

Chapter 2

Byron and the Construction of Persia through European Discourses

*Beneath the rapidly changing history of governments, wars, and famines, there emerge other, apparently unmoving histories: the history of sea routes, the history of corn or of gold-mining, the history of drought and of irrigation, the history of crop rotation, the history of the balance achieved by the human species between hunger and abundance.*¹

Michel Foucault

2. 1. Introduction

The history of contact between Persia and the West goes back to the appearance of the Persians on the Eastern coast of the Aegean and in the neighbourhood of the Hellenic world in 546 B.C. Afterwards, Alexander the Great, the first warrior-traveller who invaded Persia in 330 B.C., and Plotinus's military expedition against Persia in the hope of gaining knowledge of new philosophies² of the Persians and Indians expanded the area of contact between these two worlds. In this regard, Robert Byron in *An Essay on India*, discussing the impact of the British colonial power in India, summarizes his argument about the "contact between East and West" (*EI*: 27) and claims that it is not a new interaction at all. Similarly, Edward Said dates it back to Aeschylus's play *The Persians* (472 B.C.), through which a non-Oriental playwright, whose responses to the Persian expedition against Greece found expression in his play, makes "a symbol for the whole Orient,"³ whereas Raymond Schwab states that the "realization" of the Orient refers back to the translation of the Avesta,⁴ the Zoroastrian holy scripture. Recent research has shown that the Western world first experienced the East through its language and texts, in particular the Avesta circulating in the West. The tradition that wisdom and civilization derived from the East is reflected also in the New Testament story of three Magi—the three men from the East, who travelled to the Nativity and "brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh at the birth of Jesus and were probably Zoroastrian priests from Persia"⁵—which suggests long-standing contact between the two worlds. During the Parthian and

the Sasanian⁶ periods, the mutual exchange between Persia and the West continued, during which Persia had so great an impact upon the West that the flow of ideas was from East to West.

From the time of Alexander's invasion of Persia, to the Muslim Arabs' conquest between A.D. 633 and 651, and that by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, up to the Great War and now, Persia has been an object of interest for both Eastern and Western countries. Throughout this history, Persia has witnessed a variety of political, economic and cultural vicissitudes. At some time Persia as the oldest Empire in the world, "the fountain head of much of Near Eastern culture," and the "cradle, first of the human race and later of civilization itself,"⁷ was at the core of the European archaeological excavations. At other times, it was the centre of European studies for its non-ecclesiastical and non-revealed religion, Zoroastrianism.⁸ In yet other periods, the effect of its artistic innovations on the Byzantine art took priority as a field of study. Later, its natural beauties, its innovations in Islamic architecture, its economic situation in the world market, and its oil resources attracted the attention of Western countries.

In the twentieth century, Persia becomes important for its revolution, the time when Michel Foucault went to Persia "for an Italian newspaper as an eyewitness to the period leading up to the fall of [Mohammad Reza] Shah and the triumph"⁹ of the Islamic Revolution. Alternately, one can refer to Edward Said's *Covering Islam*, in which he cites Iran's strategic vitality and terms it "an international trouble spot!"¹⁰ In each case, this country has influenced its observers and has been the nexus of gazes in various ways. For instance, its effects on the Byzantine art influenced David Talbot Rice; its natural beauties absorbed Vita Sackville-West; its Islamic architecture preoccupied Robert Byron's mind, and in 1979, its Islamic Revolution intrigued Michel Foucault:

[Foucault] was fascinated by the type of political action taking place, the massive presence of an underarmed populace in the streets facing a police force and army among the world's most brutal and omnipresent. A revolution was taking place, but it was one that made the European Left uneasy. It was hard to identify class dynamics, social divisions, a vanguard party, or political ideology as the driving force; these "lacks" intrigued Foucault. He was intrigued by the question of the role of religion in political life, of the unexpected and resurgent role it was playing. He reminded his European readers that the sentence preceding Marx's famous phrase about religion being the opium of the people, spoke of "the spirit of a world without spirit." He saw or felt—or thought he saw—hints of such a

spirit, and of a possible role it might have in forming the self in a different relationship to politics.¹¹

Foucault's view about the collective will is changed after having visited Persia in 1979, witnessing the revolution and the downfall of the "Western-supported authoritarian [Pahlavi] regime," Mohammad Reza Shah's State, and encountering this collective will; therefore, he concludes, "above all we have to change ourselves. Our way of being, our relationships with others, with eternity, with God."¹² Thereafter, he asks "[what] is the meaning of these people, to seek out, at the price of their lives, that thing whose very possibility we Europeans have forgotten at least since the Renaissance and the period of the great crisis of Christianity—a spirituality."¹³

One of the crucial, underlying reasons for the multiplication of contact between West and East was the European expansion of capitalism, which did not develop in isolated, self-contained societies. Through all possible ways, European capitalism seeks to invest in whatever that enables it to produce, to expand and to make a profit and to find new markets; at the core of capitalism is the aim to cause production exceed consumption, and to enlarge productive capacity rather than to invest in economically unproductive enterprises. This objective is fulfilled when it captures both the home and the foreign markets in their entirety; accordingly, by virtue of capitalist exploratory, commercial and economic enterprises, there appears a relation between the capitalist world and the 'Others,' which is a relationship of "the hegemony [and superiority] of European"¹⁴ capitalism over the 'Others.' Such an expansion stimulated some forms of investment into the study of the East—as an appropriate place for the investments of European capitalists—such as its geography, history, economics, trade, geology, archaeology, languages, literature, religions, and topography.

These studies produced various works of literature, political tracts, journalistic texts, travel accounts, religious and philological works. Aeschylus's *The Persians*, Thomas Preston's *Cambyse King of Persia*, Sir John Malcolm's *History of Persia*, Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*, Moritz Wagner's *Travels in Persia*, A. V. Williams Jackson's *Persia Past and Present: A Book of Travel and Research*, Percy Sykes' *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*, Isabella Bird's *Journey in Persia and Kurdistan*, Gertrude Bell's *Persian Pictures*, Freya Madeline Stark's *The Valleys of the Assassins*,

Edward Browne's *A Year Amongst the Persians*, Vita Sackville-West's *Twelve Days*, and Archibald MacLeish's poem "You Andrew Marvell" are a few examples of such literature, predominantly concerning Persia. Accordingly, the East, in this regard Persia, becomes a site for research, excavation and investment, as well as one of the themes in European literature.

My principal objective is to deal with the underlying elements in the European travellers' accounts of Persia, and to examine their character and bias as well as their individual concerns in constructing Persia throughout their travel books, as a discourse. My argument focuses on uncovering the affinities and contradictions within European discourses of Persia as a source of social knowledge, and the different lenses through which Persia is perceived, gazed at and constructed. In short, my purpose is to look at the formation of such discourses, and in what discourses or networks Persia is constructed for the Western world. This network appears very coherent and well adapted to its purpose. When one looks at its function, one comes across an articulated knowledge. These travelogues serve me as a guide to dismantle the prevailing Western discourse constructed for all Oriental countries; i.e., these travel books present a picture of the East, here Persia, as compared to the Occidental stereotyping of the Orient described in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

At the outset, I would like to classify the construction of the Orient through various Western discourses into different categories. The first category denigrates the Orient, as being 'underhumanised', 'antidemocratic', 'backward', 'unnatural', and 'disordered', 'wrong', 'retrogressive' and 'evil.' It looks at the Orient through a distorted looking-glass and sees a deformed and distorted image of the Orient. Such a contextual systematic knowledge of the Orient is best viewed in Foucauldian terms as a discourse which is the textual manifestation of power/knowledge. In addition, it creates a relationship between the Occident and the Orient that Said believes is a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony,"¹⁵ more to the point, it is the "hegemony of European ideas [...] [the] European superiority over Oriental backwardness."¹⁶ This view emerges from the commercial and political practices of the European governments.

The second category focuses on the beauties of the Orient; it is the representation of the authors' personal impressions about the beauties and fascination of the Orient. In this

regard, the traveller focuses his gaze on the beauties of the travelleses without reducing the people's normalness and particularity, and by means of his insight, sees what the other travellers were blind to see. This way of presenting the Orient is at odds with the first category; i.e., where the first category of travellers can only inhale the odour of corruption and decay, and despised people for their cruelty, insincerity and dishonesty, the second category, for instance Vita Sackville-West, finds a purely romantic atmosphere and a charming people full of kindness, courtesy and simplicity.

In each case, however, the Orient is an appropriate place for various forms of research and investment. Likewise, Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, states: "it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other."¹⁷ Similarly, Byron argues that the West in maintaining its superiority and "vitality" in the "eternal contact" with the East "has always needed, and will always need, the contribution of East," (*EI*: 18) and concludes that from the contact between the East and the West, the "West has gained as much in the past as the East is gaining now" (*EI*: 27). In these constructions—as a translation from a reality to its verbal or graphic representation, originating in a particular socially produced discourse and subjectivity—one can examine the nexus of power and knowledge within which at least one side of the travelleses' culture and life is mistranslated or is not translated at all.

Contrary to those travellers who consider the Orient as 'effeminate', 'disordered', 'underhumanised', and 'retrogressive', Byron, in *The Road to Oxiana*, opens a new phase in dealing with the Orient. He shows the impact of the West on the Orient, analyses the dynasties, exposes and scrutinizes the consequences of "will to power." Moreover, Manfred Pfister argues, it "destabilises considerably the hierarchical opposition of Edward Said's 'Orientalism'" since "Byron's Orient, far from 'soft' and 'effeminate', is, at its best, hard and virile."¹⁸ What I am interested to show is a different picture of the East and Persia in particular, which "deflate[s] the Western discourses of Orientalism."¹⁹ Travel writers like Byron, Sackville-West, Ronald Sinclair, and Robert Payne show a picture of the Orient contrary to the Western discourse of the Orient. To understand what the European travellers—based on different objectives and period—encounter, to trace

Persia's effects on these travellers, and to see a different picture of the East (here Persia), I suggest to have a brief look at the history of Persia.

2. 2. A Brief History of Persia

Persia, the kingdom of Iran in Southwestern Asia, is the name given by the Greeks to the vast empire, which Cyrus the Great (559—530 B.C.) had founded. The term Persia stemmed from a region of southern Iran formerly known as Persis, alternatively as Pars, the modern Fars. Parsa is the name of an Indo-European nomadic people, who migrated into the region about 1000 B.C. This ancient kingdom included Media, Lydia, Babylonia, all of western Asia, Egypt and parts of Eastern Europe, with three capitals, Ecbatana as summer capital, Susa as winter capital and Persepolis as ceremonial capital. Cyrus the Great claimed descent from Achaemenes, and around 700 B.C., the Achaemenid established the Persians in Persis. At this early period, Fars was still under the domination of the Medes, the Iranian cousins settled to the north with their capital at Ecbatana. The Achaemenid dynasty began as their client kings. In 550 B.C., however, Cyrus rose in revolt, defeated the Median army and captured his overlord, King Astyages. Between 546 and 539 B.C., Cyrus systematically reduced to obedience the Greek cities along the coast of Asia Minor. Cyrus spent the last decades of his life organising the great and heterogeneous empire he had acquired.

After the death of Cyrus in 530 B.C., his son, Cambyses (530—522 B.C.), continued expanding the Persian Empire through the conquest of Egypt in 525 B.C. While he was still trying to settle Egypt, a rebellion broke out in Media. Cambyses died in unexplained circumstances on his way through Syria. The rebellion was put down by Darius I, called the Great (521—486 B.C.), the son of Hystaspes, who belonged to a branch of the Achaemenid family and royal house. Under his rule, the Persian Empire achieved its widest expansion. "He was a great builder: it was he who designed the famous platform-palace of Persepolis. [He was the] most notable upholder of the worship of Ahura Mazda,"²⁰ the god of the Achaemenid kings from whom they believed they had received their empire and with whose aid they accomplished all deeds. Darius's son Xerxes continued the war against Greece. "Seventy years later, when Xenophon took part in the ill-fated expedition of Cyrus the Younger against his brother Artaxerxes II, he was

plainly impressed by the vastness, strength and solidity that still distinguished the Achaemenid Empire. [...] Artaxerxes III, who ascended the throne in 359 B.C., was the last of the great Achaemenids.”²¹

The second classical dynasty was that of the Parthians (171 B.C.—A.D. 226), the enemies of Rome. “The Parthian kings came increasingly to depend on the loyalty of the great families of Iran. [Their king], Mithridates (170—138 B.C.) established their Empire over traditional Iran. [They] saw themselves as the protectors, even as the ‘impresarios’, of the rich and manifold cultures they had taken over. [...] In A.D. 224 Ardashir, the Sasanian king, defeated the last Parthian monarch, Artavan V; in A.D. 226 he entered Ctesiphon, in Mesopotamia, and took the title of King of Kings.”²²

The third dynasty was the Sasanians (A.D. 226—651), with their first ruler Ardashir I (A.D. 226—240), who created an empire that was constantly changing in size as it reacted to Rome and Byzantium to the west and to the Kushans and Hephthalites to the east. “The dynasty’s name was derived from Sasan, Ardashir’s father.”²³ Their successors

considered themselves as enjoying the support of the traditional religion of Iran [...] Zoroastrianism. [...] The Sasanians, in replacing the Parthians, inherited their problems. [First, distance], it took over two months to reach the capital of Ctesiphon from the mountains of Armenia. [...] The King of Kings had to be a *diraz-dast*- a man ‘with a long hand.’ [...] Second: the Sasanians ruled a variety of peoples and cultures. They had to maintain traditions of ‘soft’ government. [...] Distance, the threat of the nomads, religious ferment: [these problems] could never be solved forever. [...] Khusro I (531—579) Anoshirwan owed his position to having solved [them]. [...] Under Khusro I, the Sasanian Empire could stand at the cross-road of Asia. [...] Khusro I was the ideal ruler for the Sasanian state—always on the move, capable of patronising the widely-different groups within his Empire, deliberately maintaining, at Ctesiphon, a court larger than life. [...] Once the Arabs defeated the Persian army at the battle of Qadisiya, in 637—[on one of the Euphrates canals during which the Sasanian commander in chief, Rustam, was killed]—and had entered Ctesiphon, the King of Kings Yazdgird III (632—651) found himself with nowhere to go. [Yazdegerd fled to Media, where his generals tried to organize new resistance. The battle fought at Nehavand (642), south of Hamadan, put an end to their hopes. Yazdegerd sought refuge in one province after another, until at last, in 651, he was assassinated near Merv.] As the Parthians had done, some nine centuries earlier, the Arab horsemen found a political vacuum in Iran.²⁴

Afterwards, between A.D. 633 and 651, Islam came, and that was the end of classical dynasties in Persia. “The triumph of the Muslim Arabs over the Sasanian Empire was due to two main causes. First, there was the exhaustion of the Sasanian power by the long-drawn-out struggle with the Byzantine Empire. Secondly, the Arabs were united as they

had never been before by their new faith.”²⁵ “By 650 Islam was dominant and the ruling classes of Iran deposed or confined to their original feudalism, the Zoroastrian priesthood scattered,”²⁶ and were marginalized in Persia and some migrated to India. From that period up to Reza Shah’s accession to power in 1925, at least twelve dynasties ruled over Persia and each of them engraved and stamped its codification on the face of the country.²⁷

Persia, now a country in the Middle East, is situated for the most part between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and its territory has, therefore, often served in the past as a bridge for the people and tribes migrating westwards from the vast areas of central Asia and beyond, and sometimes in the reverse direction.²⁸ It fascinated many European travellers throughout the centuries, mainly English and French travellers. These travellers produced various travel accounts, which are the created body of theory and a social knowledge, in which there is a considerable material investment. The discovery of Persian remains and monuments by Europeans reflects the European economic, political, and “cultural vicissitudes [as well as] the growth of scientific knowledge”²⁹; it also shows the relation between Europe and the East.

2. 3. Persia through the European Travellers’ Gaze: Different Intentions

The accounts of early travellers are mainly concerned with the journey itself and the chief differences they observe from their own customs. These travellers with their curiosity often notice the ‘unusual’ phenomena in the exotic lands. They try to record every object in order to attract the attention of the Western readers, in Persia for instance, the ruins of Persepolis, the Zoroastrians customs, the court of the Persian kings, the natural beauties, the economic situations, and so forth. One of the priorities of these travellers was an archaeological study of Zoroastrianism. This reflects the impossibility of neutral knowledge with regard to both Zoroastrians and Europeans. Zoroastrianism is a religion and a form of knowledge that asserts its own perspective and imposes it on the people’s life. Simultaneously, the European expeditions, which investigate Zoroastrianism, originate in the desire to gain knowledge, dominated by a system of thought and values. Whether these travellers were ambassadors, archaeologists, soldiers, or amateurs, they were interested in obtaining knowledge about Persia. Through excavations in different

regions in Persia, they not only contributed to the Persian historical studies in Europe, but also provided useful insights into the history of Persia. The remnants and ancient monuments, the pre-Islamic and Islamic architecture of Persia, for instance, have figured significantly in the travel accounts for nearly four centuries; accordingly, there is a rich literature of travel by the European travellers who have visited Persia.

What I believe is that behind each expedition there lies an intention in relation to power. One of the most significant factors which has stimulated the European countries to send their ambassadors or other representatives to the foreign countries, especially Persia, bears out Karl Marx's claim that "capitalist production does not exist at all without foreign commerce" (*Capital*, Vol. II: 47). Consequently, the imperial eye/I incessantly gazes at the remotest parts of the world with an intention to find the resources and markets for its products. Ronald Sinclair in his journey to Persia, *Adventures in Persia: To India by the Back Door* (1988), explicitly mentions his intention, which is in accordance with the British manufacturers' interests:

It had all sounded so attractive when he [Jim Bradley] told me of the important group of *manufacturers in England* who wanted to send a man out to Iran *to study and report on trading conditions* there. [...] They explained that they wanted a person with experience in Persia, someone who could speak the language, to go out and visit the principal towns and *business centres* and send home *reports on market conditions and trade possibilities* in general.³⁰ [My emphasis]

To illuminate the range of European expeditions to Persia briefly, one can refer to the 1563 expedition under Thomas Alcock, George Wrenne, and Richard Cheyney; the journey undertaken by Richard Johnson, Alexander Kitchin and Arthur Edwards to Qazvin in 1565. Moreover, Arthur Edwards's journey in 1568, the commercial mission in Qazvin and Kashan during 1569—74 by Thomas Bannister and Geffroy Ducket, and John Newbury in 1580 and Ralph Fitch's attempts to find out the tractability of the overland route through Syria to the Persian Gulf during 1583—91 are examples of its commercial importance. The Sherleys' journeys through Turkey to Qazvin, in 1598, and their objective to get some group of European merchants to undertake the export of raw silk via Hormuz in order to divert this trade from more dangerous routes are also significant examples.³¹ The reports of these ambassadors, as well as the colourful presence of their Persian counterparts in the courts of Europe, began to fire the people's

imagination. For instance, in Spain, they followed the adventures of the Don Juan of Persia; in England, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson were writing about the Persian Sophy³² a sovereign of Persia. Soon, an unending caravan of ambassadors and merchants from England, France, Austria, Spain, and various German states began to arrive in Persia.

The memory of ancient Persia has never disappeared totally from the European mind, yet after the rise of Islam, Persia was isolated from the West. From the eighth century, the Caliphate of Baghdad controlled the land routes to the Mediterranean outlets and few Europeans undertook journeys beyond that city, except between *circa* 1250—1350. During that period, the Mongols, after the devastations of their invasion, established sufficient security of travel to allow the passage of European diplomats, traders and missionaries through Asia. Ambassadors from Venice reached Persia in 1471 and 1476, but the main motivation of travelling to Persia dated from the Portuguese discovery, in 1497, of the sea route to the East.

The Safavid Persia (1502–1736), during the reign of Shah Abbas the Great, rose to the height of its glory. His toleration of Christians attracted many Europeans to Persia, such as Ralph Fitch, one of the visitors in the late sixteenth century, who reported the riches of the East on his return to England in 1591, and so led to the founding of the East India Company. The death of Shah Abbas the Great brought a state of confusion in Persia. In addition to this confused situation, the fanaticism of the native population, a sense of insecurity and a threat against the Europeans and their investments, as well as the decline of affluence in Persia created fear about investing there for European capitalism. In this way, the country lost its profitability for commercial enterprises. Nevertheless, what Persia lost in commercial importance, it extensively regained in the European political interests in the East. From the beginning of the nineteenth century to the Great World Wars, Persia was a 'Great Source' for competition among the European powers, such as England, Russia, and France. It was the shortest overland route to India. The central position of Persia, astride the great trade routes between China, India and the West, solidified its continued commercial importance after the Arab conquest of the Sasanian Empire.

Persia suffered from the struggle of those great empires that tended to grasp at every potential for an outlet for their goods. For instance, neither Russia nor Britain could leave

Persia alone. Her richest and most populous provinces were easily accessible to the Russian armies from the Caucasus, while the Persian Gulf lay at the mercy of the British navy. Russia's policy was expansion of military imperialism followed by economic imperialism. British policy was governed by two motives, one directed against France and Russia, the other economic. Both Russia and Britain have sent their diplomats to Persia for political and economic purposes. The journeys undertaken by British travellers had primarily a commercial purpose, an 'object of gain,' such as the Elizabethan travellers, who tended to aim at purely materialistic ends. The stream of diplomatic missions to the Persian Court throughout the centuries brought about a great number of accounts of travel and adventure produced either by the envoys or by the people who accompanied them.

Since the travellers lived in different times and came from different countries, they followed different professions, occupations or concerns. On the basis of the discourses produced about Persia, it is possible to trace the following purposes implied in the travellers' expeditions: missionary, religious and archaeological research in Persia as one of the oldest empires of world-history. Other travellers' interests are the quests for the Romantic scene of many stories of the *Arabian Nights*, and Persian literature, as well as undiscovered natural beauties. Other purposes are diplomatic, political, commercial, economic because of silk, oil, and other mineral resources; architectural research, mostly the Iranian innovations in Islamic architecture, and ultimately strategic military purposes. Accordingly, the traveller and his travelogues are related to what Said terms as "worldliness." That is to say, the traveller and his text are "located in the world. [His text] is a cultural production, a cultural *act*, from the relations of power within which it is produced"³³; hence, both the traveller and his text are world-bounded.

In the Middle Ages, the difference between the Eastern and the Western world was mainly felt to be one of religion. In Europe, from the earliest time, the philosophers and scholars, who were concerned with the arguments about natural or revealed religion, hoped to find a non-Christian civilized society, whose laws were not based upon a revealed religion. Zoroastrianism, as the classical and official religion of three Persian classical empires, associated with the prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra c. 628—551 B.C.), attracted the attention of European scholars.³⁴ Abbé Ménégean was concerned with

Zoroastrianism in Persia and treated it as a natural, not revealed religion. Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil du Perron, who was concerned with Zoroastrianism—ten years after his return to Paris—published the *Zend-Avesta* in 1771, within which the “full nature of Zoroastrian liturgy was presented.”³⁵ His objective in travelling to Persia, as he declared, was:

[...] of going with that view to learn the ancient Persic in *Guazarate* or *Kirman*; an undertaking which would necessarily enlarge the ideas I had already conceived, concerning the origin of languages, and the several changes to which they are subject, and probably throw a light upon Oriental antiquities, which were unknown to the *Greeks* and *Romans*.³⁶

The interest that many travellers took in the monuments of ancient Persia caused them to view Zoroastrians mainly as the survivors of an empire known in Europe through classical and Biblical associative script, which they hoped would assist them in deciphering the ancient inscriptions. Travellers often mention religious customs in their books; accordingly, the research on Zoroastrians is one of the first steps undertaken by Europeans to deal with and construct a discourse of Persia based on such intentions. The travellers’ faith, however, influences their perceptions of both the people and their own religion.³⁷ They observe and gaze at Zoroastrians through their own religious lens. For instance, Tavernier, a French Protestant of Dutch extraction, sees signs of Christianity in contemporary Zoroastrian belief. Sir John Chardin, a French traveller to the Middle East and India, looks towards the ancient religion. Zoroaster persisted as a source of Chaldean astrology and magic, or, more acceptably, as instructor of Pythagoras and associated with Platonism.³⁸ The influence of Catholicism upon the travellers’ perceptions of Zoroastrianism also varied: della Valle had a humanist, more open-minded approach; F. Gabriel de Chinon displayed a missionary’s zeal to convert heathens. Anquetil du Perron, a Catholic with Jansenist sympathies, shared Chardin’s desire to trace a connection between the biblical world and other nations, but Anquetil was not immune to the influence of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.³⁹

The beginning of the seventeenth century is a high-water mark for Persia. “With the coming of the Safavids (1501-1734), the last of the great artistic phases, the inexhaustible vitality of the Iranian artistic tradition was once more demonstrated. Shah Ismael (1501-1524), Shah Tahmasp (1524-1576), and Shah Abbas I (1589-1627) presided over courts

in which artists ranked with ambassadors, one more epoch in which art was the attribute of kings and the most worthy expression of the state's power."⁴⁰ It is the period of constructing the great mosques and buildings of Islamic architecture in Persia, which attracted the attention of Europeans. It is also the period of missionary efforts in Persia by Western countries. For instance, Robert Byron points out the construction of "an Armenian cathedral at Julfa, across the river" (*RO*: 151) at Isfahan, which is the outcome of "a lot of missionary effort" (*RO*: 150); i.e., the West started various expeditions and sent missionaries all over the world, as instruments of religious conversion.

The travellers' reports provide useful insights into the history of Zoroastrian communities in Persia. Their accounts have been the source for knowledge concerning Zoroastrians and their religion since the seventeenth century. They have an important influence on the development of the Western thought about Zoroastrianism and the people who believe in it. During this period, very few Europeans travelled solely for pleasure or curiosity,⁴¹ and it was not until this time that Zoroastrians began to be noticed.⁴² Among those who wrote about Zoroastrians are Mandeville, della Valle, Tavernier, Thevenot, Chardin, Pedro Teixeira, Thomas Herbert, Adam Olearius, F.S. Manrique, F. Raphael du Mans, F. Gabriel de Chinon, André Daulier-Deslandes, Struys, John Fryer, Father Sanson, G. F. Gemelli Careri, Cornelis Le Bruyn, and T. J. Krusinski. Let us present an overview of the intentions of some of these travellers, whose accounts of Persian culture and religion entered the Western world and constructed a particular picture of Persia, mainly dealing with Zoroastrians and the ancient remains and monuments in Persepolis, Apadana and other sites.

Mandeville is the first European traveller, who mentions the Zoroastrian dialect of Yazd. He devotes two passages to Persia in *Travels*, which represents his historical, geographical, ethnological, theological, astronomical interests, and his views on precious stones, morality and drugs. His book also describes many interesting things a traveller to the East may encounter, such as the rites and religious customs different from his own country, the dazzling feasts, or a shocking custom in India such as suttee. The book is, to some extent, a "perfect microcosm of medieval popular lore."⁴³ Pietro della Valle, an Italian aristocrat, was a traveller whose interest was in antiquities and ancient history. In 1616, he travelled to Persia with his wife, and published accounts of his travels in three

volumes, the last in 1663. He visited the Zoroastrians' quarter at Isfahan and his description covered their suburb, appearance and religion. He visited Apadana, described it as a construction for religious purposes, and believed that the site must have been a sanctuary.

Thomas Herbert arrived in Persia in 1628. He visited Persepolis on his journey towards the court, as a member of an English embassy that negotiated with Shah Abbas about the Silk Road. He reports on Persepolis, as the only Achaemenid site, and describes the costumes of the Zoroastrians at Isfahan. Some Euro-centrism is visible in his remark that "kings amongst the infidels"⁴⁴ imitated the European monarchs in their use of *regalia*. His narrative is of considerable importance from a historical point of view, as representing the only detailed account available of the first English embassy to Persia. It has another and no less valuable aspect in the graphic picture of Persia and the Persians it presents during the early part of the seventeenth century. He maps Persia through describing the Persian law, costumes, weapons, religion, women, army, physicians, poetry, weddings, burials, food, liquors, feasts, horses, festivals, kings, and the like. Herbert names the objectives of his journey to Persia: "to benefit the future traveller as to furnish our modern geographical maps with names of truth (being indeed stuffed with false ones but invented); together with the farsangs or leagues (each accounted three miles English), that the true distances may be known and the Caspian placed in a better height."⁴⁵

Adam Olearius in 1637 and Fray Sebastien Manrique, a Portuguese missionary, during 1629—1643, were other travellers who visited Zoroastrians and tried to describe their behaviour, customs and appearances. Jean Francois Tavernier was an independent French merchant traveller in the East whose interest was in precious stones. Between 1630 and 1668, he made six journeys from Europe to the East, travelling through Persia and India, and further to Sumatra and Batavia. Tavernier, in his work, is primarily concerned with providing a guide for other merchant-travellers. He describes the routes and merchandise, the countries, the people's religion, the ceremonies such as a form of Baptism, marriage, death and funeral customs, the importance of fire in the Zoroastrian doctrine, pollution and purity, good and bad animals. In 1644, Father Raphael de Mans made a journey to Isfahan in the company of Tavernier. For forty years, he was the head of the Capuchin

mission. He spoke Persian and acted as a French interpreter at the court of Shah Abbas II. He also reported on the religion of Persia as Mohammedans, whereas the first religion was that of the adorers of fire or Guebres, the Zoroastrians.

Jean Chardin, another French traveller, spent nearly ten years in Persia between 1664 and 1678 and his account of the country was an important text during the century. His observations on Zoroastrians were influential. He arrived at Isfahan in 1666 and remained there collecting information with a Dutch Orientalist, Herbert de Jager, for a projected work on that city. He made a long visit to Persepolis and the nearby tombs. Among the contributions from Chardin are notes on the economic importance of cattle and flocks, the tent dwellers, the wine bottle made of goatskin, the eastern bricks, the bread-making, the use of cow-dung for fuel, eating habits, the sackcloth and silken bridles. This shows that Chardin was indeed extremely observant, but he looked through the eyes of a Bible-oriented Calvinist. He reports on the Apadana-reliefs, and publishes a large number of drawings made on the spot.

Father Sanson was a French missionary whom Louis XIV sent to Persia in 1683. His first care was to learn the appropriate languages—Armenian, Turkish and Persian. Because of his linguistic proficiency, he was posted to the Persian Court to protest at some local insults offered to missionaries at Hamadan. His report on Persia was published by order of the king in 1694. G. F. Gemelli Careri was a doctor of civil law who made journeys to Egypt, Palestine, Turkey, Persia, India, the Philippines and Mexico in 1693. He reached Isfahan in 1694, and visited the Zoroastrian quarter. In his book, he describes marriage, infant purification, tillage, food, fasts, festivals, and Zoroastrian exposure of the dead. Father Gabriel de Chinon, a missionary who had spent nearly thirty years in Persia, published an account of Zoroastrians in Lyons in 1671. His work shows an accurate observation, and description of the festivals and fasts, tradition and legends of the people, particularly the Armenian attitudes to the European missionaries. Another traveller was Jean Struys (or Strauss), a Dutch sail-maker and seaman by trade who was in Isfahan in 1671—72. John Fryer, an English surgeon, visited Persia in 1677, travelling from India, where he was employed in the East India Company. In his account, he describes briefly the Zoroastrian worship of fire. Father T. J. Krusinski, a Pole, added a

little information on Zoroastrians in Persia in his account of the Afghan invasion and occupation. He became Procurator-General of Persian Jesuit missions in 1722.

John Ussher, a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, made a direct link between Assyrian and Persepolitian sculptures. Ker Porter, a British visitor and painter at the beginning of the nineteenth century, came to Persia via Russia and was specifically commissioned by the President of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts. His accurate drawings of Persepolis show the signs of his ethnographic observations. James Morier, an English diplomat and writer with a very strong aristocratic bias, is one of the first of those nineteenth century explorers who, as a member of the British embassies to the Shah of Persia, visited Persepolis occasionally.⁴⁶ He journeyed to Persia and published *Hajji Baba of Isfahan*, a picaresque romance of Persian life, based on knowledge that he had acquired as a member of the British embassy staff at Tehran (1809–15). His books are *Journey through Persia, Armenia and Asia Minor to Constantinople* in 1812 and *Second Journey through Persia* in 1818. The picture Morier draws of Persian life in *Hajji Baba of Isfahan* is one-sided, as he was mainly concerned with court and military life and the more hypocritical sort of Mohammedan ecclesiastics. Yet Morier shows a keen insight into the particular section of the Persian life that he chooses to reproduce.

European scholars were also interested in the Eastern and Persian literature. During the eighteenth century, they knew *Arabian Nights* only through the anglicized versions and adaptations of Antoine Galland's selective and very freely rendered French translation of 1704. It was not until nearly a century later that the Orientalist Dr. Jonathan Scott used the Eastern sources directly in his *Tales, Anecdotes, and Letters from the Arabic and Persian* (1800), followed in 1811 by *The Arabian Night's Entertainment*. Scott's translation became the source of many English versions of the *Nights* and was itself reprinted in 1883.⁴⁷ Besides the translation of *Arabian Nights*, other scholarly works on the East and the Eastern literature during the latter part of the nineteenth century appeared. Therefore, Eastern culture circulated through Europe more than in the previous centuries.

Edward Granville Brown is one of the scholars who were interested in the Oriental languages and literature such as Turkish, Persian and Arabic. He had a comprehensive knowledge of Persian theology, mysticism, history and learning. He wrote *A Year*

Amongst the Persians (1893), which is, however, more than a mere record of travel, and goes far beyond the ordinary limits of such works, since, apart from its lively and entrancing descriptions of Persia and its people, it is a guide to the modern Persian literature and thought. Persia was destined to be the ideal of his life, and this is no doubt due to the superior attractions of the Persian literature, particularly the field of Sufi mysticism. His main desire was to visit the country that had given birth to Hafiz, one of the finest lyric poets of Persia, and to tread the pure Earth of Shiraz. In 1887, he was able to undertake this journey, and entered the country of his dreams. In the introductory chapter of his book, he states his intention in travelling to Persia:

I have so often been asked how I first came to occupy myself with the study of Eastern languages that I have decided to devote the opening chapter of this book to answering this question, and to describing as succinctly as possible the process by which, not without difficulty and occasional discouragement, I succeeded, ere ever I set foot in Persia, in obtaining a sufficient mastery over the Persian tongue to enable me to employ it with some facility as an instrument of conversation, and to explore with pleasure and profit the enchanted realms of its vast and varied literature.⁴⁸

Maps, drawings and sketches have often been political and military tools, documenting the conquered territories or potential areas to be taken from the enemies, spying on them and their wealth. Maps and cartography, as a style of representing spatial information or material signs in travel writing, are discourses which are related to power; i.e., the cartographers manufacture power as they create a spatial panopticon system. The maps in travel books, more than an artistic representation of exotic lands, are images that convey meanings about the spaces travelled through. The space mapped in a travel book is also a social syntax through which the text encodes cultural meaning in power relations. As an example related to such an enterprise, *The Voyage to Persia*, published by Louis Emile Duhousset (1858—60), a French Army officer, is a collection of sketches and drawings relating to Persia and some of her neighbours a hundred years ago. It is an outstanding panorama giving the scenes and views of towns, the historical monuments, costumes, of men and women, the weapons and military costumes, the musical instruments, the styles of hunting, the formal dress of men of power and courtiers. He was to enter Persia as a designer, artist, ethnographer, anthropologist and journalist, while serving as an officer and military instructor in the mission of Artillery Commander Victor-Francois Brougnant. One can also refer to Freya Stark's *The Valleys of the*

Assassins and Other Persian Travels in which “with words, she painted faraway landscapes and their exotic occupants in vivid colors, capturing the atmosphere of a place and the character of its people as few others have ever been able to do.”⁴⁹ She also made maps for British Intelligence.

According to the objectives and contents of the books of these travellers, they constructed a discourse of Persia, which focused on Persia as an ancient country with a long history, the cradle of both the human race and civilization, having Zoroastrian as its religion during the pre-Islamic period, and Islam after the Arabs conquered it between AD 633 and 651. Persepolis, Apadana, Ecbatana and other remnants and monuments illustrate the history of classical Persian empires; it is a country, which played an important role in the world trade along the Silk Road, and eventually, a land of many facilities and resources.

2. 4. Travel Writers at the Turn of the Century

During the period from 1876 to 1909, the British Empire was at a strong position; however, Russia, France and Germany were in a state of rivalry with Britain in its dominion. England had established many colonies throughout the world: India was the most well-known; parts of Africa, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Australia, Canada, the Bermudas, and South New Guinea were its other colonies. During this period, because of the disappearance of frontiers, the inquisitive, greedy Imperial eye/I was penetrating into the remotest corners of the world seeking out more foreign markets and more foreign sources of labour and natural resources. The Mediterranean region and the Middle East were no longer gazed at primarily as a tourists' attraction, the land of antiquity or the cradle of religions and civilizations, but as the land of various resources for imperial investments, and the land of oil, as drilling began in Persia in 1901, followed by the formation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1909. This new product attracted the interest of imperialism. Railroads, often financed by European investors with the objective of opening up further economic opportunities, crisscrossed both the Western and the Eastern countries. British ships driven by steam conquered the oceans, and the first automobiles slowly and noisily moved along the streets, predicting the progress of man and machine towards a golden age of technology.

In the late nineteenth century, scientific, technical, and economic innovations as well as new means of transportation, the telephone and the telegraph, made travel easier, cheaper, and safer. Commerce opened new spheres for the scientists, adventurers, explorers and for political intervention. As the British Empire stretched its military, political, and economic arm across the world, tourism—that prominent colonialist force which refashioned the economic, cultural, political and social system in the colonies—gained momentum. The British Empire made the natives of foreign lands adapt themselves to British customs and expectations; consequently, the travellers, who followed the routes of imperial developments, were able to travel freely and safely. At the same time, these travellers depended on the European outposts for comfort, provisions, and guidance. Besides the travellers, an increasing number of pleasure seekers joined those who travelled for knowledge, adventure, or business. Scientific researches greatly influenced travel writing, through the development of ethnography, anthropology, ecology, psychology, biology, botany, geography, chemistry, and entomology. Moreover, travel writing owed a debt to missionary works of the British evangelical groups who attempted to convert the ‘savages’ to Christianity. The Church sent the missionary groups around the world for both religious and economic purposes. Travel books written by missionaries most often were not religious tracts, even though doses of the Christian rhetoric formed the backbone of their books.

The nineteenth-century travellers were of various groups, such as the explorers, scientists, wealthy dilettantes, soldiers, missionaries, and clergymen. Whether they travelled in large groups or without companions, their objective was to find out about and to experience the unknown and exotic lands. Throughout their works, they described and defined these remote worlds for their European readers and participated in shaping the economic and political futures of the travelleses. Therefore, one might say the world came under the authority of the Victorian travellers. The British Empire had solidified its presence throughout the world—some colonies maintained through commerce, others by military or naval power. The early Victorian travellers’ aims were to fill in the map, to bring back whatever might be of use to Europeans, and to convey the culture and religion of the civilized to those thought of as primitive. From points of settlement, the travellers moved more deeply into the interiors of previously unknown territory and were

celebrated and often funded for their work and writing by organizations such as the Royal Asiatic Society, the Royal Geographical Society, and the Royal Archaeological Institute.

During the period of the powerful dominance of British economic, military, and political imperialism, hardly any area was free from a British—or at least a European—representative. International corporations regularly sent young men all over the world to look after business concerns; missionaries, and low-level political representatives worked to organize the British schemes and protect the imperial ambitions. Regardless of their original goals and objectives, the nineteenth-century British travel writers provided ethnographic or scientific data of great use to the burgeoning empire. Scientific researches, though done by the amateurs, became a central interest of travel—one mixed with political and economic ends. Travel writing was a natural and profitable consequence of the Victorian fascination with learning about the exotic lands, the ‘unknown,’ or the ‘Other.’ The Victorian travel books included an amalgamation of lively, sometimes humorous anecdotes; a detailed description of peoples and places; the scientific observations and discoveries; philosophizing on the role of the British Empire in world affairs; advice to future travellers through that area; and the comparisons between British culture and that of the ‘Other.’ By the Victorian period, travel writing, as a genre, had gained new conventions.⁵⁰

In the second part of the nineteenth century, the real exploration in the world was completed and until the beginning of the excavations in remote parts of the exotic lands, little information could be added to earlier descriptions and depictions of the world. Most travellers in this period did not have any scientific ambitions. They were real “tourists” in a modern sense of the word, some with more, others with less learned preparation. What they have in common in their descriptions of the exotic lands is the deep impression that the place and the ruins made on them, of which Persia is one of the best examples.⁵¹ The increased influence of the West in the nineteenth century and the discovery of the oilfields in Iran accentuated the European political and commercial expansion. The nineteenth century also brought an increasing amount of travellers’ reports on Persia. Their interests were mainly in the state of the ruins and remnants of ancient Persia.⁵²

The twentieth-century travellers and travel writers continued the rich tradition of exploration, adventure, and research established by the Victorians, motivated by many of

the same stimuli as earlier Royal Geographical Society explorers such as Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, or Isabella Bird. The Royal Geographical Society continued to support and reward travel in little-known areas such as Arabia and Persia. Mr. and Mrs. Harold Ingrams, who won a Gold Medal in 1940, and Freya Stark, the most celebrated and productive traveller and travel writer, who received a Gold Medal in 1942 for her travels and writing on Arabia during the 1930s and 1940s, lifted the veil from the remote recesses of Arabia and Persia during the twentieth century. From 1910 to 1939, however, travel was not only faster but also had acute political motivations. Alternately, religion, which had motivated earlier travellers to take part in the crusades and pilgrimages and the nineteenth-century travellers to journey to Africa and the Middle East, continued to motivate the twentieth-century traveller. I focus my argument on some outstanding travel writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who travelled to Persia with different objectives, whose accounts of Persia are different from those of the previous travel writers. They focus less than previous travellers on studying Zoroastrianism. One can trace the signs of political issues, scientific excavation of ancient Persia, studies in Islamic architecture and the impression of Persian natural beauty in the travel books of these travel writers.

2. 5. The Sykeses

Sir Percy Sykes—an English member of the Royal Geographical Society, an ambassador, an officer, a spy, and a traveller—“had a series of journeys of exploration in the most deserted and unmapped areas of eastern Persia, conducting surveys for the Government of India.”⁵³ In 1899, he sent repeatedly “long reports directly to Lord Salisbury, which were full of detailed information about his findings but were over-long and larded in high Victorian fashion with rambling references to the ancient Persian history, the travels of Marco Polo and the eastern campaigns of Alexander the Great.”⁵⁴ During 1900, he was acting as the British Consul in Kerman, southeastern Persia, where he had compiled an extensive collection of maps and notes for the Indian Army Intelligence and for the Royal Geographical Society. In 1905, the Royal Geographical Society was aiming to explore the possibilities for developing commerce between southeast Persia and India, and he found an opportunity to achieve such a goal. In spring 1905 Sykes set off with a team of

Indian surveyors on a lengthy tour of exploration south-west of Kerman, mapping and gathering information as he went. In Kerman, Sykes spent ten years acquiring an encyclopaedic knowledge of the people, language, history, geography, religion, archaeology and folklore of Persia.

In addition, Sykes was sent to northern Persia to take over the consulate, this time at Mashhad, gathering intelligence about the Russian military activity. He bequeathed to the British Museum some remarkable examples of prehistoric bronzes, tile-work and pottery, which he had found and gathered in the remotest parts of Persia. He wrote on the Persian gypsies and their music and even produced a short glossary of their secret language, as well as a short article on Persian tattooing. Accordingly, he is a traveller whose objectives accord with the British interests in Persia. Ella C. Sykes, his sister, accompanied him on her first journey from June 1894 to March 1897. Her travel books are based on her travels through Persia, Canada, and Central Asia: *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle* (1898), *The Story-Book of the Shah; or Legends of Old Persia* (1901), *Persia and Its People* (1910), and *A Home-Help in Canada* (1912). In her travel books, Ella Sykes states that the business of the empire was conducted by the middle-class families, the men employed by the government and stationed around the world and the women—their wives or sisters—often accompanying them.

The Sykeses' enterprise was to cross a vast area of Persia mainly on horseback, which Ella Sykes describes in her first book, *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle* (1898). The scenery of the land, the nature, the attractive Orient, and the "gorgeous East" fascinate and delight her, and occupy her mind; she sympathizes with the people. "I had been civilised all my days, and now I had a sense of freedom and expansion which quickened the blood and made the pulse beat high."⁵⁵ She gazes at the Orient with a British keenness while in Persia. "I took to Persia and things Persian at once and never felt better in my life than at Tehran. The climate seemed to exhilarate me in the most delightful way, and to one accustomed to English winters it was a treat that never palled, to wake up morning after morning to a world bathed in brilliant sunshine, with perhaps a covering of crisp white snow on the ground."⁵⁶ Even though she feels comfortable in the Orient, here Persia, the reader can see the traces of Britishness in her writings. Typically, she portrays the Orientals as "dirty, dishonest, and childlike."⁵⁷

2. 6. Isabella Lucy Bird

One of the most eminent and influential women travellers of the Victorian period who travelled to Persia is Isabella Lucy Bird. Her most well-known travel books grew out of the letters to her sister, Hennie. Her books, more than entertaining stories of travel and adventure, provide information of substantial use to the empire as it searched for new markets and resources. They are an essential component in the study of Victorian non-fiction prose, imperialism, and travel literature. Her first overland trip was from Baghdad to Tehran, and her second trip was from Julfa into the Bakhtiari territory of Luristan. *Journey in Persia and Kurdistan* (1988), published in two volumes, provides a collection of information, anecdotes, and personal, political, and philosophical speculation. As the narrative opens, Bird explains her preliminary purchases and research, but she expends most effort in informing her readers about Persia. She describes and represents the situations of cities with regard to their importance in the economic and geographical terms. Bird's detailed descriptions enable her to portray and visualize the scenes in a Dickensian way. She portrays those situations in the East most "unfamiliar" and "novel" to Europeans, but familiar to her after two years of Eastern travel. She gazes at the places in such a way that each sound, sign, and object reveals a meaning to her. For instance in Baghdad:

In the daytime there is a roar or hum by business, mingled with braying of asses, squeals of belligerent horses, yells of camel-drivers and muleteers, beating of drums, shouts of beggars, hoarse-toned ejaculations of fakirs, ear-splitting snatches of discordant music, and in short a chorus of sounds unfamiliar to Western ears.⁵⁸

One of the most frequented places she describes is the bazaar: "the bazaars are spacious and well stocked with European goods, especially with Manchester cottons of colours and patterns suited to Oriental taste, which love carnation red."⁵⁹ One can see the presence of imperialism in the Orient by means of its products and goods. The articles and goods in the bazaars fascinate her. "The jewelled daggers, the cloth of silver and gold, the diaphanous silk tissues, the brocaded silks, the rich embroideries, the damascened sword blades, the finer carpets, the inlaid armour, the cunning work in brass and inlaid bronze, and all the articles of *vertu* and *bric-a-brac* of real or spurious value,

are carefully concealed by their owners.”⁶⁰ Bird, as a female traveller, seems to gaze through feminine lenses:

At any hour of daylight at this season progress through the bazaars is slow. They are crowded, and almost entirely with men. It is only the poorer women who market for themselves, and in twos and threes, at certain hours of the day. In a whole afternoon, among thousands of men, I saw only five women, tall, shapeless badly-made-up bundles, carried mysteriously along, rather by high, loose, canary-yellow leather boots than by feet.⁶¹

One significant point presented in the above quotation refers to the predominance of men in the bazaar. This refers to the social and cultural structure of the East, which shows that in the East men are involved in the financial enterprises and business, whereas the women are engaged in housekeeping and taking care of children. In other words, the women are marginalized in such societies. The appearance of women is interesting to her, thus she describes them as an unfamiliar scene: “The face is covered with a thick black gauze mask, or cloth, and the head and remainder of the form with a dark blue or black sheet, which is clutched by the hand below the nose.”⁶²

She describes the people’s customs and traditions as well as their religion and one of the Shi’a professions of faith: “[at] the earlier possible period the *mamaché* pronounces in the infant’s ear the Shiah profession of faith: ‘God is God, there is but one God, and Mohammed is the Prophet of God, and Ali is the Lieutenant of God.’ A child becomes a Moslem as soon as this *Kelemah Islam* has been spoken to his ear.”⁶³ Bird describes the buildings, and tries to find the interrelationship between the designs and the natural sources, since in each place nature provides a particular design, which is imitated by the people in constructing their buildings. She shows the grandeur of Persian art: “The roofs, friezes, and even the walls of this house, like those of others of its class, have a peculiarity of beauty essentially Persian.”⁶⁴ After visiting the places, she concludes that the landscape influences the architecture of the land: “this exquisite design was taken from snow on the hillsides, which is often fashioned by a strong wind into the honeycomb pattern.”⁶⁵ She visits Isfahan and its historical buildings. Piece by piece, she describes the place and buildings and her detailed descriptions glorify the scenery. She also visits the Bakhtiari country and describes the Bakhtiaris as “savage or semi-savage

racés, who, though they descend to the warmer plains in the winter, invariably speak of mountains as ‘their country.’”⁶⁶

2. 7. Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell

Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell, an English field archaeologist, having an enduring interest in politics, was a traveller who travelled widely in the Middle East. Acquiring an extensive knowledge about the Arabs and local politics, she undertook liaison work with the Arabs for the British government in 1915. For her, the presence of various diseases in the Middle East, which affected the people’s life so critically, comprises one of the many contrasts Bell sees between the Middle Eastern and English life. Thus, she represents the Orient to the Europeans through comparing ‘us’ with ‘them.’ Her first visit to the Middle East was in 1892. The Great War interrupted her travels, but, having learned Arabic, Persian, and other languages, she ended her life working in the Middle East. Some of her mid-eastern journeys resulted in book-length studies and in letters, journals, and field notes, particularly those dealing with the independence of the Middle Eastern nations. Her letters provide much background information on her travels.

Bell went to Persia in the spring of 1892; there she focused her visit on Tehran and its environs. She presents Persia as a richly textured landscape composed of remnants of the past. Her first travel narrative, *Safar Nameh—Persian Pictures: A Book of Travel* (1894), later republished as *Persian Pictures*, recounts her journey during which she and her travelling companions travelled to Germany and Austria en route to Constantinople, Tiflis, Baku, and the Caspian Sea. In *Persian Pictures*, there is an intermingling of her feelings and her description of the landscape. She insists on seeing the land in an Oriental way as “unreal and fantastic,” or “fairly palace.” She was familiar with the history and politics of the regions she visited, and she frequently referred to the past circumstances as she wrote with what she called “the silence of an extinct world still heavy upon us.”⁶⁷

In the concluding part of *Safar Nameh*, she discusses and shows her motives for travelling. Through Bell’s frequent references to the *Arabian Nights*, and the impact of the gardens and landscapes on her, represented in *Safar Nameh*, one can trace the grandeur and visionary qualities of Persia. Even though she was not fluent in Persian when she wrote *Safar Nameh*, Bell learned the language quickly and spent time

translating the *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz* (1897). She scorns those who travel merely for re-creation (of their lives) in new settings; such people seek comfort in the unfamiliar countries by carrying luncheon baskets and liquor flasks to lighten their burdens. She characterizes other travellers as intent on covering continents merely in order to be able to enumerate all the places they have visited. By listening to the tales of the people, Bell is able to see into “the secret chambers” of the remote worlds and landscapes.

2. 8. Vita Sackville-West: Persia’s Impact

Victoria Mary (Vita) Sackville-West in *Passenger to Teheran* (1926) defines travel as “the most private of pleasures. There is no greater bore than the travel bore.”⁶⁸ She argues:

There would seem, then, to be something definitely wrong about all letters of travel, and even about books of travel, since the letters of another age, collected into library editions, may fairly claim to rank as books rather than as mere correspondence. There would seem, going a step further, to be something wrong about travel itself. Of what use is it, if we may communicate our experience neither verbally nor on paper?⁶⁹

For Sackville-West travel writing is a creative act, an “irrational passion” which takes the traveller out of his or her own country into the “unknown,” where “the wise traveller” is “perpetually surprised.”⁷⁰ Her travel books do not consist of the historical facts or discussions of local customs or cultures, nor do they denigrate the Orient; rather they are a combination of description of the country and a world of impressions, the effect of the Oriental life on her and the translation of her personal experiences.

In 1925, her husband Harold Nicolson was posted to Tehran, as British ambassador. In a letter dated 7 January 1927, he wrote about Persia that “there is the vast uniformity in space and even time: the feeling that it will all be the same colour and contours right away to China: the feeling that it was the same colour and contour five thousand years ago: that is the first background. The second background is the climate.”⁷¹ He continues, “I think it is this which has made me so sensitive to nature-sounds. Persia in effect is a great stillness: that really is its charm. And darling, how immense that charm is!”⁷² Such a view originates in both comparison and contrast between two worlds, the West and the East. Based on such a view, in the former, history is moving forward whereas in the latter it is ‘still’ and it is as if the history stops there. It was the splendour of Persia, which

motivates Sackville-West to visit both her husband and Persia in 1926 and in 1927. Her visits are the occasion for two travel books: *Passenger to Teheran* (1926) and *Twelve Days* (1928). *Passenger to Teheran* illustrates her expedition from England to Tehran via Egypt, India, and Iraq. Her narrative takes the reader from the security of England to “an unexploited country whose very name, printed on [her] luggage labels, seemed to distil a faint, far aroma in the chill air of Victoria Station.”⁷³ Sackville-West claims that her book is not an “odious [...] informative book of travel” but rather a “frankly personal” travel log, “reflecting the weaknesses, the predilections, even the sentimentalities, of the writer.”⁷⁴ She visits the sites that reflect her personal vision of what is significant about the culture and a country. What fascinates her is the timeless rhythm of everyday life: “husbandry is of all ages and all countries. Nothing dates.”⁷⁵

In *Passenger to Teheran*, Sackville-West describes the beauties of the land and the people, the peasants’ simple lifestyle and their close connection with nature. In her descriptions, she romanticizes the people’s oppressive working conditions, calling them “beasts of burden.”⁷⁶ For her the Persian desert represents a vast undomesticated space that fills her with tranquillity. As she motored with her driver across the desert and over the mountains, the past coloured the present, revealing “the secrecy of days when no traveller passed that way, but only the nomad Kurds driving their flocks.”⁷⁷ Once Sackville-West arrives at her destination, she feels that she is “no longer a traveller, but an inhabitant;”⁷⁸ accordingly, she spent her time moving and walking through the streets of Tehran, gazing and shopping at bazaars, looking for gardens, and exploring the sights surrounding the city. As she herself acknowledges, the result of her enthusiasm for what she calls “primitive labour” is an idyllic portrait of Persia—one that ignores “the physical disease and political corruption.”⁷⁹

In the mid-1920s, Sackville-West and her husband followed an old caravan trail across the forbidding mountains rising southwest of Isfahan, which becomes the subject of her second travel book, *Twelve days: An Account of a Journey across the Bakhtiari Mountains in South-western Persia* (1928). There were five Europeans, who set out on the Bakhtiari Road, Vita Sackville-West, Harold Nicolson, Gladwyn Jebb, and Copley Amory from the American Legation in Tehran, and Lionel Smith. She reflects on the lives of the nomads, the Bakhtiaris.⁸⁰ The group first travelled from Isfahan to Shalamzar,

where they met their caravan and began their long and difficult journey through the Bakhtiari Mountains. For Sackville-West, the remoteness of the land is more exciting than the journey itself. Like a travel journal, *Twelve Days* represents the group's daily progress and the problems they encounter along the way. The impact of the journey is so strong on her that she "would prefer to be a solitary, to stay in this isolated part of the world."⁸¹ This leads her to some interesting comparisons between the East and the West. At a crucial moment in the Bakhtiari country, the impact of natural beauties makes her confess:

My thoughts were washing lazily round in a sea of impressions; coming up to the surface in a series of little pictures. [...] I for one did not feel myself to be quite the same person: I felt that something had been added to me—something which I could never quite communicate to anybody else; an enrichment. It was as though my eyes could see a new colour which nobody else could see. My companions, doubtless, saw a new colour too; but it could not be precisely the same colour as mine: *that* was a personal possession, incommunicable (alas and thank God) in words.⁸²

Encountering the Bakhtiari villagers, it seems that she wants to escape from Western industrialized life: "I know, somewhere in my heart, that I want to be where no white man has ever been before, far from any place that has ever been heard of. The globe is too small and too well mapped, and the cinema too active."⁸³ She laments the loss of simplicity and purity that cannot be regained in the modern Western world. She expresses her feelings in search of purity within the purity of the Bakhtiari nature. Though the "globe is too small and too well mapped," the only way to gain the purity of nature seems to be through the works of the imagination. Surprisingly, it is as though Persia conferred on her a second chance to regain such purity. Frequently, a romantic sensation creeps into her heart and moves swiftly through her imagination; the purity and solitudes in Persia act like a trigger which brings a variety of feelings and sympathies into her heart. She points out "[to] me, remote places hold the magic which the romantic names held for Marlowe or Milton. (It is my only justification for writing books of travel)."⁸⁴ Elsewhere, she indicates "[but] I, when I say Qaleh Madrassseh, mean Qaleh Madrassseh. I mean that exact spot, whose contours I have learnt, whose clefts I have contemplated, enviously, running up into the mountains and had no leisure to explore. So far, at least, I am on solid ground. But of the effect of solitude in such a place I know no more than did Marlowe or Milton."⁸⁵

The splendour, peace, simplicity and immemorial beauty in the Persian life affect her; accordingly, to some extent she undergoes a great change after her journey to Persia; she confesses “[it] was *of Persia that I found myself thinking*; not, for once, of Persia in her natural beauty, but of Persia as the ideal state, of the opportunities of a wise and idealistic dictator [my emphasis].”⁸⁶ It is an understanding by means of encountering the ‘Other’; in Martin Buber’s words, “*ein Wiederfinden des Ich im Du*.”⁸⁷ In another place, she writes:

Thus one is left exiled at Qaleh Madrasseh with an army of facts waiting to be drilled into order. Facts,—that incongruous assortment which accumulates,—snippets of knowledge, fragments of observation, fleeting theories no sooner formed than discarded, ideas as self-contradictory as proverbs—at last one would have time to marshal all this into some sort of formation. An army indeed; and every unit as complicated as the soldier himself, as intricate and capable of as many interpretations. Personal conceit, however, suggests that one would deal successfully with the matter; so successfully that at the end of the thirty years one would emerge upon the world crying with a voice as the voice of a prophet.⁸⁸

She is a traveller who follows the route of nomads travelling from one zone to another in search of pastures for their flocks, and represents the glory and splendour of the Bakhtiari life and Country. Her primary objective is to portray the “immemorial beauty of Persia;” moreover, she wants to indicate the reasons that bring about the disappearance of such beauties. One can trace the impressions of the place, people and those “isolated instances” that “made an impression on [them] which in the swarming countries to which [the] Europeans are accustomed they would not have made.”⁸⁹ For her it is the:

[Dominant] impression [...] of isolation. [...] the solitude of nature, which draws us and holds us with a primitive, an indefensible attraction, all of us, however sophisticated we may be. And it was a double impression: of isolation and anachronism. Not only had we gone far away in distance; we had also gone far back in time. We had returned, in fact, to antiquity. We were travelling as our ancestors had travelled; [...] We learnt what the past had been like; and what the world had been like when it was still empty.⁹⁰

In Persia, oil had just been discovered and the first roads were being built. At the end of her sojourn in the Bakhtiari Mountains, the sight of the Persian oil fields shocks her, spoiling her romantic vision of a nomadic pastoral life. She points up not only the enrichment of the Persians from the oil but also the British success in their objectives, and criticizes the value of progress. She observes how Persia was on the verge of developing in a Western fashion, and this is unbearable for her. She points out the

shortages of Persia in terms of its policy and economy such as “the problem of transport,” the “absence of mechanical facilities,” the “problem of Persian trade,” shortages of “money,” and money which is “needed nevertheless for the agricultural expansion,” and the fact that “Persia is by no means a waterless country.”⁹¹ “Those who would Westernise Persia naturally take the desirability of factories and machinery for granted, but such an ambition is the negation of everything that this particular ideal state stands for.”⁹² Her attitude here is coping with for deconstruction.

Ultimately, she suggests a plan for political and social improvements in Persia, apart from the European plan of westernizing it. For her, Persia is a country of contrasts, a country in which two different communities collide, “the one weary, ignorant, and poor; the other energetic scientific, and prosperous.”⁹³ She appreciates Persia as a romantic country existing outside the twentieth century, a country made up of bustling bazaars, creative artisans, nomadic tribes, and picturesque landscapes. Persia captures her imagination in such a way that in *Twelve Days* she writes it “is an anachronism in our eyes, and therefore romantic; the double elements of space and time, geographical and chronological, necessary to romance, are thus amply satisfied.”⁹⁴

2. 9. Freya Madeline Stark

Freya Madeline Stark is a British traveller and travel writer who is noted for two dozen highly personal books in which she describes the local history and culture as well as everyday life. Many of her trips were to the remote areas in Turkey and the Middle East where few Europeans, and now fewer women, had travelled before. In *The Valleys of the Assassins and other Persian Travels* (1934), Stark establishes her style, combining practical travel advice with a commentary on the people, places, customs, and history of Persia. One of her intentions in travelling to Persia was to search for the origin of hidden treasures in the south-west of the country; i.e., “to look for the Assassin castles and the Luristan bronzes.”⁹⁵ She discovered a hitherto unknown fortress that had belonged to the ancient cult of the Assassins, a Persian sect of Shi’a Muslims that flourished in the late eleventh century. The book she writes revives an interest in Islam’s secret societies. For her attempts in re-mapping both Persia and Luristan in particular, and their cartographic

accomplishments, she was rewarded with the Royal Geographical Society's Back Grant.⁹⁶

In her travel accounts, Stark indicates the dichotomy between East and West. Her writings are the magnificent accounts of ancient kingdoms of the Middle East and move remarkably towards a contemplative consideration of the differences between a nomadic way of life and stable urbanity. She tries to "bridge" the gap between East and West as an "in-between" personality, a personality who tried to translate the East for the West. For Stark, journey is what Bacon termed *travail*, in other words, encountering hardships and dangers. During her journeys, she suffers from dysentery, malaria, measles, a weakened heart, dengue fever, and appendicitis. One of her goals in travelling to Persia is:

[T]o locate the Rock of Alamut, more correctly named Qasir Khan, a grim and shadowed place high in the mountains behind a rock defile. [...] Striven by its sinister associations, she carefully explored, measured, and recorded its position and attributes. [...] Freya took particular care to be the most meticulous in her observations. [...] More important as a contribution to science, she filled the empty spaces on His Majesty's Government's maps and corrected mistakes locating half a dozen new mountains and at least two hitherto unmarked villages. North of the Caspian Gate, through which the fabled Silk Route once passed, east of the Caucasus, through which mounted archers, Scythians and Cimmerians, had once burst over the Iranian plain, these mountains had lain virtually undisturbed in modern times—and Freya was delighted to have an opportunity to expand geographic knowledge.⁹⁷

During the 1930s, the international market was interested in collecting Neolithic works "often bearing cuneiform inscriptions from twelfth to nineteenth centuries B.C."⁹⁸ These historical remnants were found in graves in Luristan. From April 1930 until October 1931, she set out on her first exploratory journey into Luristan. There, she searched for Neolithic bronzes, offered secretly or even in respectable shops; moreover, she was determined to give properly scientific descriptions of the graves.⁹⁹ She gathered useful information about various types of graves, their locations and their typical characteristics.¹⁰⁰ Stark was the first European woman who ventured through Luristan with the objective "to keep the remembrance of something very complete, very ancient, very remote, and very beautiful, which may pass for ever from our world."¹⁰¹ During her journey, she reports on Reza Shah's reaction towards the Iranian tribes and finds the "agents of government much feared and resented; the tribesmen appeared to be disarmed"¹⁰² by Reza Shah and the "clothing reform and the settlement policy had yet to

be implemented.”¹⁰³ The clothing reform is also one of the signs Robert Byron encountered in Persia. Commenting on the “indignity of the people’s clothes” he asks, “[why] does the Shah make [people] wear those hats?” (RO: 41)¹⁰⁴ Stark returned to England with a report for the archaeologists and an enlarged and annotated map to submit to the War Office. She had provided information about unnamed and unmapped valleys and passes, which constituted “a valuable addition to European geographical knowledge of these parts of Persia.”¹⁰⁵ Her maps of Persia were important for the Royal Air Force.

Few European travellers have attempted to disguise themselves in order to enter the places that were forbidden for the Europeans in the East, such as Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia or the Islamic buildings in Persia. This quest is worthy of notice from two perspectives. In the first place, it refers to the travellers’ curiosity to enter a place and record what is hidden from their gazes. In the second place, it suggests that they want to gaze at the place not as an outsider but as an insider.

Like Burton, Stark disguised herself, took photographs from one of the Shi’a Muslim ritual Muharram procession, and sent them to *Illustrated London News* in 1933. This is an experience of gazing at the Orient not as a European woman and an outsider, but as an Oriental. For Stark the attempt to “find a link between Islamic ideas and her own culture was a stimulating exercise,” therefore, she tries to read the Koran and the Bible side by side. Her interest in travelling through the Islamic world was “to see herself as one of ‘the people of the Book’ the Bible.”¹⁰⁶ In this way, she prepared herself to be “welcomed by her Muslim friends in an important commonality.”¹⁰⁷ After her journeys to Persia and Luristan, Stark published *The Valleys of the Assassins* in 1934.

She was willing to redefine herself by encountering and entering one country, one language and one civilization from the next. In recounting her own transformation, she invites the readers to enter the exotic lands, to the verge of metaphysical questions about the philosophy and meaning of life. Besides being a travel writer, she was concerned with history, archaeology, photography, cultural studies and anthropology. Even though she supported the objectives of the British Empire, what she encountered from the beginning fascinated her. Her greatest genius, as a travel writer, is her capacity to empathize with the people she visited and view her own culture from within that of another. However, she criticizes the corruption of local peoples by capitalist interests and the exploitation of

local talent and Westernization. Stark inevitably has to view the world through the eyes of a proud Englishwoman. As a loyal citizen of the British Empire, however, and while she regretted the passing of an earlier, simpler way of life, Stark does not comment on the business of Empire in bringing about the changes into the world. She is a British traveller and remains British. She delivered her notes and measurements of Persia to the British Legation in Tehran, to “the Military Attaché who sent them to the War Office, which in turn sent them on to the Survey of India, the intelligence-gathering arm of the government of India.”¹⁰⁸

2. 10. Robert Byron

Robert Byron is a modernist travel writer, whose mind was preoccupied with travel and architecture¹⁰⁹; for him “foreign travel was [mainly a] part of an immense design of life.”¹¹⁰ Evelyn Waugh points out that Byron “used to shout when travel was mentioned.”¹¹¹ Throughout his life, as a traveller and travel writer, Byron practically modernised travel writing, infusing it with new credibility as a form appropriate for analysis and in deciphering one’s own culture and the culture of the ‘Other,’ as well as one’s Self and the ‘Other.’¹¹² Contrary to previous travel writers, who were (merely) concerned with reporting and describing the travelleses encyclopaedically, or were merely agents of imperialism, Byron is concerned with tracing the underlying motives and meanings within each culture, social structure, sign, and type of architecture, portraying them in power relations, like a Foucauldian analyst *avant la lettre*. His travel books, *The Station*, *An Essay on India*, *First Russia, then Tibet*, and *The Road to Oxiana*, are typical and especially *The Road to Oxiana* is typical of a modernist travel book, in which Byron, in Manfred Pfister’s words, appears as “his [own] semi-fictionalised alter ego.”¹¹³

I am interested to read Byron through his travel books and to define him as a modernist travel writer through the signs he observes and decodes, through the design of his books, and eventually through his gaze at the travelleses. His gaze at the culture of different lands is multi-dimensional. Seeking what other travellers were blind to see, he traces the underlying significations of the signs. Moreover, he fulfils his quest and ambition, and adds a new mode, method and insight to travel writing, observing and describing the

exotic lands. Throughout his travel books, one can trace an amalgamation of personal narration with art criticism, and cultural and political history.

Through re-appreciating the Byzantine or Islamic art and culture, in his works on Persia, India, Russia and Tibet, or even in his writings on England and Europe, Byron represents his cultural engagement fundamentally by means of his travel writings. His use of travel narrative—as a means to comment on British imperialism, to trace the underlying elements and the possibilities of signification in the master signs, to gaze upon the workings of power, and eventually to dismantle and undo the Western prevailing discourse concerning the Orient—dissociates Byron from previous travel writers and his contemporaries. In his career, Byron's innovation in the mode of travel writing reminds us of the modernist writers, who liberate their writings from the preceding conventions “by breaking open the conventional plot constructions of the nineteenth-century novel, thus releasing a stream of—apparently!—uncontrolled detail.”¹¹⁴

Byron was educated at Eton and at Merton College, Oxford, where he obtained a third class in modern history in 1925. Probably his knowledge and interests in architecture and history had been shaped through his studies in modern history as well as the influence of John Ruskin. He was a defender of the Byzantine, Islamic art, an admirer of architecture, whose cultural engagements developed fundamentally in his travel accounts. The effects of his travels abroad comprehensively broadened his knowledge and horizon of expectations of the Byzantine, Russian, Persian, Islamic, Indian, Chinese and Tibetan cultures. For him, to travel and encounter other cultures means to “enlarge [one's] experience” through “seeing things,” (*RT*: 62) as they are rather than are meant to be.

Byron was eighteen when he took his first journey abroad, in spring 1923 to Italy for five weeks. The following year he travelled to Hungary, and then, in 1925, accompanying David Henniker and Simon O'Neill, travelled through Germany, Italy and Greece. The subject of Byron's first book, *Europe in the Looking-Glass: Reflections of a Motor Drive from Grimsby to Athens* (1926) is the experiences he obtained during his travels in Europe. “The book shows Byron's attention to the crossing of borders, to the liminal, and the cultural impact of modernization, here in the form of the motorcar and speed, on culture and forms of perception.”¹¹⁵ Byron maintains that his objective in representing “the continent of which England forms a part is to further a new sense of

European Consciousness.”¹¹⁶ He argues that Europe is unknown to “most of her inhabitants, nurtured in the disastrous tradition of the armed and insular state, that they are unable to gauge the contrast between their own corporate civilization, the laborious construction of two thousand years, and the retrograde industrialism sprung up in a night on the other side of the Atlantic.”¹¹⁷

His next journey was to Mount Athos, with an objective in his mind, which, as Paul Fussell writes, “was to photograph the frescos in the churches and monasteries, and the result was Byron’s book of 1930 with Talbot Rice, *The Birth of Western Painting*, one point of which is that Giotto and El Greco constitute the connection between Byzantine and Western art.”¹¹⁸ The result of this journey is *The Station*, subtitled *Athos: Treasures and Men* (1928), and published when he was twenty-two. The book contains Byron’s experiences and the account of his travels with David Talbot Rice, Mark Ogilvie-Grant, and Gerald Reitlinger. Their journey to the “holy mountain” of Athos, the southern point of the Aktain peninsula, on the northern Aegean shore of Greece is a journey in both time and place, which displays peculiar generic characteristics of his writing. In this book, he is looking for the soul of Greece and the spirit of Byzantium.

The holy mountain, a politically autonomous, surviving site of the Byzantine civilization and of a monastic community since 881 A. D., preoccupied Byron’s mind. He finds a surviving Byzantine way of life in these mountains:

while the classical continues to suckle half the world on a voice of letters and stones, one fragment, one living articulate community of my chosen past, has been preserved, by a fabulous compound of circumstance, into the present time. Thither I travel, physically by land and water, instead of down the pages of a book or the corridors of a museum. Of the Byzantine Empire, whose life has left its impress on the Levant and whose coins were once current from London to Peking, alone, impregnable, the Holy Mountain Athos conserves both the form and the spirit. Scholar and archaeologist have gone before, will come after. Mine is the picture recorded. (S: 39)

The Station exemplifies his philosophy of cultural wholeness, and consists of his experiences during the journey, an analysis of the history of monasteries on Mount Athos, descriptions of landscapes, men, “the life, the psychology, and the art of that incredible and now almost vanished survival of another age, the Holy Mountain.”¹¹⁹

James Knox briefly mentions Byron's attitude in this book: "Robert's intention had been to contrast this world with the 'romance' of Athos,"¹²⁰ a remote world, "remote from the modern mind."¹²¹ Knox presents the ideas of different writers about the book:

The *Daily Mail* pronounced *The Station* to be 'a wholly delighted book [...] brimful of ideas', whilst the *Sketch* predicted for the author 'a big literary future.' [...] Arnold Bennett [...] began: '*The Station* reveals a travel writer of sly urbane wit and all inclusive observation, with a sense of style and refreshing vocabulary.' D.H. Lawrence gave the book a glowing review in *Vogue*, opening: 'Athos is an old place, and Mr Byron is a young man. The combination for once is *really* happy.' His writing on architecture attracted the warmest notices.¹²²

In addition, Leigh Fermor declares that the book "altered my whole itinerary and, one thing leading to another, perhaps the course of a lifetime. [...] Obviously I am under his spell; and mutatis mutandis, still am."¹²³

One of the leitmotifs in his trilogy (*An Essay on India, First Russia, then Tibet, The Road to Oxiana*) is uncovering the side of power in the East. For instance, *The Road to Oxiana* shows Reza Shah's dictatorship that brought the whole country under his Iron Heel, and created a new regimen; *First Russia, then Tibet* describes Bolshevised Russia; and *An Essay on India* depicts British colonial hegemony, which transformed Indian identity and created a new identity through colonization. Another recurrent motif in his books is the achievement of Byzantine, Islamic and Christian art.

In *An Essay on India* (1931), Byron appears as a social and political critic, and exemplifies the consequences of British authority over Indian identity. Simultaneously, it is a turning point in changing travel accounts into a cultural and political critique. It is based on Byron's sojourn of just eight months, between August 1929 and April 1930, during which he journeyed through the Indian subcontinent from Karachi to Calcutta, from Sikkim to Sri Lanka, making a study of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian architectures. This travel book is a trial, a test, an analysis and an essay on the British superiority complex. As James Knox shows, Byron's aim "was to cure the English of their sense of racial superiority. Given that westernization was inevitable, Robert argued, the English must treat educated Indians as their equals. Only then would Western ideas be properly assimilated for the benefit of India."¹²⁴ Byron comes to feel that British rule is implanting a new codification and identity in India against which the Indians could hardly react. He attempts to contextualise the process of colonialism and its aftermath in

India through analysing the different strata of social structure. Christopher Sykes,¹²⁵ in *Four Studies in Loyalty*, considers it one of “the best books written on any Asiatic subject by an Englishman.” The racism and bigotry of the British colonial rulers in India disturbed Byron; therefore, the book is “an appeal to common sense against the racialism of English convention in India; though the book contains much else, this is its constant and important theme.”¹²⁶ Sykes remarks that this is a book, which has to be read by “all young men and women,”¹²⁷ who decide to go to India for the first time, since it is a “description of what awaits them.”¹²⁸

My sojourn in India, [writes Byron] was a period of acute intellectual strain. The strain began as I stepped from an aeroplane at Karachi on August 4th, 1929; and it by no means ended when I boarded a P & O at Bombay on April 4th, 1930. I went to India, primarily in order to reach Tibet, secondarily because Lord Beaverbrook gave me a ticket. I had never felt, nor wished to feel, any interest in India. Now, having returned from India, I am burdened with thoughts that give me no peace and have destroyed the harmony of my former way of life. (*EI*: 4)

James Knox argues that the book mirrors “the conflict between the English and the Indians,” which is a “struggle between the materialism of the West and the spirituality of the East.”¹²⁹ By illuminating the problem in India, Byron “[unveils] a double portrait of the Indians and the English. In his study of the Indian character, he applied his theory of *genius loci*, calculating the visual effect of landscape upon the activity of its inhabitants. In the fragmented landscape of India, drained of all colour and form by the noonday sun, Robert discovered ‘the genius of integration’, which had foiled all previous attempts by conquerors to impose political order on India.”¹³⁰ It is from this background that Byron opens up different aspects of the Indian social life, disfigured by British colonial power.

He made his next journey to Russia with Sykes for six weeks in 1931-1932 when he was twenty-six years old, and the result of this journey is the first half of *First Russia, then Tibet*. The book represents Byron’s experiences of travel and its meaning. In the preface “The Traveller’s Confession,” he expresses his perception of travel as a form of knowledge, a quest for “both instruction and improvement” (*RT*: 9). He continues that among men of all types, “the travelling species” is distinguished from others by a quest for “an organic harmony between all matter and all activity, whose discovery is the purpose of their lives” (*RT*: 9). Concerning both Russia and Tibet, he proposes two extremes, “whose very diversity is symbolic”; Russia is touched by the

industrial revolution and “the moral influence” of this revolution, “has found its grim apotheosis,” (*RT*: 10) whereas Tibet remains untouched, where such influence is unknown. The gap, Byron shows, between these two worlds pictures Russia as “a sort of caricature of the West; art, politics, and thought alike have derived from Europe and can only be understood in terms of their European ancestry” (*RT*: 11). By contrast, “Tibet has no relation to the West whatsoever; the historical faculty becomes superfluous; observation consists in the assimilation of pure novelty” (*RT*: 11). The Tibetan journey is more like exploring than travelling. For Byron

travel must rank with the more serious forms of endeavour. Admittedly there are other ways of making the world’s acquaintance. But the traveller is a slave to his senses; his grasp of a fact can only be complete when reinforced by sensory evidence; he can know the world, in fact, only when he sees, hears, and smells it. (*RT*: 10)

In this book as elsewhere Byron’s best observations focus on architecture, which he considers as the master sign in each culture. In his chapter “The Russian Aesthetic,” Byron presents a description of how the earliest expressions are—literally—an enlargement of the Byzantine models, around which consequently “grew walls and towers of Tartar pattern, to form the local Kremlins and fortified monasteries” (*RT*: 57).

For Byron the “function of art is to be beautiful,” it “is decorative.”¹³¹ He believes that “art should be based upon accurate depiction of the objective world and that any attempt to do otherwise resulted in ‘distorted form and distorted formlessness.’”¹³² He argues that art has to represent the harmonious arrangement of particular perceptions, and the architectural style is a symptom of such a large harmonious cultural unity, and concludes that among all other genres, travel books can affirm the value of personal knowledge. The harmonious combination of substances, forms, contents, objects, signs and environment is at the core of his theory of artistic creation; moreover, in architecture the combination of the above elements with the prevailing power gives meaning to the buildings. In short, the sign does not exist in isolation and apart from the gestalt and harmonious combination of various parts. More precisely, like Ruskin, Byron believes that the creation and beauty of an architecture lie in relation to the “laws of natural forms,”¹³³ and its beauty is the result of a harmony, which stems from the “adaptations of those [elements] which are commonest in the external creation.”¹³⁴

Paul Fussell remarks, “[what] *Ulysses* is to the novel between the wars and what *The Waste Land* is to poetry, *The Road to Oxiana* is to the travel book.”¹³⁵ Fussell’s argument conclusively evidences that “its method is theirs: as if obsessed with frontiers and fragmentations.”¹³⁶ He continues that the book juxtaposes its various rhetorical materials into a “sort of collage of news clippings, public signs and notices, letters, bureaucratic documents like *fiches*, diary entries, learned dissertations in art history, essays on current politics, and, most winningly, at least 20 comic dialogues—some of them virtually playlets—of impressive finish and point.”¹³⁷ For Christopher Sykes, the book is “a masterpiece: a little classic of art history, of humanism and travel”¹³⁸; similarly, Bruce Chatwin comments that “anyone who reads around the travel books of the thirties must, in the end, conclude,” that it “is a masterpiece,” a “work of genius,” a “sacred text.”¹³⁹

Likewise, Manfred Pfister considers the book as a modernist text, and argues that for travellers of modern times the first step in dissociating themselves from the traditional way of representing the travelleses is to “modernise [...] themselves—by imitating and emulating avant-garde art.”¹⁴⁰ One can see the influence of Proust on Byron, who reads Proust’s book during his journey to Persia. Even though Byron tries to detach his diary from such an influence, he writes in his diary, “I have been reading Proust for the last three days (and begin to observe the infection of uncontrolled detail creeping into this diary)” (*RO*: 269). As Pfister argues, Byron had to “transform that rag-bag or omnium-gatherum of information that the travelogue used to be into an intellectually more coherent and an aesthetically more controlled structure.”¹⁴¹ He did so, and dissociated himself from “factual objectivity and encyclopaedic information.”¹⁴² Sykes’s remark that during the three years between the journey and its publication, Byron decided to rewrite it, is worthy of note. Sykes states that all the non-English conversations are Byron’s invention. Byron, in Pfister’s words, modernises his book by “revisions”, “selection”, “condensation” and “highlighting of pointed contrast,” and gives it “an open-endedness that leaves interpretation and judgement to the reader.”¹⁴³

Fussell states that Byron wanted to “locate and, define the preceding masculine, vigorous tradition later largely effaced by the pretty, dreamy, and in his view epicene and decadent art of Isfahan and Shiraz.”¹⁴⁴ Byron’s journey to Persia has

another important objective, that of presenting and exposing Persian Islamic architecture. His attempt in illuminating Persian architecture is another version of his favourite contrast, the one between Byzantine beauty and Classical prettiness, only now the enemy is not the sentimental schoolmasters of Eton and Oxford: it is “the Omar Khayyám fiends,”¹⁴⁵ as he named them.

Even though Christopher Sykes, Paul Fussell, Bruce Chatwin, Christoph Bode,¹⁴⁶ Manfred Pfister and other critics stress the quest for the origin of Islamic architecture, *The Road to Oxiana* contains something more. It is notable that Byron presents the evidence for a possible thesis relating to power. The book is about a route, the beaten track, from Alexander the Great onward, the Silk Road, Oxiana, the underlying factors in architectural construction, Reza Shah’s dictatorship, the Westernization of Persia, an analysis of social structure, art history and introduces a new insight in the process of gazing at the travellers. More to the point, he introduces a Barthesian gaze (*avant la lettre*) to travellers to regard the East anew and represent it to the world in a manner contrary to the previous travellers. Furthermore, the book mythologizes these topoi, and in turn, the Persian art and architecture mythologize Byron.

“Crossing into Persia,” writes James Knox in *A Biography of Robert Byron* (2003), “Robert felt, in contrast to the Arab world, as though he had returned to a European civilization. His only criticism was the squalor of the clothes and in particular ‘the detestable Pahlavi cap insisted on by the Shah’.”¹⁴⁷ Somewhere else, he quotes Byron: “I have arrived in Persia [...] as a person might arrive in England who confused the identities of Edward I & Edward VII. It is humiliating.”¹⁴⁸

Concerning the impact of Persian art on neighbouring countries as well as the West, Chatwin argues that the West did not influence the artistic achievements of Persia and Afghanistan, but it was the cross-fertilization with the cultures of the nomadic peoples from Central Asia which had its impact on the Persian and Afghan architecture. He infers that “once Byron gets to Iran, his search for the origins of Islamic architecture really gets under way. But to construct, out of stone and brick and tile, a prose that will not only be readable but carry the reader to a pitch of excitement requires talents of the highest calibre. This is Byron’s achievement.”¹⁴⁹ Ultimately, in *The Road to Oxiana*, Byron represents Persia as a country of many ambiguities, greatness, a country with and

without inferiority complexes, in Sykes' words, "a piece of Europe which has fallen into Islam,"¹⁵⁰ and a country whose history, culture and masculinity—manifested in pre-Islamic and Islamic architectures—dismantles Western discourse concerning the Orient. This dimension of Byron's writing differentiates and dissociates him from the previous travel writers who constructed Persia through their books.