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Dawn of Modernity in Nationalist Shanghai: Intellectual and Cultural Responses, 1927-1937

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THE DUAL MAN: IMPERSONATION AND PERFORMANCE IN THE HIJAZ

Cameron Hu

“A Persian, is he? Most amazing! However can anybody be a Persian?”
Baron de Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*

INTRODUCTION

Tradition holds that Caliph Umar (r. 644 – 652) first expelled Christians and Jews from the Hijaz – the northwestern expanse of the Arabian Peninsula – as the area became increasingly understood as Islam’s holy land. His decree, which cited the Prophet Muhammad’s imperative that “No two religions must remain in the land of the Arabs,”¹ has remained in place, apparently uninterrupted, to the present (it is now perpetuated by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). Though official records are scant, it appears that the ban on non-Muslims was rigorously and violently enforced; accounts abound of the extraordinary punishments dealt to Christians found in violation of the sanctity of the Hijaz. *Christians in Mecca*, a summary of expeditions to Mecca published in 1909, suggested that “no infraction of this decree, once brought to light, has had other than tragic consequences.”² Its author intoned that “scarcely a pilgrimage takes place without some persons being put to death as intruded Christians.”³ Indeed, John Fryer Keane, British sailor and entrant to Mecca in the late nineteenth century, heard of three Englishmen held “with iron collars round their necks chained among the hills,”⁴ and the Persian pilgrim Hossein Kazamzadeh noted that “Christians who do dare enter these forbidden places run the risk of being assassinated.”⁵

Yet despite the peril posed, a small number of Europeans appear to have visited Mecca and Medina between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶ The few extant accounts are those of sailors, captured at sea and sold into slavery, who accompanied their masters on the pilgrimage.⁷ Enslavement, however traumatic, made possible their entrance to the Hijaz. Such Europeans were exempted from Umar’s prohibition as servants to Muslims, or otherwise claim to have been forcibly converted to Islam. Yet in the nineteenth century, amidst the withering of the Ottoman Empire and heightened

European presence in North Africa and the Middle East, several travelers recast the Hijaz as an intentional destination, a site for exploration and scrutiny. Several travelers endeavored to investigate the Meccan Holy Land in person, assuming simultaneously the mantles of adventurer, amateur geographer, ethnographer, and explorer. In order to negotiate their prohibition from the Hijaz, they seized upon impersonation; forgoing conversion, they masqueraded as “eastern” natives and Muslims from birth.

The present essay suggests several points of approach for the interpretation of this peculiar phenomenon. First, it holds that impersonation must be approached as dual performance, an act projected as much toward Europe and Christianity as it was toward the Muslims after whom the explorer modeled himself. It then proceeds to describe what exactly this dual performance conveyed: to the extent that every performance is a discourse, it engaged questions of mastery, sovereignty, epistemology, and empire, and gestured at essential ideas about the Muslims, Christians, and their delimitation.

VICTORIANS, EXPLORERS, AND THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Four travel narratives compose the basis of this study: John Louis Burckhardt’s *Travels in Arabia*, Richard Burton’s *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, John Keane’s *Six Months in Meccah*, and Eldon Rutter’s *The Holy Cities of Arabia*. This selection deserves justification. Though the history of Europeans in Mecca spans some five hundred years, the spate of covert journeys in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the Hijaz was quite unprecedented, and might therefore be understood as something like a period-specific cultural phenomenon. The narratives selected span, in roughly twenty-five-year intervals, the entirety of that age of expeditions to the Hijaz, the first having been published in 1829, the last in 1928. They appear, at least anecdotally, the most popular of their kind, and therefore one might reasonably situate these narratives in dialogue with contemporaneous European cultural, intellectual, and religious practices, and, by extension, consider these narratives with regard of two temporally coincidental phenomena, the Victorian Era and the expansion of European influence in the Middle East.

John Lewis Burckhardt was widely believed to be the first Christian to enter Mecca (although several writers, scattered over four centuries, appear to have reached the Hijaz ahead of Burckhardt) and his expedition was thus regarded as the standard by which other journeys to Mecca and Medina were measured.⁸ A highly educated Swiss-British Orientalist, he was an

early affiliate of the African Association, the predecessor of Britain's Royal Geographical Society, and the minutes of its annual meeting report that Burckhardt had begun to practice "the manners of traveling mahomedans"⁹ as early as 1810. Posing as Sheikh Ibrahim ibn Abdullah – a learned Arab of ambiguous origin – Burckhardt arrived in the Jeddah, a port city of the Hijaz, in July of 1814. He traveled to Mecca and remained there through the month of the pilgrimage, visiting Medina shortly thereafter. There he contracted a fever and, after several months of incapacitating illness, Burckhardt returned to Cairo. Burckhardt's journey lasted fifteen months, and its effect on his health initiated the decline of his illustrious career in exploration.¹⁰

Sir Richard Burton, Burckhardt's immediate successor and admirer, visited Mecca and Medina in 1851 as Shaikh Hajj Abdullah, a wandering Persian darwaysh. Burton was in fact a former captain in East India Company's army who had served in India and there became a proficient speaker of Persian and Arabic, as well as several other languages. Burton's journey to the Hijaz was extraordinarily well publicized – his narrative went through several printings – and it launched a career in exploration; he later traveled to North and Central Africa and the American West, and was knighted for his exploits.

Less biographical information is available about the two remaining subjects of this study: John Fryer Keane (who arrived in Mecca in 1977) and Eldon Rutter (1925), likely because neither traveler's narrative contained the valuable scholarly matter present in Burckhardt's *Travels*, and because neither Keane nor Rutter ever amassed celebrity approaching that of Burton. Keane, who traveled as Mohammed Amin, was an English sailor who had spent the previous nine years aboard ships with primarily Muslim crews. Unlike Burckhardt and Burton, he had no formal education.¹¹ Rutter was a young Englishman who had lived amongst Arab-Muslim immigrants while a soldier posted in the Malay states.¹² He traveled to Cairo and the Hijaz as Ahmad, a Syrian pilgrim from Damascus.

The four travelers chosen were both the product and perpetuators of a unique fascination with Middle East. In contrast, the *Arabian Nights*, for example, enjoyed nearly unparalleled popularity in the nineteenth century,¹³ appearing in several translations and hundreds of printings, and reference to the tales was widespread in Victorian literature. Scholarly works on Arab figures and literature also multiplied in both quantity and quality in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The figures assessed here were not exempt from this fixation on the Orient. For example, *The Geographical Journal* reports that Rutter – who was a child at the turn of the twentieth century – "began very early in life to take a particular interest in books on Arabia and Syria."¹⁵

Likewise, Richard Burton's wife Isabel, who also delighted in posing as an Arab, recalled in her autobiography: "I was very enthusiastic about gypsies, Bedawin Arabs, and especially about a wild and lawless life."¹⁶

Expeditions to Mecca perhaps represent the apogee of this widespread fixation. The Victorian image of the Middle East was inseparable from Islam, the region's dominant religion, and as Islam's historical center, Mecca could only have represented to Victorians the ultimate target of their fascination.

PERFORMANCE AND THE INVENTION OF RISK

In the first pages of his *Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah*, Richard Burton submitted the motives for his excursion. Noting the "fatalities which of late years have befallen sundry soldier-travelers in the East,"¹⁷ Burton remarked that "What remained but for me to prove, by trial, that what might be perilous to others was safe to me? The 'Experimentum Cruciz' was a visit to Al-Hijaz, at once the most difficult and the most dangerous point by which a European can enter Arabia." Burton recognized the Hijaz as a famed and fame-making crucible, and he was not the first to do so. Burckhardt, often regarded as the most sincerely scholastic of the Meccan adventurers, nonetheless anticipated Burton's strategy. "My exploits," he wrote to an acquaintance, "are base and degrading because they oblige me almost exclusively to mix and live for many years with whatever is infamous, abject, and wretched in human nature... it is true, I hope to wrest a wreath from the hands of fame."¹⁸

Echoes of Burckhardt and Burton are apparent throughout John F. Keane's *Autobiography*, in which he remarked that "I had performed the fearfully risky pilgrimage to Mecca with but one purpose: and that was by performing a feat to bring my name forward as a capable traveler, it would stand me in good stead as a recommendation for the support and means I should require [for future explorations]."¹⁹ The pervasiveness of this approach of the Hijaz – as presenting both a "risky" trial and a means toward renown – tenders precise demands to any discussion of the expeditions.

Keane's concise approximation of the pilgrimage as a "feat" renders these concerns with particular clarity, revealing two ideas foundational to the explorers' project. First, "feat" implies an audience. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, by the mid-nineteenth century, the term could indicate "an exceptional or noteworthy act or achievement" and a "surprising trick," concepts that necessarily demand witnesses (someone, after all, must attend an event in order to deem it noteworthy). Acknowledgement of

observation is evident in Burton's will to "prove" himself, and Burckhardt's hesitant pursuit of "fame": both efforts anticipated, projected, and relied upon the presence of spectators.²⁰ It seems appropriate, therefore, to interpret the expeditions as well as accounts thereof as self-conscious *performances*, somehow existing publicly from the very moment of their conception. It follows that we must attend specifically to the gestures they directed at their intended audience, a nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century British reading public. It stands to reason that as a means to celebrity, these narratives were deliberately assembled to interact in some way or other; thus they are indicative of a broader cultural moment, rather than isolated recordings.

Second, Keane's "feat" referred specifically to the "fearfully risky pilgrimage," and as such his spectacular performance was focused upon the very risk that the Hijaz contained and posed to the explorer. Indeed, it is for this reason that Burton mythologized the Hijaz as "the most dangerous point" of entry to Arabia, and Burckhardt populated it with a cast of untouchables. The Meccan feat – with the Hijaz as its theatre – consisted largely in exposing oneself to risk.

In any case, the intended function of their journeys was confirmed by the authors' peers; contemporaneous materials suggest a consensus on the capacity of the Hijaz to create a reputation. For example, *The Geographical Journal* – the primary periodical of England's Royal Geographical Society – offered the following assessment of Eldon Rutter's *The Holy Cities of Arabia*:

Who is Eldon Rutter? It is surprising for those who have for decades been acquainted with the geographic and political history of the Middle East, that one whose name had never been so much as mentioned, should have stepped thus unannounced onto the stage of Arabian travel, with such a finished and absorbing tale to tell.²¹

The author's language need hardly be parsed. The conceptual affinity between traveler and performer glares in Rutter's location on a "stage," and his possession of a "finished and absorbing tale." Moreover, the emphasis on Rutter's identity – "Who is Eldon Rutter?" – attests quite literally to the link between name-making and expedition. The author's surprise at Rutter's anonymity likewise hints toward an extant pantheon of Arabian travelers.

Isabel Burton's "Preface to the Memorial Edition" of *Pilgrimage* –

a reflection published some forty years after her husband's travels – confirmed the basic position that risk occupied in the valuation of his travels: “There are Holy Shrines of the Moslem world in the far-away Desert, where no white man, European, or Christian, could enter (save as a Moslem), or even approach, without certain death.”²² In Isabel Burton's assessment, the import and novelty of Burton's work – in his completion of the Hajj – was located in Burton's capacity to engage and transcend verified risk.

Yet this passage also introduces the tight entanglement of impersonation with risk, and by extension, its central position within the performance of the pilgrimage at large. It was only “as a Moslem,” Isabel Burton continued, that one might safely approach the Hijaz.²³ How to retain, then, one's status as white, Christian, and European, and enter the Hijaz? Impersonation appears to have been the solution, and it therefore constituted much of the performance: it was by impersonation that risk was in fact invented, maintained, and eventually negated. That is, impersonation permitted one to first enter the Hijaz whilst internally, and to one's audience, white, European and Christian. And yet such disguise necessarily generated the variety of risk – of discovery and unmasking – to which the Hijaz exposed the explorer.

Indeed, Burckhardt's impersonation was basic to the appeal of his journey. Particularly telling is a profile from 1967 in *Saudi Aramco World*, a popular audience periodical, which summarized his travails as follows: “Burckhardt passed three months in the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medinah posing as a beggar. Not once during his travels was he unmasked as an imposter, so perfect was his knowledge of the language, the religion and the customs of the people.”²⁴ Such summaries recast Burton's narrative entirely as an account of disguise. Yet the primacy of impersonation to exploration is explicit in Eldon Rutter's unpublished manuscript, “Damascus to Hail.” Asserting the necessity of impersonation, he contended that “All important traveling in Arabia by Europeans has been in the nature of an escape.”²⁵

The emphasis on impersonation is made more significant by the considerable ambiguity that exists over its practicality and necessity. Though banned from the Hijaz on pain of death, a Christian had two options if he wished to proceed nonetheless: he could pose as an Arab, yes, but he could also formally swear belief in Islam, and thus visit Mecca as a recent convert. Yet the latter option, despite negating much of the journey's risk, was virtually ignored. Why would explorers assume new and precarious identities, construct elaborate personal histories, and subject themselves to the possibility of discovery and execution? Indeed, Mary Lovell, one of Burton's numerous biographers, indicates that this is not a novel query:

Richard's adoption of Eastern disguise offended some who suggested that it was a totally unnecessary affectation since anyone who went to the Turkish authorities and professed to be a convert could join the *Hajj*. In such a case, it was pointed out, he would have been excused had he made any mistakes in the elaborate Muslim ritual, and he would have not been in any danger of his life.²⁶

However, Lovell defends Burton's methods, arguing that a convert's access would be somehow mediated: translated or simplified or embellished for the anomalous foreigner. "This kind of Hajj had already been done. Richard felt only by traveling as a born Muslim could he obtain truly accurate information."²⁷

Yet Lovell's defense is incongruous with the actual content of Burton's narrative. *Pilgrimage* presents a surprising dearth of facts, figures, scientific or social-scientific matter presented as such – in other words, the forms typically occupied by "accurate information." Rather, Burton himself avowed a disinterest in scholarship, arguing that "it is the personal that interests mankind," and admitting to the "egotistical semblance of this narrative"²⁸ (Augustus Ralli – author of *Christians in Mecca* – in turn acknowledged that "Burckhardt had left [Burton] little to describe.")²⁹ Rutter's account was similarly acknowledged by reviewers as "the story of his adventures"³⁰ and as a work of "literary style [and] human interest."³¹ Keane's *Six Months in Meccah* also reads as a thoroughly personal account. Given the sympathetic styling of these narratives, the pursuit of "accurate evidence" is not a compelling justification for impersonation.

In a more critical biography than Lovell's, Dane Kennedy instead recognizes that Burton's impersonation was largely a deliberate component of his performance. Burton, he writes, "understood that his adventure would be measured against the achievement of Burckhardt, who had entered Mecca in disguise. He could do no less."³² Kennedy thus implies that disguise became a criterion for the evaluation of Burton's feat, and impersonation was thus practiced in anticipation of such public measurement. It is not unthinkable that Burckhardt's example transformed impersonation from mere tactic into a requisite component of the Meccan feat for his successors.

In order that we might reinforce the fundamental position of impersonation in an explorer's performance, consider, finally, the romance with which Augustus Ralli introduced his subjects: "a few examples of fearless Europeans, who taking their lives in their hands, disguised in Mohammaden

dress and outwardly conforming to Mohammedan customs.”³³ Ralli’s assessment of the performance was predicated on the practice of disguise: to be fearless (in essence, to be validated as an explorer) was to subject oneself to possible peril – “taking their lives in their hands” – by means of impersonation.

Admitting, then, the primacy of impersonation in the feat, we must ask why this was the case? Why have readers from Ralli to the present fixated on impersonation and disguise? What was signified by a Christian at Mecca, by a Christian or European posing as a Muslim? What was the performance meant to suggest about readers and peers, about themselves, and about Muslims and Arabs?

IMPERSONATION, MASTERY, AND DEFENSE

The image of the imposter in Mecca was manifestly that of precarious self-positioning, and it was curiously amplified in the second-order reports that recount the expeditions. The condensed narratives, presumably reductions of a narrative to its “essence,” often obsessed over an explorer’s capacity to maintain his disguise or assumed person. A typical example presents itself in Walter Phelps Dodge’s 1907 biography *The Real Sir Richard Burton*. Illustrating Burton’s visit to the Ka’aba – this often appears to be the singular event upon which Meccan travel accounts were founded, the moment in which the Christian has penetrated to the very heart of Islam – Dodge mused on Burton’s hazardous situation, “The picture of one solitary Christian among these fanatical Moslems is an interesting one. A little fault, a mistake in some small ceremony, would have meant a peculiarly unpleasant death at the hands of bloodthirsty fanatics.”³⁴ For Dodge, at least, Burton’s story was marked by an ever-looming possibility of detection, among crowds rabidly attentive the minutiae of religious practice and vigilant against imposters. Dodge’s impression of the Hijaz, and of Mecca in particular, suggested an environment of unfailing suspicion, and John Keane offered a corroborating account; Mecca, he avowed, was peopled with “inquisitive watchers and self-constituted spies.”³⁵

A backdrop of vigilant Muslims appears to have been a condition for readers’ appreciation of disguise. Dodge exclaimed, for example, that “no suspicion as to Burton’s nationality was ever aroused,”³⁶ and another writer, reporting on Burckhardt’s progress in the *Calcutta Journal*, opened his article with mention of Burckhardt’s uncanny capacity “to pass among the most suspicious as a native of the country.”³⁷

This attention – not merely to disguise, but to disguise in the face of

suspicion – announces the political symbolism of impersonation and the Meccan pilgrimage at large. It is stated above that impersonation invented the risk on which an explorer’s performance was founded. However, the synthetic origins of “risk” are now evident. The perception of perpetual or environmental risk referred to a populace of Muslims perpetually suspicious and violent. But just as risk was invented, the suspicious environment was an obstacle imagined (or created) by the practice of proscribed entry – it was only Keane’s elected violation that rendered him available to the surveillance and implicit punishment of “watchers” and “spies.” Recalling, then, the questionable necessity of disguise, perhaps the imagination of a hostile Muslim populace was in fact a conscious component of an explorer’s feat.

If impersonation positioned the Muslim population of the Hijaz as an obstacle to be overcome, Burckhardt, Burton, Keane, and Rutter themselves became understood as participants in an imagined global contest, one that pitted Islam’s exclusionary practices against European right. Katherine Sim’s 1969 biography, *Desert Traveler: The Life of John Louis Burckhardt*, presents an apt model of that opposition. “It had been in the face of grave danger,” she wrote of Burckhardt’s earlier travels:

that [Burckhardt] had penetrated the jealously guarded lost city, and only by the means of an ingenious stratagem was he able to outwit its fierce Arab custodians. So it was that after six myth-shrouded centuries he restored to all cognizant peoples Petra.³⁸

Sim’s style approaches mythopoesis: in addition to its epic tone – “So it was” – it articulates an archaic opposition of “Arab custodians” and “cognizant peoples,” and establishes Burckhardt as a near-messianic figure, one who finally *returns* to Europeans something wrested from them, and to which they possessed a right. Burckhardt is made representative of Christianity and England, and his victory theirs by extension (although most Europeans will not see Petra themselves, that Burckhardt has laid eyes on the city can “restore” it to them). Burckhardt’s enlistment as a proxy permits us to reconsider the oppositions developed in Isabelle Burton’s claim about Mecca’s impenetrability. “There are Holy Shrines of the Moslem world in the far-away Desert, where no white man, European, or Christian, could enter.” Perhaps the appeal of a Christian or European in the Hijaz existed beyond the mere amusement proffered by risk – as Sim’s text implies – extending into a symbolic sphere of geographical expansion.

Successful passage through the Hijaz did not merely indicate

the ability to sufficiently mimic Muslim character and appearance (though this is not unimportant; Parama Roy, for example, has suggested that Burton's disguise "renders the native transparent.")³⁹ More significantly, successful impersonation was positioned in both narratives and secondary reports as a kind of victory, earned *against* a duped native population. Take, for example, Burton's arrival in Egypt; he recalled having "rejoiced to see that by dint of a beard and in a shaven head I succeeded...in misleading the inquisitive spirit of the populace."⁴⁰ Burton's pleasure in deception is obvious here, and indeed, retellings of that moment share his delight: "On landing at Alexandria, he was recognized and blessed as a True Believer by the Moslem population,"⁴¹ one reported, and in a slight variation, another remarked that "so successful was Burton that upon his arrival in Egypt he was blessed as a True Believer."⁴² "True Believer" was not Burton's term, nor was the vague "Moslem population." Rather, the two were amplifications that slyly expanded Burton's localized anecdote into a comically universal scenario of triumph.

Yet beyond the deception of Muslims, in which the explorer was portrayed as a convincing Muslim, the impersonator often attempted to prove himself a more knowledgeable and devout Muslim than most, besting them at their own practices in ubiquitous scenes of mastery. The Pasha Muhammad Ali, for example, was skeptical of Burton's sincerity and summoned him to Tayf. The Pasha's associates reminded him "it is not the beard alone which proves a man to be a true Moslem,"⁴³ and Burckhardt was thus compelled to appear before the Kadhy of Mekka, who interrogated him on his faith. The interview proceeded as follows: "He asked what Arabic books I had read, and what commentaries on the Koran and on the law; and he probably found me better acquainted with such works than he expected."⁴⁴ Burckhardt was evidently satisfied with his performance; he had passed. Yet the notion of "outdoing" the Muslim was seized upon and amplified by Burton's interlocutors. In Ralli's retelling, "Two of the ablest professors of the law then in Arabia, examined him upon the Koran, and declared that he was not only a Moslem but a very learned Moslem."⁴⁵ What was initiated as a subtle display of Burckhardt's competence became a rather dramatic moment in its retelling, wherein the explorer was admitted to high ranks of religious expertise by Islam's greater intellectuals, a transformation that likely also served fantasies of besting and mastery.

Eldon Rutter's writing often approached the same sentiment. Describing, for example, a fellow Hajji's attempt to recite a verse of the Qur'an, Rutter explained that the Muslim "had no idea of the meaning of the words which he uttered, but in spite of that he appeared to entertain so great a faith

in the soul-saving value of exercise.”⁴⁶ Having established the ignorance of that pilgrim, and perhaps gestured toward the irrational character of much of Muslim faith, Rutter translated the verse for his reader with great fanfare. The public was thereby meant to share in Rutter’s superior grasp of Islamic culture, elevating themselves above the typical Muslim.

Yet if the impersonation was at once a discourse of mastery and domination, it nevertheless enacted a simultaneous rhetorical strategy of evasion and defense. On the most literal level, Dane Kennedy suggests that impersonation’s alternative, conversion, “would be seen as an act of abasement to an inferior faith and culture if carried out while he maintained his identity as an Englishman.”⁴⁷ That is, conversion would suggest something like a sully of English self-regard by submitting an Englishman to the religious jurisdiction of Muslims. By contrast, impersonation permitted Burton to avoid the surrender of his (and his native country’s) apparent superiority.

This notion of impersonation as a defensive mechanism can be expanded and redirected in several directions. In her *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt offers a model of explorer/author – the “experiential unhero” – bearing remarkable resemblance to protagonists of the Hajj accounts. She notes, for example, that Mungo Park, a Scottish explorer of West Africa (and Pratt’s archetypal example of the experiential unhero), “did not write up a narrative of geographical discovery, observation, or collection, but one of personal experience and adventure. He wrote, and wrote himself, not as a man of science, but as a sentimental hero.”⁴⁸ Park is subject and participant in what Pratt titles “Reciprocal Vision,” a phenomena in which “Seeing itself operates along lines of reciprocity in his text... in exchange for seeing Africa and Africans, Park repeatedly portrays himself as subjected to the scrutiny of the Africans. In a parodic reversal Park’s portmanteau is surveyed simultaneously as a landscape and a zoological specimen.”⁴⁹ What distinguishes sentimental narratives of the Hajj from Mungo Park’s, then, is an evasion of that reciprocal or mutual inspection: impersonators delighted in a shielded observation, a tactic that perhaps that guarded Englishness against the nationalized indignity of having been scrutinized (and therefore evaluated, measured, and judged): one viewed without the indignity of being viewed. Indeed, Burton wrote in defense of impersonation, “My spirit could not bend to own myself a *Burma*,⁵⁰ a renegade – to be pointed at and shunned and catechized, and object of suspicion to the many of contempt to all.”⁵¹ Impersonation was therefore the product of an aversion to such reciprocal surveillance, which posed a threat to the ego, or more precisely, “spirit” (this idea of a reciprocal relationship also allows us to expand an analysis of Keane’s sensed presence of

“inquisitive watchers and self-constituted spies; who was Keane, if not himself an inquisitive watcher and self-constituted spy?).

Having introduced the matter of “spirit,” we might tentatively speculate that – in addition to a political and physical strategy – impersonation also permitted the evasion of a parallel ontological crisis. Jacques Derrida’s late essay “The Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad/from the Foreigner” elaborates a relationship between the status of “foreigner” and a sovereignty of one’s own being pertinent to the discussion of impersonation. “Isn’t the question of the foreigner,” he begins, “a foreigner’s question?”⁵² This passage suggests an immediate relationship between the status of foreignness and a corresponding phenomenon, literal and symbolic, of interrogation. Crossing borders, national or otherwise, the foreigner must divulge his identity, origins, etc. Derrida continues: “As though the foreigner were being-in-question.”⁵³ Here, the interrogation is abstracted as a reproach to the self-sovereignty of the foreigner: While interrogated, the foreigner yields power over himself to the representatives of the polity he enters. But interrogation is also a reciprocal relationship that parallel’s Pratt’s: “[The foreigner is] also the one who, putting the first question, puts me in question.”⁵⁴ The foreigner thus returns the destabilizing gesture to his host, puts into question his host’s being; he is the potential spy, importer of contraband materials, revolutionary or counterrevolutionary, etc. In sum, the experience of the foreigner and host is posited as a mutual or reciprocal undermining of the other’s sovereignty and authority. The utility of that principle to the interpretation of impersonation is obvious – impersonation permitted the explorer to circumvent such border processes and thus the disempowerment of the foreigner, while he continued to problematize sovereignty in Hijaz in a very real way (his surveillance abetted and anticipated imperial presence).

These are admittedly speculative discussions (it is difficult to verify empirically a phenomenology) but they are lent potential weight by the efforts by both travelers and commentators to defend Englishness and Christianity against political or religious humiliation.

ON BEING ENGLISH

What was the relationship of the impersonator to his place and culture of origin? In behaving as a Muslim, did he compromise political or religious loyalties? How was the reader to distinguish performance from authentic life? Three yet-unaddressed phenomena address the complicated affiliations of the Christian-as-Muslim: a) Keane’s efforts to reclaim an alleged Englishwoman whom he met in Mecca, b) an entire constellation of discussions

regarding the morality and sincerity of Burckhardt and Burton's Islam, and c) a ubiquitous narrative practice in which disguise was dramatically shed.

Keane claimed that upon arrival in Mecca he found an Englishwoman resident there – a discovery that Augustus Ralli would call “the most astonishing of Keane's adventures.”⁵⁵ Astonishing, of course, because it presented a similar anomaly to Keane's – the English citizen as Muslim – however, this instance appears to have inspired less laudation than pity. Keane lamented upon first contact, for example, that one might “spend a woe life as she was doing, in such wretchedness and misery, buried alive in Mecca.”⁵⁶ Keane's interest, however, was contingent on a notion of racial and national purity: “‘No,’” I said, ‘She can't be an Englishwoman; and I consoled myself by settling that she must be a country-born half-caste, fair enough to be called English.’”⁵⁷ This is merely the first instance of a lengthy and obsessive interrogation of her precarious cultural position, a fixation that in fact constituted Keane's account. After meeting with her on several occasions (“How we let loose our English tongues!” he recalled⁵⁸), Keane eventually confirmed her racial commonality after “she raised her veil and showed me her face, which was as English as my own.”⁵⁹

It was on that basis that Keane claimed to have launched extensive state processes on her behalf. Upon return to Britain, Keane campaigned extensively for her rescue; he reported her story to a number of gentlemen, and following his encouragement the Foreign Office “sent instructions to their Consul at Jeddah to send a Mohammedan agent into Meccah and make inquiry for the supposed captive.”⁶⁰ Locating her eventually in India, a British magistrate complicated Keane's certainty in her circumstances and nationality: “she denies [as Keane posited in his narrative] that she is an English-woman who was ravished from her friends during the Mutiny, forced to turn Mohammaden and marry her ravisher...it is difficult if not impossible to believe that she is an Englishwoman.”⁶¹

In an essay entitled “The Curious Affair of Lady Venus,” M.D. Allen has suggested that Keane's Englishwoman was most likely a fabrication, an embellishment of the popularly circulated story of “Miss Wheeler,” whose circumstances were intertwined with those of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, as well as the case of Zohra Begum, a Eurasian widow resident simultaneously with Keane.⁶² If the account was in fact a fabrication, engineered like much of the Meccan performance for popular appeal, perhaps Keane's preoccupation with untainted or attenuated Englishness is indicative of a broader cultural moment. Indeed, this same obsessive delimitation characterizes much of the public debate – one that continues into the present – over the ambiguous religious states that Burton and Burckhardt occupied in the

course of impersonation.

Such discussions attempted to address definitively whether Burton and Burckhardt were in fact virtuous Christians, a status apparently compromised by their affiliation with Islam. There appears to have been a disquieting element of ambiguity to impersonation. Augustus Ralli's comment that Burckhardt was "terribly at ease"⁶³ in Mecca was not likely a careless one, and it refers to the same "strange and sinister territory of doubt or skepticism or half-hearted apostasy...between Christianity and Islam" about which another commentator wrote.⁶⁴ It is perhaps the abhorrence of this sinister territory that compelled one critic charge that impersonation enacted something like betrayal:

To feign a religion which the adventurer himself does not believe, to perform with scrupulous exactitude, as of the highest and holiest import, practices which he inwardly ridicules, and which he intends on his return to hold up to the ridicule of others, to turn for weeks and months together the most sacred and awful bearings of man towards his Creator into a deliberate and truthless mummery, not to mention other and yet darker touches – all of this seems hardly compatible with the character of a European gentleman, let alone that of a Christian.⁶⁵

Such claims were opposed by attempts to restore Burton to the side of things European and Christian: "long before he died he grew more orthodox," wrote one biographer. "That he greatly admired the Koran there is no doubt; that he preferred it to the bible there is no proof."⁶⁶ These discussions of Burton reveal again a fixation on a delimitation of the boundary between Christian and Muslim; the indeterminateness of impersonation was articulated as a problem, one to be resolved by pinning Burton firmly to one side or the other of the divide.

Burckhardt was subject to similar scrutiny, and lengthy passages have been devoted to teasing out his loyalties precisely: "His own deep-rooted ethics invariably made him marvel at mob gullibility, and it seems to have been hard for him to recognize the two-faced attitude of the average Muslim religioso. This is one reason that makes it possible to think that he could, and even did, accept for himself the *principles* of Muslim religion without being guilty of apostasy at any time."⁶⁷ This passage is symptomatic of critiques of Burckhardt, which admit the complexity of his approach to Islam but nonetheless seek an absolute marker of identity, and assert the possibility of "guilt" of apostasy.

Although impersonation was often problematic and controversial for readers – and indeed, such controversy was often the intent of the impersonator – it offered the explorer a narrative device by which readers could distinguish him from sincere pilgrims. The impersonator’s Christianity was reified by the peculiar relationship that held between himself, his narrative, and the reader. An impersonator was psychologically distant from the rites of the Hajj because he had additional concerns – surveillance in anticipation of reportage, for example, and anxieties about the discovery of his disguise. Keane, for example, noted that “Observing and inquiring...recalled me to my identity”⁶⁸ – it was spectatorship itself that set him apart from the surveyed. Likewise, Parama Roy has argued that “What we are never allowed to forget is Burton’s sense of his own separation from the collective cultural experience of pilgrimage.”⁶⁹ This separation was pervasive. In his description of the rites of the Hajj, for example, Keane reminded us of his ritual ablutions that “for appearance’s sake I drank not a little of it, disagreeable as it was.”⁷⁰ Keane’s aside indicated to the reader that he was still acting, that at his core he was separate from Islamic practice, and thus that his European conscience remained intact. In turn, secondary accounts are rife with nods toward the self-conscious Englishman living within a Muslim shell. One commentator wrote of Burckhardt that:

His astonishing proficiency in the language, his whole appearance, now rendered so perfectly Arab-like, by a tanned skin, coarse hands and feet, and a long beard, as well as his intimate knowledge of the precepts of their religion, and a practical acquaintance with its ceremonies, all contributed to shelter him from the slightest suspicion of being an infidel; although by the gradual initiation which he obtained from travel and observation, into all the mysteries of their prayers, prostrations, and ablutions, he had escaped the otherwise indispensable rite of circumcision, so that while still an “uncircumcised dog,” he passed as a true believer.⁷¹

What intrigued the author was that Burckardt’s affiliations were even preserved *physically*, a fleshly bastion of Christianity remnant beneath Muslim robes – empirical proof of loyalty, a kind of talisman to repelled foreign influence.

However, the explorer’s essential Christianity was most thoroughly evident in definitive scenes of conclusion, in which the explorer shed his Muslim identity and was free to act as an Englishman. In the final pages of

The Holy City of Arabia, Rutter's relief is evident in his explanation that "for the first time in more than a year I now ate with a knife and fork."⁷² Keane likewise wrote of his departure from Mecca: "I had thrown off all semblance of a Mohammeden, and talked in the most undisguised English... On the morning of the day on which we arrived in Bombay, I shaved and put on my European rig... Nobody would have suspected that the young English sailor who ate as much cold pork for his supper that night as any other three men at the table, had been a zealous Mohammeden devotee a few weeks before."⁷³ This type of passage asserted unambiguously the sham of impersonation – the impersonator emerged unscathed and unaltered by his performance, his taste for pork and dinner-table etiquette indicating his continued preference for things European, quotidian or otherwise. Moreover, the placement of this scene at the end of a narrative is important. The end, of course, is traditionally the space of resolution in contrast to the conflict preceding it. Thus the antecedent situation – of living amongst Muslims – is by implication a grueling and conflictive affair.

BE(COM)ING MUSLIM

In assuming the "authentic" Muslim persona, an explorer disclosed what he believed to be the essential character of Arabs and Muslims. Burton, for example, describes in great detail months spent refining his disguise, and so we are allowed unusual access to his preconceptions. Explaining the intricacies of "oriental manners," he offers the following:

Look at that Indian Moslem drinking a glass of water. With us the operation is simple enough, but his performance includes no fewer than five novelties. In the first place he clutches his tumbler as though it were the throat of a foe; second he ejaculates, "In the name of Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful!" before wetting his lips; thirdly, he imbibes the contents, swallowing them not sipping them as he ought to do, and ending with a satisfied grunt; fourthly before setting down the cup he sighs forth, "Praise be to Allah!" – of which you will understand the full meaning in the desert; and fifthly, he replies, "May Allah make it pleasant to thee!" in answer to his friend's polite "pleasurably and health!" Also he is careful to avoid the irreligious action of drinking the pure element in the standing position.⁷⁴

Burton's theorization of the act (the five-step program could not have been religious or legal doctrine) emphasized a propensity for dense ritual and illogic. Drinking was construed as obscenely formal and multi-staged, subject to strict religious governance. This is not unrelated to the aforementioned presumption of a "deep spirituality" endemic to Muslims. Yet set against this complex ritualism is a portrait of crude physicality. Burton claimed witness to the violent clutch of the glass and "wetting of lips," to grunts, swallowing (the subject of a bizarre normative remark), and sighs – all of which point to a relentless primitivity. We are left, then, with a juxtaposition of the irrational and primitive against Burton's rationalism and civilization.

It was not necessarily with disdain, however, that this dichotomy was broached; often the primitive possessed a naïve romance, as with Burton's explication of the Arab's "untranslatable" *kayf* (which he nonetheless described as a kind of lay philosophy): "This is the Arab's *kayf*. The savoring of animal existence; the passive enjoyment of mere sense; the pleasant languor, the dreamy tranquility, the airy castle-building which in Asia stand in lieu of the vigorous, intensive, passionate life of Europe."⁷⁵ Although *kayf* certainly held some appeal for Burton, an avowed skeptic in regard to civilization, the repeated distinction between simple "animal existence" and the vigorous, intensive Europe carries obvious political and ethical import.

Keane extends Burton's note of a generally irrational character in Muslims. "Hajji's", he argued, "work themselves up to foaming inarticulate idiotcy...To think that the faith reached by such as the earnest Omer, the faith of the illustrious Moors and many a chivalrous Saldin, should have fallen off in the hands of these Eastern weaklings to a mere belief in prayer doing."⁷⁶ Again, Islam is marked by a blind ritualism: an attachment to a vapid rehearsal, void of content. One might note, however, that this is perhaps the only interpretation that a distanced spectator like Keane could offer. "Mere belief in prayer in doing" perhaps necessarily fails to achieve more formidable belief when it is not invested with sincerity. In any case, what eventually distinguishes Keane's critique from Burton's is that the Keane explicitly located the aberration in race: "I fear, as that stirring faith has failed to make anything of the Eastern, there is but a poor look-out for Christianity. If every tinted skin from light straw to ebony were Evangelical Low Church to-morrow, there would be as much opium and tobacco as consumed before."⁷⁷ Thus Islam was not treated as the incorrigible element, but in fact darker-skinned peoples identified as inherently or fundamentally aberrant.

Yet the universal dismissal of the "Eastern" did not preclude the construction of racial hierarchies amongst Eastern peoples. For Burckhardt, the

inhabitants of the Hijaz were “more polite toward each other as well as toward strangers,” and of a more lively disposition than either the Syrians or the Egyptians,” who are inclined toward “insensibility or stupidity” and impoliteness.⁷⁸ Keane’s hierarchy was broader in scope: he endeavored to order some eleven different groups. “Individually,” Keane reports, “I like the Turk, he is a manly brave little fellow.”⁷⁹ The Arabs, however, were “swindlers to a man, trained from infancy to the rooking of the pilgrim-pigeon, inherited for an unknown number of generations.”⁸⁰ In order of remaining preference, he found that “the Malays are quiet and honourable in their dealings, yet close-fisted,”⁸¹ “the Negro is “to be found here in his proper place, an easily-managed, useful worker.”⁸² “Tartans and Boharans,” are “as dirty as any others or dirtier,” and the “nondescript rabble from the China, the West Coast of Africa, or Russia...may be disposed of in two words – mangy mongrels.”⁸³

What is important to retain from these examples is not only their obvious bigotry, but rather, the attitude implied by their employment: that Muslims could be divided and organized as such, and that their character was predetermined by race.

It is useful to note that many of the aspects deemed laudable in Islamic culture were described in distinctly European terminology or iconography. Examples abound; Keane, upon seeing two unveiled Bedouin girls at whose “lithe slender figures and graceful movements” he could not help but look, thought to himself “what a perfect ‘Rebekah’ at the Well’ either of those girls would make in a picture.”⁸⁴ Likewise, Keane compared the Malay – of whom he approved as “the most rational of the pilgrims” – to “Scotsmen of the East.”⁸⁵ The more admirable of Pilgrims therefore mirrored aspects of his own culture; they exuded an incipient Europeanism.

CONCLUSION: IMPERSONATION IN AN AGE OF EMPIRE

Direct reference to the critical phenomenon of Orientalism is largely absent from this analysis. For the most part such discussion has been left implicit, as most of the tropes apparent here – mastery, penetration, the juxtaposition of western rationality and eastern irrationalism, sweeping generalizations, a homogenous East, the construction of binaries, etc.– are so easily incorporated into that critique that to deploy it would be redundant. Yet the accounts of Mecca are so rife with explicit imperialist gestures that to ignore them would deprive the phenomenon impersonation of its full import.

In a letter to Norton Shaw, secretary of the Royal Geographical Society, Burton assessed Egypt as a potential target of conquest: “I verily think

we might march into it almost without opposition.”⁸⁶ *Pilgrimage* moreover posits that Egypt was “the most tempting prize which the east holds out to the ambition of Europe,”⁸⁷ and that Egyptians “long for European rule.”⁸⁸ These were prescient statements indeed, given the entanglement of Britain and France in Egyptian affairs that would follow only a few decades after Burton’s expedition.

Writing two decades later, Keane was perhaps more worrisome, complaining that “In these days of universal intercommunication and rapid and certain spread of the most trifling new-matter, to and from the most out-of-the-way corners of the globe, what could better show how isolated and cut off from Christian supervision are the doings of the Hijaz.⁸⁹ Who can know what alarming projects or conspiracies may not at this moment be on foot in Meccah that centre and hotbed of Mohammedan intrigue?” Keane thus indicated that Christians possessed a right to infiltrate the Hijaz: the area *should* be known to them, *should* be controlled, monitored, and contained.

Given these and other claims, one is pressed to consider the ways in which impersonation could facilitate the expansion that Burton and Keane prescribe. The basic suggestions of impersonation – that Islam could be mastered and penetrated, that Muslims were by comparison primitive – were inherently permissive, advertising for and justifying intervention. We might easily confuse these expeditions with espionage: who else but spies would disguise themselves in order to uncover foreign secrets? The proximity of the explorers to formal military intelligence is perhaps too opaque to label them agents as such, but the apparent affinity in the style, content, and use of their information cannot but implicate the impersonator in a military project.

ENDNOTES

¹ F.E. Peters, *The Hajj*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 206.

² Augustus Ralli, *Christians in Mecca*, (New York: Kennikat, 1971), 2.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John Keane. *Six Months in Meccah*, (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1881), 165.

⁵ Peters, 207.

⁶ Michael Wolfe. *One Thousand Roads to Mecca*, (New York: Gove, 1997), 104. It is impossible, of course to know the frequency with which Europeans appeared in Mecca. It is reasonable to assume that more visited than composed accounts, and that not all accounts were circulated publicly.

⁷ Wolfe, 104.

⁸ Nearly every subsequent European account to Mecca refers to Burckhardt’s work.

Richard Burton’s and John Keane’s narratives often refrain from comment on Mecca or

the Hajj, explaining that nothing can be added to Burckhardt's notes on the subject.

⁹ "Minutes of the African Association, General Meetings 1789-1831", Royal Geographical Society, London, England.

¹⁰ William Adams, "J.L. Burckhardt, Ethnographer" *Ethnohistory* 20, no. 3 (1973) 213-228.

¹¹ Robin Bidwell, *Travelers in Arabia*, (New York: Hamlyn, 1976), 127-128.

¹² P.Z.C., "An Englishman in Mecca," *The Geographical Journal* 73, no. 5 (1929), 1.

¹³ It is suggested that only the Bible eclipsed *Arabian Nights* in popularity in the nineteenth century in

Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 36.

¹⁴ Thomas Assad, *Three Victorian Travelers*, (London: Routledge, 1964), 1 – 9.

¹⁵ P.Z.C., 460.

¹⁶ Mary S. Lovell, *A Rage to Live: A Biography of Richard and Isabel Burton*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 95.

¹⁷ Richard Burton, *Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, (New York: Dover, 1964), 2.

¹⁸ This passage is excerpted as printed in its entirety from Ralli, pp. 81-82; the author does not what information the ellipsis omits.

¹⁹ Robin Bidwell, *Travelers in Arabia*, (New York: Hamlyn, 1976), p. 129.

²⁰ In a letter to Noroton Shaw written upon completion of the pilgrimage, Burton's anticipation of an acclaim is already evident – "P.S.,", he closed, 'could you get my arrival reported in some London papers[?]'. "Richard Burton to Dr. Norton Shaw, November 16, 1853, Burton Correspondence, Royal Geographical Society, London.

²¹ P.Z.C., 460.

²² Burton, xvii.

²³ By positioning Burton as the first White European Christian to visit Mecca, Isabel Burton refers to the questionable sincerity of Burckhardt – who preceded Burton – in his conversion. This topic is broached elsewhere in this essay.

²⁴ Trevor L. Christie, "Sheikh Burckhardt: Explorer" *Saudi Aramco World*, (September-October 1967): 17.

²⁵ Eldon Rutter, "Damascus to Hail," Royal Geographical Society, London, England.

²⁶ Lovell, 125.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Burton, 4-5.

²⁹ Ralli, 162.

³⁰ H.A.R. Gibb, "Review: The Holy Cities of Arabia", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 5, no. 3 (1929): 626.

³¹ P.Z.C., 463.

³² Dane Kennedy, *The Highly-Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2005) 65.

³³ Ralli, 2.

³⁴ Walter Phelps Dodge, *The Real Sir Richard Burton*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), 75.

³⁵ Ralli, 206.

³⁶ Dodge, 63.

³⁷ "Travels of M. Burckhardt in Egypt and Nubia", in *New Voyages and Travels Vol. II* (London: Sir Richard Phillips, 1819), 7.

³⁸ Katherine Sim, *Traveler: The Life of Jean Louis Burckhardt*, (London: Gollancz, 1969), 15.

- ³⁹ Parama Roy, "Oriental Exhibits: Englishmen and natives in Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Mecca*," *Boundary 2* 22, No.1 (1995): 185 -210.
- ⁴⁰ Burton, 8.
- ⁴¹ Georgiana Stisted, *The True Life of Capt. Sir Richard F. Burton*, (London: H.S. Nichols, 1896), 73.
- ⁴² Dodge, 107.
- ⁴³ Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1829). 71.
- ⁴⁴ Burckhardt, 73.
- ⁴⁵ Ralli, 79.
- ⁴⁶ Rutter, 90-91.
- ⁴⁷ Kennedy, 65.
- ⁴⁸ Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 75.
- ⁴⁹ Pratt, 82.
- ⁵⁰ Burton defines *Burma* as "An opprobrious name given by the Turks to their Christian converts."
- ⁵¹ Burton, 23.
- ⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 200), 3.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ralli, 215.
- ⁵⁶ Keane, 40.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Keane, 55.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Keane, 206.
- ⁶¹ Keane, 209.
- ⁶² M.D. Allen, "The Curious Affair of the Lady Venus", in *Shaw and Other Matters*, Ed. Susan Rusinko (Susquehanna University Press: 1998), 110-120.
- ⁶³ Ralli, 72.
- ⁶⁴ Sim, 288.
- ⁶⁵ Burton, xxi.
- ⁶⁶ Dodge, 53.
- ⁶⁷ Katherine Sim, *Traveler: The Life of Jean Louis Burckhardt*, (London: Gollancz, 1969), 257.
- ⁶⁸ Keane, 33.
- ⁶⁹ Roy, 196.
- ⁷⁰ Keane, 18.
- ⁷¹ "Travels of M. Burckhardt in Egypt and Nubia," 20.
- ⁷² Rutter, 280.
- ⁷³ Keane, 182.
- ⁷⁴ Burton, 6.
- ⁷⁵ Burton, 9.
- ⁷⁶ Keane, 31.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Burckhardt, 200.
- ⁷⁹ Keane, 90.
- ⁸⁰ Keane, 91.

⁸¹ Ibid, 94.

⁸² Keane, 100.

⁸³ Keane, 104.

⁸⁴ Keane, 117.

⁸⁵ Keane, 94.

⁸⁶ Richard Burton to Norton Shaw, November 16, 1853, Burton Correspondence, Royal Geographical Society, London.

⁸⁷ Burton, 114.

⁸⁸ Burton, 111.

⁸⁹ John Keane, *My Journey to Medinah*, (London, Tinsley Brothers, 1881), 191.