

# *Ex Oriente Lux: Eastern Religions,* Western Writers

**Harry Oldmeadow**

## **Introduction**

In the early nineteenth century Hegel remarked that;

[w]ithout being known too well, [India] has existed for millennia in the imagination of the Europeans as a wonderland. Its fame, which it has always had with regard to its treasures, both its natural ones, and, in particular, its wisdom, has lured men there.<sup>1</sup>

Eusebius relates the time-honoured anecdote that Socrates himself was visited in Athens by an Indian who asked him about the nature of his philosophising.<sup>2</sup> India is mentioned a good deal in the classical literature from Herodotus onwards and we know that ancient philosophers and theologians such as Pythagoras, Diogenes, Plotinus, and Clement took a close interest in the learning of their Eastern counterparts. We remember that Alexander the Great's entourage in his Eastern campaigns included several distinguished philosophers, historians and writers wishing to learn more about the intellectual and spiritual life of the Eastern barbarians, and we are told that Alexander himself conversed with the gymnosophists, as the Greeks called them; the naked sages of India.<sup>3</sup>

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the eminent Indian philosopher and first President of India, has written of the West's attraction to "the glamour of the exotic" and has remarked that "[t]he East has ever been a romantic puzzle to the West, the home of adventures like those of the Arabian Nights, the abode of magic, the land of heart's desire..."<sup>4</sup> Michel Le Bris has characterised the East as it exists in the European imagination as;

[t]hat Elsewhere, that yearned for realm where it was supposed that a man might get rid of the burden of self, that land outside time and

---

Harry Oldmeadow is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Coordinator of the Religion and Spirituality Studies Program at La Trobe University Bendigo.

<sup>1</sup> Hegel quoted in Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 251.

space, thought of as being at once a place of wandering and a place of homecoming.<sup>5</sup>

But, of course, this is only one facet of a very complex phenomenon. At least since the time of the classical historians and playwrights the East has also been depicted not only as exotic, mysterious, and alluring, but as sinister, dark, and threatening. Stephen Batchelor has put the matter in psychological terms:

In the European imagination Asia came to stand for something both distant and unknown yet also to be feared. As the colonizing powers came to identify themselves with order, reason and power, so the colonized East became perceived as chaotic, irrational and weak. In psychological terms, the East became a cipher for the Western unconscious, the repository of all that is dark, unacknowledged, feminine, sensual, repressed and liable to eruption.<sup>6</sup>

Then too, there is another persistent strain in European attitudes, one typified by the frankly contemptuous remarks of the colonial administrator and historian, Thomas Babbington Macaulay. None of us will be unfamiliar with his characterisation of Indians as “lesser breeds without the law” even if we be unaware of the provenance of that deeply offensive phrase. Perhaps less well-known, but no less characteristic, was his dismissal of Hinduism as a web of “monstrous superstitions” and of the ancient Sanskrit scriptures as “less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England.”<sup>7</sup>

The history of intellectual and cultural contact between West and East is complex. Here we are concerned with the ways in which imaginative and speculative writers have engaged in a dialogue with Eastern spirituality in the relatively recent past; roughly the last two centuries. One might approach an investigation of the place of the East in the recent European literary and philosophical imagination in any number of ways. One might, for instance, organise the inquiry around the impact of particular Asian religious traditions, or around specific national cultures in the West. Or again our approach might be through a theoretical schema such as we find in Edward Said’s widely-celebrated *Orientalism* (1978), in which he argued that the Orient was a “system of ideological fictions” whose purpose was and is to legitimise Western cultural and political superiority, and that the Western understanding

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1994), p. 234.

<sup>7</sup> Macaulay quoted in Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 73. See also Eric Sharpe, *The Universal Gita: Western Images of the Bhagavadgita* (London: Duckworth, 1985), p.17.

of the East – “Orientalism” – has grown out of “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony.”<sup>8</sup> For current purposes I will isolate five groups of writers who exhibited a close and serious interest in Eastern philosophy and spirituality: the German and English Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the American Transcendentalists; modernist poets and novelists of the early twentieth century; a group of “neo-Vedantins” and perennialists who congregated on the American West Coast in the 1930s; and finally several writers from those cultural perturbations of the 1950s and 1960s, the Beat movement and the emergent ‘counter-culture’. The discernment of various intellectual and spiritual influences will offer some glimpses into a Western cultural transformation arising out of the encounter with the East.

### **The German and English Romantics**

The Enlightenment *philosophes*, who fall outside our immediate purview, had been much attracted to the Chinese civilisation. Many aspects of Chinese thought and culture had become well known in Western Europe, largely through the Jesuit missionaries. Writers like Voltaire, Diderot, Helvetius, Leibniz and David Hume extolled the virtues of Chinese civilisation, particularly Confucianism, which they understood as a rationally-based and humanistic system of social ethics. So widespread was the interest in and enthusiasm for things Chinese that we might speak of a wave of Sinophilia, if not Sinomania, flowing over Western Europe, particularly France, in the first half of the eighteenth century. However, late in the century the European gaze shifted from China to India.

The beginnings of a serious and informed intellectual interest in the philosophic and religious thought of India can be tied to several specific events in the late eighteenth century: the founding in the 1780s of the Asiatic Society of Bengal by the remarkable William Jones, lawyer, linguist, poet, and scholar; the publication of the first journal of Oriental studies, *Asiatic Researches*; Charles Wilkins’ 1785 translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a book “which was to exercise enormous influence on the mind of Europe and America”<sup>9</sup> and followed in 1801 by Duperron’s Latin translation from the Persian of a number of Upanishads as *Oupnek’hat*; the rapid emergence of the first generation of Indologists amongst whom we may mention Jones, Wilkins and Thomas

---

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 321, 325. I have elaborated a critique of Said’s position in ‘Debating Orientalism’, *Australian Religion Studies Review*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2005), pp. 133-150.

<sup>9</sup> Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, p. 10.

Colebrook, precursors of the great nineteenth century philologists and scholars such as Max Müller.

Among the German Romantics in whom the Eastern scriptures ignited an intense, if sometimes temporary, excitement were Herder, Goethe, Schelling, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Schleiermacher, Schiller, Novalis, and both Schlegels; a veritable roll call of German Romanticism! Herder was amongst the first of the Romantics to “conscript the Orient in pursuit of the goals of Romanticism.”<sup>10</sup> “O holy land [of India], I salute thee, thou source of all music, thou voice of the heart”, he wrote, and, “Behold the East – cradle of the human race, of human emotion, of all religion.”<sup>11</sup> Many of the German Romantics lauded the Hindu scriptures, particularly the *Upanishads*; Schelling, for instance, asserted that the “sacred texts of the Indians” were superior to *The Bible*. In England we can discern various Oriental interests and themes in the work of Southey, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and De Quincey, though in some cases the interest was once-removed, mediated by the German Idealists. However, these interests sometimes went quite deep; Shelley’s exposition of Vedantic philosophy in *Adonais* might be adduced as an example. Said, in somewhat lurid language, refers to “the virtual epidemic of Orientalia affecting almost every major poet, essayist and philosopher of the period.”<sup>12</sup>

What was the excitement all about? The East in general and India in particular became a site where several Romantic interests could happily converge: the interest of the early Indologists in the origins of various European and Indian languages, and the claim that these may have had a common genesis, became intertwined with new and burgeoning Romantic conceptions about national and cultural identity, conceptions paralleled in a strange way by the affirmation of a universal humanity whose lineaments could just as easily be read in the ancient Hindu Scriptures as in the Judaeo-Christian heritage or in classical Greece. Several German Romantics believed that the origins of civilisation itself were to be found in India. Following Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, for instance, claimed that, “[t]he primary source of all intellectual development – in a word the whole human culture – is unquestionably to be found in the traditions of the East.”<sup>13</sup> Under Schlegel’s linguistic and anthropological theories Germanic culture could be traced back to ancient India: this was, in part, a reaction against a classicism “indelibly

---

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 65.

associated with France.”<sup>14</sup> We might also note in passing that it was Schlegel who coined the term ‘Oriental Renaissance’ to describe the contemporary efflorescence of European interest in matters Eastern, and who was responsible for the second translation of the *Gita* into a European language, in this case Latin.<sup>15</sup> Schlegel also offers us one instance of a recurrent existential pattern, the immersion in Eastern thought and spirituality followed by a return to one’s own religious tradition, marked in his case by a late conversion to Catholicism. By way of an aside we might also note that the younger Schlegel, August Wilhelm, occupied the first chair in Indology at a German university, Bonn.

Romantic philosophers found the monistic teachings of the *Upanishads* to be in close harmony with their own Idealist beliefs, and their repudiation of the materialistic and mechanistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. Indian values and ideas concerning the unity of all life forms and the world-soul could also be seen to validate Romantic ideas about “the transcendental wholeness and fundamentally spiritual essence of the natural world.”<sup>16</sup> As Schlegel claimed, “[i]n the Orient we must seek the highest Romanticism.”<sup>17</sup> Some of the Romantics, Blake and Novalis amongst them, nurtured ideas about “a single God for all mankind” and about a universal essence to be found at heart of all the great mythological and religious traditions, an idea later popularised under the term ‘the perennial philosophy’.

Let us look a little more closely at the Eastern engagements of Arthur Schopenhauer. His principal work, *The World as Will and Representation*, first appeared in 1818 before Schopenhauer was exposed to Indian influences. But it was not until its reappearance in 1844, now densely textured with Indian references, that it really exerted its influence on European intellectual life. Its impact on Wagner and Nietzsche is well-known. Schopenhauer had studied under Fichte and Schleiermacher at university in Berlin but the paramount influence was Kant. On Schopenhauer’s desk in his study stood two figures: a bust of Kant and a statue of the Buddha.<sup>18</sup> Schopenhauer, at age twenty-five, was given a copy of Duperron’s *Oupnek’hat*. It was a revelation to him: “the most profitable and elevating reading which... is possible in the world. It has been the solace of my life, and will be the solace of my death.”<sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer subsequently embarked on the collection and study of such Asian texts as had

---

<sup>14</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Batchelor, *Awakening of the West*, p. 252, and Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, Clarke, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Batchelor, *Awakening of the West*, p. 252. See also Said, *Orientalism*, p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> Batchelor, *Awakening of the West*, p. 255.

<sup>19</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 68.

been translated into European languages, claiming that “Sanskrit literature will be no less influential for our time than Greek literature was in the 15th century for the Renaissance.”<sup>20</sup>

Schopenhauer believed India was “the land of the most ancient and the most pristine wisdom”<sup>21</sup> from whence could be traced many currents within European civilisation, Christianity included. He subscribed to the widely held Romantic belief that Christianity “had Indian blood in its veins” and claimed, “Christianity taught only what the whole of Asia knew already long before and even better.” For this reason he believed that Christianity would never take root in India: “the ancient wisdom of the human race” he stated, “will not be supplanted by the events in Galilee. On the contrary, Indian wisdom flows back to Europe, and will produce fundamental changes in our knowledge and thought.”<sup>22</sup>

Schopenhauer also affirmed the idea of the underlying unity of the world’s great religious and philosophical traditions: “in general,” he wrote, “the sages of all times have always said the same.”<sup>23</sup> Like many other Romantics, he found in the Eastern Scriptures validation of his own idealist, anti-rationalist agenda but he also discovered in Buddhism resonances with his own particular psychological and ethical interests. The ethical ideal of compassion and the metaphysic of emptiness struck a deep chord in Schopenhauer who was one of the first Europeans to seriously investigate Buddhism as a coherent philosophical system. He can be seen as a transitional figure in the movement of interest away from Hinduism towards Buddhism in the mid-nineteenth century. As Wilhelm Halbfass has observed;

he showed an unprecedented readiness to integrate Indian ideas into his own European thinking and self-understanding, and to utilize them for the illustration, articulation and clarification of his own teachings and problems. With this, he combined a radical critique of some of the most fundamental presuppositions of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, such as notions of a personal God, the uniqueness of the human individual and the meaning of history, as well as the modern Western belief in the powers of the intellect, rationality, planning and progress.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Batchelor, *Awakening of the West*, p. 255.

<sup>21</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 111.

<sup>24</sup> Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 120. For a detailed account of the affinities and discontinuities between Schopenhauer’s thought and Buddhism, see Peter Abelsen,

### The American Transcendentalists

Soon after the appearance of the revised edition of *The World as Will and Representation*, in the winter of 1846 and on the other side of the Atlantic, Henry David Thoreau watched a group of Irishmen (whom he called “Hyperboreans”!) carve massive blocks of ice out of Walden pond, ice bound for the southern states and for India. Their labours sparked in Thoreau’s imagination another scene;

[t]hus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells in the root of the tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.<sup>25</sup>

One recalls Blake’s meetings with Old Testament prophets in the backstreets of London. Thoreau, like the other American Transcendentalists, met with ancient India in her scriptures and in his own imagination, never travelling far outside his native New England.

Like the German Romantics, the New Englanders derived much of their knowledge of India from the heroic labours of the early Orientalists. William Emerson for instance, liberal Bostonian cleric and father of Ralph Waldo, was an avid reader of *Asiatic Researches*, which he covered with extensive annotations.<sup>26</sup> Thoreau’s first encounter with an Eastern text was in Emerson’s library; the text was Jones’s *Laws of Manu* which, said Thoreau, “comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had been swept unobstructed over the

---

‘Schopenhauer and Buddhism’, *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 43 (1993), pp. 255-278.

<sup>25</sup> From ‘Walden’ in *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Viking Press, 1964), pp. 538-539.

<sup>26</sup> Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), p. 56.

plains of Hindustan.<sup>27</sup> The *Gita*, which Thoreau read under the trees every morning at Walden, had only arrived in Concord in 1843, Wilkins' translation given to Emerson as a gift. Let us glance at the Eastern enthusiasms of the three key imaginative writers in American Transcendentalism: Emerson, Thoreau and Walt Whitman. We might, by way of shorthand, describe their interests as metaphysical, practical and poetic respectively.

For Emerson the Hindu scriptures in particular were a mine of metaphysical and philosophical insights which corroborated and sometimes shaped his own emergent philosophy, underpinned by the idea of the universal world-soul and the underlying unity of God, man and nature for which he found plentiful Indian sanctions. "We lie in the lap of an immense intelligence," he wrote, "which makes us organs of its activity and receivers of its truth."<sup>28</sup> Emerson's enthusiasm for Eastern philosophy and spirituality was more or less restricted to Hinduism and its primary Scriptures: the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *Gita*. The latter, he confided to his journal, was;

the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered over and disposed of the same questions which exercise us.<sup>29</sup>

A Hindu imprint is clearly evident in the poems 'Brahma' and 'Hamatreya', and in essays such as 'Fate', 'Plato', 'The Over-Soul', 'Illusions' and 'Immortality'. The first four lines of 'Brahma', for instance, are almost a paraphrase of Krishna's words to Arjuna in the *Gita*:

If the red slayer thinks he slays,  
Or if the slain thinks he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again

Emerson's attitude to Buddhism oscillated between the ambivalent and the hostile. In particular, what he understood as the Buddhist idea of *nirvana* was repugnant to him. The idea of annihilation, he wrote, froze him with its "icy light";

---

<sup>27</sup> Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 58. On Emerson's engagement with Hindu doctrines see S. Nagarajan, 'Emerson and Advaita: Some Comparisons and Contrasts', *American Transcendental Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1989), pp. 325-336; Russell Goodman, 'East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth Century America: Emerson and Hinduism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 51, no. 4 (1990), pp. 625-645; Guido Ferrando, 'Emerson and the East' in *Vedanta for Modern Man*, ed. Christopher Isherwood (New York: New American Library, 1972), pp. 351-356.

<sup>29</sup> Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, p. 24.

This remorseless Buddhism lies all around, threatening with death and night... Every thought, every enterprise, every sentiment, has its ruin in this horrid Infinite which circles us and awaits our dropping into it.<sup>30</sup>

In another journal entry, the “Sage of Concord” summarised Buddhism as “Winter. Night. Sleep.”<sup>31</sup>

Thoreau, the “Yankee Diogenes” as some of his contemporaries called him, was less interested in metaphysical speculation and more concerned with living a simple, spiritual life. He was much more enthusiastic about Buddhism whilst he shared Emerson’s enthusiasm for the *Gita* of which he wrote, “the reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagavat-Geeta.”<sup>32</sup> Thoreau adopted as his motto *Ex Oriente Lux* – “Light comes from the East.” In the “Ethnical Scriptures” column of *Dial*, the principal organ of the Transcendentalists, Thoreau presented his own translation (from Eugene Burnouf’s French) of the *Lotus Sutra*, one of the great texts of the Mahayana. The principal lesson Thoreau drew from the Sutra was the necessity for sustained and disciplined meditation, soon put into effect during his sojourn at Walden. His temperament was of a much more contemplative turn than Emerson’s. Earlier, in 1841 he wrote in his journal that;

one may discover the root of the Hindoo religion in his own private history, when, in the silent intervals of the day or the night, he does sometimes inflict on himself like austerities with a stern satisfaction.<sup>33</sup>

As Rick Fields has remarked, Thoreau was perhaps the first American to explore “the nontheistic mode of contemplation which is the distinguishing mark of Buddhism.”<sup>34</sup> His friend Moncure Conway compared Thoreau with the ascetics of the Indian forests;

---

<sup>30</sup> Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 60. In recent years there have been several attempts to find some affinities between Emerson’s thought and sensibility and Zen Buddhism; see Stephen Morris, ‘Beyond Christianity: Transcendentalism and Zen’, *The Eastern Buddhist*, NS, vol. 24, no. 2 (1991), pp. 33-68; and John Rudy, ‘Engaging the Void: Emerson’s Essay on Experience and the Zen Experience of Self-Emptying’, *The Eastern Buddhist*, NS, vol. 26, no.1, (1993), pp. 101-125.

<sup>32</sup> Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, pp. 62-63.

[l]ike the pious Yogi, so long motionless while gazing on the sun that knotty plants encircled his neck and the cast snake-skin his loins, and the birds built their nests on his shoulders, this poet and naturalist, by equal consecration, became a part of field and forest.<sup>35</sup>

Emerson once famously remarked that Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was "a mixture of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *New York Herald*," the latter being a somewhat yellowish rag of the day. Whitman himself said that he had absorbed "the ancient Hindu poems" as well as some of the cardinal texts of the West, in preparation for his *magnum opus*. Fields describes the poetic process in Whitman as a kind of "ecstatic eclecticism," borne out by passages such as this, from Whitman's "Song of Myself":

My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,  
Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern,  
Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years,  
Waiting repose from oracles, honoring the gods, saluting the sun,  
Making a fetish of the first rock or stump, powowing with the sticks  
in the circle of obis,  
Helping the lama or Brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols,  
Dancing through the streets in a phallic procession, rapt and austere  
in the woods a gymnosophist,  
Drinking mead from the skull-cap, to Shastas and Vedas admirant  
minding the Koran.<sup>36</sup>

More reminiscences of Blake and anticipations of Ginsberg! In one of his later works, *Passage to India*, Whitman traces a journey not "to lands and seas alone" but to "primal thought... Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions."<sup>37</sup>

## The Modernists

Before turning our attention to two groups of inter-war writers we must briefly catalogue several key developments between the time of the Transcendentalists and the Great War, which promoted the dissemination of Eastern influences: the growth of a cluster of Indological disciplines in European universities and the prodigious scholarship of figures such as Max Müller and Paul Deussen; the popularising of Eastern mythology and teachings by figures such as Edwin

---

<sup>35</sup> Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 64. On the impact of Buddhism on both Thoreau's asceticism and his thought see Alan Hodder, "'Ex Oriente Lux': Thoreau's Ecstasies and Hindu Texts", *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 86, no. 4 (1993), pp. 403-438.

<sup>36</sup> Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 65-66.

<sup>37</sup> Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 66.

Arnold, Paul Carus and Lafcadio Hearn; the proliferation of Eastern texts available in reputable European translations; the remarkable growth of the Theosophical Society in four continents and the popularity of “occult” teachings apparently derived from Eastern sources, where one may mention such formidable figures as Madame Blavatsky, Alexandra David-Neel, Walter Evans-Wentz and George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. The World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 introduced to the West three figures who were to have a lasting impact: the charismatic Swami Vivekananda, apostle of a new universal religion based on ancient Hindu sources; Anagarika Dharmapala, first of many Theravadin teachers in the West; and Shoyen Shaku who inaugurated a long line of Zen Masters who would have a mesmeric effect on Western seekers.<sup>38</sup> Mention should also be made of Shoyen Shaku’s pupil who was later to become the single most important figure in the popularisation of Zen in the West, Daisetz T. Suzuki.

The two groups of writers whom we can, roughly, locate in the inter-war period, are the modernist poets and the neo-Vedantins. To understand the appeal of Eastern cultural forms and religio-philosophical ideas in this period we must take account of the cultural crisis that engulfed the European intelligentsia. The epochal event, of course, was the Great War but the seeds of the crisis go back at least to the mid-nineteenth century when various subterranean fissures in the European psyche were making themselves felt: one need only muster the names of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire and Nietzsche, each of whom registered some of those profound inner disturbances which were to culminate in the barbarisms of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup>

Oriental motifs and images, both visual and literary, abound in the work of the *fin-de-siècle* European *avant-garde*. As J.J. Clarke has observed,

Orientalism... helped to give expression and substance to a deep sense of cultural crisis and to loss of faith in the West’s idea of progress through scientific rationalism, and to a need for new modes of representation. Responding to the cultural crisis at the turn of the century, modernism meant, in essence, the demand for a new and purified consciousness, one that could replace the discredited tastes and conventions of the Victorian period.<sup>40</sup>

Two modernist poets, Yeats and Eliot, furnish us with representative cases.

---

<sup>38</sup> See Eric Ziolkowski, ‘The Literary Bearing of Chicago’s World’s Parliament of Religions’, *The Eastern Buddhist*, NS, vol. 26, no. 1, (1993), pp. 10-25.

<sup>39</sup> See George Steiner’s provocative thesis in *In Bluebeard’s Castle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

<sup>40</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 101.

The influences on Yeats' thought and poetry were many; Celtic mythology, neo-Platonism, Blake, Swedenborg amongst the more conspicuous. But Yeats also derived sustenance from the East. In 1887 he joined the recently founded Theosophical Society in London, through which he was introduced to *Advaita*, the non-dualistic metaphysical teaching of the Vedanta. He found in Vedanta a corroboration of his own rejection of all forms of philosophical dualism. In the Hindu scriptures he found "an alliance between body and soul [which] our theology rejects" as well as the "the mind's direct apprehension of the truth, above all antinomies."<sup>41</sup> He was powerfully attracted by the *Upanishads* and collaborated with Swami Purohit on a translation. Under Ezra Pound's influence he became a fervent admirer of the Japanese *Noh* plays, and through D.T. Suzuki's writings an enthusiast of Zen Buddhism which, in its ability to annihilate all intellectual abstractions, he came to regard as the apex of Eastern wisdom.<sup>42</sup> We can note in passing that Pound's *Cantos* exhibit strong Oriental influences derived from his study and translation of Chinese poetry and philosophy. Following the American Orientalist Ernest Fenellosa, Pound also became entranced by the expressive possibilities of the pictographic Chinese script, charmingly describing his own idiosyncratic poetic exploitation of Chinese characters as "listening to incense."<sup>43</sup>

Like Eliot, Yeats was convinced by his studies of Eastern sapiential traditions that Indian wisdom was more accommodating than modern Western philosophy to the "multidimensionality of Truth."<sup>44</sup> Sankaran Ravindran has argued that Yeats' work can be understood as a steady growth in the understanding of the Indian conception of life as a drama played out between the self (the egoic personality) and the Self (*atman*). Other distinctively Indian ideas about *karma*, transmigration, the four stages of life and the interdependence of the inner and outer worlds also find expression, often veiled, in Yeats' poetry and in his later prose works.<sup>45</sup>

In 1911 T.S. Eliot embarked on three years intensive postgraduate study at Harvard of Sanskrit, Indian philosophy, Pali and the religious thought of

---

<sup>41</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Edwardes, *East-West Passage: The Travel of Ideas and Inventions between Asia and the Western World* (London: Cassell, 1971), p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Sankaran Ravindran, *W.B. Yeats and Indian Tradition* (Delhi: Konark, 1990), p. vii.

<sup>45</sup> See Bruce Wilson, "'From Mirror to Mirror': Yeats and Eastern Thought", *Comparative Literature*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1982), pp. 28-46.

China and Japan.<sup>46</sup> This immersion left a lasting mark, both on his own spiritual development and on his poetic vision and method. Although Eliot summed up the effect of his Indological studies as “enlightened mystification”<sup>47</sup> the impact was sufficiently serious for him to consider, at the time of composing *The Wasteland*, becoming a Buddhist, before committing himself to Anglo-Catholicism.<sup>48</sup> On his own testimony it can be argued that Eliot’s eventual religious affiliation grew out of his early Indian studies, which helped him to escape the intellectual prejudices of his own milieu, a not unfamiliar pattern of spiritual growth.<sup>49</sup>

Eastern themes, motifs and allusions are to be found throughout Eliot’s work but particularly in his poetic masterpieces, *The Wasteland* and *Four Quartets*. The Buddha’s ‘Fire Sermon’, the eighth chapter of the *Gita*, and several *Upanishads* figure prominently. Critics have argued about the effectiveness of Eliot’s use of Eastern imagery and scriptural allusions but there is no doubt that they contribute significantly to a sharply distinctive method and poetic vision. Eliot himself explicitly acknowledged his poetic debt to “Indian thought and sensibility.”<sup>50</sup> The impact of Buddhism is most evident in *Four Quartets*, which is pervaded by the premier doctrines of impermanence and suffering, whilst Eliot’s treatment of the central theme of time and eternity bears a strong Eastern inflection.<sup>51</sup> We might also note that Eliot’s practice of synthesising themes from Greek, Hindu and Buddhist as well as Christian sources testifies to his belief in a mystical experience which is of neither East nor West and which transcends religious forms – a characteristically though not exclusively Eastern notion. But Eliot was no New Age eclectic: his well-known insistence on the intimate relationship of culture and religion, and on the necessity of the particularities of tradition precluded any sentimental notion of a “distillation” of the “essence” of different religions

---

<sup>46</sup> Details of these studies can be found in J. Perl and A. Tuck, ‘The hidden advantage of tradition: the significance of T.S. Eliot’s Indic studies’, *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 35, no. 2, (1985), pp. 115ff.

<sup>47</sup> Eliot quoted in Perl and Tuck, ‘The hidden advantage of tradition’, p. 127.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Spender, ‘Remembering Eliot’, in *T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Alan Tate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> See Perl and Tuck, ‘The hidden advantage of tradition’, p. 115.

<sup>50</sup> From *Christianity and Culture* (1949), quoted in Perl and Tuck, ‘The hidden advantage of tradition’, p. 127n.

<sup>51</sup> The most detailed discussion of the impact of the Eastern Scriptures on Eliot’s poetry is in Harold McCarthy, ‘T.S. Eliot and Buddhism’, *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1952), pp. 31-55. See also Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, pp.132-135.

such as might lead to a new “universal” religion. He thoroughly disapproved of those Western appropriations of Eastern religion that jettisoned “hagiology, rites and customs.”<sup>52</sup>

In the context of the growing European familiarity with the cultural heritage of the Far East, mention should be made of the pioneering work done by Arthur Waley, a decidedly eccentric Englishman who never visited the East but who achieved a prodigious feat in translating many Chinese and Japanese classics; *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1918), *The No Plays of Japan* (1923), *The Tale of Genji* in six volumes (1923-33), *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* (1928), *The Analects of Confucius* (1938) and *Monkey* (1942). Waley also produced commentaries on Chinese painting, Taoist and Confucian philosophy and Chinese shamanism.<sup>53</sup> Another slightly later linguist, translator and commentator who exercised a significant influence in mid-century was R.H. Blythe who moved mid-life to Japan in 1940, and spent the rest of his life there. The best-known of his works is *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*.<sup>54</sup> Let us also note another group of writers who showed some interest in Eastern spirituality in their literary creations, the novelists of the Raj of whom three stand out; Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster and Somerset Maugham. The principal texts are *Kim* (1908), *A Passage to India* (1924) and *The Razor's Edge* (1949), each of which offers a peculiar blend of provincial English prejudices and genuine insights into the confrontation of cultures.<sup>55</sup>

### **The California Vedantins**

Another constellation of writers appeared in California in the 1930s; the dominant figures here are Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood whilst the bit players include Romain Rolland and Gerald Heard. Although they share

---

<sup>52</sup> Perl and Tuck, ‘The hidden advantage of tradition’, p. 131n.

<sup>53</sup> See Ivan Morris (ed.), *Madly Singing in the Rain: An Appreciation and Anthology of Arthur Waley* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970). See also Alison Waley, *A Half of Two Lives* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1982).

<sup>54</sup> See Robert Aitken, ‘Remembering R. H. Blythe’, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol. 7, no. 3, (1998), pp. 22-25, and Timothy Ferris, ‘Past Present’, *The Nation*, April 30th, 1990, p. 609.

<sup>55</sup> For some recent critical discussion which takes account of the fictional representations of Indian philosophy and spirituality see Richard Cronin, ‘The Indian English Novel: *Kim* and *Midnight's Children*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, (1987), pp. 201-213; K.J. Phillips, ‘Hindu Avatars, Moslem Martyrs, and Primitive Dying Gods in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 15, no.1 (1988), pp. 121-140.

many interests and enthusiasms with the figures whom we have already encountered, these writers are primarily of interest in their attempts to propagate the “perennial philosophy”, the foundations of which they believed were most clearly discerned in the Vedanta. They were all influenced, one way or another, by the universalist strain in the neo-Hindu movements variously associated with such figures as Vivekananda, Tagore, Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan.

Huxley is best known in the West for the dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932) but the work that bears the heaviest Eastern impress is the later Utopian fiction, *Island* (1962). From an early age Huxley was deeply interested in Eastern religion and philosophy. He made a close study of the work of such Orientalists as Edward Conze, Heinrich Zimmer and D.T. Suzuki, as well as of the great scriptures and spiritual classics of the East. In mid-life, in the late 1930s, Huxley moved to California where he became closely associated with the Vedanta Centre and, with Isherwood and Heard, edited the magazine *Vedanta and the West*. These writers were convinced that many of the ills of the modern West could be remedied by Eastern values and ideas, most particularly the Vedanta which Vivekananda, patron saint of the American neo-Vedantins, had so eloquently championed at the World Parliament of Religions. Their ideas, along with those of various Hindu gurus with whom they were associated, are on display in two anthologies, edited by Isherwood, which first appeared in the 1940s and have remained in print ever since: *Vedanta for Modern Man* (1945) and *Vedanta for the Western World* (1948).<sup>56</sup>

Isherwood’s reputation as a novelist is in well-deserved decline, although interest in him as a “personality” does not seem to have abated; note the widespread interest in his interminable diaries! However Isherwood did perform one honourable service for which he deserves our lasting gratitude: his biography of the remarkable Ramakrishna, along with Ramana Maharshi one of the few indubitable Indian saints and sages amidst the veritable plague of so-called swamis, gurus, “enlightened masters”, “maharishis”, “bhagvans” and the like of recent times. *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (1965),<sup>57</sup> whilst not without a hagiographical strain, is informative, judicious and sensible as well as being finely-attuned to Ramakrishna’s spiritual genius. An earlier biographer of the *Paramahansa* was the French writer Romain Rolland whose

---

<sup>56</sup> *Vedanta for Modern Man*, ed. Christopher Isherwood (New York: New American Library, 1972); *Vedanta for the Western World*, ed. Christopher Isherwood (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968).

<sup>57</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1974).

*Life of Ramakrishna* (1929) introduced the Bengali saint to a wider European audience. Rolland also produced one of the early Western appreciations of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, by far the most significant work to emerge from the Californian coterie was Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946).<sup>59</sup> The work was an anthology of quotations drawn from the world's sacred texts, strung together by Huxley's commentary which attempts to identify what he rather clumsily calls "the Highest Common Factor" to be found in the world's religions. There is no doubting the intelligence, learning and good will that Huxley brought to this undertaking, but his vision of the perennial philosophy is seriously marred by all manner of disabling modern prejudices and assumptions. To give but one example: for all his disquiet about the scientific ideology of the modern West he himself succumbs to it over and over again.<sup>60</sup> We must also sharply distinguish Huxley from a group to whom we can turn for a much more authoritative explication of the *sophia perennis* as it finds expression in the great religious and sapiential traditions of both East and West as well as in the primal mythologies from around the globe. I refer to the "traditionalists" or "perennialists" in whose vanguard we find René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon, each of whom has played a distinctive role in reanimating the timeless wisdom.

Before closing the door on the interwar years we should touch on the work of another writer who only achieved widespread renown after World War II, the shadowy figure of Herman Hesse. Like many others who developed a serious interest in Eastern religion and philosophy, Hesse was the son of missionaries who had spent many years in the East. He grew up in a milieu saturated with mementoes of the Orient, some of them lovingly described in his autobiographical sketches.<sup>61</sup> Hesse made several visits to the East, not entirely

---

<sup>58</sup> Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1929), and *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being* (New York: Century, 1924). For Somerset Maugham's account of his meeting with Ramana see *Points of View* (London: Heinemann, 1958), pp. 56-93.

<sup>59</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974)

<sup>60</sup> For a critique of Huxley's idiosyncratic understanding of the perennial philosophy, see K.S. Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000), pp. 158-160.

<sup>61</sup> See particularly 'Childhood of the Magician' (1923) and 'Life Story Briefly Told' (1925) in *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Theodore Ziolkowski (London: Picador, 1975).

happy experiences,<sup>62</sup> but retained throughout his life an abiding interest in Eastern spirituality and in a synthesis of religious ideas from East and West. Also central to his intellectual and creative projects was the attempt to affirm and demonstrate the underlying unity of all the branches of the human race. Although Hesse was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature largely for his last novel, *The Glass Bead Game* (1943), the zenith of his acclamation was probably the counter-cultural enthusiasm for his novels among the more serious-minded hippies of the late 1960s. In particular, *Steppenwolf* (1927) in which the European sense of anxiety and cultural location is dramatically rendered, and *Siddhartha* (1922) where Hesse attempted a distillation of what he had learned of Eastern spirituality mingled with what he found most valuable in his own pietistic Protestant background.

### **Beats and Hippies**

The Beat movement of the 1950s drew on many different cultural streams: the Romantic poets, American transcendentalism, black musical idioms, and European existentialism. Among their Eastern sources, Japanese Zen was pre-eminent but the Beats also evinced a serious interest in aspects of Buddhism at large, Hinduism and Taoism. By the early 1960s when the Beat movement was apparently dying of media hype and before the hippies had appeared, there were also signs of a budding interest in some of the more arcane aspects of Eastern traditions, most notably perhaps the convergence of psychedelic experimentation and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.<sup>63</sup> Huxley's earlier experiences with mescaline anticipated the counter-cultural preoccupation with consciousness-altering drugs: *The Doors of Perception* became one of the canonical countercultural texts along with the *Tao Te Ching*, Hesse's *Siddhartha* and various other books of dubious provenance, perhaps most notably Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan series.

There were also, in the post-war years, those *litterateurs* who travelled to the East in search of spiritual nutriments but who returned with their hunger unassuaged or who, worse, came to the view that the vaunted spiritual treasures of the Orient were, at best, a mirage, at worst a fraud perpetrated by tricksters who preyed on Western gullibility. One of the more interesting of this type was Arthur Koestler who visited India and Japan in the 1950s, and in *The Lotus and*

---

<sup>62</sup> See Ralph Freedman, *Herman Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), pp. 149-156, and Hesse's 'Remembrance of India' (1916).

<sup>63</sup> See Tony Schwartz, *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), chapter 1, and Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (London: Faber, 1969), chapters 4 and 5.

*the Robot* (1960) reported his finding that both countries were “spiritually sicker, more estranged from a living faith than the West.”<sup>64</sup> Shortly after his return from Japan he also published an excoriating attack on D.T. Suzuki and his work, accusing Zen in general and Suzuki in particular of being woolly-minded, irrational, amoral, hypocritical and crypto-fascistic. We do not have time to assess Koestler’s case here, nor to attend to Suzuki’s response. However, something of the flavour of Koestler’s admonitions can be tasted in a passage such as this: “By virtue of its anti-rationality and amorality, Zen always held a fascination for a category of people in whom brutishness combines with pseudo-mysticism, from Samurai to Kamikaze to beatnik.” Or in his assertion that “It is time for the Professor to shut up and for [the] Western intelligentsia to recognize contemporary Zen as one of the sick jokes, slightly gangrened, which are always fashionable in ages of anxiety.”<sup>65</sup> These fulminations are salutary reminders that not all Western encounters with Eastern spirituality have been rewarded with edifying results.<sup>66</sup> Nor was everyone impressed by those Western writers who became self-styled champions of Eastern spirituality. William Burroughs, for instance, wrote in a letter to Jack Kerouac;

I have seen nothing from those California Vedantists but a lot of horse shit, and I denounce them without cavil, as a pack of pathetic frauds. Convinced of their own line to be sure, thereby adding self-deception to their other failings.<sup>67</sup>

The outlandish and iconoclastic aspects of the Beats has, until recently, rather obscured what was in many instances a deeply serious and transformative engagement with Eastern spirituality. Orgiastic sexual escapades, monster drug

---

<sup>64</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Lotus and the Robot* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), p. 276.

<sup>65</sup> Passages from Arthur Koestler, ‘Neither Lotus nor Robot’, *Encounter*, vol. 16 (February 1960) quoted in Larry Fader, ‘Arthur Koestler’s Critique of D.T. Suzuki’s Interpretation of Zen’, *The Eastern Buddhist*, NS, 13:2 (1980), pp. 54, 56. In *The Lotus and the Robot* Koestler had characterized Zen as “a web of absurd solemnities,” see p. 233.

<sup>66</sup> In recent years there has been considerable attention paid to the links between various types of ‘Orientalism’ and European fascism, uncovering the Nazi affiliations of such figures as Heinrich Harrer and the Herrigals. See Donald Lopez Jr, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995). See also Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), chapter 14.

<sup>67</sup> Letter, 18 August 1954, in *The Letters of William S. Burroughs 1945-1959*, ed. Oliver Harris (London: Picador, 1993), p. 226.

binges, disreputable life-styles, Ginsberg's 'Howl', alcoholism, fear and loathing in the suburbs, Burroughs' bizarre killing of his wife, strange happenings of all manner and kind; these are some of the Beat motifs foregrounded in the public perception. But there was also serious intent. Allen Ginsberg recently summed up the Beat agenda this way:

[w]hat we were proposing was some new sense of spiritual consciousness. We were interested in non-violence, sexual freedom, the exploration of psychedelic drugs and sensitivity... We were interested in Eastern thought and meditation. We had quite an open heart and open mind.<sup>68</sup>

We need not look very deeply into the Beat movement to find evidence of sincere commitments to Eastern teachings and practices. A few examples: Gary Snyder spent the best part of ten years in a Zen monastery in Japan; over a period of several years Jack Kerouac made a sustained study of Eastern religious texts, translated Buddhist scriptures from French into English, attempted to live like a Buddhist monk and wrote an unpublished biography of the Buddha; Phillip Whalen eventually became an ordained Zen monk; Allen Ginsberg took the Three Refuges and devoted much of his exuberant energy to *dharma* work over the last twenty-five years of his life. Here too we find, perhaps for the first time, a significant engagement with Buddhism by women writers such as Diane di Prima, Joanne Kryger, Lenore Kandel and Anne Waldman who, with Ginsberg and by invitation from Chögyam Trungpa, established the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute, a magnet for all manner of counter-cultural types in the 1970s and beyond. Many of the Beats as well as countercultural pop gurus such as Alan Watts made pilgrimages to the East, to visit holy sites, to take teachings, to live the monastic life.<sup>69</sup>

On one level one might suppose that a good deal of the Beat/counter-cultural infatuation with the exotic, the 'oriental', the 'mystical' and 'magical' was indeed of a sentimental and fashionable order. Doubtless, there was a good deal of counterfeit spirituality peddled by false *gurus*, by charlatans and hucksters, as there is today under the canopy of New Age-ism. But, no question, the interest in Eastern spirituality met some deep yearning for a

---

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Henry Tischler, 'Allen Ginsberg – Journals Mid-Fifties: 1954-1958', at <http://www.authorsspeak.com/ginsberg>. Tischler's interview with Ginsberg took place on July 24th, 1996 and appeared on this website, which was accessed in 1998. The website no longer exists.

<sup>69</sup> For some account of the various encounters of the Beats with Eastern religions see Carole Tonkinson (ed.), *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995).

*vision of reality* deeper, richer, more adequate, more attuned to the fullness of human experience, than the impoverished worldview offered by a scientifically-grounded humanism.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen, this involvement in Eastern spirituality was not without precedent; nor was it either ephemeral or trivial and, indeed, it is still bearing fruit. The adherence of a rapidly growing and highly significant portion of the Western intelligentsia – artists, writers, philosophers, social activists prominently – to Eastern religious forms (most notably from the Tibetan and Japanese branches of Buddhism), and the assimilation of Asian modes of spiritual experience and cultural expression into Western forms, is one of the more remarkable cultural metamorphoses of the late twentieth century, one as yet barely recognised let alone understood. More particularly, the impact of the Tibetan diaspora on the West, especially the United States, demands more serious and sustained attention.