

Neither a Borrower

*Forging Traditions in
French, Chinese and Arabic Poetry*

Richard Serrano



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CHINESE AND ARABIC POETRY

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INTRODUCTION



How do we free a poem from the narratives written around it? We must reconsider the tales of literary history, question the origins and ends of hermeneutical methodologies, and search records of reading (whether in the form of commentaries or scholarly articles) that make story of moment. In *Neither a Borrower* I examine key texts of French, Chinese and Arabic literary history in which allegorizers, commentators, scholars and other sorts of readers remake lyric poetry into narrative or elide the lyric moment so that the text not only means something else, but becomes something else. I further complicate my task by concentrating on texts that read, reread and rewrite texts from other cultures. The narrative of this intercultural transmission and how it comes to pass further interferes with—and eventually illuminates—our understanding of what the poem is and what it means.

When information transmitted between cultures is in the form of poetry, texts somehow more than mere physical objects yet never fully separated from the world either, the terminology becomes distressingly metaphorical. For who owns a poem, even at this twilight of print culture? Modern Greeks can demand the return of the Elgin marbles from the British Museum, but they can hardly dare insist that Ireland return Odysseus from Joyce's *Ulysses*, or that Homer's epic structures undergirding Virgil's *Aeneid* be returned to Athens by Classics professors. At best these most pernicky of imagined Greeks could hope to read Homer as if the intervening centuries of Virgil, Dante and Joyce bore no effect on how they read the great blind bard. Of course, understanding Joyce as the inevitable successor to Homer, via Virgil and Dante, requires both the distortion of all intervening texts and the suppression of elements of classical Greek culture frowned upon today in the West: trotting off the newly arrived guest for a bath from the maid, strict segregation of the sexes, slavery, pederasty, etc. The coherence of the Western literary tradition when

examined in detail is even more ephemeral than the texts it claims for itself and depends on a wilful sort of cultural amnesia. The transmission of cultural information among poetic traditions considered radically different is then even more complex and unavoidably messy. Amnesia is not an option.

'Appropriation' is an insufficient label for the tangled processes of intercultural transmission described in the studies found in this book. While this term goes some way towards accounting for the desire to make the text of another culture one's own, it implies as well that the text has definitively changed ownership and now has no connection whatsoever to its creator or to the culture in which it was born. But can a poem be stolen? Unless I burn all the books and cart off all the manuscripts, I can never take Abū Tammām's poetry from the Arabs. Even after eliminating all written trace of his work, I would still have to quarantine all those who could recite his poems or parts of them. This is not to say that the study of Arabic literature in the West has been without effect. It was, for example, only after two centuries of sustained Western interest in *A Thousand and One Nights* that Arab scholars began to give it the same attention previously devoted only to classical poetry, the traditions of the Prophet or the Qur'ān. Somehow, then, the text is not appropriated, but simultaneously taken and left behind, taken and returned, returned and kept. It may be transformed by uses not intended by its first owner. Nor does a French poet's borrowing from classical Chinese poetry rid the Chinese canon of its favourite poets. If anything, a Chinese poet's borrowing from Western poetry is more likely to disturb the Chinese tradition, since that tradition risks becoming irrelevant if today's Chinese writers do not incorporate it into their language and world. Indeed, post-Mao poets such as Duo Duo and Gu Cheng appreciate Tang poets as merely beautiful and look to Baudelaire (in translation) for inspiration instead.

While 'appropriation' is perhaps too harsh a word, 'borrowing' seems far too anodyne to describe such a potentially perverse or subversive act. When Dante borrows Aeneas' descent to the underworld he not only expands such a voyage into the first third of his *Commedia*, but also distorts our understanding of both the significance and the purpose of the descent in Virgil's text. When Virgil borrows epic structures from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* he reverses their chronology, having Aeneas wander home like Odysseus before he engages in battle *à la* Achilles. Students who read all three

texts in one course borrow the idea of Dante as founder of vernacular Italian literature, toss in Virgil as the creator of a new founding myth for Rome, and then, reaching backwards, make of hapless Homer the first national myth-maker of Greece. Homer's contemporaries could not have recognized such a Homer, since they would have had great difficulty with the concepts of nation, myth or even Greece. It is the power of texts-made-tradition to suppress difference and smooth over discrepancies. There are enormous gaps between and among Greek and Latin literatures, although most universities house scholars of them in the same department. Our belief in Western Literature demands that we forget that the lines of transmission were broken in the early Middle Ages. Most Greek learning came to the West through Arab scholars in the later Middle Ages, although there seem to be few Western academics clamouring to admit Arabic scholarship into Classics.

What then does it mean to take poetic texts or elements of them from cultures that we cannot yet pretend are from the same tradition? Over the past two decades Western attempts to comprehend other cultures—to grasp at them and make them part of the West's body of knowledge—have become ideologically suspect. Those who study the production of other cultures must ask themselves if the objects of their research can be seen clearly—or at all—through the fog of prejudice and delusion manufactured by their own cultures. The study of poetry, although marginalized and rarefied these days, is no exception. Nonetheless, to label all Western attempts at intercultural comprehension as imperialistic is at once grossly reductive and myopic. To think of the West as a boorish, greedy monolith and all its poets as cheerleaders of conquest is shortsighted, silly, and, in the end, not very interesting. Both the medieval Arabs and Chinese, and any other powerful and productive peoples organized as empire, have taken extensively from cultures preceding and surrounding them. The West of the past two centuries is not alone in this, although its global reach is so far unique.

Certainly the practice of poetry within an empire is never innocent and always implicated in its cultural and political context. This truth was well understood by classical Arab and Chinese poets, whose commentators took far more interest in determining context than is usually the case among modern literary theorists. We literary scholars who today attempt to make sense out of the interaction among cultures—and here I mean those distant from us both geographically

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and temporally—should follow their lead and insist on contextualization as well as rigorous theoretically informed analysis. We should not only read Arab and Chinese critics and commentators, of both the past and the present, to understand their literatures, but to understand our own. Nor should the nexus of comparison always be East–West or North–South—learning to read Qur’ānic commentaries necessarily influences the way we learn to read Confucian commentaries and vice versa.

In the title of this book I have chosen not to label the processes explored in these studies either ‘appropriation’ or ‘borrowing’, but instead ‘forging’. I borrow (or appropriate) this word from the vocabularies of metallurgy, criminology, and exploration. I consider these authors *and* the commentary traditions *and* the scholarly criticism surrounding them neither borrowing nor appropriating, neither lending nor giving, but forging. Each of the texts discussed is acutely aware of its precarious place in its own tradition, although there are certainly few texts more canonical than the *Classic of Poetry* to the Chinese or the Qur’ān to the Arabs, few bodies of work more intensely studied than the poetry of Buḥturī, Wang Wei, Segalen or Mallarmé. *Neither a Borrower: Forging Traditions in French, Chinese and Arabic Poetry* examines texts that self-consciously forge new traditions by introducing disparate elements from alien traditions in the hopes of creating a tradition entirely new. It also examines texts that call into question the very notion of a literary tradition by picking out the disparate elements of that tradition in which they find themselves. And I, too, am forging as I pull texts from their generally accepted contexts and rejoin them in others, as well as by borrowing methodologies from other disciplines in order to rethink canonical texts. Borrowing the strategies scholars use in reading Confucian commentaries is helpful in rethinking how to read Qur’ānic commentaries. Borrowing the strategies scholars use to explain film imagery is helpful in rethinking how to read imagery in the Chinese lyric.

Much of *Neither a Borrower* concerns itself with Arabic and Chinese texts discovered (or, in the case of the Qur’ān, reconsidered) during the rise of Western colonialism and, in turn, French texts inspired by these discoveries and reconsiderations. It is not surprising, then, that the Orientalist project is one of those narratives I most insistently peel away from the lyric text. Yet my de-Orientalizing practice is always more interested in exploring how this complex and conflicting project

affects our understanding of a particular text than in assuming the sins of my scholarly forebears. In the first chapter, 'Buḥturī's Poetics of Persian Abodes', I trace the history of the Western European encounter with Arab culture, gradually narrowing my focus in order to focus on Orientalist speculation about the relationship of Imperial Arabic culture to the pre-Islamic culture from which it is separated by the revelation of the Qur'ān. An overview of the evolution of one particular trope common to both pre-Islamic and Imperial poetry, the abandoned encampments, allows me to contrast the medieval Arab understanding of the place of pre-Islamic poetry in their culture. Having recreated a rather complicated historical context, I then examine one of the most famous poems of Arabic literature, Buḥturī's 'I have preserved my soul from what pollutes my soul', in which the poet resituates the near-obligatory abandoned encampments in order to ponder the ruins of a one-time capital of the Persian Empire. This move calls into question the relevance of the Bedouin sources of Arab culture for the urban Abbasid court culture of the ninth century, yet ultimately re-establishes their centrality.

Having established the complications and ambiguity of the relationship between post-revelation and pre-Islamic poetry, I then examine the complexities of the fraught relationship between that poetry and the Qur'ān itself in the second chapter, 'Pillow Talk in the Qur'ān: Narrative and Lyric Rupture in Sūrat Yūsuf'. I argue that traditional Muslim commentators are misleading in their zeal to fill in the narrative gaps of the Qur'ān while Orientalist scholars are mistaken in their belief that the Qur'ān is an aesthetic failure on its own terms. Careful examination of key terms in the Qur'ān and special attention to a singular moment of textual ambiguity in Sūrat Yūsuf reveal that attempts to narrativize the Qur'ān has clouded our understanding of its close, even perilous, relationship to the lyric. This new understanding of how the Qur'ānic text works brings into focus the Qur'ān's own anxieties about poetry and its insistence that Muḥammad is not a poet.

The relationship between narrative and poetry is central as well to the third chapter, 'Confucius Goes to the Movies', in which I turn to the *Classic of Poetry*, the earliest collection of Chinese poetry. In order to define *xing*, a type of imagery that has no corresponding term in Western literature, I borrow the language used to describe imagery in film of the early twentieth century. By simultaneously stripping away the narratives of the Han Dynasty Confucian commentaries of

several centuries later attached to these poems, and the naturalized narrativizing techniques of feature film, I am able to return to the essential lyricism of these poems and these films. All the same, as was the case with the Qur'ānic commentaries in Chapter 2, I do not simply dismiss the commentaries as recklessly distorting the sense of the text, but focus attention on their discomfort with the poems' refusal to narrate. Reaction to the disruption of film image at the beginning of the twentieth century and the consequent rush to impose narrative is analogous to the Han impulse to impose Confucian morality on poetic image through narrativizing commentary.

Having considered the origins of Chinese poetry and the commentaries that have come down to us along with it, in the fourth chapter, 'Wang Wei's Poetics of Fallen Lotus Petals', I consider the place of this eighth-century court poet within this tradition. First, I demonstrate how Western scholars have transformed Wang Wei's lyric moments into narrative through their use of the traditional Chinese labelling of him as a Buddhist poet. I suggest that an investigation of Wang Wei's frequent allusions to the *Songs of Chu* is better suited to help us understand how Wang Wei himself saw his place as a poet at the culmination of a millennium and a half of Chinese poetry. He evokes the slightly suspect origins of the *Songs of Chu* to suggest the heterogeneity of the lyric tradition even as he reassimilates it to render the Chinese tradition seamless again, in some way making himself the hero of the Chinese lyric tradition. Along the way, I again argue against the allegorization of lyric poetry and resist anthropological readings, each of which is actually a covert narrativizing gesture, as I did in the chapter on Buḥturī.

This lengthy discussion of how Chinese poetry works in chapters three and four provides background for the fifth chapter, 'Segalen's Poetics of Stones and (S)hell'. The naval doctor Victor Segalen's attempts to reform twentieth-century French poetry by introducing the *stèle* as a new poetic form was based on a profound misunderstanding of Chinese culture and poetry. Despite his claims to the contrary, Segalen drains all Chinese content from these simulations of stone tablets. Filling Chinese form with Western content creates inherently unstable poems. In fact, Segalen's new poetics turns out to be so old-fashioned as to be most suitable to the Hell of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Although French and other critics have been much smitten with Segalen for the past forty years, often going so far as describe his poetry as replacing China, his putative attempt to reform French

poetry with the addition of material from a non-European culture is actually an attempt to reform French poetry with reference to its own prehistory.

Segalen's practice provides a useful foil for the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, whom few would recognize as a Chinese poet, in the sixth and final chapter. Although Mallarmé's references to China were sporadic, I formulate a new narrative of the poet's career that suggests that his brilliant reformulation of French poetry and language itself is due in part to an uncanny de-Orientalizing of the French reception of Chinese and other East Asian cultures. The celebrated difficulty of Mallarmé's poetry would seem to be, in part, due to its affinities with classical Chinese poetry, which his contemporaries for the most part found no less baffling. Mallarmé does indeed forge a new tradition from disparate elements, because only the obsessed and half-crazed eye of this critic has recognized some of those elements as alien to the French tradition.

I hope that *Neither a Borrower's* borrowings and identification of borrowings, appropriations, forging and forgery has not dulled the edge of husbandry, as Polonius warns Laertes to be neither lender nor borrower. I both lend this book and borrow it from you, hoping that such simultaneity will prevent me losing both it and friend.

CHAPTER 1



Buḥturī's Poetics of Persian Abodes

Why does the Abbasid court poet Buḥturī turn from the central trope of classical Arabic poetry, the abandoned encampments, and write a poem in which he travels instead to weep over the ruins of Persia's great capital? Many Western Orientalist and Abbasid scholars and poets hold curiously parallel, though sharply divergent, conceptions of the relationship of Imperial to pre-Islamic Arab cultures. How does Buḥturī's lyric voyage at once call into question the foundation of Abbasid poetic practice and make it again new?

Approaching the Oriental

In December 1862, an irate Gustave Flaubert responded to Sainte-Beuve's review of *Salammbô* in *Le Constitutionnel*:

Je n'accepte pas non plus le mot de *chinoiserie* appliqué à la chambre de Salammbô [...] parce que je n'ai pas mis là un seul détail qui ne soit dans la Bible ou que l'on ne rencontre encore en Orient. Vous me répétez que la Bible n'est pas un guide pour Carthage (ce qui est un point à discuter), mais les Hébreux étaient plus près des Carthaginois que les Chinois.

[I do not accept use of the word *chinoiserie* to describe Salammbô's room [...] since I have not put there a single detail that is not in the bible or that you could not find today in the Orient. You tell me again that the Bible is not a guide to Carthage (which is up for discussion), but the Hebrews were nearer to Carthaginians than the Chinese are.]¹

Sainte-Beuve's criticisms of *Salammbô* are many and not unjustified. Unlike 'Walter Scott, le maître et le vrai fondateur du roman historique', who had the good Scottish sense to restrict his novels to 'son Écosse' of only a few generations or centuries earlier, Flaubert is millennia and a continent away from *his* Carthage.² Sainte-Beuve did not intend, as Flaubert well knew, to accuse the author of filling Salammbô's boudoir with actual Chinese-inspired *friperie*, but of

resorting to alien ornamentation—so alien that it could only be described in terms of the most alien, Chinese—because he was unable to recreate the actual world of Carthage for lack of ‘un ensemble d’informations’.³ Flaubert’s umbrage at Sainte-Beuve’s putative attempt to read Chinese baubles onto Salammô’s nightstand rings false; in defending himself against a charge he himself renders absurd he deflects attention from the absurdity of the true source of his borrowings. Flaubert does not care that the Hebrews never made it to Carthage or that the Jews of 1860s Tunisia were not from the Holy Land, but had fled Spain in the fifteenth century. Nor does Flaubert care that neither Carthage nor Carthaginians existed in the 1860s. Flaubert was assured, as was Sainte-Beuve, no doubt, that the Orient was at once timeless and textual, and that ancient Carthage could therefore be reconstructed.

Flaubert and Sainte-Beuve (who, it should be noted, did not criticize Flaubert for decorating Salammô’s room in ancient Old Testament or contemporary Bedouin) were not the last to collapse the centuries and conflate distinct historical periods of West Asia and North Africa (i.e., the Orient). Nor were only French writers of the nineteenth century culpable. In fact, Flaubert shows more interest than most in at least the trappings of authenticity. He visited the site of Carthage before presuming to reconstruct it. Other writers representing the Orient never travelled, or if they did, remained engaged with what they had learnt of it in books or second-hand from travel account of others. Victor Hugo appended Spain to the Orient, enabling him to claim travel through the Orient before composing *Les Orientales* (1829), although he is obviously much more interested in imagined Turks than in the Spanish or even the Greeks whose struggle for independence he glorifies. Nerval on his way to the Orient refused to tour the sites of Constance because he did not want to ‘gâter davantage Constance dans [son] imagination [...] bordant son lac et son fleuve comme une Stamboul d’Occident’.⁴ He willfully confounds Constance with Constantinople, Switzerland with Turkey. Fr. Marie-Joseph Lagrange, in his nearly unreadable book of 1903, *Études sur les religions sémitiques*, explains the ancient (i.e. pre-Islamic, and therefore untainted) Semites by lumping them together with the ‘Néo-Calédoniens’ of the early twentieth century and the ‘sauvages’ of ‘la Nouvelle France’ of 1636.⁵ Hugo never visited the Orient, Nerval skipped the Holy Land because he ran out of money, and Lagrange never met a Néo-Calédonien of 1900 or a New World

savage three centuries his senior. Whether Hugo taking on the role of God on his way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah in 'Le Feu du ciel', the opening poem of *Les Orientales*, Nerval replacing a visit to Palestine with a long, fantastic narrative about King Solomon, or Lagrange gathering information on ancient West Asian ('sémitique') religions in order to explain the Hebrews of the Old Testament, there is an insistence on a return to origins—without an actual return. The return is best merely textual, imaginary or academic.

Even when a return to the Orient is imagined, the French colonialist or exoticist writer seems unwilling to admit a fellow countryman as the perpetrator. In Gautier's *Roman de la momie* (1855), for example, the tomb-trashing is financed by Lord Evandale, a well-heeled fop of an Englishman, and directed by the erudite German, Dr. Rumphius. They are led to the site of the tomb by Argyropoulos, a Greek on the make, 'vêtu d'une façon assez théâtrale'.⁶ Nary a Frenchman participates in the pillage. In *Aziyadé*, Pierre Loti insists from page 1 that Loti, who is not the real Loti but the character Loti (Loti is only a pen-name; neither Loti is Julien Viaud, the flesh-and-blood behind the pen), is not French, but 'un lieutenant de la marine anglaise'.⁷ A Frenchman would not traipse around Istanbul in Turkish dress while cavorting with a Circassian member of a local harem, though we suspect all along that only a Frenchman could get away with it. Indeed Loti—the character, *not* the author—often forgets that he is English. Within a page of reading—in French—that Loti is English, we encounter the 'Préface de Plumkett', a friend of Loti whose name is certainly not French, where we find a quotation from Musset and another from Hugo that, the editor of this edition warns us, 'on chercherait en vain sous le titre donné par Loti'.⁸ Of course, we cannot expect an Englishman with the prosaic sobriquet of Plumkett to know his Hugo. His error may very well be the last moment of national verisimilitude in *Aziyadé*. Not much further on, in a letter to 'cher Plumkett', English Loti recounts a conversation between Loti, Samuel the houseboy and Aziyadé the Circassian seductress, which ends with a phrase from Samuel 'dit en sabir avec une crudité sauvage que le français ne peut pas traduire'.⁹ The Englishman dare not attempt to translate into French something said in another language, unnamed, altogether. Our orientalist heads whirl like dervishes in Loti-land. All these contortions are to what end? To lay the blame for French naughtiness at English feet, or some other, naughtier bit of anatomy.

Crossing the Mediterranean by way of *La Manche*, we can see the dangers posed to readers of an actual return (rather than an imagined return) to the cradle of humanity. Sir Charles Lyall, the early twentieth century English translator of the *Mufaḍḍaliyāt*, a medieval Arab compilation of pre-Islamic poetry, tells us that

[...] the best of all commentaries on the ancient poetry of the Beduins is C.M. Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* [...] the narrative of more than a year and a half (1876–1878) spent in close and intimate companionship and travel with the nomads, as well as in residence in important towns [...]. The unchangeable conditions of life in Arabia are such that the modern Beduin is extraordinarily like his ancestor of fourteen centuries ago in manners, habits, and moral and social standards; and the reader of *Arabia Deserta* is reminded almost on every page of some phrase or thought in the old poetry which has light thrown upon it by the author.¹⁰

This passage is puzzling. First, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* quickly becomes *Arabia Deserta*; the text replaces the geographical location, its Latinization rendering it both ancient and distant. Scholars who hunger and, more importantly for nomads in the desert of literary criticism, thirst after commentaries to explain the mysteries of pre-Islamic (*Jāhili*) Arabic poetry, upon Lyall's recommendation eagerly turn to Doughty's two-tomed travels. It is soon obvious, however, that when Lyall calls Doughty's book 'the best of all commentaries', he must be speaking metaphorically, for few scenes in Doughty's book offer information about the world of ancient Arab poets. We wonder, for example, if an English guest of fourteen centuries ago would have entreated his stingy Bedouin host for morning coffee, only to hear the well-rehearsed first wife responding, 'there is no water'. Coffee is precious among the nomads of 1877. We imagine that it would have been even more precious among them fourteen centuries ago, since it was not introduced to the Arabs until the fifteenth century CE. Besides, *everyone* in this camp knows that Zeyd, Doughty's host, is so grudging of his coffee that he flees at the sight of even fellow Bedouin guests.¹¹ It is difficult to imagine the famous pre-Islamic poet 'Antar's first wife, or any pre-Islamic Bedouin wife, swinging down from her *howdah* to deny a thirsty Englishman his coffee with an obvious lie. Ever faithful to the adjective which is his name (we wonder if Loti's first choice for Plunkett's name was Doughty), Doughty goes off to fetch the unscrupulous, coffee-withholding wife with bribes of tobacco when she returns to her family after an argument with her husband.¹² He is, of course, successful.

Doughty's descriptions of nineteenth-century Arab Bedouins have about as much to do with pre-Islamic poetry as with the price of tea in China or the price tags on the obverse of Salammbô's knick-knacks. Doughty's 'commentary' replaces the heroism and passion of pre-Islamic poetry with the venality and buffoonery of degenerate nomads and their domestic tiffs. Perhaps Lyall had in mind the sole passage (out of 1300 pages) in which Doughty describes desert poets:

All their speech is homely; they tell of bygone forays and of adventures in their desert lives. You may often hear them in their tale quote the rhythms between wisdom and mirth of *kasasîd* (riming desert poets without letters); the best are often widely current among the tribes. In every tribe are makers: better than any in this country were the *kassâds* of Bishr. The *kassâd* recites, and it is a pleasant adulation of the friendly audience to take up his last words in every couplet. In this poetical eloquence I might not very well, or hardly at all, distinguish what they had to say; it is a strange language. The word *shaer*, he that '*feeleth*,' a poet, is unused by them; the Beduins knew not the word, Zeyd answered 'it is *nadem*.' The Beduin singer draws forth stern and horrid sounds from the rabeyby or viol of one bass string, and delivers his mind, braying forcedly in the nose. It is doubtless a very archaic minstrelsy, in these lands, but a hideous desolation to our ears.¹³

It is hard to imagine Lyall willingly hunched over volumes of medieval Arabic braying, though, of course, the texts are blessedly silent. We can understand then why the French would not want to visit the Orient. 'For a person who has never seen the Orient, Nerval once said to Gautier, a lotus is still a lotus; for me it is only a kind of onion'.¹⁴ For Lyall, Arabic poetry is worthy of a lifetime of labour; for Doughty, having heard some, it is a 'hideous desolation to our ears', a mere onion of a tuneless chantey.

Let us leave Lyall's appreciation of Doughty's book a mystery and turn to the admiration of T. E. Lawrence, an English adventurer truly doughty:

It is not comfortable to have to write about 'Arabia Deserta'. I have studied it for ten years, and have grown to consider it a book not like other books, but something particular, a bible of its kind [...]. We call the book 'Doughty' pure and simple, for it is a classic, and the personality of Mr. Doughty hardly comes into question. Indeed, it is rather shocking to learn that he is a real and living person [...]. [The book] is the true Arabia, the land with its smells and dirt, as well as its nobility and freedom.¹⁵

For Lawrence the book not only replaces the place, but it is the *true*

Arabia, leaving us to wonder what is the *false* Arabia? Someone else's book? A Frenchman's book? An Arab's book? Pre-Islamic poetry, which may indicate 'true' Arabia's nobility and freedom, but not much of its smells and dirt? The book not only replaces Arabia, but Doughty himself replaces—is—the book. Learning that Charles Montague Doughty is a real and living person is as shocking as the notion that pre-Islamic poets and their conniving, petulant wives (if we accept the convention that the Arabs of fourteen centuries ago exist in Doughty's book, and, therefore, *really* exist) are real and living people. For someone who can call a country a book, then call that book a person, then catch his breath at the thought of that person's existence, collapsing the identities of peoples fourteen centuries remote is nothing at all. No wonder the French left the dirty work to the English.

Situating the Semites

'In Scotland', where, according to Sainte-Beuve, Flaubert should have situated his historical novel, if of course he had, like Sir Walter Scott, been Scottish,

at least, no words need be wasted to prove that a right understanding of the religion of the Old Testament is the only way to a right understanding of the Christian faith; but it is not so fully recognised, except in the circle of professed scholars, that the doctrines and ordinances of the Old Testament cannot be thoroughly comprehended until they are put into comparison with the religions of the nations akin to the Israelites.¹⁶

William Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), encyclopaedic and dense, seldom offers the promised explanation of Christianity, or any substantive analysis at all, but instead has come to be something of a Bible itself, still quoted in scholarly articles seeking to solve pre-Islamic mysteries. Smith seems to suggest that words are being wasted elsewhere, presumably London and centres of Orientalist endeavour in England. Right understanding requires not only removal from the object of study, but distance from the centres of that study. Perhaps Smith's heralding from a land which twelve centuries earlier was still on the fringes of the Christian universe, itself then little more than an annoying appendage to Islamic empire, enables him to appreciate the importance of a people themselves nearly always on the frontier of civilization.

That Babylonia is the best starting-point for a comparative study of the sacred beliefs and practices of the Semitic peoples, is an idea which has lately had some vogue, and which at first sight appears plausible on account of the great antiquity of the monumental evidence. But, in matters of this sort, ancient and primitive are not synonymous terms; and we must not look for the most primitive form of Semitic faith in a region where society was not primitive.¹⁷

An argument in favour of mere antiquity might lead us to Egypt or the Indus Valley or the Yellow River Valley and away from the Holy Land. Nonetheless, it does seem odd that a study intent on a return to origins shrugs off 'great antiquity'. We wonder if an anthropologist specializing in the Industrial Revolution twelve centuries hence would prefer as object of study a clan of kilt-clad Scots bagpiping over the highlands to the arguably more relevant inhabitants of London and Birmingham—or even Glasgow.

Smith has two problems with focusing on Babylon, or its equivalent. First, the sophisticated structure of Babylonian religion works against his assumption that Christianity improved upon primitive religions. As he explains in his introduction:

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are *positive* religions, that is, they did not grow up like the systems of ancient heathenism, under the action of unconscious forces operating silently from age to age, but trace their origin to the teaching of great religious innovators, who . . . deliberately departed from the traditions of the past. Behind these positive religions lies the old unconscious religious tradition which formed part of that inheritance from the past into which successive generations of the Semitic race grew up as it were instinctively [...]. The positive Semitic religions [...] had to displace what they could not assimilate [...]. No positive religion that has moved men has been able to start with a *tabula rasa*, and express itself as if religion were beginning for the first time [...]. A new scheme of faith can find a hearing only by appealing to religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exist in its audience [...].¹⁸

Smith's language is loaded with terminology that would be employed with increasing precision by psychoanalytic theorists in the decades following his lectures: unconscious, displacement, instinct. He seems to have a nebulous concept of the pre-Islamic Arabs as the holders of the West's unconscious. They are necessarily unaware of the structure of their beliefs. A Moses, a Jesus or a Muḥammad provides control and structure, a sort of superego made flesh, or, at least, text. Himself curiously unable to find adequate structure for his work, Smith then spends several hundred pages describing the contents of that