For a writer such as Irving, in search of fresh material, Granada was a gold mine.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to examine Irving's interest in the Orient as he came to know it through Moorish Spain, and to discover what the Orient meant to him. The focus will be on the development of Irving's Orientalism from his early reading through the writing of The Alhambra. Though initially the Orient seems simply to provide Irving with Romantic inspiration, ultimately it is a psychological landscape where personal loss and frustration are assuaged.
Two important studies dealing with this period of Irving's life are William Hedges's *Washington Irving: An American Study, 1802-1832* (1965), and Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky's recent *Adrift in the Old World: The Psychological Pilgrimage of Washington Irving* (1988). Both authors examine the significance of Irving's sojourn in Granada, but neither of them considers the full implications of Granada—particularly the Alhambra—as a location for meaningful Orientalist experience in the West.

II.

Washington Irving's interest in the Orient probably began during his childhood in New York when he first read *The Arabian Nights*. The *Arabian Nights* was one of the most popular books in the United States at this time. Between 1794 and 1800 it went through no fewer than eleven editions in cities from Philadelphia to Boston. The *Arabian Nights* had a great effect on Irving and allusions to it appear in almost everything he wrote. Irving read, reread, and remembered the tales. They became literary touchstones for him and he often referred to them in letters and journals. Simply by invoking the tales he could summon up a sensuous, colorful world of love and adventure.

Another important book he read in his youth was Gines Perez de Hita's *The Civil Wars in Granada* which was translated

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into English in 1803. Hita's book was Romantic history at its best. It was part of the Spanish-Moorish Orientalist tradition of tales and legends surrounding the Moors in Spain. Mixing fact and adventure, it recreated some of the same tales Irving would use later in *The Alhambra*. Irving himself acknowledged the powerful influence Hita had on his initial interest in Granada when he wrote,

From earliest boyhood, when, on the banks of the Hudson, I first pored over the pages of old Gines Perez de Hytas's apocryphal but chivalresque history of the civil war in Granada, and the feuds of its gallant cavaliers, the Zegris and Abencerrages, that city has ever been a subject of my waking dreams; and often have I trod in fancy the romantic halls of the Alhambra.

Thus, it can be seen that Irving's interest in the Orient did not begin with his appointment to the American legation in Madrid; its roots went deep into his earliest reading in literature and history. These two books, *The Arabian Nights* and *The Civil Wars of Granada*, one a collection of Oriental tales, and the other a Romantic history, represent two of Irving's favorite genres, the short story and historical writing. *The Alhambra* is almost a mixture of these genres. When he came to write on Granada, it made sense to draw from the literature which had influenced him the most in forming his initial interest in the Orient and Granada.

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6 Ibid., p. 39.
References to the Orient first surface in Irving's published work in a series of letters in *Salmagundi* (1808). Written by Mustapha, a Tripolitan visiting New York, these satirical letters detail the follies and foibles of American life. The device of the Oriental traveler writing home had been popularized by others including Goldsmith in his *Citizen of the World* (1762) and Addison in several pieces in *The Spectator*. Irving was well-aware of the tradition and simply transferred the setting from England and Europe to New York. Irving was in his mid-twenties when he wrote the Mustapha letters, and the Orientalism they display is relatively superficial. Pseudo-Oriental rhetoric full of professions of Islamic faith, overblown epithets, and hyperbole, is used for heavyhanded comic effect. It is difficult to believe that Irving really subscribed to the kind of crude Orientalism the Mustapha letters display. Rather, he was probably using available models of an established tradition to comment on politics and society in the United States.

References to the Orient turn up next in *Knickerbocker's History of New York* (1809). Irving's irreverent history begins with a chapter presenting various theories of the creation of the world, including one Arab theory. Irving found the Arab theory in a book entitled *Accounts and Extracts of the*.

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Manuscripts in the Library of the King of France (1789) and he doesn't stray too far from the original text. Basically, he exaggerates certain sections and leaves out material, ultimately creating a fairly humorous mockery of scholarship.\(^8\) Here, unlike in the Mustapha letters, Irving is dealing with a translation of a real Arab text as a source. The satirical intent is much the same, but the author's use of Arab sources brings him closer to the Arab world.

So far, considering the literary climate of early nineteenth-century New York, Irving's Orientalism is fairly predictable. Its origins are in popular British literature and in the eighteenth-century literary models which attracted Irving at that time. The kind of Orientalism displayed in Salmagundi and Knickerbocker is largely satirical and non-Romantic, reflecting the influence of neoclassicism. In short, Irving had yet to discover the real importance the Orient had for him.

Perhaps a more important source of Irving's Orientalism was the rapidly developing European Romantic interest in the Orient. Irving is a key transitional figure between neoclassical literature and Romantic literature in the United States. It makes sense that his earliest literary forays would be most heavily influenced by neoclassical attitudes and that his later work would reflect more specific Romantic views. The Arabian Nights was the cornerstone for the European Romantic

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 98.
view of the Orient. Since Irving had grown up with *The Arabian Nights*, he was well-prepared for the burst of Romantic Orientalist literature, spearheaded by Lord Byron and Thomas Moore, which began to be published in England and Europe in the early 1800s.

Irving, like many other young writers, virtually idolized Byron. During Irving's years in England, he moved in literary circles which not only gave him intimate knowledge of the details of Byron's life, but allowed him to read the famous manuscript of Byron's autobiography before it was burned.  

Thomas Moore was a personal friend of both Byron and Irving. Irving met Moore in Paris where the Irish poet introduced him to a number of influential people and gave him ideas for several pieces. Irving was a great admirer of Moore's work and learned from his technique. He saw that the extensive notes accompanying *Lalla Rookh* represented hours of painstaking research which paid off in the book's authentic feel. This example of research supporting an Oriental text by a Westerner could not have been lost on Irving. Later, when he came to write his own Oriental books, Irving would rely heavily on research he did in libraries in Madrid.

Irving's background in Orientalism, then, comes from several sources including childhood reading, early neoclassical literary models, and the Romantic Oriental vogue which swept Europe in the early nineteenth century. While Byron and Moore

were busy with their Oriental tales, Irving was focusing his attention on the tales and essays of *The Sketch Book*. It wasn't until a dozen years later when he reached Granada that Irving's Orientalism would finally surface, fully developed, and exhibiting bits and pieces of all the Oriental sources he had been exposed to.

III.

Up to this point I have focused on the large external forces shaping Washington Irving's interest in the Orient. Ultimately, however, I believe the importance of the Orient to him was psychological, and deeply personal. The vogue of writing about the East pointed Irving toward Granada, but the rewards from exploring the Moorish experience in Spain were more personal than literary. In this section I want to focus on the themes of identity and loss; first, to see how they generally relate to Irving, and then to see how the theme of identity is central to *The Sketch Book* and how the theme of loss is central to *The Conquest of Granada*. Both of these themes appear later in *The Alhambra* and are major facets of Irving's Orientalism.10

Irving's bittersweet experiences with identity and loss shaped the period preceding his seventeen-year sojourn in

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England and Europe. Salmagundi and Knickerbocker's History of New York brought him considerable recognition as a young literary personality, but his law career had foundered and his love life had been disastrous. He had never fully recovered from the death of his one great love, Matilda Hoffman in 1808. Later, he wrote of the effect her loss had on him:

I cannot tell you what a horrid state of mind I was in for a long time—I seemed to care for nothing—the world was a blank to me—I abandoned all thoughts of the Law.... I seemed to drift about without aim or object, at the mercy of every breeze; my heart wanted anchorage. I was naturally susceptible and tried to form other attachments, but my heart would not hold on; it would continually recur to what it had lost; and whenever there was a pause in the hurry of novelty & excitement I would sink into dismal dejection. For years I could not talk on the subject of this hopeless regret; I could not even mention her name; but her image was continually before me and I dreamt of her incessantly.11

To make matters worse, before leaving for England in 1815 Irving had been frustrated in another romance when he was led to believe a woman he was interested in had become engaged to someone else.12 In 1812 he told a friend, "I always keep it in view as a kind of succedaneum for matrimony, and promise myself in case I am not fortunate enough to get happily married to console myself by ranging a little about the world."13 England must have seemed a comfortable refuge for a man who had no


13 Ibid., p. 566.
definite profession and who was haunted by a tragic love affair.

When it became apparent that the family business would go under, Irving resolved to survive on his writing. Most of the essays and tales found in The Sketch Book were written between 1817 and 1820 when Irving was either living with his sister and brother-in-law in Birmingham, or traveling restlessly around England relying on the hospitality of friends. The emotional turmoil Irving felt is reflected in the tone of the book.

Identity is one of the central themes running like a thread through The Sketch Book. The simple fact that Irving attributes the book to Geoffrey Crayon points to the theme's importance. Besides hinting at Irving's own uncertain identity as a writer, his use of a persona here and throughout his early writing career reflects the identity problem American writers were having as a whole. Who they were and how they could declare their literary independence from England was not clear. Certainly, literary independence couldn't be won in battle or legislated in Congress—it had to be earned.

The focus on identity in The Sketch Book first surfaces in the opening chapter, "The Voyage." "The Voyage" is a dark essay describing the author's journey to England. Irving enjoys watching the sky and the sea and daydreaming, but the most memorable event is the discovery of a mast of a ship which had gone down. Irving comments that there is no trace of the ship's name. This inspires many dismal anecdotes about lost
ships and drowned men. When Irving's boat docks in Liverpool on a beautiful day, he dwells on the reunion of a sailor and his wife. The sailor has been so sick that his wife doesn't recognize him. Irving himself arrives with "no friend to meet, no cheering to receive." "I stepped upon the land of my forefathers," he writes, "but felt that I was a stranger in the land." Without the reinforcement of someone to greet him Irving feels alienated.

"Rip Van Winkle," "The Specter Bridegroom," and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," the three tales in The Sketch Book, all deal with problems of identity. Rip is a henpecked husband whose only escape is by hunting squirrels in the Catskill Mountains. When he returns from his twenty-year nap, he is like Irving stepping off the boat in Liverpool—all is foreign and unwelcoming. His house is empty, "the windows shattered and the doors off the hinges." The closest thing to terror in "Rip Van Winkle" comes here when Rip seems to have lost his identity. All of his questions to the townspeople and all their questions to him revolve around identity. Finally, Rip cries out in despair, "Does anybody here know Rip Van Winkle?" When they point to Rip's son, "a precise counterpart of himself," leaning against a tree, Rip is at the end of his wits:

I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else got into my shoes—I was myself last night; but I fell asleep on the mountain—and they've

changed my gun--and everything's changed--and I'm changed--and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!  

Many of Irving's narrators and central characters are variations of the personality of Irving himself; here, Rip Van Winkle is a perfect example of this. At the time of the writing of The Sketch Book Irving was caught--as Rip is--between the past and the future, between England and the United States. The question of who he was was of central importance.  

"The Specter Bridegroom" again focuses on identity. The main character's identity shifts several times. First he is mistaken for the Count who is supposed to marry the Baron's daughter, then he claims to be the ghost of the dead Count, and finally, he reveals his true identity and marries the daughter. The marriage theme has added significance in relation to Irving's own troubled love-life. In the tale, it is the groom who dies before the wedding; in real life it was Irving's fiancée who died.  

The last chapter in The Sketch Book, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" also mixes identity and love. Ichabod Crane loses to Brom Bones in the competition for Katrina's affections. Brom then disguises himself and chases Ichabod from Sleepy Hollow. Brom Bones's name and his headless horseman disguise identify him as an avatar of death. Again, Irving seems to be writing about his own tragedy. Just as death takes Katrina from Crane

15 Ibid., p. 38.
and forces him to leave, so death took Matilda from Irving and caused him to travel.

In *The Sketch Book*'s essays, identity continues to be an important concern. At the center of the book Irving includes an essay on a visit he made to Westminster Abbey. Besides being a spiritual center, Westminster Abbey contains tombs of and monuments to the great figures of England's past. In a sense, it is a source of all the received authority that Irving and the United States had to come to terms with. As Rubin-Dorsky suggests, the spirits that Irving communes with in Westminster Abbey seem threatening, as if they hold a "potential trap for the imagination."\(^{16}\) His description of Westminster Abbey ends with a dark meditation on the ravages of time and the anonymity of death: "Thus man passes away; his name perishes from record and recollection; his history is as a tale that is told, and his very monument becomes a ruin."\(^{17}\) Although the meditation echoes Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Irving's feeling of desolation in the face of death is genuine. This chapter also previews an important stylistic technique used later in *The Alhambra*. Irving "builds" "Westminster Abbey" around the architecture of the abbey, just as he "builds" *The Alhambra* around the architecture of the palace. The central difference is that where the architecture of Westminster Abbey

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17 Ibid., p. 142.
is dark, heavy, and depressing, representing the cultural weight of the American debt to the British, the architecture of the Alhambra, as we shall see, is liberating and full of imaginative possibility.

Following "Westminster Abbey" is an essay on Christmas which contains one of only two references to the Orient in The Sketch Book. The chapter praises the delights of a traditional Christmas in England, but closes by referring to the alienation the author feels hovering just beyond the evening fire, an alienation relieved only by memories of the past:

The scene of early love again rises green to memory beyond the sterile waste of years, and the idea of home, fraught with the fragrance of home dwelling joyous, reanimates the drooping spirit—as the Arabian breeze will sometimes waft the freshness of the distant fields to the weary pilgrim of the desert.18

The wonderful effect of this memory is compared to an Arab breeze carrying the smell of open fields. The pilgrim, of course, is Irving, not certain where he's going, but certain he must go. For a brief moment, the breeze makes him forget his problems.

The other Oriental reference in The Sketch Book occurs in "Stratford-on-Avon," a chapter describing Irving's visit to Shakespeare's birthplace. In the house where Shakespeare was born Irving compares Shakespeare's chair to "the flying chair of the Arabian enchanter." The reference appears to be to the famous flying carpet of King Housain in The Arabian Nights.

18 Ibid., p. 152.
These two references suggest some of the attitudes Irving was developing toward the Orient. First, the Orient is associated with positive aspects of the past, specifically, with childhood. Second, the Orient is associated with pilgrims and searchers, like Irving. Finally, the Orient is an imaginary land where miracles can take place.

The first of Irving's works dealing specifically with Oriental themes is *The Conquest of Granada*, said to be "from the Mss. of Fray Antonio Agapida." Like *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, the book is history, but history according to Irving, told by one of his personas. Unlike the *History of New York*, however, *The Conquest of Granada* is Romantic history rather than mock-history. The book is important because here, for the first time, Irving's sympathy for the Moors is clearly visible. The central theme, hammered at time and again, is the real and symbolic meaning of the Moors' loss of Granada.

Through Agapida, Irving shows us the destruction of an entire way of life. At the start of the book, under Moorish rule, the land is fertile and the people happy:

So beautiful was the earth, so pure the air, and so serene the sky, of this delicious region, that the Moors imagined the paradise of their Prophet to be situated in that part of heaven which overhung Granada.  

By the end, however, Ferdinand and Isabella have driven the Moors out, laid waste to the countryside, and rule Granada with

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an iron hand. The message is clear: Granada is Eden; its capture means the loss of Paradise.

In *The Conquest of Granada* Irving first introduces Boabdil, the last Moorish king. The prediction at the start of the book "that this child will one day sit upon the throne, but that the downfall of the kingdom will be accomplished during his reign"20 sets the story in motion. Boabdil is one of Irving's great characters and is a central figure in understanding Irving's Orientalism. Indeed, as we shall see more fully in *The Alhambra*, Irving identifies his loss of childhood and loss of love with Boabdil's loss of Granada. Both of them have lost the Garden, and both of them long to return to it.

IV.

Irving's next work was *The Alhambra*, his last and perhaps greatest work of fiction. In a sense, Irving wrote two sets of books, one Western, consisting of *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, and *The Sketch Book*, and one Eastern, consisting of *The Conquest of Granada*, and *The Alhambra*. Some of the similarities between *The History of New York* and *The Conquest of Granada* were briefly discussed above. Just as striking are the similarities between *The Sketch Book* and *The Alhambra*.

For *The Alhambra* Irving employs the same technique he had used with *The Sketch Book*, that of gathering together essays

and tales under a general title. Both of the books begin with an arrival and end with a departure. Granted, the departure at the end of The Sketch Book is Ichabod Crane's departure from Sleepy Hollow; nevertheless, it is symbolic of the narrator taking leave of his readers. One important distinction here is that in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" Ichabod Crane is ignominiously chased from the town; in The Alhambra, the author is more formally called away from the palace by letters to attend to unstated business matters.

But if the two books have a number of similarities, the differences are considerable. Despite its being a miscellany like The Sketch Book, The Alhambra has a coherence the earlier work does not. "The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent." is a bit of a grab-bag title which allowed Irving to include virtually all the shorter pieces he had been writing. The idea of the "sketch book" also suggests that the scale is small and the final product may be relatively impressionistic and unfinished. The "Geoffrey Crayon, Gent." pseudonym complements the title perfectly by reenforcing the artistic metaphor and hinting that the author is not a great artist working on a large canvas, but rather a decorator interested in the miniature. "The Alhambra," on the other hand, is a much more substantial and complex title. By naming the book after the ruined palace, Irving identifies one with the other and establishes a unity of place.
Most of *The Alhambra* is set either in the Alhambra or in Granada. This emphasis on place gives the book a focus *The Sketch Book* lacks. Action in *The Sketch Book* occurs all over England and the United States, without any apparent rhyme or reason. In the Alhambra, each room, courtyard, garden, and view inspires a story; and each story, in turn, tells us more about the palace, its occupants, and also about Irving. The artistic motif of *The Sketch Book* is replaced by an architectural motif. The crumbling Oriental architecture suggests both the lost grandeur of the Moors and the troubled past of the author. Like Poe's *House of Usher*, which is a metaphor for the Usher family, the Alhambra is a metaphor for the whole Moorish experience in Spain and, by extension, for Irving's fascination with it. The palace and the book are both labyrinthine. The author and the reader explore and learn together. Each new discovery of a room or passageway spurs Irving on.

Chapters such as "The Hall of the Ambassadors," and "The Mysterious Chambers," concern Irving's attempts to penetrate the mysteries of the palace. In "The Mysterious Chambers," Irving discovers some locked rooms. After obtaining the key he enters and finds a suite of rooms decorated in European style but looking out on the Generalife and the Moorish garden of Lindaraxa. "The desolation of these chambers," Irving comments,

had a more touching charm for me than if I had beheld them in their pristine splendour, glittering with the pageantry
of a court.

When I had returned to my quarters, in the governor's apartment, everything seemed tame and commonplace after the poetic region I had left. The thought suggested itself: why could I not change my quarters to these vacant chambers? that would indeed be living in the Alhambra, surrounded by its gardens and fountains, as in the time of the Moorish sovereigns.21

Here we see Irving attempting to retain his European heritage while at the same time moving deeper into the Alhambra, coming more completely under its spell. The European chambers are virtually a metaphor for Irving himself. They exist surrounded by Moorish ruins.

Irving's new apartment has a dramatic effect on him. At times his imagination seems drunk with Romance. "I would sit for hours at my window inhaling the sweetness of the garden," he tells us.

The temperature of a summer midnight in Andalusia is perfectly ethereal. We seem lifted up into a purer atmosphere; we feel a serenity of soul, a buoyancy of spirits, an elasticity of frame, which render mere existence happiness.22

The similarity between this passage and Emerson's famous transparent eyeball passage in *Nature* (1836) is striking. For Irving, night amidst the ruined Oriental architecture of the Alhambra has almost the same profound transcendent effect that a walk across Boston Common has on Emerson. Rubin-Dorsky puts the effect that Irving's change of apartments has on him in appropriately (for Irving) sexual terms: "The Alhambra no


22 Ibid., p. 61.
longer appears to Irving as a formidable mystery; it is now, like a lover, open and yielding.  "23

The use of the architectural motif is one of the main strengths of The Alhambra and ultimately makes it a better book than The Sketch Book. 24 The Sketch Book has several individual tales which are landmarks in American literature, but much of it is important only as a kind of historical document showing the state of American literature in the early nineteenth century.

Initially, The Alhambra was also by Geoffrey Crayon, but in later editions the pseudonym was dropped. The character of the book is more confident and personal; maybe Irving did not feel the need for a persona to mediate between himself and the reader. Perhaps the biggest difference between the two books is the tone. The Alhambra is a fairly happy book; the melancholy atmosphere of The Sketch Book has disappeared.

What caused this change in Irving? Why is The Alhambra so much sunnier than The Sketch Book? Irving's two visits to Granada seemed to mark a turning point in his life. The first, in 1828, followed two years of laborious writing on the Columbus biography. Irving was ready for a break and the magic of Granada was exactly what he needed. During his second visit the next year he was offered the Governor's apartments in the

23 Rubin-Dorsky, Adrift in the Old World, p. 240.

24 For more on the architectural motif in The Alhambra see Rubin-Dorsky, Adrift in the Old World.
Alhambra. His twelve-week residence there allowed him to enter the lost, exotic world of the Moors in a way that no amount of research could. Past and present, fact and fiction merged. He lived with the ghost of Boabdil and heard tales of the Moors from the local peasants. The history of the Moors came alive for him and perhaps in that history he recognized a vague metaphor for his own past. The Moors had lost Eden, and with it part of their identity. Yet, in the deserted palace and in the minds of the Granadians, the past glowed and gave strength. Perhaps through the example of the Granadians Irving a way of approaching his own past.

The opening chapter of The Alhambra is entitled "The Journey." Like "The Voyage" in The Sketch Book, its main purpose is to physically transport the narrator and psychologically transport the reader to the scene where most of the action will take place. It is basically a story-teller's technique similar to the one used at the start of "Rip Van Winkle" where the narrator transports the reader up the Hudson to the Catskill Mountains, to a particular village in the mountains, and finally to a particular house inhabited by Rip Van Winkle. Like "The Voyage" also, "The Journey" brings us into the world of the narrator. We are not only traveling to Granada, we are also coming under the spell of the narrator. The letters which the narrator receives at the end of The Alhambra not only free him from his Oriental idyll and call him...
back to the "business of the dusty world," they also free the reader from the narrator and allow the book to end.

"The Journey" is a much longer chapter than "The Voyage" but like the seacrossing in "The Voyage," the trip across Spain to Granada is fraught with difficulties. The landscape that Irving must travel through to reach Granada is "a stern, melancholy country, with ragged mountains, and long sweeping plains, destitute of trees, and indescribably silent and lonesome." The danger of meeting bandits forces travelers into groups led by armed guides. Still, the trip here is generally happier than the trip in The Sketch Book. The ruins of Moorish castles are picturesque and the few rivers they come to are refreshing.

For guide, groom, and valet, during the trip, Irving hires a "sturdy Biscayne lad." "He was, in truth," Irving tells us, "a faithful, cheery, kindhearted creature, as full of saws and proverbs as that miracle of squires, the renowned Sancho himself, whose name, by the by, we bestowed upon him." If Irving's valet becomes Sancho, then Irving must, by extension, be Don Quixote. With the roles established, the nature of the journey and the chapter become clear. It is a journey from the reality of the present to the romance of the past. One of Sancho's main jobs is to keep the alforjas filled with food and the bota filled with wine. Irving reminds us that both of

25 Irving, The Alhambra, p. 3.
26 Ibid., p. 10.
these containers are Arab inventions. By being in charge of
the bota Sancho symbolically controls reality. At one point
Irving comments,

I found he was well-versed in the history of Don Quixote,
but, like many of the common people of Spain, firmly
believed it to be a true history. "All that happened a long time ago, Senor, said he,
with an inquiring look.
"A very long time," I replied.
"I dare say more than a thousand years,"--still looking
dubiously.
"I dare say not less."27

Though Irving appears to be humoring Sancho, the fact is that
he agrees with him and thereby gives Sancho control. As the
travelers get closer to Granada, the evidence of the former
Moorish grandeur becomes more apparent. Finally, Irving gets
his first glimpse of his destination: "In the distance was
romantic Granada surmounted by the ruddy towers of the
Alhambra, while far above it the snowy summits of the Sierra
Nevada shown like silver."28 Unlike "The Voyage" which ends
darkly with Irving standing alone on the dock, "The Journey"
ends humorously with Sancho duping Irving into staying at one
of the shabbiest posadas in Granada. Irving now is truly, but
happily, at the mercy of Granada.

While many of the chapters in The Alhambra have to do with
identity and loss, the restlessness which was found in The
Sketch Book is not present. It is as if Irving has finally
found the place he was looking for in The Sketch Book, the

27 Ibid., p. 15.
28 Ibid., p. 23.
place where the past and the present meet and blur. Indeed the chapters themselves, some of them taking place in the present and some in the past, mix together to create one dream-like state. At the center of the book is the longest tale, "The Legend of Prince Ahmed al Kamel; or, the Pilgrim of Love." Unlike the gloomy "Westminster Abbey" in the center of The Sketch Book, "The Pilgrim of Love" is a bright love story with a happy ending.

Like The Sketch Book, The Alhambra is a mix of genres. Historical vignette, short story, and essay are all found in the book. The kind of short story Irving uses here draws largely from the tales found in The Arabian Nights. Irving acknowledges the importance of the Arabian Nights to the whole conception of The Alhambra when he addresses the artist David Wilkie in the dedication of the first edition of the book:

You may remember, that in the rambles we once took together about some of the old cities of Spain, particularly Toledo and Seville, we remarked a strong mixture of the Saracenic with the Gothic, remaining from the time of the Moors; and were more than once struck with scenes and incidents in the streets which reminded us of passages in the Arabian Nights. You then urged me to write something that should illustrate those peculiarities, 'something in the Haroun Alrasched style,' that should have a dash of that Arabian spice which pervades everything in Spain.29

In a sense, The Alhambra is Washington Irving's Arabian Nights. Like The Arabian Nights, The Alhambra is a kind of frame story which takes place in a specific amount of time. Also like The Arabian Nights, in The Alhambra there is a fine

29 Ibid., p. 325.
line between fact and fantasy, natural and supernatural.
Irving even expands this confusion to cover past and present.
Beyond these general similarities, a number of the tales in The
Alhambra have their roots in the Oriental tales of The Arabian
Nights. The genre of the Oriental tale is discussed in the
chapter on Poe, but briefly, the popularity of the Oriental
tale spread to the United States from Europe where it
originated in the increased contact between Europe and the
Orient. Typically, Oriental tales have a Middle Eastern
setting, exotic action (often involving Eastern nobility and
magicians), enchantment, love, and hidden treasure.30

A good example of the Oriental tale in The Alhambra is
"The Legend of Prince Ahmed Al Kamel; or, the Pilgrim of Love."
Appearing at the middle of the book, it acts as a hub around
which the other tales turn. In many ways it gathers together
the central concerns of The Alhambra. The story is about a
young Moorish prince from whom all mention of love has been
hidden. This has been done because an astrologer has predicted
that if he finds out about love at too early an age, he will be
in extreme danger. Despite being held virtually a prisoner in
the Alhambra, the Prince learns about love from a dove. He
begins communicating with a Christian princess by using the
dove as a messenger. The tale ends with his meeting the

30 For a careful study of the Oriental tale in the United
States see Mukhtar Ali Isani, "The Oriental Tale in America
Through 1865: A Study in American Fiction" (Ph.D.
princess, stealing her away from her protective father, marrying her, and then there is a final reconciliation where everyone is satisfied. The story is a love story with a happy ending, unlike most of the tales in The Sketch Book. The Irving here is a different Irving from the one in The Sketch Book. He has reached the destination of his quest and it is Oriental. The whole tone of the tale is similar to the tales in The Arabian Nights. Indeed, without going into great detail, Irving's tale bears a striking resemblance to "The Ebony Horse" in The Arabian Nights. The purpose here is not to trace Irving's tale back to a specific source in Eastern literature, but to suggest the kind of source he was using and suggest why he might have been using that particular source. Love stories make up a large portion of the tales in The Arabian Nights. Irving would have been attracted to this kind of tale because love was a major element in his thoughts and existed, for him, only in a kind of ideal, imaginary state, exactly the kind of state he found himself in at the Alhambra.

Another genre in The Alhambra is travel writing. Again, this parallels The Sketch Book which contained a good bit of travel writing. "The Pilgrim of Love" discussed above, besides being a love story, contains elements of travel writing. The hero travels from Granada to Toledo to meet with his love. The descriptions given during his trip seem as if they came

\[31\] Ibid., p. 149.
directly from a travel book. Ahmed travels, guided by an owl and a parrot,

through the stern passes of the Sierra Morena, across the sunburnt plains of la Mancha and Castille, and along the banks of the 'Golden Tagus,' which winds its wizard mazes over one half of Spain and Portugal. At length they came in sight of a strong city with walls and towers built on a rocky promontory, round the foot of which the Tagus circles with brawling violence.

'Behold,' exclaimed the owl, 'the ancient and renowned city of Toledo; a city famous for its antiquities. Behold those venerable domes and towers, hoary with time and clothed with legendary grandeur, in which so many of my ancestors have meditated.'

Here, the wise owl is acting like a tour guide for Ahmed and, by extension, the reader.

Other chapters in *The Alhambra* are travel-related, but include much more history and are specifically for people unfamiliar with Spain and Granada. These include the chapters relating to Boabdil, the central figure in *The Alhambra* and a central figure in helping us understand how personally involved with Granada and the Orient Irving actually was.

Boabdil was the last Moorish king of Granada. He has been popularly criticized for his handling of the fall of Granada, but Irving, meditating on the story, finds the balance inclining in Boabdil's favor:

> Throughout the whole of his brief, turbulent, and disastrous reign, he gives evidence of a mild and amiable character. He, in the first instance, won the hearts of his people by his affable and gracious manners; he was always placable, and never inflicted any severity of punishment upon those who occasionally rebelled against him. He was personally brave; but wanted moral courage; and, in times of difficulty and perplexity, was wavering

and irresolute. This feebleness of spirit hastened his downfall, while it deprived him of that heroic grace which would have given grandeur and dignity to his fate, and rendered him worthy of closing the splendid drama of the Moslem domination in Spain.33

The focus on Boabdil in *The Alhambra* reflects Irving's lifelong interest in powerful individuals such as Christopher Columbus, Mohammed, John Jacob Astor, and George Washington, whom he also wrote about at great length. Irving's interest in these men is an early example of the nineteenth-century vogue of hero worship which helped shape Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841) and Emerson's *Representative Men* (1850). But for Irving, Boabdil is more than a great Islamic King. Irving identifies with Boabdil throughout *The Alhambra*. He relates several stories concerning Boabdil and makes a point of visiting sites associated with the King. Irving is able to summon up Boabdil in *The Alhambra* by visiting the sites associated with him. While some of these are in the environs around Granada, most of these are in the palace itself. One of the most important sites associated with Boabdil is the Court of Lions.

The Court of Lions is where the Abencerrages supposedly met their bloody end. The Albencerrages were the Moslems in Spain who claimed their ancestry was of pure Arab blood going all the way back to the time of Mohammed. Tradition says a number of these blue-blooded Arabs were beheaded in the Court of Lions during the conquest of Granada by the Christians.

33 Ibid., p. 96.
Because of this tradition the court has become a symbol of the final defeat of the Moors. Irving begins his chapter entitled "The Court of Lions":

The peculiar charm of this old dreamy palace is its power of calling up vague reveries and picturings of the past, and thus clothing naked realities with the illusions of the memory and the imagination. As I delight to walk in these 'vainshadows,' I am prone to seek those parts of the Alhambra which are most favorable to this phantasmagoria of the mind; and none are more so than the Court of Lions, and its surrounding halls. Here the hand of time has fallen the lightest, and the traces of Moorish elegance and splendour exist in almost their original brilliancy. Earthquakes have shaken the foundations of this pile, and rent its rudest towers; yet, see! not one of those slender columns has been displaced, not an arch of that light and fragile colonnade given way, and all the fairy fretwork of these domes, apparently as unsubstantial as the crystal fabrics of a morning's frost, exist after the lapse of centuries, almost as fresh as if from the hand of the Moslem artist. 34

For Irving, the Court of Lions—the richest portion of the Alhambra—is a visible counterpart of the Arabian Nights, and is as close to the glorious past as he can come. It brings together the beauty, romance, and final tragedy of the Moors in Spain. He discusses its two aspects. During the day, with the sunshine "gleaming along its colonnades and sparkling in its fountains," and the busy bee "humming among the flower-beds," the Court of Lions is an Oriental Garden of Love. "It needs but a slight exertion of the fancy," Irving tells us,

to picture some pensive beauty of the harem, loitering in these secluded haunts of Oriental luxury. He, however, who would behold this scene under an aspect more in unison with its fortunes, let him come when the shadows of evening temper the brightness of the court, and throw a gloom into the surrounding halls. Then nothing can be

34 Ibid., p. 79.
more serenely melancholy, or more in harmony with the tale of departed grandure.\textsuperscript{35}

It is clear that the Court of Lions represents the spiritual heart of the lost Garden of Moorish Spain. And, for Irving personally, it is also the heart of his lost Garden. The twelve stone lions encircling the fountain at the center of the court are related to the guardian Sphinx of ancient Egypt and to the angel sent to stand at the gates of Eden after Adam and Eve were expelled.\textsuperscript{36}

One evening, Irving meets a "turbaned Moor" in the Court of Lions and during a long discussion on Boabdil's role in the massacre of the Abencerrages, tries to vindicate the dead King's memory. Irving blames early historians, notably Gines Perez de Hita in whose book Irving first read of Granada, for Boabdil's unfair treatment. In effect, Irving is attempting to argue with history, to change the past and be allowed to return to the Garden before the Fall. This conflict between the reality of history and the romance of history is at the heart of both \textit{The Alhambra} and Irving's Orientalism. Irving's Orient is the Romantic past, a world made of wishes struggling with the world of what is. Unlike the later Orientalism of Emerson and Melville, dealt with in Chapters Four and Five, Irving's Orientalism has little basis in religion and the spirit. In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 152.
\item \textsuperscript{36} These lions are also related to the motif of the Sphinx which became so important in nineteenth-century Orientalist literature. See Chapter Four for a discussion of the Sphinx and Emerson.
\end{itemize}
place of the spirit he has history which, if correctly understood, may allow the Moors to return to the Court of Lions and Irving to return to the Garden.

One central scene which clearly shows the depth of the relationship between Boabdil and Irving is when Irving finds the gate which Boabdil used when he finally left the Alhambra for the last time. Boabdil gave orders that the gate be closed up after he passed through. Irving finds a ruined gate which had been closed by loose stones and decides this must be Boabdil's gate. Irving then traces the King's route on that last day as he climbed the hills away from Granada:

I arrived at the foot of a chain of barren and dreary heights, forming the skirt of the Alpuxarra mountains. From the summit of one of these the unfortunate Boabdil took his last look at Granada; it bears a name expressive of his sorrows, La Cuesta de las Lagrimas (the hill of tears). Beyond it, a sandy road winds across a rugged cheerless waste, doubly dismal to the unhappy monarch as it led to exile.37

When Irving, himself, leaves Granada, he remembers Boabdil's farewell:

Towards sunset I came to where the road wound into the mountains, and here I paused to take a last look at Granada. The hill on which I stood commanded a glorious view of the city, the Vega, and the surrounding mountains. It was at an opposite point of the compass from La cuesta de las lagrimas (the hill of tears) noted for the "last sigh of the Moor." I now could realize something of the feelings of poor Boabdil when he bade adieu to the paradise he was leaving behind, and beheld before him a rugged and sterile road conducting him to exile.38

37 Irving, The Alhambra, p. 95.
38 Ibid., p. 275.
Here Irving completely identifies his situation with Boabdil's. Both are leaving Paradise. The imagery and the tone are reminiscent of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and Boabdil's walled up gate suggests the impossibility of returning to the source. The only significant difference in their departures from Granada is that they leave by exactly opposite routes; Boabdil returns to the Orient and Irving returns to the Occident.

The ending to The Alhambra has provoked a fair amount of discussion. Hedges believes Irving's whole trip to Granada was a "flight from time" which was "doomed to failure" and that the ending simply bears this out. This argument, of course, claims The Alhambra represents a falling off of Irving's writing ability, rather than the high point of his career. The Alhambra was published in 1832, the same year Irving arrived back in the United States. Though the almost simultaneous occurrence of these two events is coincidental, it emphasizes what I believe is the significance of the Alhambra and of the Orient to Irving. Certainly the years Irving spent in Europe changed him and mellowed him, but, more importantly, Irving learned at the Alhambra that the past can exist in the present and can enrich it. The Moorish Garden of Granada was in ruins, but it was still vital; though Eden was lost, the magic of Eden was not. Unlike England and Europe which gave Irving material to use in his writing but also encumbered him with Western

39 Hedges, Washington Irving, p. 263.
tradition, the Alhambra opened the Orient to him, an area barely touched by Western authors, and thus an area which offered him the kind of liberation his imagination seemed to need.
CHAPTER III
EDGAR ALLAN POE'S ARABESQUE AESTHETIC

I.
In looking at Edgar Allan Poe's Orientalism, I want to start with a poem, "To Helen," which, on the surface, appears more Classical than Oriental. After "The Raven," "To Helen" is Poe's best-known poem. Its lyricism and sonnet-like compression have frequently been commented on. My interest in the poem, however, is not so much in its lyric excellence, as in the development of its three stanzas, and how this development mirrors the development of Poe's Orientalism.

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand!
Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy-Land!1

Written when Poe was in his early twenties, "To Helen" has a Romantic intensity reminiscent of Keats's odes. The poem is

about a quest for beauty." In the first stanza, Helen is a real woman whose name and physical beauty conjure up Helen of Troy and Odysseus's voyage home to Penelope. In the second stanza, the Classical features of the real woman—her "Naiad airs"—mentally transport the poet "home" to Greece and Rome. This is the same Greece of Keats's urn and Lord Elgin's marbles—the golden age of Classical antiquity. In the last stanza, Helen is transformed from an image of Classical beauty to Psyche, the goddess of the mind and soul who comes from the "Holy-Land."

As in much of Poe's work, the movement in "To Helen" is from the exterior to the interior. The object of the quest changes from the physical to the spiritual. Physically, the poem begins outside, on the "perfumed seas," and ends inside, in a "window-niche." This physical movement is repeated in the intellectual movement. Initially, "To Helen" seems to deal with the Classical world and Classical aesthetic values, but the last line, with its reference to Psyche and the "Holy-Land," hints at another more complex aesthetic. In the poem, "Holy-Land" can be understood to be the traditional geographical area in the Middle East and also the spiritual and creative realm of Psyche, the "Holy-Land" of the mind, which was so important for Poe. It is a Holy Land which, physically and spiritually, is more Oriental than Classical.

In this chapter, then, I will trace Poe's fascination with the Orient and show how his interest in popular Orientalism developed into an arabesque aesthetic which is at the core of
his work. I will begin by examining several of Poe's poems which have Oriental elements, move to a discussion of his book reviews of specifically Orientalist works, and finally look at some of the tales which reveal the full complexity of Poe's Orientalism.

II.

Poe was aware of the popular interest in the Orient, not only through the journals he read which contained accounts of American and British explorations in the Middle East, but also through the poems and tales inspired by these explorations. Byron's Hebrew Melodies and Tales, Chiefly Oriental were as famous in America as they were in Europe. Indeed, Byron was an early model for Poe. Thomas Moore's Oriental romances, Lalla Rookh and Alciphron were also well-known to Poe. He reviewed Alciphron in 1840 in Graham's Magazine, admiring the Moore's ingenuity and hailing the poem as a masterpiece. Poe's earliest writings show that he shared in the general excitement about things Oriental.

The title of Poe's first book, Tamerlane and Other Poems (1827), reveals a strong interest in the exotic. While none of the poems in this book are particularly memorable, they point in the direction his later work would take. In the title poem, Poe describes the lament of the Tartar peasant who sets out to conquer the world for Islam and, when he returns home, finds his beloved has died. The setting is the village in central
Asia where Tamerlane grew up. References to Samarcand and the mountains of Belur Taglay add to the exoticism. As with much of Poe's work, "Tamerlane" takes place in a strange and mysterious location about which his readers probably have little knowledge. It is a superficial, semi-Classical, semi-Oriental poem which is interesting mainly because it indicates the kind of material the young poet was attracted to.

"Al Aaraaf," Poe's next attempt at a major work, is somewhat more successful than "Tamerlane," but here the machinery is too grand and the substance too ephemeral. Poe leans heavily on Milton, Shelley, and Moore for instructions. The scene is even more vague than in "Tamerlane" and where that poem at least has its roots in history and has a physical location, "Al Aaraaf" is concerned only with the ideal. Poe's letter to Isaac Lea discussing the poem provides some background information. The title, Poe says, is from the Al Aaraaf of the Arabians, a medium between Heaven and Hell where men suffer no punishment and yet do not attain that tranquil & even happiness which they suppose to be the characteristic of heavenly enjoyment....I have placed this 'Al Aaraaf' in the celebrated star discovered by Tycho Brache which appeared and disappeared so suddenly....I have imagined some well known characters of the age of the star's appearance, as transferred to Al Aaraaf—viz Michael Angelo—and others—of these Michael Angelo as yet alone appears.

Thus Poe mixes Arab cosmology with Western history to create his own brilliant star.

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In the poem, Al Aaraaf is the home of Nesace, Goddess of Beauty, and Ianthe, one of Nesace's minions. The action concerns the fall of Michelangelo and Ianthe because of the passion they feel for each other. In Part II, Nesace speaks to Ianthe:

Ianthe, dearest, see! how dim that ray
How lovely 'tis to look so far away!
She seemed not thus upon that autumn eve
I left her gorgeous halls--nor mourn'd to leave.
That eve--that eve--I should remember well--
The sun-ray dropp'd, in Lemnos, with a spell
On th' Arabesque carving of a gilded hall
Wherein I sate, and on the draperied wall--
And on my eye-lids--0 the heavy light!
How drowsily it weigh'd them into night!
On flowers, before, and mist, and love they ran
With Persian Saadi in his Gulistan:
But 0 that light!--I slumber'd--Death, the while,
Stole o'er my senses in that lovely isle
So softly that no single silken hair
Awoke that slept--or knew that he was there.\(^4\)

Here the mix of Classical and Oriental references seems tailored for popular taste. The memory of the Greek island of Lemnos summons up Oriental visions of Saadi's "gulistan," a Persian garden of love. But the mysterious melancholy, the "Arabesque carving," the "draperied wall," the "heavy light," and the presence of death create a tone and atmosphere which are pure Poe. Even at this early stage of his career the darkness is hovering around the edges.

The final couplet of the poem, dealing with the ill-fated union between Michelangelo and Ianthe reads, "They fell: for Heaven to them no hope imparts / Who hear not for the beating

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\(^4\) Ibid., p. 50.
of their hearts." Here, in the tension between passion and intellect, is the seed of some of Poe's best-known poems and tales.

In "Al Aaraaf," Poe is responding to the nineteenth-century hunger for exoticism—for poems like Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and Moore's Lalla Rookh—and he is also wrestling with his own cosmology, trying for originality. Unfortunately, the imaginative energy of "Al Aaraaf" cannot offset the recycled props and action. "Al Aaraaf" is Poe's failed attempt at a dark Romantic epic.

Another of Poe's early poems which shows his interest in the Orient is "Israfel." The epigraph, incorrectly attributed by Poe to the Koran, informs us that Israfel is an angel "whose heart-strings are a lute" and who "has the sweetest voice of God's creatures." The poem is an eight stanza lyric which contrasts Israfel's world and the world of the poet. Like "Al Aaraaf," "Israfel" is about the conflict between the real and the ideal. But while the spirits and ghosts in "Al Aaraaf" lack intensity, and the imaginary location gives the poem too much dramatic distance, "Israfel" has the kind of heightened passion which is almost a trademark of Poe:

In heaven a spirit doth dwell
"Whose heart strings are a lute;"
None sing so wildly well
As the angel Israfel,
And the giddy stars (so legends tell)
Ceasing their hymns, attend the spell
Of his voice all mute....

And they say (the starry choir
And the other listening things)
That Israfel's fire
Is owing to that lyre
By which he sits and sings--
The trembling, living wire
Of those unusual strings....

The ecstasies above
With thy burning measures suit--
Thy grief, thy joy, thy hate, thy love,
With the fervour of thy lute--
Well may the stars be mute!5

It is clear that Israfel is no chaste, angelic choirboy. The
"spell of his voice" and the "burning measures" of his lute are
more visionary than heavenly.

Even more important than this difference between "Al
Aaraaf" and "Israfel" is the fact that in "Israfel's" final and
critical stanza, an "I" is introduced:

If I could dwell
Where Israfel
Hath dwelt, and he where I,
He might not sing so wildly well
A mortal melody,
While a bolder note than this might swell
From my lyre within the sky.

Suddenly, the poet has entered and is longing for
transcendence. The central element in the stanza is "if."
Everything hangs on that word. On one level, the tension in
the poem is between the poet and Israfel. On another level, the
tension is really between different elements within the
poet.

Daniel Hoffman points out an interesting parallel between
the epigraph to "Israfel" and the epigraph to "The Fall of the
House of Usher" which reads, "Son coeur est un luth suspendu; /

5 Ibid., pp. 62-64.
Sitot qu'on le touche il resone." The suspended lute resonates in both pieces, and both pieces are, in effect, about doubles. In "Usher," Roderick Usher buries his twin sister alive. In "Israfel," an earthly singer longs to change places with his counterpart in heaven. Both "Israfel" and "Usher" are about two parts of a whole. Israfel is the creative imagination free of earthly restraints; the poet in the poem is Poe, hobbled by worldly responsibilities. "Israfel" may have been written while Poe was at West Point wrestling with a vocation. This would explain, in part, the "if" and the sense of frustration in the last stanza.6

What is of interest regarding Poe's Orientalism in this poem, is that he has chosen Israfel, an Islamic angel, as his alter-ego. The change from "Tamerlane" and "Al Aaraaf" is major. Israfel is not used simply for the sake of exoticism, to appeal to the contemporary fascination with the Middle East, he represents an important facet of Poe's personal and creative life.

Other poems by Poe have obvious Oriental traits, but the development in the use of Oriental elements in the three poems just discussed leads more directly to what I think is the central importance of the Orient to Poe. Initially the Orient is simply an exotic landscape Poe can use to give his work a mysterious allure, but finally it is an aspect of Poe's own

imagination which he must come to terms with. In most of the
works discussed above, Oriental elements are used when the
focus of the poem is some aspect of beauty or art. "To Helen"
and "Al Aaraaf" are both concerned with beauty and aesthetics;
"Israfel" focuses on the artist and the creative imagination.

III.

Before moving on to an examination of Poe's tales, I want
to look briefly at his reviews of Orientalist works. Since Poe
never visited the Orient, indeed probably never left the United
States, all of his information about the Middle East came
second-hand through reading, or possibly through attending one
of the many lyceum lectures devoted to the Orient. Though
Orientalist paintings were exhibited in New York, Philadelphia,
and Boston during the mid 1800s, there is no hard evidence that
Poe viewed any of these works.

I have already indicated that Poe was strongly influenced
by Byron and Moore. Of these two, Thomas Moore who, after
Byron, was the most popular English Romantic poet of the times,
probably had the greatest influence on Poe's Orientalism.
Moore's long Oriental romance Lalla Rookh (1817) was a best
seller and did much to spark nineteenth century interest in the
Middle East. In 1839 Moore published Alciphron, a poem dealing
with Egyptian initiation mysteries, and in January of the
following year Poe wrote a glowing review.
Poe begins his review by complementing Moore for his imaginative recreation of ancient Egypt:

Amid the vague mythology of Egypt, the voluptuous scenery of her Nile, and the gigantic mysteries of her pyramids, Anacreon Moore has found all of that striking material which he so much delights in working up, and which he has embodied in the poem before us.  

He then goes on to summarize the poem, discuss Coleridge's distinction between fancy and imagination, and how this relates to the piece, and finally quote passages which "exalt and etherealize" the "suggestive force" of the poem. Two of the passages Poe copies are worth quoting here:

```
The eternal pyramids of Memphis burst
Awfully on my sight--standing sublime
'Twixt earth and heaven, the watch-towers of time,
From whose lone summit, when his reign hath past,
From earth forever he will look his last....

Is there for man no hope--but this which dooms
His only lasting trophies to be tombs?
But 'tis not so--earth, heaven, all nature shows
He may become immortal, may unclose
The wings within him wrapt, and proudly rise
Redeemed from earth a creature of the skies!
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What is interesting about these lines is that the tone and sentim ent, the fascination with death, is so similar to Poe's own concerns. The second passage, while missing the defiant, proud giddiness of Poe, has an echo of "Israfel." This is not to suggest that Moore had any knowledge of Poe's poem when he wrote Alciphron, but simply to point out that Poe's

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8 Ibid., pp. 67-68.
appreciation of Moore's Orientalism is, in part, an
appreciation of a kindred spirit. What Poe admired in Moore
was the mysterious exoticism and the interest in the other-
worldly, both of which are characteristics of Poe's own work.

In an earlier and perhaps more important review, Poe
examined John Lloyd Stephens' Arabia Petraea (1837). Stephens'
book relates his travels in Egypt and the Levant. His journey
covered areas which had been little explored by nineteenth-
century travelers and the book was an immediate popular
success. Poe's review is careful and thorough, indicating his
personal interest in the material. The review is often cited
as an example of how Poe used other people's expertise to
enhance his own reputation as a critic. In the review, Poe
spends several pages discussing Stephens' route north from
Egypt to Petra and on to Hebron. The area in question, Edom,
had been cursed by God in Isaiah 34.10: "None shall pass
through it for ever and ever." Contemporary travelers took the
curse literally, believing that anyone who attempted to cross
Edom would die. Poe points out that contrary to Stephens'
assertions, the explorer did not actually pass completely
through Edom. He entered the wasteland from the south, but
after visiting Petra traveled west to Gaza instead of directly
north to the Dead Sea. Poe's conclusion is that Stephens "did
not pass through the Edom of Ezekial."9 Not content to drop
the matter, Poe returns to the curse. "It is essential," he

9 Ibid., p. 17.
states, "that these prophecies be literally rendered."10 Poe then goes on to make a careful translation of the curse from the Hebrew of Isaiah and to compare his version to other prophecies in the Old Testament. His conclusion is that God did not mean that Edom would be impossible to traverse, he meant only that Edom would be desolate and infertile.

Apparently, Poe had little knowledge of Hebrew and relied heavily on information obtained from Professor Charles Anthon at the University of Pennsylvania.11 In the review, of course, Poe played the expert without acknowledging Anthon's help.

My own interest in the passage discussed and in the controversy regarding Poe's translation, is not in the fact that he passed himself off as a Biblical authority, but in the central importance he gives to the "accurate" translation of the curse. Poe was fascinated with language and its possibilities, with the way language can affect and define reality. Travel books are always concerned with interpretation, but here Stephens's Arabia Petraea comes down to a matter of the interpretation of language. The truth of the importance of Stephens's journey depends on the text you read. Poe's emphasis on the translation of the curse suggests that proper interpretation holds the key to Stephens's entire Middle East adventure. In effect, Poe is acknowledging the importance of language in verifying and defining the

10 Ibid., p. 17.
nineteenth-century experience of the Middle East. And he is not only acknowledging the importance of Stephens's language, the language of the New World, but he is also acknowledging the importance of Biblical language, the language of the Old World.

Poe's translation of the Hebrew text is one example of his fascination with codes and ciphers, a fascination which first seems to surface about this time. Poe's Narrative Voyage of Arthur Gordon Pym, published less than a year after his review of Arabia Petreae, drew important material from Stephens's book. Poe took the unusual characters which are described on the walls of the caves on the island of Tsalal from Stephens's descriptions of hieroglyphics he saw in the caves on Mt. Sinai. The note at the end of Pym explaining the characters is the first clear instance of Poe's fascination with ciphers and codes:

Figure 1, then, figure 2, figure 3, and figure 5, when conjoined with one another in the precise order which the chasms themselves presented, and when deprived of the small lateral branches or arches (which, it will be remembered, served only as a means of communication between the main chambers, and were of totally distinct character), constitute an Ethiopian verbal root— the root 'To be shady'— whence all the inflections of shadow or darkness.

In regard to the 'left or most northwardly' of the indentures in figure 4, it is more than probable that the opinion of Peters was correct, and that the hieroglyphical appearance was really the work of art, and intended as a representation of the human form. The delineation is before the reader, and he may, or may not, perceive the resemblance suggested; but the rest of the indentures afford strong confirmation of Peters' idea. The upper range is evidently the Arabic verbal root 'To be white,' whence all the inflections of brilliancy and whiteness. The lower range is not so immediately perspicuous. The characters are somewhat broken and disjointed; nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that, in

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their perfect state, they formed the full Egyptian word, 'the region of the south.' It should be confirmed that these interpretations confirm the opinion of Peters in regard to the 'most northwardly' of the figures. The arm is outstretched toward the south.\textsuperscript{12}

The mention of Egyptian hieroglyphics is significant. Although Egyptology and the study of hieroglyphics existed well before the nineteenth century, it was not until Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 and the discovery of the Rosetta stone in the following year that Egyptology as we know it began. The expedition and the discovery of the bilingual inscriptions on the Rosetta stone caused a surge of interest in Egyptian hieroglyphics and in codes in general. Thus, Poe's fascination with codes probably has its origin in Orientalism.\textsuperscript{13}

It was not long after \textit{Ewm} appeared that Poe published in Alexander's Weekly "a challenge to the world" in which he promised to decipher all cryptograms submitted.\textsuperscript{14} This was the first of two "challenges" he made. The second appeared in Graham's Magazine. How good a cryptographer was Poe? W.K. Wimsatt claims that

\begin{quote}
\text{to study Poe at work on ciphers is to find not a wide knowledge and intricate method of procedure, but rather a kind of untrained wit, intuition which more quickly than accurately grasps the outlines of cryptic principles and}
\end{quote}

\begin{enumerate}
\end{enumerate}

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immediately with confident imagination proclaims the whole.15

In any event, in both contests, Poe was relatively successful in solving the codes sent in.

IV.

Up to this point, I have dealt only with Poe's poetry and reviews. Now I would like to look at some of his short stories. First, I will examine "Ligeia" to see Poe's linking of the Orient with Romance, and to see his debt to Gothic novels; then I will discuss his specifically Oriental tales, where the main subject matter is Oriental; finally I will look at the tales which revolve around Poe's interest in the arabesque.

The name Ligeia appears initially in "Al Aaraaf" where it is given to a spirit who seems to represent what Daniel Hoffman calls "the disembodied embodiment of Intellectual Beauty."16 Whether or not this is a manifestation of the same figure who appears in the tale, the use of the same name relates the woman in the tale to the Oriental world of the poem. In the tale Romance and the Orient are specifically linked. The narrator, Ligeia's husband, comments that

if ever that spirit which is entitled Romance—if ever she, the wan and misty-winged Ashtophet of idolatrous

Egypt presided, as they tell, over marriages ill-omened, then most surely she presided over mine.\textsuperscript{17}

Egypt is here named as the home of Romance. As the tale unfolds, Oriental motifs are used to increase the sense of mystery. The bridal chamber—which later becomes a death chamber—is decorated with an arabesque tapestry, and in each of the corners of the room stands, "a gigantic sarcophagus of black granite, from the tombs of the kings over against Luxor."\textsuperscript{18} The immediate inspiration for Poe's decoration comes from the Gothic novels that were so popular in Europe. The dark, brooding atmosphere which is found in "Ligeia" and which is typically associated with Poe's work is part of the Gothic tradition. The Oriental motifs Poe uses to heighten the tension are more than just special effects, however. Because these motifs are exotic and mysterious, they help open up the text to the realm of the psyche.

In an unpublished dissertation, "The Oriental Tale in America Through 1865: A Study in American Fiction," Mukhtar Ali Isani does a good job of tracing the development of the Oriental tale in the United States. The genre of the Oriental tale emerged in the United States around the turn of the eighteenth century. According to Isani, the growth of the magazines created a demand for lighter literature, and the war

\textsuperscript{17} Poe, \textit{Poetry and Tales}, p. 262.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 271.
against the Barbary states in North Africa drew national
attention to the Orient as a setting for tales of adventure.

Following the British patterns, the earliest American
Oriental tales were moral tales or spy tales. Gradually,
however, other types of Oriental tales appeared including
historical, religious, and, most popular, romantic tales. The
romantic Oriental tales were strongly influenced by the
popularity of the English verse romances of Byron and Moore.
Many of the best-known American writers of the time—including
Poe—wrote Oriental tales. 19

Poe wrote a total of seven tales which can be considered
Oriental tales: "A Tale of Jerusalem," "Four Beasts in One:
of Scheherazade" and "Some Words With a Mummy." Few of these
rank with his best work and I will only briefly consider these
stories here. Perhaps one of the main points to note is that
these stories were written throughout his career, from "A Tale
of Jerusalem" in 1831, to "Some Words With a Mummy" in 1845.
This shows Poe's continuing interest in the genre.

Of the seven tales, four of them, "A Tale of Jerusalem,"
"Four Beasts in One: The Homo-Camelopard," "The Thousand-and-
Second Night Of Scheherazade" and "Some Words With A Mummy,"
are fairly light pieces which give Poe the opportunity to

19 Mukhtar Ali Isani, "The Oriental Tale in America
Through 1865: A Study in American Fiction" (Ph.D.
indulge in burlesque and satire while allowing his imagination to have free rein. The other three tales, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," "Silence--A Fable," and "Shadow--A Parable," and are more complex and serious.

"A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" is a well-crafted mystery story which ranks just below Poe's best work. It is different from most of his tales in that it takes place in specific, named locations, the Ragged Mountains near Charlottesville, Virginia, and Benares, India. The action of the tale concerns a vision of Benares that the main character, Bedloe, has while walking in the mountains. The city is described as an opulent "Eastern-looking city, such as we read of in the Arabian Tales." Bedloe finds himself caught in a violent rebellion against the ruling foreign government. He is shot with a poisoned dart and, in the vision, dies. When he finally comes to his senses in the mountains and makes his way back to Charlottesville, he discovers that a Mr. Oldeb (Bedlo spelled backwards) had been killed in the real uprising thirty years before. Within a week of his vision, Bedloe himself dies under mysterious circumstances.

Here the Oriental setting is used as a backdrop for a tale of doubles and reincarnation. The setting at first appears relatively unimportant, but the fact that the central action concerning the double takes place in an Oriental dream-world is worth noting. One way Poe creates psychological depth is by

20 Poe, Poetry and Tales, p. 659.
using exotic Oriental settings and motifs. Whenever they appear in his work, the level of complexity increases. The companion tales, "Silence--A Fable" and "Shadow--A Parable" are good examples of this.

"Silence" and "Shadow" are almost Oriental prose poems concerning different facets of death. Their subtitles, "A Fable" and "A Parable" alert us to the fact that these are not simply for entertainment, they are meant to instruct, as well.

"Silence" deals with the death of sound, and "Shadow" deals with the sounds of death. They are different sides of the same coin. Both tales have ghastly, brooding atmospheres. Though "Silence" takes place in "Lybia, on the borders of the river Zaire,"21 and "Shadow" seems to take place in Egypt or Greece, the locations are psychological rather than physical. The importance of these tales in the development of Poe's Orientalism is in his use of Oriental settings and motifs to create intense, psychological works which appear to have obscure, esoteric meanings.

V.

I have tried to establish that the Orientalism in Poe's work has popular origins but came to have a deeper meaning as Poe became more skilled at his craft. In the recent Beneath the American Renaissance, David Reynolds comments that for Poe,

21 Ibid, p. 221.
"Oriental fiction was a primary symbol of the unfettered imagination." In part this is true. In Poe's tales the Orient is an exotic, Romantic location where almost anything can take place. But the key to the real importance of the Orient for Poe is, I believe, connected to his use of the term "arabesque." Poe's Orientalism, beyond popular culture, comes down to the complexity of this one term. What was the arabesque for Poe and what part did it play in his creative imagination?

The title of Poe's first collection of short stories is Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1839). The distinction Poe makes between "grotesque" and "arabesque" has provoked a lot of criticism. While certain generalizations can be made regarding the differences between these two terms, definitive categories for Poe's various tales cannot be established. In The Power of Blackness Harry Levin concludes,

since both 'arabesque' and 'grotesque' mean much the same thing, in the sense of capricious and fanciful, efforts to subdivide Poe's tales between them are harder to support than Coleridge's problematic distinction between imagination and fancy.23

In a fairly recent dissertation on the subject, "Novel Conceptions, Unusual Combinations: The Arabesque in Poe" (1970), Patricia Clark Smith takes a new approach suggesting

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that the roots of these terms are in a particular style of decorative art. Smith believes that the excavations at Pompeii in the early nineteenth century, especially the discovery of unusual paintings on the walls of Pompeian villas, caused a surge of interest in the decorative arts. The paintings in Pompeii are in a distinctive style depicting a large variety of representational forms, including animals and humans, wrought into a single graceful design. In nineteenth-century descriptions of the wall paintings, this style is loosely called "grotesque" or "arabesque." Smith consulted a number of nineteenth-century encyclopedias and magazines and found that there was no clear consensus about the distinction between the meanings of the two words. Turning to Poe, Smith examines the preface to Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque, where Poe briefly discusses the terms, and then the tales themselves. She decides that

Poe seems to have associated the arabesque-grotesque style in art, which was thought to create unity out of disparity, with his own doctrines of cosmological and aesthetic unity.... Poe seems to use 'grotesque' to imply a defensive, uneasily jocular attitude on the part of his narrators toward intimations of unity; 'arabesque,' on the other hand, is used to imply a serious and acquiescent attitude.24

Smith's investigation of the two terms is thorough and clear and I agree with her on most points. For my purposes, however, the distinction between "grotesque" and "arabesque" is not an

issue. I am concerned only with the "arabesque" and how it relates to Poe. I agree with the connection Smith makes between the arabesque style in art and Poe's "doctrines of cosmological and aesthetic unity," but I want to take this one step further. "Doctrines of cosmological and aesthetic unity" strikes me as too cold. I suggest that the term "arabesque" is one of the central characteristics not only of Poe's intellect and art, but of his life as well. Indeed, the reason the arabesque is so important in Poe's tales is because it was so important in his life. For Poe the arabesque was a method of ordering and rationalizing events, of creating, almost by force of will, an eye within the storm.

In *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* Daniel Hoffman succinctly gives his definitions of "grotesque" and "arabesque." "In an art work," he states,

"grotesque" signifies the depiction of monsters in an elaborate, foliated setting; while "arabesque" refers to an intricate pattern, geometric in design, which does not reproduce the human form--this latter element deriving from the Mohammedan injunction against the reproduction in a work of art of that divine image, the human body.... The intricacy of pattern in an arabesque corresponds to Poe's desire, or need, to reveal by complex and elaborate concealments of his theme. There is no human form anywhere in Poe's arabesques; but their intricate patterns of abstraction create a synthetic and harmonious--though often horrifying--experience, a consistency.25

Hoffman's definition differs from Smith's in that he believes the source of Poe's arabesque style is Islamic rather than Pompeian, and that he believes the arabesque style should...
contain no human forms. Considering the general popularity of the Orient and Poe's knowledge (however superficial) of Islam as evidenced in "Al Aaraaf" and "Israfel," it seems likely that Hoffman's use of the term is closer to Poe's than Smith's is.

One good place to begin examining Poe's use of the arabesque is in his essay, "The Philosophy of Furniture." Much of Poe's work concerns structures, both physical and mental, and the arrangement of these structures. Boxes, rooms, and buildings are carefully described and are the focus of interest in such works as "The Oblong Box," "Landor's Cottage," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." The arrangement of space and the circumscription of space are important motifs in Poe's work.

In "The Philosophy of Furniture" Poe addresses his obsession with structures head-on. He begins by criticizing American "internal decoration" and then moves to a description of his ideal room in which "repose speaks in all." Here, Poe clearly states the importance of the arabesque.

One of Poe's central criticisms of American apartments is their "lack of keeping." By "keeping" he means arrangement and decor. Poe compares the "keeping of a room" to the "keeping of a picture--for both the picture and the room are amenable to those undeviating principles which regulate all varieties of art."26 For Poe, then, a room is a piece of art subject to the same aesthetic laws as a painting.

26 Poe, Poetry and Tales, p. 383.
In Poe's careful description of his ideal room, he pays special attention to the carpet. "The soul of the apartment," Poe states, "is the carpet. From it are deduced not only the hues but the forms of all objects incumbent." "Touching pattern," Poe continues,

a carpet should not be bedizzened out like a Riccaree Indian—all red chalk, yellow ochre, and cock's feathers. In brief—distinct grounds, and vivid circular or cycloid figures, of no meaning, are here Median laws. The abomination of flowers, or representations of well-known objects of any kind, should not be endured within the limits of Christendom. Indeed, whether on carpets, or curtains, or tapestry, or ottoman-coverings, all upholstery of this nature should be rigidly Arabesque.27

Poe's carpet is more than a simple floor covering. It is the focus of the apartment, or, more exactly, it focuses the apartment, organizing the entire room. And how does it do this? By its arabesque design. Poe's arabesque is a unifying aesthetic force, a pattern which arranges and energizes. I take his use of the word "soul" to mean something which is dynamic, not static; something which, in effect, has a life of its own, and can breathe life into everything around it. Poe's discussion of the arabesque in "The Philosophy of Furniture" is as close to a definition of the term as he ever gets. And from what he says, arabesque designs should not contain the kind of natural figures found in the Pompeian wall paintings. They are much closer to their Arabic and Islamic source—a source which dictates non-representational forms.

27 Ibid., p. 384.
Poe, of course, is well-known for the insistence on logic and order in his work. All of what he called his "tales of ratiocination" are based on the use of careful, logical thought to solve problems. Even tales of madness, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart," are built around a framework of logic, however twisted. In his poetry, also, Poe preferred strict rhythms and meters. So much so that Lowell, in his "A Fable For Critics," blasted Poe for his mechanical regularity, claiming he talked "like a book of iambics and pentameters."28 Poe's interest in logic, order, and proportion, and his concern with the arabesque have a common root. In the tales of ratiocination, the lines of thought, the logic followed by the main characters, has a kind of arabesque beauty about it. The thought processes are like the arabesque decorations in Oriental art. The logic weaves in and out and makes unusual turns, but eventually leads to the solution. Poe seems to have embraced the Classical notion that rigid regularity was a reflection of, and a connection to, the harmonious structure of the universe.29 But Poe was not a Classicist. He may have yearned for Classical harmony as one way of ordering the chaos of his life, but it was not completely his nature. It is a characteristic of the arabesque in art, that while it may initially appear to be busy and unorganized, it is in fact highly ordered.

A definition of arabesque which is nearly contemporary with Poe appears in The New American Cyclopedia (1857) edited by George Ripley and Charles Dana. It is worth quoting at length to find out what the popular understanding of arabesque was and to see the parallels between this understanding and Poe's whole aesthetic. The fact that it receives such a detailed entry indicates the interest in and importance of the arabesque at that time. According to the Cyclopedia, arabesque is

a style of ornament consisting of infinitely varied combinations of straight and curved lines, very much used by the Arabs, or rather the Moors of Spain, and deriving its name from them. The Koran forbids to all true believers the representation of any animal.... The most beautiful specimens are to be found in the far-famed palace of the Alhambra.... Though the colors have faded somewhat from the effects of time, the eye still wanders with delight among their mazy beauties, gliding over graceful curves, infinite in their variety, and ever charming from the harmonious contrasts of bright colors, whose opposing brilliancies, to a certain extent, neutralize each other, and make even the bright gold that borders or winds among them seem merely a necessary adjunct to the richness of the whole.... After feasting his eyes upon the wonderful beauty of these rich mazes, it may interest the philosophical inquirer to observe from how few and simple elements they all arise. If a series of straight lines be drawn equidistant and parallel to each other, crossed by a similar series at right angles, so as to form squares, and the spaces thus given be intersected diagonally in each alternate square, the figures here shown, and every other possible combination, will be given by the lines. The same figures and the same variety may equally be produced where the lines are equidistant diagonally; there is in fact no possible limit

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to the invention of designs of this description; by different combinations of lines and colors they may be multiplied with the greatest facility. The same style of design may be shown not only on surfaces, but in the forms of solids. Thus, in the Alhambra, 'the ceiling of the Sala de la Barca, a wagon-headed dome of wood of most elaborate patterns, receives its support at each end from pendentives abutting against the great arches.' These pendentives are of a very curious mathematical construction. They are composed of numerous prisms of plaster, united by their contiguous lateral surfaces, consisting of seven different forms, proceeding from three primary figures. These are the right-angled triangle, the rectangle, and the isosceles triangle. The curves of the several pieces are similar, so that a piece may be combined with any one of the others by either of its sides; thus rendering them susceptible of combinations as various as the melodies which may be produced from the seven notes of the musical scale. Such is the wonderful power and effect obtained by the repetition of the most simple elements.31

Figure 8 shows some examples of the kinds of arabesque designs described in the passage. The passage could almost have been written about Poe. The emphasis on variety and effect controlled by a "curious mathematical construction," the complex mazes arising from the combination of simple elements, and the emphasis on the "richness of the whole," are all characteristics of Poe's work. Poe himself said that "the highest order of the imaginative intellect is always preeminently mathematical."32 And in "The Philosophy of Composition" he claimed that the writing of "The Raven" was completed with the "precision and rigid consequence of a

mathematical problem."³³ Poe was not a spontaneous Romantic
who composed by "ecstatic intuition,"³⁴ but a highly
disciplined craftsman working with Romantic themes. His highly
imaginative poems and tales are circumscribed by an ornate,
carefully controlled style, a style which--by the definition
above--could be called arabesque.

Perhaps the classic example of this in Poe's poetry is the
elaborate construction of "The Raven" which Poe details in "The
Philosophy of Composition." The poem contains eighteen six-
line stanzas each with the rhyme scheme abcbbb. The first five
lines of each stanza are trochaic octameter, and the sixth line
is trochaic tetrameter. The b rhymes are based on the refrain,
"Nevermore," which Poe supposedly chose for its sonorousness.
The idea discussed in the Cyclopedia of using "infinitely
varied combinations" of relatively simple elements, parallels
almost exactly Poe's determination "to produce continuously
novel effects by the variation of the application of the
refrain."³⁵ Effects of double rhyme and alliteration add to
the complexity of the rhythm. According to Poe, the subject of
this carefully wrought arabesque construction--the death of a
beautiful woman--was decided on after the foundation for the
construction had been laid.³⁶ In other words, the arabesque

³³ Ibid., p. 428.
³⁴ Ibid., p. 427.
³⁵ Ibid., p. 429.
³⁶ Ibid., p. 429.
itself was initially more important than the subject it defined.

"William Wilson" is a good example of Poe's use of the arabesque in his stories. The name, William Wilson, each word consisting of two syllables and similar sounds, has the kind of variation on a theme found in arabesque designs. The tale begins and ends at the narrator's deathbed. In between are all manner of arabesques. The plan of the school Wilson attends is as complicated as the ceiling of the Alhambra described above:

There was really no end to its windings--to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be. From each room to every other there were sure to be found three or four steps either in ascent or descent. Then the lateral branches were innumerable--inconceivable--and so returning in upon themselves that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole mansion were not very far different from those with which we pondered upon infinity.37

Wilson's attempts to escape his double by zig-zagging across Europe from Oxford to Rome, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, Paris, Naples, and even Egypt. The final scene at a masquerade party in Rome brings all the elements of the tale together in an arabesque climax. Wilson pushes himself through the "maze" of the crowd, is confronted by his double, and attacks him in a frenzy. The double's final speech makes clear what has happened:

'You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead--dead to the World, to Heaven, to Hope! In me didst thou exist--and, in my death, see by this image,

37 Poe, Poetry and Tales, p. 340.
which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.\textsuperscript{38}

The first sentence is a simple statement of fact. This is followed by a pause and another more disturbing statement which is explained in the last sentence. The careful manipulation of language, the piling up of words, pauses, and repetitions, all lead to the last clause, "thou hast murdered thyself." The whole tale is an elaborate arabesque of theme, incident, and language.

A striking visual parallel to "William Wilson" is William Rimmer's \textit{Flight and Pursuit} (1871) (Fig. 7). The exact meaning of this enigmatic painting has never been clear. The scene is the interior of a palace richly decorated with arabesque designs. In the left foreground a man in Oriental dress with a dagger in his belt and a blue cape over his shoulder is running toward a flight of three steps. In the background, an eerie, transparent figure carrying a sword and completely matching in form and posture the figure in the foreground, chases the runner. The arch through which we see this "double" reveals more arches which create a mirror-like effect and seem to stretch to infinity.

The unusual scene and the nearly monochromatic palette give Rimmer's painting a dream-like, psychological quality. Indeed, the painting seems to depict a psychological drama of the double similar to that found in "William Wilson."

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., pp. 356-357.
Rimmer's figures dressed in Oriental clothing and carrying a dagger and sword are similar to Poe's Wilson dressed for the masquerade ball in Rome, wearing a "cloak of blue velvet" and carrying a "rapier." Rimmer's arabesque architecture has the same effect as Poe's verbal arabesques. Both of them suggest the "patterned strangeness" of the mind.  

The fullest description of Poe's arabesque method is in his own "Philosophy of Composition." Readers of Poe are generally moved to take a position on the truth of this detailed description of how he wrote "The Raven." For my purposes here, it is the content of the essay, not its truthfulness, which is important. The "Philosophy of Composition," may not really explain how "The Raven" was written, but it does tell us a great deal about Poe's arabesque aesthetic and his method of composition.  

In many ways "The Philosophy of Furniture" and "The Philosophy of Composition" are companion pieces. The similarity of the titles reflects a similarity of themes. Both pieces are about composition—one about the composition of a room, and the other about the composition of a poem. The purpose of the compositions discussed is the same—to produce a unified effect. This is done in both pieces by the manipulation of carefully chosen elements. In "The Philosophy of Furniture" Poe discusses exactly what chairs, wall hangings, and curtains should be placed in the ideal room. In "The

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Philosophy of Composition" Poe tells us precisely what sounds, meters, and rhythms should be found in the ideal poem. The emphasis in both is on order. The center of "The Philosophy of Furniture" is the arabesque carpet, and while the arabesque is not named in "The Philosophy of Composition," the same aesthetic which orders the room in "The Philosophy of Furniture," orders "The Raven" in "The Philosophy of Composition." Indeed, the feeling that the room in "The Raven" is the same as the room in "The Philosophy of Furniture" is overwhelming. Both of them are places of repose amply furnished with comfortable chairs and lamps, and both of them are inhabited by one person—the writer. Poe's room in "The Philosophy of Furniture" is probably the prototype for most of the rooms which appear in his work.

What I am suggesting is that Poe's whole aesthetic view is arabesque, and that the core of this arabesque aesthetic is a unity based on complexity. In his discussion of "The Raven" in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe dwells on the originality of the stanzas, and on the importance of "Beauty" in the poem. Poe takes as much care ordering his stanzas in "The Raven" as he does ordering his room in "The Philosophy of Furniture." In this regard, it is worth pointing out that "stanza" is the Italian word for "room." Poe says that the real originality of the poem's stanzas is not in the different elements which make up the stanzas, but in the combination of these elements. "Nothing," Poe states, "even remotely approaching this
combination has ever been attempted. Again, it is the combination of elements into a unified whole, which Poe is striving for. Poe claims that "Beauty is the atmosphere and essence" of "The Raven."

When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect--they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of soul--not of intellect, or of heart--upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating 'the beautiful.'

The arabesque aesthetic of "The Philosophy of Furniture" is at the root of the method of composition described in "The Philosophy of Composition."

VI.

By way of concluding, I want to examine two related tales which Poe greatly valued and believed had hidden, spiritual meanings--"The Domain of Arnheim," and "Landor's Cottage." "The Domain of Arnheim" contains two major elements: a narrative of the history of Arnheim and its creator, and a theoretical discussion of landscape gardening, and by extension, of the nature of Art. Critical discussion of the tale has usually ignored the narrative and centered on the

40 Brooks, American Literature, vol I, p. 430.
41 Ibid., p. 428.
42 Allen, Israfel, p. 608.
Here, I would like to examine the two parts as a whole and discuss this in relation to Poe's arabesque aesthetic.

"The Domain of Arnheim" seems to have had special importance for Poe. In 1848 he sent a copy of it with an impassioned love letter to Sarah Helen Whitman, assuring her that it "expresses much of my soul." It is an unusual Poe tale in that Ellison, the main character, is rich and happy.

"From his cradle to his grave," Poe tells us, "a gale of prosperity bore my friend Ellison along. Nor do I mean the word prosperity in its more worldly sense. I mean it as synonymous with happiness."

Ellison has inherited a fortune and his sole purpose in life, after having given money to charities, is the welfare of his spirit. "In the widest and noblest sense he was a poet," Poe informs us.

He comprehended, moreover, the true character, the august aims, the supreme majesty and dignity of the poetic sentiment. The fullest, if not the sole satisfaction of this sentiment he instinctively felt to lie in the creation of novel forms of beauty.

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46 Ibid., p. 858.
Ellison's great wealth allows him to build an intricate, perfect landscape where "beauty, magnificence, and strangeness" are united. Several pages of "The Domain of Arnheim" concern landscape gardening and the proper arrangement, or "composition" of the landscape. What Poe has written is, in effect, a philosophy of landscape along the lines of "The Philosophy of Furniture" and "The Philosophy of Composition."

"The Domain of Arnheim" is about an ideal landscape. The last half of the tale describes, in careful detail, Ellison's creation. To get to Arnheim you must journey in a "canoe of ivory, stained with Arabesque devices" along a winding river through a country of "weird symmetry," "thrilling uniformity," and "wizard propriety." The goal of the journey is a mass of semi-gothic, semi-Saracenic architecture, sustaining itself, as if by miracle in mid air; glittering in the red sunlight with a hundred oriel, minarets, and pinnacles; and seeming the phantom handiwork, conjointly, of the Sylphs, of the Fairies, of the Genii, and of the Gnomes.

Surely this is a view of paradise. And in this paradise, the arabesque is a central feature. The boat to Arnheim is decorated with arabesque designs, suggesting the importance of the arabesque as a "vehicle" for reaching paradise. The river winds like an arabesque decoration. The landscape along the way has the unifying order of the arabesque, and when you finally arrive, the architecture is saracenic (arabesque),

47 Ibid., pp. 866-867.
48 Ibid., p. 870.
having been constructed by genii (supernatural Islamic spirits).

An interesting visual parallel to "The Domain of Arnheim" is Thomas Cole's *Youth* (Fig. 6). This painting became the most famous single image in Cole's *Voyage of Life* series because of the thousands of engravings of it which were distributed in 1848.\(^9\) Cole's ornate boat, limpid water, imaginary landscape, and vision of the Moorish-style structure floating in the blue sky, have parallels in Poe's tale. For Cole, the castle is an emblem of human ambition; in "The Domain of Arnheim," Ellison's lifelong ambition is to build Arnheim. In both of these, the floating Saracenic-style buildings which are the object of the voyages represent sources of inspiration and power, power which manifests itself in an Oriental fashion. While these two works are probably not directly connected, the similar use and meaning of arabesque motifs in Poe's verbal painting and in Cole's visual tale emphasizes the importance the Orient had for them.

"Landor's Cottage" is subtitled, "A Pendant to 'The Domain of Arnheim.'" It is, if anything, more subtle and complex than "Arnheim," though it has less plot. It is a kind of tone poem. Where "Arnheim" has a grand atmosphere, "Landor's Cottage" has a more intimate atmosphere. And although "Landor's Cottage" is

paired, by Poe, with "The Domain of Arnheim," it can be just as easily read as a "pendant" to "The Philosophy of Furniture."
The tale concerns the narrator's journey through a golden countryside reminiscent of a landscape painted by an artist of the Hudson River Valley school of painting. The air is filled with "Arabian perfumes." The elements of the journey are similar to the elements of the journey in "The Domain of Arnheim." There are verdant hills, silver streams, a canoe, lake, and at the end of the journey, a building--in this case, Landor's cottage. In both tales, the journey the narrators take creates a kind of controlled arabesque pattern which has detail and intricacy and unifies the entire piece.

In "Landor's Cottage," the narrator tells us that the setting is New York state, but the whole atmosphere is charged with a mysterious atmosphere. The cottage is described at length. It is built of "old-fashioned Dutch shingles--broad, and with unrounded corners," which give it the appearance of being "wider at bottom than at top, after the manner of Egyptian architecture."50 "When I say," the narrator tells us, that this house, like the infernal terrace seen by Vathek, "était d'une architecture inconnue dans les annales de la terre," I mean, merely that its tout ensemble struck me with the keenest sense of combined novelty and propriety--in a word, of poetry.... In fact, nothing could well be more simple--more utterly unpretending than this cottage. Its marvelous effect lay altogether in its artistic arrangement as a picture.51

50 Poe, Poetry and Tales, p. 895.
51 Ibid, p. 893.

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Vathek is the main character in William Beckford's Orientalist novel, *Vathek, an Arabian Tale* (1786). Beckford's Orientalism comes largely from *The Arabian Nights*. Poe's allusion, then, continues the piling up of Oriental motifs in the tale. The aesthetic point in the passage quoted is the same point of view found in "The Philosophy of Furniture." The interest in the pictorial, the arrangement of elements to form a whole, and the Oriental touches connect it directly to the earlier essay.

Inside the cottage, the narrator carefully describes the parlor. The parlor is the destination of the journey and there is a feeling that the journey is some sort of religious pilgrimage. The sun is setting, the traveler has finally arrived.

The room is described as "rigorously simple."

On the floor was an ingrain carpet (of excellent texture)---a white ground, spotted with small circular green figures. At the windows were curtains of snowy white jaconet muslin: they were tolerably full and hung decisively, perhaps rather formally, in sharp, parallel plaits to the floor--just to the floor. The walls were papered with a French paper of rare delicacy--a silver ground with a faint green cord running zig-zag throughout. Its expanse was relieved merely by three of Julien's exquisite lithographs *a trois crayons*, fastened to the wall without frames. One of these drawings was a scene of Oriental luxury, or rather voluptuousness; another was a 'carnival piece,' spirited beyond compare; the third was a Greek female head: a face so divinely beautiful, and yet of an expression so provokingly indeterminate, never before arrested my attention.52

The room, I would suggest, is a variation on the room in "The Philosophy of Furniture." While the tones here are lighter--

52 Ibid., p. 897.
green and white instead of red and gold--the effect is the same. The designs on the carpet and walls are not called arabesque, but certainly fit Poe's description of arabesque. In "The Philosophy of Furniture," the walls of the room are papered with a "glossy paper of a silver grey tint, spotted with small Arabesque devices." In "Landor's Cottage," the parlor walls have a "silver ground with a faint green cord running zig-zag throughout." In "The Philosophy of Furniture," the carpet has an arabesque design described as "a crimson ground, relieved simply by the appearance of a gold cord...thrown upon it in such a manner as to form a succession of short irregular curves--on occasionally overlaying the other." The carpet in the cottage has "a white ground, spotted with small circular green figures." Both of these pieces are about an ideal world, an orderly, peaceful world of repose, and in both of these pieces, one of the major elements is an arabesque, Oriental element.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Poe's arabesque paradise is the sense of melancholy solitude brought on by the lack of human figures. The Domain of Arnheim is totally uninhabited; only in its pendant, "Landor's Cottage," do we find a human presence. Annie, who answers the door, receives a fair amount of attention, but Landor himself is totally ignored to allow the narrator to carefully describe the arrangements of the house. True, Poe tells us he may write another article containing "particulars of Mr. Landor himself," but apparently
he never did. As the title suggests, the focus is on the cottage. Poe's arabesque world is a world of pattern, placement, and design, created by human beings but seemingly not truly inhabited by them. It is as if Poe took the Islamic prohibition against the depiction of the human body and applied it to his arabesque aesthetic. The emphasis is on the grand design, not the human beings (such as Poe) who contribute to it. Poe's arabesque aesthetic is ultimately concerned with a state of mind.

In many ways, Poe's personal life was an attempt to reach the world described in "Landor's Cottage." The chaos and excess he sometimes exhibited publically, was countered by the calm and order his wife and mother-in-law tried to maintain at home. In the same way that arabesque designs often initially appear tangled and excessive, but upon close examination prove to be highly ordered with a mathematical precision, Poe's life and work is a curious mixture of excess and order. Even Poe's writing style is ornate but highly structured. The popular interest in Orientalism initially drew Poe to focus on the Orient and write about it, but beneath his superficial interest lay a deeper, psychological connection which his creative imagination responded to. Poe, in all his work strived for effect. To create effect meant assembling elements in ways that would cause them to resonate. Poe realized that the arabesque designs of Oriental decoration achieved unity by a

53 Allen, Israfel, p. 569.
complex mixture of imagination and mathematics. The beauty Poe tried to achieve in his works could be best approached with a mathematical-like formula similar to the formula used to create arabesque designs. All of his work results from this blend of wild imagination placed in a tight, intricate framework. Finally, arabesque for Poe is not only a decorative design, but also way of thinking about the universe.
CHAPTER IV
RALPH WALDO EMERSON: THE SPHINX IN THE GARDEN

Mrs. Helen Bell, it seems, was asked, "What do you think the Sphinx said to Mr. Emerson?" "Why," replied Mrs. Bell, "the Sphinx probably said to him, 'You're another.'"

--Emerson's Journal

I.

In his 1984 biography of Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Days of Encounter (1984), John McAleer sums up Emerson's Orientalism in a single paragraph:

Incursions into Oriental scriptures did not mold Emerson's thought, as some have believed. During his formative years he knew the writings of the Orientals only at second hand and his philosophy took shape without reference to them. In fact, in 1822 he characterized Hindu religious thought as stemming from "indolence and ignorance." His earliest writings including his first volume of essays, contain few references to the Orient, none of any importance. After having developed his own most significant ideas, Emerson, beginning in 1837, undertook a reading program that included texts from Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Confucianism. From that time onward references in his journal to Oriental thought are numerous. By 1845 he considered himself steeped in the subject. Yet, from what he read he assimilated only what harmonized with his own system. As he himself said in his journal in 1857, 'We read the orientals but remain occidental.'

McAleer is both right and wrong. He is right when he says that Oriental thought had little direct effect on Emerson during his formative years, and he is right when he says that Emerson took from Oriental literature only what harmonized with

his own thought (for most readers, one of the functions of reading is—consciously or unconsciously—to reinforce and add complexity to their own thoughts). But he is wrong in his assertion that Oriental literature had no influence on Emerson's early writings, and he is dead wrong in his attempt to dismiss Emerson's Orientalism in this one paragraph.

In 1837, when McAleer states Emerson began his study of Oriental literature, Emerson had only just published Nature; the bulk of his career was still ahead of him. Most of his work after Nature reveals varying degrees of influence of Oriental thought. To dismiss Emerson's Orientalism is not only to blink away a vital aspect of his work, but it is also to ignore virtually all of Emerson's poetry, poetry which to a large extent was sparked by his exposure to Oriental literature.

The most comprehensive studies of Emerson's Orientalism are Frederic Carpenter's Emerson and Asia (1930) and Arthur Christy's The Orient in American Transcendentalism (1932). These two books lay the foundation for any study of the importance of the Orient to Emerson. Carpenter explores the overall effect that Indian, Persian, and Greek thought had on Emerson. He pays particular attention to Neoplatonism. Christy examines the parallels between Eastern religions and American Transcendentalism. His section on Emerson focuses mainly on the relationship between Buddhism, Hinduism, and Transcendentalism. Neoplatonism and Transcendentalism have
often been used as skeleton keys to Emerson. But however
smoothly these keys may turn, in the end, the door they open
leads only into a small room of a much larger house. To see
Emerson in the context of Neoplatonism and Transcendentalism is
useful, but limiting. His importance to American literature
and thought is more complex than that.

In this chapter I will focus on Emerson's Orientalism as a
personal reaction to the religious and intellectual climate in
the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century.
Though Emerson was a Unitarian minister and came from a long
line of ministers, his interest in the Orient was not based on
the importance of the Holy Land to Christianity. I will also
examine how Oriental literature—specifically Persian
literature—gave Emerson an original way of writing about the
American landscape. My main concern is with Emerson's poetry
and the influence that Persian poetry had on it. Emerson
supported himself by lecturing but he considered himself first
and foremost a poet. In 1835 he wrote,

I am a born poet, of a low class, without doubt, yet a
poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing, be
sure, is very "husky," and is for the most part in prose.
Still am I a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear
lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in
matter, and specially of the correspondences between
these and those.  

By "poet" Emerson here means an inspired soul rather than
someone laboring over rhyme-schemes. Indeed, at the time he

2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selections from Ralph Waldo
Emerson, Stephen Whicher, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957),
p. 19.
wrote this he had composed few poems. It is nevertheless Emerson's poetry--his "husky" verse--that most clearly reveals his Orientalism. To begin, I want to look at Emerson's "The Sphinx," a poem which has baffled readers since it first appeared in the Dial in 1841.

II.

In Emerson's first book of poetry, Poems (1847), "The Sphinx" appeared first, a riddling rite of passage for all who dared to read further. Indeed, throughout his life, "The Sphinx" always stood guard at the beginning of collections of Emerson's poems. Later, however, after Emerson's death, when Edward Emerson edited his father's collected poems, he moved "The Sphinx" back into the book and replaced it with "Goodbye."

"The Sphinx" had always puzzled Emerson's contemporaries and most of his readers were happy to see the change. The change, however, drastically alters the book and, perhaps more importantly, it blurs Emerson's role as one of the leaders of the literary and intellectual renaissance taking place in nineteenth-century America.

To understand Emerson's "The Sphinx" one really needs to understand the context in which it was written. Three events are of particular importance: Emerson's break with the Church, his Phi Beta Kappa address on "The American Scholar," and his address to the Divinity students at Harvard.
In 1832 Emerson resigned his position as Minister at Boston's Second Church in a disagreement over the celebration of the Lord's Supper. For reasons of conscience, Emerson felt unable to administer the sacrament. He had concluded that Jesus did not intend the celebration of the Lord's Supper to be "an institution for perpetual observance," and that the significance attached to it created confusion about the spiritual relationship between God and Jesus. The danger was in putting too much emphasis on Jesus and not enough on God. Coming, as he did, from a long line of ministers, Emerson's resignation was a radical move. In breaking with the Church, Emerson was publicly admitting that Unitarianism had little to offer him, and he was starting down a road that would lead to "The American Scholar," "The Divinity School Address," and "The Sphinx."

If Emerson found little sustenance in the Lord's Supper, he found even less in American intellectual life. In "The American Scholar," delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1837, he attacked the lack of original thinking and writing by Americans, and urged Americans to stop rewriting European literature. He quoted an Arab proverb, "A fig tree looking on a fig tree becometh fruitful," to emphasize that foreign literature was useful only insofar as it sparked

3 Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edward Emerson, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), vol. 11, pp. 4-5.
4 Ibid., vol 1, p. 97.
America to produce its own literature. Emerson's call for a native intellect and literature was not new; many people lamented the pervasive influence of European thought and literature in America. What set "The American Scholar" apart, however, was the fact that it was the first time that a call like this had been made loud and clear at Harvard. Oliver Wendell Holmes's famous characterization of "The American Scholar" as "our intellectual Declaration of Independence" is apt, but declaring independence and being independent are two different things. Emerson knew this and he knew that it was incumbent upon him to help loosen the strangle hold that the Old World had on America. His next salvo, "The Divinity School Address" came less than a year later.

In "The Divinity School Address" Emerson tried to do for religion what he had done for literature in "The American Scholar." Considering his break with the Church and his reputation as an independent thinker, no one could have been surprised at his radical pronouncements before the Divinity students at Harvard. What is surprising is that he was allowed to speak to them at all. In "The Divinity School Address," Emerson spelled out his feelings on the state of American religion by attacking historical Christianity. He challenged the convictions expressed in the Reverend Andrews Norton's The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels. "It is the office of a true teacher," he told the divinity students, "to show us
that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake."\(^5\) At a time when many clergymen were debating the authenticity of biblical miracles and making pilgrimages to Palestine to verify the truth of the Scriptures, Emerson was developing his own ideas on the importance of the Bible. To Emerson, the verification of the Scriptures was irrelevant—perhaps harmful—to a meaningful spiritual life. "Historical Christianity," he said, "corrupts all attempts to communicate religion."\(^6\) As for pilgrimage, the idea of traveling halfway around the world to follow other pilgrims who are following Jesus must have seemed absurd to Emerson. For Emerson, pilgrimage was a form of imitating, and imitation, he would claim in "Self-Reliance" is a form of suicide.

All of this, the history of Emerson's argument with the Church and his push for a uniquely American intellectual life, is well-known biographical information. What I suggest, however, is that an understanding of the positions Emerson took in "The American Scholar" and "The Divinity School Address," is essential to an understanding of "The Sphinx." "The Sphinx" is, in short, a highly compressed symbolic rendering of Emerson's struggle with the American religious and intellectual life of the 1830s. That this struggle involves a Sphinx, a mythical beast, is significant. Because it appears in both Greece and in Egypt, the Sphinx is a bridge between Western

\(^5\) Ibid., vol 1, p. 144.

\(^6\) Ibid., vol 1, p. 130.
Hellenic-based traditions and Oriental traditions. It was in turning from the cultural emptiness of the West—in seeking inspiration from new sources—that Emerson discovered the Sphinx and the Orient.

Due to its opacity, "The Sphinx" often receives only passing attention in discussions of Emerson's works. Emerson's own explication of the poem has not proved particularly useful:

I have often been asked the meaning of "The Sphinx." It is this,—The perception of identity unites all things and explains one by another, and the most rare and strange is equally facile as the most common. But if the mind live only in particulars, and see only differences (wanting the power to see the whole—all in each), then the world addresses to this mind a question it cannot answer, and each new fact tears it to pieces, and it is vanquished by the distracting variety.7

When "The Sphinx" is examined in detail, critics disagree on many issues, dividing themselves on whether or not the poet succeeds in answering the Sphinx's riddle.8 Ralph Rusk believes the poet succeeds and says "The Sphinx" is "simply an earlier and less involved poetic experiment on the same theme" as "Each and All."9 Frederic Carpenter echoes this when he claims that "'Each and All' and 'Brahma' deal with the same

7 Ibid., vol. 9, p. 412.
Gay Wilson Allen, in his 1981 biography of Emerson, goes back for instructions to a 1903 essay by William Sloane Kennedy and decides that the poet fails to correctly answer the Sphinx. Of those who find the poet unsuccessful, Thomas Whitaker's 1955 essay provides one of the most comprehensive and careful readings of the poem. Most recently, Gayle L. Smith convincingly argues that the language of the poem--particularly in the Sphinx's reply to the poet--suggests that the Sphinx is correctly answered and that its disappearance into the landscape is a positive ending. Smith is on the right track, and I believe her reading can be enhanced by examining the poem in the context of Emerson's Orientalism.

Despite its supposed difficulty, it is fairly easy to sketch the contours of "The Sphinx." In the poem, the Sphinx asks why Man "crouches and blushes / Absconds and conceals" while the rest of Nature "lies bathed in joy." A poet answers the Sphinx that "The Lethe of Nature / Can't trance [Man] again," that Man cannot return to the state of innocence

found in Nature (the Garden), but that man can attain a "vision profounder" through an understanding of the interrelationship and unity of all things. The dualism of the world—the "Eterne alternation" between pleasure and pain—can be reconciled by "love, the unifying force, operating... just below the surface." On hearing this the "merry Sphinx" is absorbed into the landscape, "melting" into the clouds, "silvering" into the moon, "spiring" into yellow flames, "flowering" in red blossoms, "flowing" in the sea, and finally "standing" on "Monadnoc's head." Thus, though the poet does not give the answer which traditionally would destroy the Sphinx, the Sphinx's transformation and the generally affirmative tone of the poem's conclusion indicate that he has at least discovered a way to live with her. But what is the Sphinx, who is the poet and why did Emerson think enough of the poem to place it at the front of Poems?

In mythology, the Sphinx is a fabulous animal which has a lion's body and the head of a man, woman, or sometimes another animal. The human head may be the result of the anthropomorphization of a sacred lion. In Egypt, where it seems to have originated, it was placed as a guardian of temples and tombs and is probably symbolic of a divine guardian. The Sphinx frequently has a small statuette of the person it is guarding between its paws. An example of this is at Karnak where the avenue leading to the Amun precinct is

15 Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 314.
lined with 120 ram-headed Sphinxes, each sheltering an image of
the king.16

Interpretations of the religious significance of the
Sphinx vary, but some scholars believe that the Sphinx is
ultimately connected with the story of the Fall in the Bible.17
After Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, a
cherubim was sent to guard the Garden. The Sphinx serves the
same purpose as this cherubim. It is a guardian and a symbol
of intellectual and religious authority. Correctly answering
the Sphinx's question is an act of rebellion which destroys it
and allows you to enter the Garden. The theme of the Fall
appears frequently in Emerson's work. "Man is a god in ruins"
he said in "Self Reliance." Emerson desperately wanted to
rationalize the Fall, to destroy the Sphinx and return to the
Garden.18

During the nineteenth century, the Sphinx was a fairly
common subject in fiction and poetry in the United States.
Periodicals and gift books of the time contain numerous

16 John Baines and Jaromir Malek, Atlas of Ancient Egypt

17 Theodore Reik, Dogma and Compulsion, Psychoanalytic
Studies in Religion and Myths (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press,

18 The most recent examination of the theme of the Fall
in Emerson's work is Barbara Packer's Emerson's Fall: A New
Interpretation of the Major Essays (NY: Continuum Press, 1982).
Packer discusses the Fall as an organizing and unifying
principle in Emerson's essays.
examples of literature dealing with Sphinxes. Besides Melville's "The Sphinx" in Moby Dick, which will be discussed in the next chapter, other well-known examples of the Sphinx in literature include Poe's short story, "The Sphinx," and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's novel, The Story of Avis, dealing with a painting of a Sphinx. In all of these works, the Sphinx represents a question or problem which must--for better or for worse--be resolved.

A visual rendering of the religious significance of the Sphinx can be seen in Luc Olivier Merson's Rest on the Flight into Egypt (Fig. 9). Here Mary and Jesus replace the traditional statuette between the paws of the Sphinx. With its serenely upturned face, the Sphinx appears almost god-like. Indeed, in its position as all-powerful protector, it is in the exact role usually taken by the biblical God toward true believers.

Although Emerson had no knowledge of this painting, his Sphinx and Merson's Sphinx serve essentially the same purpose: they both represent kinds of Biblical power and authority. For Merson, it is an authority that provides security, for Emerson, it is an authority whose lack of emotional warmth inspires revolt.

We have seen that in the 1830s Emerson was in an active state of rebellion against Unitarianism and the intellectual climate in the United States. "The Sphinx" is Emerson's poetic version of his struggle with this received authority. The poet in the poem is both Emerson himself and the ideal poet he so often wrote about. In the poem, the Sphinx--symbol of the old ways of the Old World--is not destroyed but, in effect, made American. It is the fig tree looking on the fig tree and causing it to bear fruit. Emerson does not treat the Sphinx as an antagonist, but instead as a manifestation of the stony past which is recognized and released. Emerson was not against the Old World per se, but he believed the Old World had to be reinvented in the New World. This is the meaning of the last stanzas of "The Sphinx" where the Sphinx is absorbed into the American landscape.

Emerson put "The Sphinx" at the front of Poems to announce his position at the forefront of the rebellion and to "guard" his poems from readers seeking more traditional literary fare. Critics' complaints about the placement of "The Sphinx" were exactly what he expected. Emerson constructed his book carefully. Those who managed to read beyond "The Sphinx" discovered something previously unknown in American poetry: a recognizably American landscape, but a landscape charged with meaning and colored by the Orient. Emerson's Sphinx is the guardian at the gate, who, when understood, retreats into the Garden allowing us to pass.
III.

Just as "The Sphinx" leads us into Emerson's Poems, it also leads us into his Orientalism. Emerson's Orientalism is largely the result of his study of the Persian poets Hafiz and Saadi. These poets were the subject of two of his essays, "Persian Poetry," and "Saadi," and inspired dozens of Emerson's translations and original poems.

Exactly when Emerson first read Hafiz and Saadi is not known. By the early 1840s he appears to have come under their spell and was reading them with much pleasure. Emerson's main contact with Hafiz and Saadi was probably in a German translation. In the early nineteenth century, Persian poetry was receiving a good deal of attention in Europe. In Germany, this was partly due to the publication of two books of translations by Joseph von Hammer: one, the collected works of Hafiz entitled, Der Divan von Mohammed Schemseddin Hafiz (1812), and the other an anthology of Persian poetry called Geschichte der schönen Redekunste Persiens (1813). These books were widely available in Europe and the United States and were both owned by Emerson. In addition to this, in 1819 Goethe, one of Emerson's favorite authors and one he included in Representative Men, published Der West-östliche Divan (The West-East Divan) a cycle of lyric poems modeled on Persian verse. Goethe's Orientalist poetry further fueled Emerson's interest in Hafiz and Saadi.
One important point to note here is that Emerson's initial contact with Persian poetry was via German Orientalism. Unlike Anglo-French Orientalism which was based on the British and French presence in the Levant, German Orientalism was largely the product of scholarship. Germany had no national interest in the Orient. Because of this, the Orient was never an actual location and landscape the way it was for France and Britain. German Orientalism was a scholarly, armchair Orientalism. The German influence on Emerson may account for the fairly scholarly approach he took toward the Persian poets which resulted in the essays on Hafiz and Saadi.

But beyond the German recommendation, what attracted Emerson to Persian poetry in general and to Hafiz and Saadi in particular? The answer is fairly complex. Emerson's interest in Persian poetry was two-fold. First, he was interested in the poets themselves, in Hafiz and Saadi, as examples of the "Orphic Poet" announced in *Nature*. Second, in Persian poetry Emerson discovered a way of writing about the world which blended everyday life and the spiritual life in a way wholly compatible with his personal outlook. "It is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul," he told the Divinity students. Persian poetry provoked and inspired Emerson and was a useful model for his own poetic urges.

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"The search after the great men," Emerson says in *Representative Men* (1850) "is the dream of youth and the most serious occupation of manhood." Following the emotional turmoil of his break with the Church, Emerson traveled to Europe. One reason for the trip was to find the "great men" of his day and see what they knew. Though he met many influential men of letters including Landor, Coleridge, and Carlyle, the real lesson Emerson learned was that no one could help him but himself. Certainly he made a lasting friendship with Carlyle who taught him much, but in some areas—poetry in particular—Carlyle could provide little help.

In the "Prospects" chapter of *Nature*, a book whose boldness grew out of Emerson's trip to Europe, Emerson introduces an "Orphic Poet" who sings of the past and the future. For Emerson, this Orphic Poet is the archetypal wise and great poet—"one of Emerson's "great men."

He appears in various guises throughout Emerson's work and is the subject of Emerson's essay, "The Poet." In "The Poet" Emerson describes what he believes are the nature and function of the poet. Since Emerson's development of the idea of an Orphic Poet roughly corresponds with his initial enthusiasm over the discovery of Hafiz and Saadi, it seems likely that this concept of the ideal poet was enriched by Emerson's exposure to the Persian poets.

21 Emerson, *Works*, vol 4, p. 3.
Emerson's essays on the Persian poets promise more than they deliver and in the end reveal more about their author than they do about Hafiz and Saadi. The first of these, "Persian Poetry," gives a quick introduction to the place and importance of poetry in Persia, and then focuses on Hafiz. Emerson's knowledge of Persia was book knowledge and his comments tend to be generalizations. He describes the country in extremes. "All or nothing is the genius of Oriental life," he tells us. There are only two important days, the day of birth and the day of death. Life is fierce, short, and hazardous. "The temperament of the people agrees with this life in extremes. Religion and poetry are all their civilization." The excitement produced by poetry "exceeds that of the grape." Emerson describes a land where poetry and religion are the focus of everyday life, a land Emerson himself might like to inhabit. Concerning the general characteristics of Persian poetry, Emerson says:

The Persians have epics and tales, but, for the most part, they affect short poems and epigrams. Gnomic verses, rules of life conveyed in a lively image, especially in an image addressed to the eye and contained in a single stanza, were always current in the East; and if the poem is long, it is only a string of unconnected verses. They use an inconsecutiveness quite alarming to Western logic.

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22 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 238.
23 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 238.
24 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 239.
Many of the characteristics Emerson singles out here apply equally well to his own poems. "Days," for example, one of his best-known poems is basically a short, gnomic verse containing advice on how to live each day. As for the "alarming inconsecutiveness" of Persian verse, Emerson's own "inconsecutiveness," particularly in his essays, has often been remarked and has been the subject of numerous discussions of his style and method of composition.

Most of "Persian Poetry" is devoted to the poet Hafiz. Like Emerson, Hafiz was a student of both poetry and theology. He was a dervish, a follower of Sufism, a mystical Islamic sect, and a professor of Koranic studies. Emerson praises Hafiz for the "easy audacity" of his poetry and the "rapidity of his turns."26 Hafiz, Emerson tells us, "abounds in pregnant sentences which might be engraved on a sword-blade."27 Some of the examples he quotes sound as if they were written by Emerson himself. Hafiz's "On every side is an ambush laid by the robber-troops of circumstance"28 could easily have come from Emerson's essay, "Fate." And his "Here is the sum, that, when one door opens, another shuts"29 sounds as if it were written for Emerson's essay "Experience."

26 Ibid., vol. 8, pp. 244-245.
27 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 245.
28 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 245.
29 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 245.
Wine and love are two of Hafiz's major themes, but he is no low rioter. Hafiz's wine is wine of the spirit which gives him "a new ground of observation, whence to draw sometimes a deeper moral than regulated sober life affords: 'I will be drunk and down with wine; / Treasures we find in a ruined house'."\(^\text{30}\) Hafiz's love, "though he runs the whole gamut of passion,"\(^\text{31}\) is ultimately a sacred love which compliments his spiritual wine.

Emerson's essay "Saadi" was originally published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1864 and then used as the preface to a translation of Saadi's Gulistan published the next year. As with the essay on Persian poetry, "Saadi" begins with a naive and simplistic summary of life in Persia. "Life in the East wants the complexity of European and American existence," Emerson tells us.\(^\text{32}\) "Every word in Arabic is said to be derived from the camel, the horse and the sheep. We fancy we are soon familiar with all their images."\(^\text{33}\) But under the spell of Saadi's verse, we are told, everything is transformed, the monotonies which we accuse, accuse our own. We pass into a new landscape, new customs, under which humanity nestles very comfortably at Shiraz and Mecca, with good appetite, and with moral and intellectual results that correspond, point for point, with ours at New York and London. It needs in every sense a free translation, just

\(^{30}\) Ibid., vol. 8, p. 247

\(^{31}\) Ibid., vol. 8, p. 259.


\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 33.
as from geographical position, the Persians attribute to
the east wind what we say of the west.\textsuperscript{34}

The word "correspond"—so important for Emerson—is a key.
When Emerson suggests that the moral and intellectual life of
the Orient corresponds "point for point with ours at New York
and London," by extension he suggests that the role of Saadi in
Persia corresponds with his role in the United States.

Saadi was not a dervish and his verse does not have the
lyric flights of Hafiz, but he has more practical sense and
better "moral sentiments" than Hafiz.

He is the poet of friendship, love, self-devotion, and
serenity. There is a uniform force in his page, and,
conspicuously, a tone of cheerfulness, which has almost
made his name a synonym for this grace.... What a contrast
between the cynical tone of Byron and the benevolent
wisdom of Saadi!\textsuperscript{35}

As Emerson continues, he becomes increasingly enthusiastic
about Saadi. The comments he makes can also be applied to
Emerson himself:

The poet or thinker must always, in a rude nation, be the
chief authority on religion. All questions touching its
truth and obligation will come home to him, at last, for
their answer. As he thinks and speaks will intelligent
men believe.... [Saadi] asserts the universality of moral
laws, and the perpetual retributions. He celebrates the
omnipotence of a virtuous soul.... A certain intimate and
avowed piety...is habitual with him.\textsuperscript{36}

Emerson again comments on the "inconsecutiveness of Persian
poetry, this time calling it "wonderful." He ends by hoping

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 34.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., pp. 34-35.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 35.
\end{itemize}

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that the genius of Saadi may find a new audience in America. Emerson's wish, of course, was partially fulfilled by his own translations of Persian poems and by his own Persian inspired poetry.

Why does the description of the poetry by Hafiz and Saadi in these two essays sound so much like a description of Emerson's own verse? The reason is not hard to find; it is because Emerson's most important poetic models were taken from the work of Hafiz and Saadi. Psychologically, Emerson came to identify himself so closely with these poets, that he sometimes referred to himself as Saadi. In a note to Emerson's poem "Saadi," Edward Emerson writes that his father adopted Saadi's name "in its various modifications, for the ideal poet, and under it describes his own longings and his most intimate experiences."37 In discussing Hafiz in an 1847 journal entry Emerson wrote, "such is the only man I wish to see and to be."38 Emerson's descriptions of Hafiz and Saadi as poet-priests is virtually a description of the role Emerson saw himself in. Hafiz and Saadi have an inspired religious abandon and intensity, coupled--especially in Saadi--with a moral sentiment that Emerson greatly admired and tried to achieve in his own work. They saw the unity in diversity which Emerson also saw and they showed that this could be a subject for poetry. "I find in him a pure theism," Emerson said of Saadi.

37 Emerson, Works, vol. 9, p. 447.
38 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 417.
Probaby here he is referring to Saadi's confidence in his own belief. It was this kind of "pure theism" Emerson himself wanted to believe in.

What Emerson does in these essays is introduce his ideal poet—a poet who mixes religion and poetry much the way Emerson tried to do himself. The poetry Emerson admires so much in these essays seems to have many of the characteristics of Emerson's own verse. Perhaps it is not too much to say that in these essays Emerson is creating Hafiz and Saadi as much as he is introducing them to the American public. In effect, he read himself in the lives and work of Hafiz and Saadi. He took what was useful to him and, like the Sphinx, disappeared into the American landscape.

IV.

A careful account of the influence of Persian poetry on Emerson's poetry has been done by J.D. Yohannan. 39 Yohannan looks at Emerson's interest in Persian poetry and identifies many of Emerson's individual poems which contain elements of poems by Hafiz and Saadi. It is not my intention to reexamine material he has already studied. It remains, however, to evaluate the broader aspects of this influence. Specifically, I will examine how Emerson's fascination with Hafiz and Saadi

affected his view of the major setting and subject of much of
his poetry, the American Garden. The American Garden, in fact
the whole concept of the Garden, is "rooted" in the Oriental
Garden which is so important in Persian poetry.

In Emerson's "The Sphinx," the Sphinx disappears into the
natural world for a good reason. The natural world was, for
Emerson, the most important fact about America. When Emerson
turned from the Church, he turned to the natural world.
Indeed, he made his decision to leave the ministry while
traveling in the White Mountains. But Emerson's natural world
is not the frontier of Chingachgook and Deerslayer. Rather, it
is the American landscape charged with the spirit; it is the
American Garden. By setting the Sphinx "on Monadnac's head,"
Emerson is Orientalizing the American Garden, giving it what
William Sloane Kennedy called Emerson's characteristically
Oriental 'tinge.'

Even in Emerson's day, the idea of the United States as a
new Garden of Eden was part of the American cultural mythology.
One of the earliest and most famous passages describing the New
World as Paradise is a seventeenth century text by Samuel
Sewall:

As long as Plum Island shall faithfully keep the commanded
Post; Notwithstanding all the hectoring words and harsh
Blows of the proud and boisterous Ocean; As long as any
Salmon, or Sturgeon shall swim in the streams of the
Merrimac.... So long shall Christians be born there; and
be first made meet, shall from thence be Translated, to be

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40 William Sloane Kennedy, "Clews to Emerson's Mystic
Verse," The American Author (June 1903), p. 205.
made partakers of the Inheritance of the Saints of Light.  

Sewall's Garden is explicitly a Christian Garden which he locates in the identifiable landscape of Newbury, Massachusetts. Emerson continues this tradition of viewing New England as the new Garden but he expands the Garden beyond the bounds of a Biblical strictly Biblical Garden to make room for his Transcendental beliefs. The origin of the American Garden is, as Sewall implies, the Biblical Garden of Eden in Genesis. And since the setting for the Bible is the Orient, the origin of the American Garden is also Oriental.

One of the most interesting similarities between Emerson's poetry and the poetry of Hafiz and Saadi is the emphasis on the Garden. Saadi's two best known works are poetic "gardens": the Gulistan, or The Rose Garden, and the Bustan, or The Perfumed Garden. Hafiz's poems frequently refer to gardens—the heavenly garden, the garden of Adam and Eve, and the garden of love both spiritual and carnal. Traditionally, the garden has been a favorite setting for Persian poets. Their poems praise the singing of the birds, the scent of the flowers, the coolness of the running water, the freshness of the breezes, and the promise of heavenly and earthly pleasures present in the garden's sights and sounds.  

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The main setting for Emerson's poetry is also a garden, but it is the American Garden. Although other natural settings from all over the world are mentioned in Emerson's poems, his landscape is predominantly the New England countryside. References to New England mountains, rivers, flora, and fauna abound. Titles such as "The Rhodora," "The Humble-Bee," "The Snow Storm," "Woodnotes," "Monadnoc," and "Monadnoc From Afar" reveal that the majority of his poems concern the natural world of New England.

"Monadnoc From Afar" specifically refers to the New England landscape as a garden:

Dark flower of Cheshire garden,
Red evening duly dyes
Thy sombre head with rosy hues
To fix far-gazing eyes.
Well the Planter knew how strongly
Works thy form on human thought;
I muse what secret purpose had he
To draw all fancies to this spot. 43

Here Monadnoc is described as a flower planted in the Cheshire garden. The garden has the vastness of the New World whose inhabitants are Lilliputian in comparison with the Monadnoc "flower."

Emerson's garden is often Orientalized with elements taken from the traditional Oriental garden. In Emerson's second book of poems, May-Day, two poems, "My Garden," and "Days," focus, in different ways, on the American Garden and reveal how Emerson Orientalized it. "My Garden" talks about the American

43 Emerson, Works, vol. 9 p. 361.
landscape as a garden which is vastly different from the flower beds planted beside the houses in Concord:

In my plot no tulips blow,—
Snow-loving pines and oaks instead;
And rank the savage maples grow
From Spring's faint flush to Autumn's red.

My garden is a flower ledge
Which older forests bound;
The banks slope down to the blue lake-edge,
Then plunge to depths profound.

....

Here once the Deluge ploughed,
Laid the terraces, one by one;
Ebbing later whence it flowed,
They bleach and dry in the sun.

....

Hither hastened, in old time, Jove,
And every god,—none did refuse;
And be sure at last came Love,
And after Love, the Muse.

....

Aeolian harps in the pine
Ring with the song of the Fates;
Infant Bacchus in the vine,—
Far distant yet his chorus waits

....

But the meanings cleave to the lake,
Cannot be carried in book or urn;
Go thy ways now, come later back,
On waves and hedges still they burn.44

The poem deals with the author's inability to understand the subtle language of Nature. My interest, however, is in the garden's Oriental aspects. The garden's physical location has been identified as some property Emerson owned across from

44 Ibid., vol. 9, pp. 229-231.
Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond, but the spiritual location is elsewhere. The mention of Jove, Bacchus, and the Deluge suggest an Eastern setting, and the presence of water along with references to love, music, poetry and wine, make it clear that the spiritual location is the Garden of the Orient. In "My Garden" Emerson imbues his New World Garden with an Oriental spirit.

The well-known "Days," which comes just before "My Garden" in May-Day does virtually the same thing but with greater effect. It is short enough to quote in full:

Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.
To each they offer gifts after his will,
Bread, kingdoms, stars, and sky that holds them all.
I, in my pleached garden, watched the pomp,
Forgot my morning wishes, hastily
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day
Turned and departed silent. I, too late,
Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn.45

The poem deals with Emerson's inability to live with the kind of blazing intensity he longed for. Too late, he realizes that he hasn't taken advantage of each day as fully as he might have. Yohannan finds a possible source for this poem in Persian poetry, but whether or not a specific Persian poem sparked "Days," certainly Emerson's study of Hafiz and Saadi informed the spirit of the poem. The days "like barefoot dervishes" and the theme of lost opportunity suggest Emerson's admiration for the boundless energy of the dervish Hafiz, a

poet who never seemed to lose an opportunity. Emerson, sitting in his "pleached garden," being approached by an endless line of dervishes suggests how profoundly Persian poetry affected him. Where Sewall's Garden is a New World Christian Garden, Emerson's Garden is a New World Garden with all the trappings of the Oriental Garden.

Another example of Emerson Orientalizing the American garden is found in "Bacchus," an imitation of a poem by Hafiz which Emerson translated and included in Poems. The first lines of "Bacchus" read:

Bring me wine, but wine which never grew
In the belly of the grape,
Or grew on vine whose tap-roots, reaching through
Under the Andes to the Cape,
Suffer no savor of the earth to scape.\(^46\)

Twenty pages on, under the title "From the Persian of Hafiz," Emerson translates:

Butler, fetch the ruby wine,
Which with sudden greatness fills us.
...

Bring, me boy, the fire-water
Zoroaster sought in dust.
To Hafiz revelling 'tis allowed
To pray to Matter and Fire.\(^47\)

\(^46\) Ibid., vol. 9, p. 125.

\(^47\) Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Early Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), p. 202. It is interesting that ten pages of translations from Hafiz were in the first edition of Poems but were removed from later editions of Emerson's poetry. Removing the translations has the same effect as changing the placement of "The Sphinx." It superficially transforms a tough and complex book of poems into something more palatable to American poetic taste. To see the book with the Persian poems restored is to see the full extent of their influence on Emerson.
The similarities between these two poems are clear. Emerson took his inspiration and imagery from Hafiz's poem but used the New World garden as the setting. Besides the Andes and the Cape, "Bacchus" mentions the Atlantic and the South Seas. Garden imagery in Bacchus includes birds singing, flowers blooming, and grass growing. In *Emerson as Poet*, Hyatt Waggoner examines the Christian elements in Bacchus and relates the wine imagery to the sacrament. Certainly Emerson had this in mind, but his emphasis is on turning from the dogmatic Christian symbolism to a more Transcendental symbolism. The immediate source of the poem is the Oriental world of Hafiz and the Persian garden, not the biblical garden. Emerson writes to extol the virtues of the New World seen through the Orient.

One of Emerson's most extended uses of the American Garden as a setting for Oriental thought occurs in his poem, "The Poet." This poem, though never completed and not published during Emerson's lifetime was worked on for many years. Emerson probably began it while he was absorbed in his essay of the same name and was reading extensively in Persian poetry. The second half of the poem depicts Saadi in what is basically an American landscape replete with "harebells nodding on a rock / A cabin hung with curling smoke, Ring of axe or hum of wheel / or gleam which use can paint on steel." And while no


specifically American mountains or lakes are named, the mention of pine trees and the aurora borealis suggests a New England setting. The third section of this half reads:

Said Saadi, 'When I stood before
Hassan the camel-driver's door,
I scorned the fame of Timour brave;
Timour, to Hassan, was a slave.
In every glance of Hassan's eye
I read great years of victory,
And I who cower mean and small
In the frequent interval
When wisdom not with me resides,
Worship Toil's wisdom that abides.
I shunned his eyes, that faithful man's,
I shunned the toiling Hassan's glance.'

In a note to these lines, Edward Emerson writes that

Hassan the camel-driver was, without doubt, Mr. Emerson's sturdy neighbor, Mr. Edmund Hosmer, for whom he had great respect. The camels were the slow oxen, then universally used for farm-work, with which Mr. Hosmer ploughed the poet's fields for him.

Thus, in "The Poet" Emerson uses the American Garden as the setting for Oriental action and thought, and transforms the American farmer into an incarnation of a Persian philosopher.

V.

Twenty-five years after Emerson published his first collection of poems, Frederick Edwin Church, America's foremost landscape artist of the mid-nineteenth century, moved into his new home, Olana, in Hudson, New York. The house, based largely

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50 Ibid., vol. 9, p. 323.
51 Ibid., vol. 9, p. 506.
on Persian designs, and to which Church devoted the last half of his life, is perhaps his greatest work of art.

Like many of his contemporaries in art and literature, Church looked both West and East for inspiration. During his early years and greatest fame, he traveled in the West, painting New World landscapes on an epic scale. Later he spent two years (1867-69) in Europe and the Orient and complemented his paintings of scenes in the Western Hemisphere with a series of Oriental compositions. Church considered these Orientalist works to be some of his most important paintings. It was during his trip to the Orient that Church got the inspiration for Olana.

Though Church and Emerson held quite different religious views (Church was raised in the Calvinist tradition) both men believed the American Garden had an aura of divinity. They came to the Garden to experience and record its spiritual power. Olana defines the American Garden much the same way Emerson's poetry does. Both the house and the poetry create, to varying degrees, Oriental centers in the Garden of the New World. Just as the Oriental arches of Olana's windows present the New World through the Oriental world, Emerson's poems present the New World through an Oriental poetic framework.

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(Fig. 9).\textsuperscript{53} It is Bayard Taylor's \textit{Tent-Door at Abu Hammed} (Fig. 1) formalized and placed in the New World. The effect of seeing the American landscape through the Persian arches of Olana's windows is similar to the effect of reading "My Garden," or "Days" or any other of Emerson's poems which deal with the American Garden and contain Persian allusions. Church's inspiration is much more obvious than Emerson's, and its manifestation is more the culmination of popular artistic taste, but the source of this inspiration and the effect that it has is the same. The Orient thus becomes a method of ordering and defining the American landscape. In essence, it is a way of seeing the New World through the Old. It is Emerson's Sphinx sitting on Monadnoc's head, both foreign to the American landscape and yet an integral part of it.

Another parallel worth noting exists between Olana and Poe's Domain of Arnheim. As we have seen, Arnheim is an Oriental paradise built by Ellison, a wealthy landscape gardener. It has at its center a mass of "semi-Saracenic architecture, sustaining itself as if by miracle in mid-air." Arnheim is located a day's journey by water from a large city. In many respects, the description of Arnheim sounds like a description of Olana. The name "Olana" is a corruption of the Arabic "Al Ana," meaning "Our Place on High." Olana is Church's Orientally inspired "paradise" dramatically set on top

of a hill about a day's journey up the Hudson from New York City. My concern in the similarity between these two structures is to reveal points of similarity, not points of dependence. The fact that striking similarities exist between Poe's imaginary Arnheim and Church's earthly Olana suggests the depth of interest that the nineteenth century American imagination had in an Orientally inspired paradise set in the New World.

VI.

According to Hyatt Waggoner, the poetic tradition which begins with Edward Taylor and takes in Emerson, Dickinson, Frost, and others, is the central poetic tradition in America. If, as Waggoner claims, Emerson is the central figure in this tradition, it suggests that Persian poetry has had a subtle unacknowledged role in the development of American poetry.54

In this chapter I have attempted to show the depth of Emerson's Orientalism and the extent to which it influenced his poetic vision of America. Emerson did eventually visit the Orient. In 1876 while his house in Concord was being repaired following a fire, Emerson traveled to Egypt. He was seventy-two at the time and his journal reveals the frustration he felt at his lack of basic knowledge of the people and the surroundings:

54 Hyatt Waggoner, American Poets From the Puritans to the Present (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968).
All this journey is a perpetual humiliation, satirizing and whipping our ignorance. The people despise us because we are helpless babies who cannot speak or understand a word they say; the sphinxes scorn dunces; the obelisks, the temple walls, defy us with their histories which we cannot spell.\textsuperscript{55}

Emerson views the ancient sites as architectural hieroglyphics which he cannot decipher. Evidently the importance of the Orient to him was not based on its physical setting. For Emerson, the Orient was more a spiritual location than a geographic one.

\textsuperscript{55} Ralph Waldo Emerson, \textit{The Heart of Emerson's Journals}, Bliss Perry, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), p. 335.
CHAPTER V
HERMAN MELVILLE ON THE VIA CRUCIS

By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come into the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and nobody is there!—appallingy vacant, as vast as the soul of a man.

—Pierre

I.

In 1841 Herman Melville went to the South Pacific. In 1856 he went to the Holy Land. Out of these two trips came the inspiration for the bulk of Melville's work. The Pacific trip provided the material for most of his fiction, while the trip to the Holy Land marked the end of Melville's public life as a prose writer and the beginning of his life as a poet. During his last thirty years, Melville devoted virtually all of his energy to poetry. On the surface, Melville's literary life seems to divide itself neatly into two periods and two genres. What this doesn't tell us, however, is that while the genre changed, Melville's themes and concerns remained the same. Physically, Melville traveled in opposite directions, first west to Polynesia and then east to the Levant, but the purpose of his travel was always the same. Melville's quest was largely a quest for faith. As Charles Olson says in Call Me Ishmael, "Melville wanted a God."1 Nearly all of his writings

1 Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael (San Francisco: City Lights, 1947), p. 82.
concern, on some level, this search for faith. But for
Melville faith did not mean the blind belief he associated with
organized religion. In his mind and in his work, faith is
associated with the source, the place where spiritual power
originates. The Orient, as the source of the major Western
religions, was a natural attraction for Melville. Melville's
dark Romanticism, which many critics have commented on, is
comprised of a number of elements, central among which is the
Oriental element. The focus of this chapter, then, is the
role the Orient plays in Melville's search for faith. The
works I will concentrate on are Typee, Moby Dick, Journal Up
the Straits, and Clarel. These texts clearly reveal the
complex importance that the Orient came to have for Melville.

II.

The Orient or Oriental elements appear in almost all of
Melville's work. Dorothee Finkelstein's Melville's Orienda
(1961) does an excellent job of identifying and discussing the
importance of these elements. Her book, in many ways, lays the
foundation for my discussion of Melville. Finkelstein examines
Melville's reading in Oriental literature. Her emphasis is on
the conscious, historical awareness Melville had of the Orient
and how this manifests itself in his work. My purpose here is
to take Finkelstein's study a step further to explore the

2 See Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne,
underlying significance of Melville's interest in the Orient and the part this interest plays in his creative imagination.

In Finkelstein's chapter on Melville's reading she examines the works which influenced his view of the Orient. These works are generally of two kinds: the standard Orientalist imaginative writing such as the Arabian Nights, Lalla Rookh, and Vathek, and the more expository travel narratives such as Stephens's Arabia Petraea, Thomson's The Land and the Book, Stanley's Sinai and Palestine, and Bartlett's Forty Days in the Desert and The Nile Boat. To these, of course, must be added the Bible and the Koran. In American Renaissance F.O. Matthiessen suggests that the Bible was the "most deeply rooted element in [Melville's] reading, the one most likely to assert itself when he wanted an illustration."3 Melville drew freely from his knowledge of the Orient and peppered his writing with references to the Bible, Islam, ancient Egypt, and the mysteries of the Middle East.

One element of the travel books mentioned above is worth dwelling on. The books Melville relied on most for information about the Orient were not the Romantic, picturesque, travel narratives which were so popular in the nineteenth century. Rather they tended to be books focusing on the religious importance of the Levant. William Thomson, author of The Land and the Book, was in fact a missionary whose book's stated

purpose was to illustrate the word of God by examining "the living manners and customs of the East." The fact that Melville chose books like this suggests the fundamentally spiritual—as opposed to Romantic—attraction he had to the Orient.

*Typee. A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) was Melville's first book and was an immediate international success. It achieved the kind of popularity Melville's work never had again during his lifetime. The controversy over the book's authenticity, and over whether a common seaman could possibly write anything as absorbing and polished as *Typee*, was settled when Richard Greene, Melville's companion in the Marquesas Islands, came forward and verified the essential elements of the text.

Reading *Typee* today, it is easy to see why people questioned the tale. The book has the kind of simplicity of story and structure which puts it in the realm of myth. "Certainly the book is primarily a travelogue," says Charles Feidelson,

its scene is the solid earth; and the language does not often invite a symbolistic interpretation. Yet here, at the beginning of Melville's literary career, the stuff of his experience seems to hover on the verge of the symbolic expansion it was to undergo in *Mardi* and *Moby Dick*.

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Thus, while on one level the book is "a peep at Polynesian life," giving a systematic account of the author's stay with the Typees, on another level the book has symbolic significance.

The story beneath the travelogue is the tale of two men attempting to enter a Polynesian Garden of Eden. The elements of this story are Biblical and Oriental. After jumping ship, Tom and Toby, wander in the jungle before finding the valley of the Typees. At one point, Tom notices that one of his legs is beginning to swell. He suspects he may have "been bitten by some venomous reptile." Immediately after this, while in a fever resulting from the swollen leg, Tom pushes aside some branches to get his first view into the valley of the Typees. "Had a glimpse of the gardens of Paradise been revealed to me," he states, "I could scarcely have been more ravished with the sight." The description of the valley is a description of Eden. The valley's crowning beauty is its "universal verdure" watered by "silent cascades." The juxtaposition of the snake and Paradise is not coincidental. A serpent lured Adam and Eve from the Biblical Garden; to enter the Polynesian Garden, Tom and Toby must also encounter the snake.

7 Ibid., p. 64.
8 Ibid., p. 64.
Getting past the serpent is not the only rite of passage. To reach the valley floor, Tom and Toby must climb down a narrow, tree-filled gorge. Melville compares their difficult descent with Giovanni Belzoni's progress in the tombs of Gournou in Upper Egypt: "Belzoni, worming himself through the subterranean passages of the Egyptian catacombs, could not have met with greater impediments than those we have encountered."9 Belzoni was a colorful explorer and collector of Egyptian artifacts. His Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs and Excavations in Egypt and Nubia (1823) was known to Melville and contains a passage similar to Melville's description of Tom and Toby's entrance into the valley of Typees. Belzoni describes his route as passing down a watercourse full of rocky debris "which the water carries down from the upper parts."10 In Typee, the way into the valley is down a streambed "covered with fragments of broken rocks which had fallen from above."11

The comparison between Tom and Toby's entrance into the Typee valley, and Belzoni's entrance into the Egyptian tombs is important for several reasons. Psychologically, as a Garden of Eden, the Typee valley represents the safe haven of the womb. Belzoni, of course, is exploring a tomb, a place of the dead.

9 Ibid., p. 75.
11 Melville, Typee, p. 75.
The suggestion that the Garden of Eden is both womb and tomb was a fear that haunted Melville throughout his life and is one of the major themes found in *Moby Dick*. Second, the reference to Belzoni places Tom and Toby in the company of the early explorers of the Middle East and specifically juxtaposes their discovery of the Typee valley with the attempt to unravel the mysteries of the pyramids and Ancient Egypt. Thus, Melville's Polynesian Garden is not strictly speaking the Garden of Eden transferred to the Pacific. It has traditional elements of the Garden of Eden, but it has other elements which connect it more generally with the Western desire to understand the Orient.

If the valley of Typee initially appears to be Paradise, Tom and Toby soon realize that all is not well. When they finally find some fruit to eat, it turns out to be rotten, the heart half eaten by birds. Later, after Tom and Toby have been there for several months, they realize they are prisoners rather than guests. As the complex reality of the valley of the Typees becomes more apparent, allusions to Paradise and the Garden become less frequent. The implication is that one can't find paradise simply by jumping ship in Polynesia and living with the natives. That life may offer some answers, but it won't provide a lasting faith.

In the novels written after *Typee* Melville moved from including minor allusions to the Orient, to making a deeper more psychological examination of the importance of the Orient.
The culmination of this psychological investigation can be found in *Moby Dick*.

III.

In *Moby Dick* it is possible to feel the force of Melville's obsession with the search for faith and the role the Orient played in this obsession. Three of the most important figures in the tale have their roots in the Orient: Ishmael, Ahab, and Fedallah.

From the first sentence, "Call me Ishmael," we are in the realm of the Bible, the Koran, and the search. The name Ishmael contains all that. The biblical Ishmael was the rejected son of Abraham and Hagar, an Egyptian slave. When Hagar became pregnant, an "angel of the Lord" informed her: "Behold, thou art with child and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael.... And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him." (Genesis 16:11-12) After the birth of Abraham's second son, Isaac, by Sara, Ishmael was cast out of the household:

Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away; and she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.... And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness. (Genesis 21:12-14, 20)

Although Ishmael disappeared in biblical history, the term "Ishmaeli" became a designation for desert people, and later for a mystical sect of Islam. Today, Ishmael is considered the forefather of the Arabs, who are said to be descended from Ishmael's twelve sons. The Koran portrays Ishmael reverently
and makes no mention of the details of his birth and rejection by Abraham. The Ishmael in Moby Dick is drawn from the biblical figure, not the Koranic one. Melville's Ishmael is the abandoned son, the "isolato," the exile, the wanderer.

Matthiessen points out that Melville's writings frequently focus on Ishmael-like characters. In Redburn, published two years before Moby Dick, and based on Melville's first experience at sea, Redburn worries that he is becoming an outcast on board, a "sort of Ishmael." Pierre finds himself cast out like "an infant Ishmael into the desert, with no maternal Hagar to accompany and comfort him." And Israel Potter for more than forty years "wandered in the wild wilderness of the world's extremest hardships and ills."

The psychological ties between the Ishmael figure and Melville himself are important. As a child, Melville was brought up in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Although both of Melville's parents came from affluent families, his mother was maternally aloof and Melville's father went bankrupt and died insane in 1832. Thus, at age eleven, Melville was left more or less on his own. The loss of his father taught Melville that life is both fragile and mysterious, and the child's search for a father became one of the central themes in Melville's fiction. In Moby Dick, Ishmael asks, "Where is the foundling's

13 Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 443.
father hidden?" Ishmael is Melville's narrator and he is Melville. They are connected by their experiences, vocations, and world views. They are both whalemens, yarnspinners, ruminators; and they are both searchers. The "me" in "Call me Ishmael" is Melville.

Like Ishmael, Ahab has his roots in the Old Testament. The biblical Ahab was a king of Israel known especially for his hostility to the prophet Elijah and his tolerance of profane cults. Elijah, it must be remembered, was the name of the old man who warned Ishmael not to embark on the Pequod. Ahab, the Bible tells us, "did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him." (I Kings, 16, 33) Melville's Ahab has the same disregard for higher laws as the Old Testament king. Like Cain, whose bitterness he shares, Ahab's face is marked with a "livid brand." Ahab feels he has been wronged by events beyond his control and he wants to strike back. Ahab and Ishmael have a common dissatisfaction; they are two sides of the same coin.

It is sometimes suggested that Ahab is a Zoroastrian. In Chapter CXIX, "The Candles," Ahab addresses the "corposants," or St. Elmo's fire in true Zoroastrian fashion:

Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence
wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed.  

But characters in Moby Dick cannot easily be pigeon-holed. Ahab may "once" have worshiped the "spirit of clear fire," but his allegiances in Moby Dick are less dogmatic. That spiritual forces drive the action, there can be no doubt, but these forces do not fit the normal religious definitions. They have their roots in Christianity, Islam, and Zoroasterism, but they are raw mixtures of these religions. Ultimately, the spiritual forces at work in Moby Dick do not represent different religions, but the Oriental religious impulse. Most of the prominent religions of the West are present in one form or another on board the Pequod, and are directed by Ahab against the white whale.

One central scene in Moby Dick which shows the fusion of different religions and spiritual desires is Chapter LXX, "The Sphinx." This chapter comes at the end of several chapters describing the process by which blubber is taken off a whale. At one point, Melville discusses the unusual scars etched into the skin of the whale, which were caused by battling with other whales. "To the quick, observant eye," he says, these marks are "hieroglyphical; that is if you call those mysterious cyphers on the wall of the pyramids hieroglyphics." Then, a chapter later Melville describes the beheading of the whale.

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15 Ibid., p. 244.
After the body and head are separated, the head is hoisted against the ship's side and the crew goes below for dinner. The head is described as hanging "to the Pequod's waist like the giant Holofernes's (head) from the girdle of Judith." It is "black and hooded," and "hanging there in the midst of so intense a calm, it [seems] the Sphinx's in the desert." Ahab appears on deck and addresses the head:

Speak, thou vast and venerable head...which, though ungarnished with a beard, yet here and there lookest hoary with mosses; speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee....O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!

Ahab's soliloquy implies that knowledge of the universe leads to a state of non-believing, or a state where one religion is as good as another. The mix of biblical references with allusions to the mysteries of ancient Egypt suggests that Melville sees all these spiritual methods as ways to the same end.

Ahab's soliloquy is Melville's version of Hamlet's musings in the graveyard when he addresses Yorick's skull. In the Orient, the Sphinx serves the same purpose the skull serves in the West. It is a mute point of reference, maybe not exactly a momento mori, but certainly a symbol of the mysteries of life. Here, the Western tradition of meditating on a skull is fused

16 Ibid., p. 247.
17 Ibid., p. 247.
18 Ibid., pp. 247-248.
with the Eastern tradition of questioning the inscrutable Sphinx.

A roughly contemporary visual parallel to Melville's "The Sphinx" is Elihu Vedder's The Questioner of the Sphinx (Fig. 5).19 Painted in 1863, more than ten years after Moby Dick was published, Vedder's work shows an Arab crouching at the mouth of the Sphinx in the moonlight. The scene is desolate and mysterious. The body of the Sphinx is totally covered by sand, so only the head is visible. The desert in the background is littered with broken columns stretching away in the darkness. The Arab is a worn figure who has dropped his cane and rests on his knees, listening. At the bottom right is a human skull half buried in the sand. As in Melville's chapter, the Sphinx and the skull are brought together.

While the two settings may be different, the similarities between Ahab and his "sphinx," and Vedder's The Questioner of the Sphinx are striking. Both figures seek knowledge that transcends thought and time. In both pieces, language is important. Questions involving the nature of the universe are asked, and are answered only with silence. Both figures are alone in different kinds of wastelands—one watery, the other desert, both empty, desolate, and terrifying. Ahab's soliloquy has the same kind of dramatic quality that Vedder's painting does. The two figures' ages are probably about the same and

while one has an ivory leg, the other carries a cane. In both scenes, too, death is present: in Moby Dick it is present simply in the severed head of the whale, in Vedder's painting it is present in the skull.

One other aspect which is important here is the point of view in each piece. The viewer and reader are about the same distance away from the action in each work. There is a sense that Melville and Vedder are personally involved in their works and that Ahab and the Arab are, in part, personae. Through Ahab, Melville himself is questioning the whale's head, and through the Arab, Vedder questions the Sphinx.

This is not to suggest a direct connection between "The Sphinx" chapter in Moby Dick and The Questioner of the Sphinx, but to point out a similar interest in and use of Oriental materials. Though Melville and Vedder never met, they admired each other's work. Melville dedicated Timoleon to Vedder and owned a copy of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam illustrated by Vedder. Vedder was a Swedenborgian and this, in part, accounts for the mysticism in his work, a mysticism that seems to have attracted Melville.20

In Moby Dick, Fedallah does not appear until the first lowering of the whaleboats, almost a third of the way through the book. He is described as such a creature as civilized, domestic people in the temperate zone only see in their dreams, and that but dimly; but the like of whom now and then glide among the

20 Finkelstein, Melville's Orienda, p. 284.
unchanging Asiatic communities, especially the Oriental isles to the east of the continent—those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries which even in these modern days still preserve much of the ghostly aboriginalness of earth's primal generations, when the memory of the first man was a distinct recollection, and all men his descendants, unknowing whence he came, eyed each other as real phantoms, and asked of the sun and the moon why they were created and to what end; when, though according to Genesis, the angels indeed consorted with the daughters of men, the devils also...indulged in mundane amours.21

But if Fedallah's home is in the South Pacific, his religion is Middle Eastern. The name, "Fedallah," is a compound word made up of "feda," the Arabic word for "sacrifice," and "Allah," the Arabic word for God. Today we know "Feda" as the root of "fedayeen," referring to the Palestinians actively fighting for a homeland. Translated, "Fedallah" means roughly "the sacrifice of God." Considering Melville's interest in language, he must have been aware of its meaning.22

Finkelstein calls Fedallah Melville's "most openly Islamic figure" and devotes a number of pages to an examination of his importance in the drama.23 In fact, Fedallah's spiritual allegiances are more Zoroastrian than Islamic. Fedallah has an Arabic name but he is a Parsee, a member of a fire-worshipping Zoroastrian sect centered in Bombay. During Ahab's speech in "The Candles," Fedallah is on his knees in an act of worship.

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21 Melville, _Moby Dick_, p. 189.
23 Ibid., p. 226.
As with most of the characters in *Moby Dick*, however, it is wrong to see Fedallah as representing one religious belief. Rather than characterize him as Islamic or Zoroastrian, I believe that spiritually, Fedallah and his four shadowy companions broadly represent the mysterious, unknowable side of the Orient with which Ahab is obsessed.

Fedallah is a potent symbol, a fusion of Polynesia and the Orient, the two important poles in Melville's life. Fedallah is central in *Moby Dick* not because of what he does, but because of what he represents. For Melville, Polynesia was physically the most beautiful landscape he had ever seen. Fedallah represents the mixture of this beauty with the spiritual energy of the Orient. What is interesting is that instead of producing a positive character, this mixture from Melville's two "Holy Lands" is an oddly sinister figure. The suggestion is that Melville, even before his trip to Jerusalem, views the Orient with doubt, uncertainty, and perhaps fear. Fedallah may not explain everything about Melville's Orientalism, but he is certainly an important piece in the puzzle.

*Moby Dick* is filled with references to the Orient and the entire spirit of the book reflects Melville's obsession with faith, a faith centered in the Orient. Ultimately, however, *Moby Dick* has no answers. It shows Melville's position in the middle of the century by revealing the kinds of themes he was working with. The fact that Ishmael, like the Ancient Mariner,
survives to tell the tale and to continue wandering and searching, implies that on a spiritual level the destruction of Ahab and the Pequod resolves nothing.

IV.

Melville's trip to the Holy Land was made ostensibly to improve his health. The writing of Moby Dick and, immediately following that, Pierre, The Confidence Man, and numerous short stories had left Melville exhausted. By 1856 it was clear to his family that he desperately needed a period of recuperation. The money for the journey was provided by Melville's father-in-law, Justice Shaw, and on October 11 Melville sailed alone from New York.

Melville's reunion with Hawthorne in Liverpool, where Hawthorne was serving as American Consul, is well-known. Hawthorne's description of Melville at this time is important because it clearly reveals Melville's state of mind as he traveled toward Jerusalem.

He stayed with us from Tuesday till Thursday; and, on the intervening day, we took a pretty long walk together, and sat down together among the sand-hills (sheltering ourselves from the high, cool wind) and smoked a cigar. Melville, as he always does, began to reason of providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to and fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sandhills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were
a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature and is better worth immortality than most of us.24

The scene is an interesting premonition of things to come. Here, thousands of miles from Egypt and the Holy Land, Melville is already physically "among the sand hills" and mentally wandering to and fro over the "deserts" of providence, futurity, "and everything that lies beyond human ken."

Hawthorne's observations on Melville's lack of belief but lack of comfort in his unbelief are significant. It is this restlessness of spirit which fuels the Journal Up The Straits and Clarel.

Travel may have been prescribed for Melville's failing physical and mental health, but the itinerary chosen is that of a pilgrimage for a man in a spiritual crisis. All of Melville's fiction, from the seeming objectivity of Typee, to the open symbolism of Moby Dick, had been building to this. Melville's trip to the Holy Land was a search for spiritual refreshment. His Journal Up The Straits, Clarel, and much of Timoleon are the records of this search.

Melville's Journal Up The Straits is the raw account of the author's six month trip to the Holy Land. But Melville's trip differed from the majority of nineteenth-century pilgrimages to the Orient. Most pilgrims went to the Holy Land

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to affirm their faith; Melville went in the hope of finding faith.

The *Journal* is Melville's first reaction to what he saw and experienced in the Orient. The voyage from Liverpool to Constantinople contained moments of optimism. On November 25 the ship entered the Mediterranean:


Melville's experience in the Marquesas had given him a taste of the New World paradise and now he was hoping to find the paradise of the Old World. The single word, "pacific," here both describes the smoothness of the voyage and summons up Melville's pastoral sojourn with the Typees.

In Salonica a number of Arab and Turkish women got on board. Melville, not usually known for his interest in or portrayal of women, took special note of the new passengers: "Two negresses, faces covered to conceal their beauty.... Some very pretty women of the harem. 'Ashmacks' worn by them. Very lazy." When the ship reached Constantinople, Melville compared the city to a woman:

The fog only lifted from about the skirts of the city.... It was a coy disclosure, a kind of coquetting, leaving room for the imagination and heightening the scene.

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25 Ibid., p. 7.
26 Ibid., p. 17.
Constantinople, like her Sultanas, was thus seen veiled in her ashmack.\textsuperscript{27}

And he continued noticing the women around him peering from the houses:

\begin{quote}
Among the women, ugly faces are rare.--Singular these races so exceed ours in this respect.... Out of old shanties peep lovely girls, like lilies and roses growing in cracked flower pots. Very shy and coy looking.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Melville's interest in Middle Eastern women is rivaled only by his earlier fascination with the women of the Marquesas. Fayaway, in \textit{Typee}, while basically a two dimensional character, is one of the few women in Melville's works who is portrayed as having feminine grace and beauty. Melville's visions of paradise--both East and West--are haunted by images of sexuality, and in every case the images remain sterile.

Many travelers to the Orient were curious about Arab women. In \textit{The Howadj in Syria} (1852), a book owned by Melville and written by his friend, George William Curtis, the author uses Melville's technique of comparing a city to a woman when he compares Damascus to a woman. The secret charm of Damascus, Curtis tells us,

\begin{quote}
is discovered only by penetrating deeper and farther into its exquisite courts, and gardens, and interiors, as you must strip away the veils and clumsy outer robes to behold the beauty of the Circassian or Georgian slave.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 19-20.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 30.
\item \textsuperscript{29} George William Curtis, \textit{The Howadj in Syria} (NY: Harper Brothers, 1852), p. 12.
\end{itemize}
Curtis, however, takes his description one important step further than Melville did. He turns Damascus into a sexual object—a slave-woman—whose charm is only revealed when she is "stripped" and "penetrated." Traditionally, cities "seduce" visitors, not the other way around, but here Curtis, the visiting Westerner, has his way with the Orient. The implications go to the heart of some popular nineteenth-century ideas of the Middle East.

For Westerners, one attraction of the nineteenth-century Orient was its supposed voluptuousness. Islam was viewed as a religion without morality and Muslims as dedicated sensualists. A fascination with Oriental women was common among travelers to the Levant. Orientalist paintings of colorful harems and slave markets were extremely popular in the West. They presented a world where Christian mores did not apply, where Westerners with a little imagination could indulge themselves in carnal desires without actually committing any sins. 30

A visual image which typifies this voyeuristic attitude toward the Orient, and is a striking visual parallel to Curtis's description of Damascus, is Jéan-Leon Gérôme's The Slave Market (Fig. 10) painted in the early 1860s. Here is Curtis's "Circassian or Georgian slave" stripped of her "clumsy robe," and stripped also of her comparison with Damascus. The

painting is virtually a study in Orientalist eroticism. Technically, it masquerades as a combination of a genre scene and a portrait of a nude. The details in the heavy garments worn by the men act as a foil to the slave's glowing white skin. But the presentation makes a cultural statement as well: the Orient is a land to be possessed, a land where no sexual fantasy is taboo. Just as the dark, Oriental men possess the naked slave-woman, the Western viewer—thanks to Gérôme—possesses the entire scene. Moreover, by participating only as a viewer, the Westerner can be titillated and feel morally superior at the same time.31

Though Melville is certainly no sensualist and his attitude is not as aggressive as Curtis's or Gérôme's, it is easy to see where his interest in Oriental women has its origins and the direction it took many writers and artists. Perhaps Melville was caught between his own self-consciousness and the popular image of the Orient as a land of pleasure. Unlike Curtis and Gérôme, Melville traveled to the Levant largely to heal his spirit, not to report back to the rest of the world on the erotic commercial transactions of the Arabs.

In Constantinople Melville was overwhelmed and pleased with sights and sounds. He wandered through the covered bazaar and mixed with the people crowding the bridges. "The

31 For an excellent discussion of this painting and of the voyeuristic aspect of Western Orientalist painting, see Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," Art In America, 71 (May 1983) pp. 118-131, 187-191.
Propontis, the Bosporous, the Golden Horn, the domes, the minarets, the bridges, the men of war, the cypresses. Indescribable."32

But when Melville turned from Constantinople to Cairo his writing became more somber. As his ship passed through the Greek islands, Melville noted the contrast between the Greek isles & those of the Polynesian archipelago. The former have lost their virginity. The latter are fresh as their first creation. The former look worn and meager, like life after enthusiasm is gone. The aspect of all of them is sterile & dry. Even Delos, whose flowers rose by miracle in the sea, is now a barren moor, & to look upon the bleak yellow of Patmos, who would ever think that a God had been there.33

Cairo haunted Melville. He commented on the "grand masquerade of mortality," the "uninhabited houses in the lonelier parts of the city," and the "ruined mosques, domes knocked in like stoven boats." Wherever Melville went, the ocean went with him. "The desert," he said, was "more fearful to look at than the ocean."

The real turning point in Melville's pilgrimage came not as one might expect in Palestine, but at the pyramids. The pyramids are located where the desert meets the green ribbon of the Nile, where life meets death. Melville comments:

Line of desert & verdure, plain as line between good & evil. An instant collision of alien elements. A long billow of desert forever hovers as in the act of breaking upon the verdure of Egypt.34

33 Ibid., p. 51.
34 Ibid., p. 59.
The significance of the placement of the pyramids was not lost on Melville. He saw the relationship between the desert and the river as symbolic of the dualistic nature of the universe. The desert is described as a deadly wave about to break on the green shore of life. The sense of impending doom and terror Melville feels carries over into the profound effect the pyramids had on him:

Pyramids from distance purple like mountains.... A feeling of awe & terror came over me. Dread of the Arabs. Offering to lead me into a side-hole. The dust. Long arched way,—then down as in a coal shaft. Then as in mines under the sea. The stooping & doubling. I shudder at the idea of ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah. Terrible mixture of the cunning and awful. Moses learned in all the lore of the Egyptians. When I was at top, thought it not so high—sat down on edge. Looked below—gradual nervousness & final giddiness & terror.... Pyramids still loom before me—something vast, indefinite, incomprehensible, and awful.35

The lines of stone do not seem like courses of masonry, but like strata of rocks. The long slope of crags and precipices.... It is all or nothing. It is not the sense of height, (or breadth or length or depth that is stirred), but the sense of immensity. After seeing the pyramid, all other architecture seems but pastry.... As with the ocean, you learn as much of its vastness by the first five minutes glance as you would in a month, so with the pyramid.36

It is not surprising that Melville's impulse is to describe the pyramids as mountains. Mountains held a special interest for Romantic writers. Monadnoc, Kathadin, and the White Mountains were sources of spiritual energy for Emerson

36 Ibid., p. 63.
and Thoreau. Melville's Arrowhead Farm where he wrote *Moby Dick* looks out on Mount Greylock to which he dedicated *Pierre*. But the manmade pyramids—so like mountains, yet so different—had a supernatural aura which frightened Melville. After trying to describe them in terms of mountains and the ocean, he finally gave up:

> It has been said in panegyric of some extraordinary works of man, that they affect the imagination like the works of Nature. But the pyramid affects one in neither way exactly. Man seems to have had as little to do with it as Nature. It was that supernatural creature, the priest. They must needs have been terrible, those Egyptian wise men. And one seems to see that as out of the crude forms of the natural earth they could evoke by art the transcendent mass and symmetry and awe of the pyramid, so out of the rude elements of the insignificant thoughts that are in all men, they could rear the transcendent conception of a God. But for no holy purpose was the pyramid founded.

Melville stubbed his toe on the pyramids. The labyrinthine streets of Constantinople and Cairo had led him to these massive, mountain-like, inscrutable tombs, but the positive faith he was searching for was not there. The Sphinx, guardian of the pyramids, its "back to the desert & face to the verdure," was "solid rock." Like Bartleby in the Tombs prison, modeled, it should be remembered, on Egyptian designs, Melville could do nothing but stare in dismay. And, unfortunately for him, the disappointment would continue.

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37 Melville dedicated his book following *Pierre, Israel Potter*, to the Bunker Hill Monument, a 221 foot granite obelisk whose architectural origins are Egyptian. Potter fought on Bunker Hill, one of the sacred mountains in American Revolutionary mythology.

38 Melville, *Journal Up the Straits*, pp. 63-64.
When Melville finally reached the Holy Land, all his enthusiasm was gone. The dry, barren landscape depressed him:

Whitish mildew pervading whole tracts of landscape—bleached—leprosy—encrustation of curses—old cheese—bones of rocks,--crunched, gnawed, & mumbled—mere refuse & rubbish of creation—all Judea seems to have been accumulations of this rubbish.... No moss as in other ruins—no grace of decay—no ivy—the unleavened nakedness of desolation—whitish ashes—lime-kilns—you see the anatomy—compares with ordinary regions as skeleton with living & rosy man.39

Stones of Judea. We read a good deal about stones in scriptures. Monuments & memorials are set up in stones; men are stoned to death; the figurative seed falls in stony places; and no wonder that stones should so largely figure in the Bible. Judea is one accumulation of stones—Stony mountains & stony plains; stony torrents and stony roads; stony vails and stony fields, stony homes & stony tombs; (stony eyes & stony hearts).40

From the piled stones of the Pyramids to the scattered rubbish and stones of Judea, the movement is toward disintegration. It is the same symbolic change which occurs in Pierre, only now the setting is Oriental. In Pierre the Mount Greylock of the playful dedication becomes the Memnon Stone with all its Oriental connotations of Egyptian mysteries, and is finally transformed to the scattered, broken boulders in Pierre's prophetic dream. For Pierre whose name in French means "stone," and for Melville stone-bound on the road to Jerusalem, it is the disintegration of the primordial hillock, the source.

39 Ibid., p. 75.
40 Ibid., p. 89.
Oddly, there is no mention of Melville's initial view of Jerusalem. For most pilgrims, approaching the city for the first time was an overwhelming experience. Lamartine, who visited Jerusalem in 1832, and whose *A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, Melville read, waxed eloquent on first seeing the city:

About a league before us, the sun shown upon a square tower, an elevated minaret, and the great yellow walls of some edifices which crowned the summit of a hill, and the foundations of which were lost in the hill itself: by the points of other minarets, the battlements of some high walls, and blue and black summits of some domes which rose behind the tower and the great minaret, we could recognize a town which stretched down the brow of the hill.... This could only be Jerusalem; we had thought ourselves much farther from it, and each of us without daring to ask a question of the guide, lest the illusion should be destroyed, enjoyed in silence the first glance cast by stealth upon the Holy City; everything inspired the name Jerusalem! It was herself!.... We stopped our horses to contemplate this mysterious and dazzling apparition.  

Melville, however, was more interested in his hotel: "Hot & wearisome ride over the arid hills.--Got to Jerusalem about 2 p.m. Put up at Mediterranean Hotel." Later, he described seeing Jerusalem from a road near Bethlehem: "Unless knew it, could not have recognized it--looked exactly like arid rocks."  

In Jerusalem the holy sites Melville had come so far to see seemed desolate and were in ruins:

The Holy Sepulchre--ruined dome--confused and half-ruinous

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42 Melville, *Journal Up the Straits*, p. 67.

43 Ibid., p. 78.
pile. -- Labyrinths & terraces of mouldy grottos, tombs, & shrines. Smells like a dead house.44

The so-called pool of Bathsheba full of rubbish. -- sooty look & smell.45

Here, Melville's comments on the Pool of Bathsheba, a pool with special associations because of the adulterous affair between David and Bathsheba, seem almost predictable in light of his own uneasy relationships with women. Even the olive trees around the Holy City appeared grotesque, haunted, and melancholy-looking to Melville, "quite in keeping with Jerusalem & its associations."46

The last section of his Journal which focuses on the Levant deals with the Christian missionaries Melville met who were trying to convert the Jews. Melville's account reveals the embittered disillusionment with which he had come to view Christianity. The missionaries are portrayed as half-crazy Westerners wasting away in the desert. For all the money and time spent, few, if any converts were ever made. "Hapless are the favorites of heaven,"47 he concluded.

What sets Melville's journal apart from most nineteenth-century accounts of visits to the Levant is its lack of romantic and religious fervor, and its overall bleakness. Many pilgrims noted the contrast between the romantic picture of the

44 Ibid., p. 88.
46 Ibid., p. 88.
47 Ibid., p. 92.
Holy Land and the grim reality of its desolate landscape. Generally they interpreted the physical wasteland of Palestine as supporting the doctrine of resurrection. The bloom was gone and the spirit had fled, but this was simply in preparation for the day of reckoning. A good example of this rationalization is found in Arthur Penhryn Stanley's *Sinai and Palestine in Connection with Their History* (1856) which Melville owned and drew from when composing *Clarel*. Stanley was Canon of Canterbury and Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford, so his inclination was to read the Bible in the landscape, no matter how forced the result. To the unorthodox Melville, however, Stanley's kind of logic was suspect. The flight of God was a cause for grief and could not be argued away. One of Melville's final comments sums up best his entire experience in the Holy Land: "No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations than Palestine—particularly Jerusalem. To some the disappointment is heart sickening."

V.

If Melville's trip to the Orient did not cure him, it at least quieted him. Privately, his relatives still worried. Letters which have recently come to light reveal his wife's unhappiness with Melville and her desire to find a way to end

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49 Melville, *Journal Up the Straits*, pp. 92-93.
Melville himself no longer wrestled with incomprehensible metaphysical sea tales. Outwardly he was, to use his own word, pacific. He lectured, traveled, and wrote poetry, and in 1866 took a post at the New York customs house. Inwardly, he was resigned, but he was still digesting the experiences he had had in the Levant. Finally, in 1876, twenty years after his pilgrimage, Melville published *Clarel. A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*.

As Melville himself said, *Clarel* is "eminently adapted for unpopularity." At least part of the reason for its unpopularity is its poetic form. Melville's eight syllable lines are monotonous, even with the varied rhyme scheme. Probably, the narrative would have been better adapted to blank verse or prose.

The story concerns Clarel, a young divinity student, who visits Jerusalem and then sets out with a group of companions on a pilgrimage to the Jordan river, the Dead Sea, Mar Saba monastery, Bethlehem, and back to Jerusalem. This is the same trip Melville took and was a fairly standard itinerary for nineteenth-century pilgrims. But *Clarel* is not a simple poem about a tourist in the Holy Land, and despite the journey the poem describes, it is not really a poem of action and narrative flow. *Clarel* is a poem of ideas in which a group of pilgrims explores the various beliefs that animate each of them. In effect, Melville used the central part of his journal detailing
the two weeks he spent in Palestine as the basis for a thinly disguised spiritual autobiography. The characters in the poem have very different religious attitudes—Christian, Jewish, and Islamic—representing, to some degree, various facets of Melville's own spiritual struggle.

Woven into this spiritual autobiography is a tale of frustrated love. While in Jerusalem Clarel meets and falls in love with Ruth, a young Jewish woman. When he returns from his journey hoping to marry Ruth, he finds she has died. Acted out against the complex spiritual background of the Orient, this love story takes on special significance. In effect, Melville dramatizes his own incapacity for a meaningful relationship with a woman. The subtle theme of sexuality which ran through the Journal Up the Straits becomes an integral part of Clarel. The barren landscape is here a clear metaphor for the lack of an inspiring female presence in Melville's own life.50

To write Clarel Melville drew heavily from several sources besides his journal. This method of combining personal experience with outside sources was the same method he had used to compose Moby Dick. Some of the most important works he used for Clarel were Stanley's Sinai and Palestine, W.H. Thomson's The Land and the Book, and William Bartlett's Walks About...Jerusalem, Forty Days in the Desert, and The Nile Boat.

Bartlett was an artist whose engravings show the exotic and romantic side of life in the Levant. His Palestine is replete with endless camel caravans hurrying to Mecca and peaceful Arab encampments by palm-fringed oases. Verbal details from these texts and visual details from Bartlett's engravings, were translated into Melville's poetry and used to authenticate the pilgrimage described in Clarel.51

Clarel has the same overall structure and themes found in Typee and Moby Dick. All three works center around a journey and deal broadly with a search for faith.52 In the same way that the Typee valley and the Pequod are self-contained worlds and isolate the main characters from the rest of the world, in Clarel the nine pilgrims are unified by their pilgrimage through a hostile landscape.

One important similarity between Typee and Clarel is that in both books there are relationships between men and women which are ultimately unfulfilling. In Typee, Tom and Fayaway's relationship seems superficially ideal but has no real substance. In Clarel, Clarel and Ruth's romance ends when Ruth dies of grief because her father is murdered. Again, it is the frustration of paradise lost acted out in images of sexuality.

Perhaps one of the most glaring differences in these books is the physical setting. Both Typee and Moby Dick take place

51 Finkelstein, Melville's Orienda, pp. 65, 83.

in the South Pacific, on the edge of the modern Orient, while Clarel is set in the Holy Land, the center of the nineteenth-century Orient. This physical difference between the lush world of Polynesia and the barren world Holy Land is specifically brought out by Rolfe, the pilgrim in Clarel who is most similar to Melville, when he comments that the island paradise of Tahiti would have been a more appropriate site than Bethlehem for the birth of Christ:

From Bethlehem here my musings reach
Yes--frankly--to Tahiti's beach....
That vine-wreathed urn of Ver, in sea
Of halcyons, where no tides do flow
Or ebb, but waves bide peacefully
At brim, by beach where palm trees grow
That sheltered Omai's olive race--
Tahiti should have been the place
For Christ in advent.53

The sentiment is straight out of Melville's journal and occurs several times in Clarel. But while the two areas are physically different, for Melville, they are symbolically the same. Both of them are examples of paradise lost.

Though Clarel is not a sea tale and takes place largely in the desert, references to ships and the sea appear frequently. In the opening pages, Clarel muses on the threat of spiritual and intellectual shipwreck:

Needs be my soul
Purged by the desert's subtle air
From bookish vapours, now is heir
To nature's influx of control;
Comes likewise now to consciousness

Clarel is not simply a tourist in the Orient. The kind of information he seeks cannot be found in the guide books. Indeed, there is a vast part of the Orient which guide books can never explain. A few lines later, Clarel thinks back on his encounter with a "grave one," on the streets of Jaffa who advised him,

'Our New World's worldly wit so shrewd
Lacks the Semitic reverent mood,
Unworldly--hardly may confer
Fitness for just interpreter
Of Palestine. Forgo the state
Of local minds inveterate,
Tied to one poor and casual form.
To avoid the deep saves not from storm.'

This shadowy figure, the ghost of Moby Dick's Elijah and Coleridge's Ancient Mariner cautions Clarel against the easy religion of guide book and souvenir stand.

Later, as the pilgrims ride to Bethlehem, Rolfe sees Jerusalem from a distance and alerts the others:

Slant palm to brow against the haze,
Meantime the salt one sent his gaze
As from the mast-head o'er the pale
Expanse. But what may eyes avail?
Land lone as seas without a sail.
'Wreck, ho--the wreck!'...
'See ye, see?
'Way over where the gray hills be;
Yonder--no, there--that upland dim:
Wreck, ho! the wreck--Jerusalem!'56

Again, the character is Rolfe, but Melville is speaking.

Perhaps the most sustained passage of metaphysical
expression in Clarel comes when the pilgrims reach Mar Saba
monastery near the Dead Sea. The monastery, dramatically
situated on a cliff, was famous for a lone palm tree which grew
from the cliff wall (Figs. 11 and 12). The palm itself became
a kind of object of pilgrimage. In the third section of the
poem, entitled "Mar Saba," four of the pilgrims meditate on the
tree from different vantage points. For each of them the tree
means something different. While they are meditating, Clarel
appears at the tree and looks out at all of them. The effect
is fugal, and is reminiscent of "The Doubloon" chapter in Moby
Dick. Just as Pip calls the doubloon nailed to the Pequod's
mast, "the ship's navel," the palm tree springing from the
cliff is a kind of navel of Mar Saba, and a central symbol in
Clarel. It is virtually the only green plant in the poem. For
Rolfe, one of the four gazing at the tree, it is a reminder of
the Polynesian paradise he once knew and lost.

There is an interesting scene in Redburn which relates to
the Mar Saba palm. "I very well remembered," the narrator says

56 Ibid., p. 408.
in Redburn,

staring at a man pointed out to me by my aunt one Sunday in church as the man who had been in Stony Arabia and passed through strange adventures there, all of which I had read with my own eyes in the book which he wrote, an arid-looking book in a pale yellow cover.

'See what big eyes he has,' whispered my aunt; 'They got so big because when he was almost dead with famishing in the desert, he all at once caught sight of a date tree, with ripe fruit hanging on it.'

Upon this I stared at him until I thought his eyes were really of an uncommon size, and stuck out from his head like lobster. I am sure my own eyes must have been magnified as I stared. When church was out, I wanted my aunt to take me along and follow the traveller home. But she said that the constables would take us up if we did; and so I never saw this wonderful Arabian traveller again. But he long haunted me; and several times I dreamt of him and thought his great eyes were grown until larger and rounder; and once I had a vision of that date tree.57

The "wonderful Arabian traveller" was John Lloyd Stephens, whose Arabia Petraea (1837) was a travel classic even in Melville's day.58 In the passage, Redburn/Melville looks to Stephens as if he were a kind of Old Testament god. The church setting, Stephen's large all-seeing eyes, and the fact that he disappears after church and cannot be followed give the encounter spiritual significance. The young boy's recurring dreams of Stephens, and the vision of the date tree, a symbol of life, hint at the pilgrimage Melville would later make to the Levant and the Mar Saba palm. Only for Melville, the palm would offer no sustenance and would not lead him back to the church. In the passage, it is possible to see the early


58 Horace Greeley compared Typee and Omoo to Arabia Petraea. See Finkelstein, Melville's Orienda, p. 45.
powerful attraction the Orient had for Melville, an attraction rooted in a personal search for faith rather than orthodox Christianity.

Another scene in *Clarel* which has a parallel in *Moby Dick* occurs just before the scene with the palm. Mortmain, a pilgrim who perceives the world as basically hostile, has his black skull cap stolen by an eagle and dropped down the cliff. A similar scene occurs near the end of *Moby Dick* when Ahab has his hat snatched by a sea-hawk and dropped into the sea. In both cases the stolen hat is an ill omen. Mortmain quietly dies soon after, while meditating on the palm tree, and within a few chapters of losing his hat, Ahab is dragged to his death by Moby Dick.

But while these parallels between *Clarel* and Melville's earlier works may be interesting to note, what do they tell us about Melville's Orientalism? Certainly, Melville did not view the Orient as many Americans did as a stage set for the Arabian Nights or the Bible. Nor did he view it with the reverence and fervor of a true believer. While there are romantic elements in the *Journal* and *Clarel*, these elements seem to reflect the popular Orientalist view rather than Melville's personal experience. The overall tone of both the *Journal* and *Clarel* is one of dismay at the bleakness of the Holy Land. What action there is in *Clarel* takes place under a dark cloud of doom. Deaths occur in each of the four sections of the book. Of the nine pilgrims who begin the journey, only four finish. Among
American Orientalist works of literature, *Clarel* stands out as virtually the only one to paint a bleak picture of the spiritual life in the Levant. The whole tone suggests that religion in the Holy Land is as barren as the landscape.

VI.

The last work Melville published before he died was a slender volume of poetry, entitled *Timoleon* which appeared in 1891. The final twenty-one poems appear under the heading, "Fruit of Travel Long Ago" and concern Melville's 1856 trip to the Orient. These contain many of the ideas in *Clarel* and were probably written during the composition of that poem. They deal by turns with Italy and Greece, and end in Egypt at the pyramids. In "The Archipelago" Melville concludes by comparing the Greek islands to the Marquesas: "'Tis Polynesia reft of palms, / Seaward no valley breathes her balms-- / Not such as musk thy rings of calms, / Marquesas!"59 Melville's paradise lost continues to haunt him. The last two poems, "In the Desert" and "The Great Pyramid," describe the harshness of the landscape and the immensity of the Great Pyramid. The desert is "like blank ocean in blue calm"; the pyramid is a manmade mountain confronting Nature with a "dumb I AM." *Timoleon* has only a glimmer of the energy and originality of Melville's earlier published work. To a large extent, the Oriental

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elements it contains are restatements of themes Melville had worked with more extensively in his *Journal* and *Clarel*.
CHAPTER VI
PERSPECTIVES

From the perspective of the 1980s, nineteenth-century American Romantic Orientalism appears to be largely a popular phenomenon which had little depth and few lasting effects; a footnote, perhaps, to the American renaissance. In art and architecture it produced some unusual paintings, such as Vedder's "The Questioner of the Sphinx," and several anachronistic buildings, such as Church's Olana, and it added a number of motifs to the stock of artists and architects. In literature it was responsible for some exotic travel books and a flurry of minor poems, tales, and novels inspired by the mysteries of Egypt and The Arabian Nights. Clarel, Melville's huge and forgotten "poem and pilgrimage in the Holy Land" is the last gasp of Romantic literary Orientalism in the United States.

But perspectives can be deceiving. Nineteenth-century American Orientalism appears unimportant partly because it has received so little attention. The four writers at the core of this study--Washington Irving, Edgar Allen Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville--were all profoundly affected by the growing Western contact with the Orient.

Washington Irving had a life-long fascination with Moorish culture. Much of what he wrote, from the Mustapha letters in
Salmagundi to the two volume biography of Mohammed, reflects this interest. Irving's most significant Orientalist work, and possibly the most important book he wrote, is The Alhambra. The Alhambra is an unusual mix of fiction, history, and travel. It is an atmospheric work full of the grandeur of the past seen through the eyes of an American abroad. But for Irving, the Alhambra, the ruined Oriental palace of the Moors, was more than just a location, it was a direct connection to the past. By climbing the hill and entering the palace gate, Irving could enter a dream-world where the distinction between fact and fiction blurred. The result was restorative. The bittersweet history of the Moors in Spain could be meditated on and rewritten, and, by extension, Irving's own bittersweet past could be summoned up and psychologically resolved.

Like Irving, Poe developed his brand of Orientalism without ever visiting the Levant. His only knowledge of the East came from his reading which ranged from Sale's Koran to Stephen's Incidents of Travel in Arabia Petraea. For Poe the Orient provided the basis for an aesthetic view of the world which was at once supremely simple and highly complex. The intricate arabesque patterns in Oriental art had a combination of fluidity and order which Poe responded to and which finds a parallel in his own poetry and prose. Poe's literary art has much in common with the arabesque in Oriental art. In both, stylization, symmetry, and craftsmanship are of utmost importance. And in both, also, meaning is woven into surface
pattern. Just as Oriental arabesques may hide verses of the Koran behind their complex patterns, Poe's literary arabesques may subtly disguise his own unified world view.

The Oriental flavor of Emerson's work was the topic of several studies completed in the 1930s, and has only recently surfaced again as an area of interest. Emerson's knowledge of Oriental literature was fairly extensive. He read German versions of Persian poetry, Sale's Koran, and The Arabian Nights. Of these, the poetry of the Persian mystics, Saadi and Hafiz, influenced him the most. Emerson's most productive years as a poet coincide with his careful study of these poets. Working from German translations of the originals, Emerson made a number of translations himself. He was attracted not only by the rich imagery, dancing rhythms, and gnomic style, but also by the mystical vein running through the poems. Indeed, a clue to the source of his own images and rhythms can be found in the work of Saadi and Hafiz. Emerson's translations of those poets are often so similar to his own poems that it is difficult to distinguish between them. But probably the most important hint Emerson got from Persian poetry was in its view of the natural world. Much Persian verse focuses on different manifestations of the Garden. Emerson's study of Saadi and Hafiz freed him from the confining religious legacy of New England and allowed him to write about the American Garden with a kind of spirituality not based on Christianity. For Emerson, the
Orient represented a spiritual framework which could help support and give definition to the American Garden.

Melville's interest in the Orient is connected to his personal search for a spiritual source. The main purpose of Melville's early whaling adventures in the South Seas and his later journey to the Holy Land, seems to have been to resolve problems of personal emptiness and spiritual emptiness. More than any other author studied here, Melville struggled with Christianity; his Orientalism is firmly rooted in the importance of the Levant to Christian faith. Clarel is a religious poem. It ends with Clarel (a thinly disguised portrait of Melville) joining the crowd on Easter day in Jerusalem as it wends its way along the Via Crucis toward Calvary. Melville's pilgrimage to the Holy Land didn't have as hopeful a conclusion. For Melville, the Orient was the source where questions of faith and personal conflict might be resolved. His journey to the Holy Land was taken to locate this source and to find out if indeed it had answers to his questions. His own final years of silence in New York following his return from Jerusalem attest to the illusiveness of the answers he searched for.

The development of American Romantic literary Orientalism from Irving to Melville reveals an increasing subjectivity. As texts, The Alhambra is a Romantic history of an exotic culture while Clarel is the spiritual history of a complex individual. Irving, at the Alhambra in Granada, lived on the edge of the
Orient; Melville took the pilgrimage to its center. For both of them, however, and for Poe and Emerson as well, the Orient was largely a created world which fulfilled—with varying degrees of success—their psychological and spiritual needs in a way the West, by itself, could not. After Melville, the Orient continued to fascinate Americans, but as tourism became better organized and Western graffiti spread over the ancient monuments, the initial Romantic bloom of the Pyramids, the Sphinx, and the Holy Land began to fade.
CHAPTER XV.

THE ETHIOPIAN FRONTIER.


A few hours and I began to feel thirsty, so we hurried on in advance to the mud hamlet of Abou-Hammed. We dismounted from the bank of the river, where we were received by a dark Abdalch, who was officiating in place of the Governor, and invited me to take possession of the latter's house. Achmet gave him a large wooden bowl and told him to fill it from the Nile, and we would talk to him afterwards. I shall never forget.

Figure 1

Bayard Taylor  The Tent-Door at Abou-Hammed

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Chapter XIX.

Ethiopian Nights' Entertainments.


"For it was in the golden prime
Of good Heron Al-Hassid."—Tennyson.

With my voyage on the Ethiopian Nile a thread of romance was woven, which, in the Oriental mood that had now become native to me, greatly added to the charm of the journey. My nights' entertainments were better than the Arabian. The moon was at the full, and although, during the day, a light north-wind filled my sails, it invariably fell calm at sunset.

Figure 2

Bayard Taylor  Moonlight on
the Ethiopian Nile
Figure 3

Frederick Church  El Khasne,
Petra

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Figure 4

Sanford Robinson Gifford

"On the Nile"
Figure 5

Elihu Vedder
The Questioner of the Sphinx
Figure 6

Thomas Cole  Youth
Figure 7

William Rimmer
*Flight and Pursuit*
Figure 8
Arabesque Patterns
Figure 9

Luc Olivier Merson
Rest on the Flight into Egypt
Figure 10
View of Hudson river valley from Persian window of Frederick Church's Olana
Figure 11
Jean-Leon Gérôme
The Slave Market
Figure 12.

Mar Saba Monastery and
Mar Saba Palm

From William Thomson's
The Land and the Book

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Figure 13

Mar Saba Palm
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