

‘Not knowing the Oriental: ignorance and power in the colonial East’
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It is twenty-five years since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). In no trivial sense, we are all after Said. It is to him that we owe among other things a fundamental understanding of colonial discourse, that enables us to see it as a Foucauldian system of knowledge/power, whereby control over a part of the world is brought about, exemplified and stabilized by knowledge and its institutions. Through Orientalism, the west authors the east and becomes its authority. Our understanding of postcolonial resistance is predicated on an acceptance of the same intellectual architecture. Power enables knowledge, knowledge legitimises power.

This essay, however, is about ignorance. For everyone except God, there is always a horizon or frontier of knowledge, behind which stretches the great Hinterland of ignorance. This is an idea memorably expounded in a poem published in the year in which Britain acquired the island of Hong Kong, a known and chartered quantity that might be the gateway to a mainland of sublime vastness.¹ For Tennyson’s Ulysses, experience, what we know, is an arch, ‘wherethrough / Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move’. The great imperial melancholy of that poem was to find an attenuated echo more than fifty years later in Kipling’s ‘Recessional’, with its call to humility and contrition, and a seemly modesty in recognition of one’s own limits. Tennyson’s hero recognized that no amount of travel and discovery will reduce the ‘untravelled world’ to known space, since the margin of our own ignorance travels with us and ahead of us, forever out of reach. There is always more to be ignorant of. Furthermore, there are certainly occasions when it is more prudent not ‘to follow knowledge like a sinking star’, as Ulysses acknowledged in another rather defeatist metaphor, for, as he admitted to his mariners, ‘It may be that the gulfs will wash us down’, and the quest may end in disaster and drowning. This essay considers the

¹ The Treaty of Nanjing was signed in 1842 and ratified the following year. Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ appeared in his *Poems* of 1842.

question of western knowledge and ignorance of the Orient in the colonial period. Since Rudyard Kipling wrote about the Orient and since he could be described as the most knowing writer in the history of literature (and it is interesting that ‘knowing’, as an adjective in English, has a distinctly disreputable odour), the essay is headed in the direction of a consideration of ignorance of the East in Kipling. My title refers to this. But it is also an intertitular revision of the first chapter of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* – which is entitled ‘Knowing the Oriental’ – and in the first part of the essay I will consider the powerful thesis of that book, with its argument about the place of western ‘knowledge’ of the Orient in the history of western domination of the Orient, specifically by looking at one of Said’s chosen examples.

The Earl of Cromer’s ignorance

Said begins the Introduction to *Orientalism* with the civil war in Lebanon in 1975-6, a couple of years before the book was published. But he begins the first substantive chapter, entitled ‘Knowing the Oriental’, in June of 1910, when the House of Commons in London listened to a speech by Arthur James Balfour, leader of the Conservative Party and former Prime Minister, on the problems of Egypt. While Egypt was not formally a part of the British Empire, Britain had had very important financial and strategic interests in the country since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and British administrators and troops had been in place there since the Arabi revolt of 1881-2.² Now that Egyptian nationalism was admitted to be on the rise, some questioned whether the British presence should be maintained there, and Balfour’s speech of June 1910 is an eloquent defence of British involvement in Egypt’s affairs.³ He pays due tribute to the greatness and antiquity of Egyptian civilization, and disclaims any superiority to it on the part of the relatively youthful civilizations of Europe. But his western knowledge of the Orient also tells him that Egypt is a country that has never of its own motion established self-government, and

² Anglo-French dual control was established over the Khedive’s finances in 1876. Britain intervened to save the Khedive from the Arabi revolt in 1881-2, and Sir Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer) was put in place to reform Egyptian finances. British administrators and troops remained in the country. With the outbreak of war in 1914 Egypt was made a British protectorate.

³ The speech is reprinted in A. P. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and its Enemies*, 1959, 2nd edition (London: Macmillan, 1985) 359-62. For its intellectual context, see Jason Tomes, *Balfour and Foreign Policy: The International Thought of a Conservative Statesman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

that the same may be said of all other oriental nations; it is on this knowledge, and on the record of their administrative success, that Balfour bases his defence of British *de facto* government of Egypt. For Said, this is a first instance of the way knowledge of the Orient legitimizes power over it.⁴

It is significant for the autobiographical dimension of *Orientalism* that Said's first witness is the future author of the Balfour Declaration proposing the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine.⁵ But he soon goes on to focus on a figure more centrally identified with 'England in Egypt': one of the great imperial proconsuls, the Earl of Cromer, the former Sir Evelyn Baring, of whom, when he retired as Consul General in Egypt in 1907, Balfour himself said: 'Lord Cromer's services during the past quarter of a century have raised Egypt from the lowest pitch of social and economic depredation until it now stands among Oriental nations, I believe, absolutely alone in its prosperity, financial and moral'.⁶ While Balfour's theses on Orientals pretended to objective universality, Said observes, Cromer spoke about Orientals 'specifically as what he had ruled or had to deal with, first in India, then for the twenty-five years in Egypt during which he emerged as the paramount consul-general in England's empire'.⁷ It is with the example of Cromer that Said expounds fully his own thesis of empire as essentially a cybernetic system, dealing in the control and communication of knowledge. 'Once again, knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control'.⁸ Orientalism – western knowledge of the Orient – was a rationalization of colonial rule, and colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmndsworth: Penguin, 1985) 31-6.

⁵ The 'Balfour Declaration' was actually drafted by Leopold Amery, 'after Milner had tried his hand', on 2 November 1917. See the discussion in Thornton, 167. Balfour was Foreign Secretary in Lloyd George's war cabinet.

⁶ See Denis Judd, *Balfour and the British Empire: a study in imperial evolution 1874-1932* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 286.

⁷ Said, 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*

It seems appropriate then to ask just what the Earl of Cromer thought he knew about Oriental people. Much of the answer is to be found in the two volumes of his *Modern Egypt*, published in 1908, the year after he retired from his job as *de facto* ruler of Egypt, and Said makes extensive reference to this text. In this book, which is scholarly enough with its citation of French and German as well as English Orientalists, Cromer nevertheless insists that the knowledge he deploys is not that of a learned man but is empirically derived from his twenty-five years working career in the country – it is the knowledge of experience (and it is this knowledge, rather than the more textual knowledge of the scholarly profession of Orientalism, that is my topic here).

In the middle of *Modern Egypt*, between its narrative history and its political analysis, is an ethnographic and sociological account which has acquired some notoriety. Interestingly, it is presented under the sign of ignorance, being subtitled ‘The Egyptian Puzzle’. This part of the book is informal, sometimes jocular, and it describes the ‘Dwellers in Egypt’ from the point of view of the Englishman, such as Cromer himself perhaps, who has come to the country equipped with ideas about individual justice, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and similar notions, with the mission that he is to benefit the mass of the population. This slightly comic, haplessly well-intentioned individual, in Cromer’s account, has his work cut out in the confusing and exasperating conditions of modern Egypt, formed over sixty centuries of misgovernment and oppression. ‘In fact, the Englishman will soon find that the Egyptian, whom he wishes to mould into something really useful with a view to his becoming eventually autonomous, is merely the rawest of raw material’,⁹ (ME 561-2), and the Englishman, wishing to point out what is to be done by way of improvement and then to step back and leave the Egyptians to do it, will find that ‘to fulminate against abuses, which were the growth of centuries, was like firing a cannon-ball into a mountain of mud’.¹⁰ The cannonball, Cromer’s emblematic projectile of Western modernity, could be expected to make a decisive impression on any manufactured structure; but fired into a mountain of ignoble mud, it would just disappear. Mud in Egypt is, to be sure, no ordinary mud, but

⁹ The Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt* 1908, 2nd edition (London: Macmillan, 1911) 561-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 556.

acknowledged to be an enriching, cthonic, generative material;¹¹ still, Cromer is uncompromising in his characterization of his modern Egyptians as low, formless, undistinguishable, made from a different element when compared to their northern would-be benefactor.

Cromer has much to say about the Oriental character – as Said points out, he appears to make little distinction between the Indian and the Egyptian oriental, both being poles apart from the European in temper and disposition. ‘Want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is, in fact, the main characteristic of the Oriental mind.’¹² And there follows the catalogue of arrogant and racist put-downs – irrational, silent, stagnant in mind, improvident, unorganized, cunning, and so on – of which Said’s *Orientalism* offers so many depressingly similar examples from various places and times. Rather than elaborate on these essentializations, I want to draw attention to the use they are put to by Cromer. For the radical difference of the Egyptian, presented as a difference in nature rather than merely in institutions, religion, ideas of government, or social customs, constitutes a barrier which, he says categorically, ‘prevents the Englishman and the Egyptian from understanding each other’.¹³ The difference of the Egyptians makes them essentially unknowable. And if you add to this essential difference the strangeness, from a Western point of view, of their language, arts, religion, and their most ordinary customs and expressions, it becomes clear that there is an insurmountable epistemological stumbling block between the Englishman and the object of his knowledge and government. These differences may be explained by professional Orientalists, but such explanations are beside the point for the man of practical experience, the Englishman who is ‘only a diplomatist and an administrator, whose proper study is also man, but from the point of view of governing him rather than from that of scientific research into how he comes to be what he is’.¹⁴ For such a person, for whom the Orient is not an academic discipline but a practical daily problem, acknowledging that essential unknowability is the beginning of prudence, if not of

¹¹ ‘Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun; so is your crocodile.’ (Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act II sc vii, 29-30)

¹² *Modern Egypt*, 573. Cromer bolsters this assertion with a quotation from Renan’s *Vie de Jésus*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 579.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 586.

wisdom. Cromer was doubtful whether ‘even those Englishmen who have been actively engaged in the work of Egyptian administration have always recognized to the full that, in taking in hand Egyptian reform, they had to deal with a society which was not only in a backward state of civilization, but which was also, from their point of view, well-nigh incomprehensible’.¹⁵

If knowledge supports and justifies power, and the power wielded by the British over Egypt was absolute as Balfour described it, why this strange insistence on the unknowability of the Oriental in Cromer’s book? For this is more than just the rhetorical equivalent of a good-humoured acknowledgement of the strange ways of foreigners. Part of the strategy of thematising the cultural and natural distance between English and Egyptians is certainly to make a point about the magnitude of the task undertaken by Cromer and his English subordinates, and consequentially the magnitude of their achievement. But Cromer’s insistence on the unknowability of the Orient is overdetermined, and needs also to be seen in the light of his theory of imperialism, and his ambitions for the direction of British imperial policy in the years to come.

Modern Egypt is far from reticent in its delivery of an account of what Egyptians are like, in terms of an inventory of fixed essential national characteristics, and yet this is accompanied by, and at odds with, a language of incommensurability, featurelessness, darkness, mud. Cromer shows and shows off his knowledge of the Orient and then declares its inadequacy and defeat; the Orient must remain unknown. I believe the explanation of this contradiction can be sought in the contemporary debate about imperialism, in which Said in *Orientalism* unfortunately showed no interest. In 1908 Cromer’s task of governing Egypt was finished. But he still had a part to play in influencing policy, and *Modern Egypt* intervenes powerfully in the debate about empire which had been going on for more than a hundred years in Britain. Britain was a global power. What were its obligations and interests? Cromer, not surprisingly, had views on this matter, which were supported by his unsurpassed reputation as the engineer of what

¹⁵ Ibid., 587.

he himself called ‘the regeneration of Egypt’,¹⁶ the greatest success story of imperial administration. After a quarter of a century, what should the British do now about Egypt? In more general terms, what should they do about their empire, including India?

Some people – nationalists in Egypt and anti-imperialists in Britain – were of the opinion that the Egyptians, and others of what Cromer called the ‘subject races’, should be allowed to direct their own affairs as an independent nation, or – to put it less flatteringly – that Egypt should be left to ‘stew in its own juice’.¹⁷ Others felt that it was high time that Egypt was formally incorporated into the British empire. The first alternative was, in Cromer’s view, simply impractical. A British withdrawal from the country would see Egypt slide back from the modernity he had so painstakingly conferred upon it, and soon be given over, he feared, to despotism under ‘a retrograde government, based on purely Mohammedan principles and obsolete Oriental ideas’,¹⁸ and then become the prey of one of the less benevolent of the European powers. As for the option of bringing Egypt fully into the empire, ‘I never have been,’ he says firmly, ‘nor am I now in favour of the British occupation of Egypt’.¹⁹ The incompatibilities between British and Oriental people were frankly too large to sustain a permanent relationship. In the absence of ‘community of race, religion, language, and habits of thought, which ordinarily constitute the main bonds of union between the rulers and the ruled’,²⁰ only artificial bonds could be forged, and these could never be reliable. ‘Neither by the display of sympathy, nor by good government, can we forge bonds which will be other than brittle.’²¹ His quarter-century of Egyptian experience had left him unsentimental about the imperial family of races. The British, he conceded, were not liked by their oriental subjects, and never would be. And although the trade advantages of empire brought with them the burden of good government, it had never really been British policy or practice to get very close to their subject people.

¹⁶ Ibid., 587. This language of Britain’s mission of secular redemption in the Orient was at least as old as Macaulay.

¹⁷ Ibid., 904. Similar arguments were being made at this time about India, though it was not until after the Great War that the cause of independence for India began to attract significant support in Britain.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 908.

²¹ Ibid., 909.

He expatiated on this view in an address to the Classical Association a couple of years later, which was published as *Ancient and Modern Imperialism*. It is hard to imagine a more exemplary imperial occasion, as the great proconsul deploys his classical learning²² and his oriental experience to deliver his views on a comparison of the British with the Roman Empire, one of the favourite themes of English imperial discourse.²³ There were many similarities, he said, but the chief difference was that the Romans assimilated their subject peoples, in a way that none of the modern European empires had managed or attempted. ‘There has been no thorough fusion, no real assimilation between the British and their alien subjects, and, so far as we can now predict, the future will in this respect be but a repetition of the past.... From this point of view, therefore, British Imperialism has, so far as the indigenous races of Asia and Africa are concerned, been a failure.’²⁴ He shows that this is because modern imperialists face barriers of religion, racial antipathy, and language loyalty, unknown or insignificant to the Romans. Indeed, whereas Latin may be assumed to have united the empire under Rome, the acquisition of a European language by modern Orientals more often than not does nothing to inspire political sympathy, but on the contrary ‘furnishes the subject races with a very powerful arm against their alien rulers’.²⁵ The alienation that exists between the rulers and subjects of the modern Orient is a gulf that cannot be overcome; the antipathies that exist between them would make it dangerous to try. And this is why Cromer sets a limit on British knowledge of ‘the dwellers in Egypt’, and on British power. The aim is indeed eventual British withdrawal, and Egyptian autonomy, though this will take at least another generation to come to pass, he believes. This is of course the mission of liberal imperialism, with the usual deferral attached; for several generations, liberals had been

²² Unlike his contemporaries Milner (Kings College School, London, and Balliol) and Curzon (Eton and Balliol), Cromer’s educational path had taken him at the age of fourteen to Woolwich to train for the Royal Artillery. This did not indicate underprivilege. After active service and a spell at the War Office, in 1872 he became Private Secretary to the Viceroy of India, Lord Northbrook, who was his cousin.

²³ It is a comparison made, to very different ends, in such fictional works as Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* and Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’, but the assimilation of the colonial to classical paradigm went back to Renaissance times. ‘Europeans knew the world through its signs and correspondences to things known. The exploration of the terrestrial world was being carried out at the same time that Europeans were exploring their own origins in the pagan past of Greece and Rome.’ See Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1996) 79.

²⁴ The Earl of Cromer, *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* (London: John Murray, 1910) 88, 89.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

saying much the same about India. Meanwhile the Englishman in Egypt can deploy his detailed knowledge of the oriental mind to help him govern wisely, and with sympathy; but he will recognize and even welcome the fact that his knowledge runs only up to a point, and beyond that point the oriental remains unknowable in his radical difference. Assimilation is not possible, or desirable, and the Englishman's authority and identity is guaranteed by what we might call a prophylactic ignorance. The close contact of intimate knowledge is risky, and the enquirer might be swallowed up in that dark, muddy and alien interior, and disappear into it for good. An aloof, even philistine refusal to know plays an important part in the discourse of colonial experience, and suggests that in some circumstances power may be served by ignorance as well as by knowledge.

What Strickland knew

The Orient was a network. Cromer had been on the Viceroy's staff in India. The programme of administrative reform under his leadership in Egypt was carried out by British officials and technicians trained in India, and its dominant theme was the introduction of techniques, institutions and programmes based on their own Indian experience.²⁶ British Egypt was created out of the experience of British India. And knowledge was certainly power in British India,²⁷ as many instances in Kipling's fiction can attest. In *Kim*, the Ethnological Survey is a covert state apparatus for surveillance – Saidian Orientalism in its ideal form. But there are hundreds of less institutional instances in Kipling's fiction where information is crucial for control of a situation, and correspondingly where ignorance exposes its possessor to impotence, failure and ridicule. Kipling was enamoured of intelligence in the military-political sense, an enthusiasm not very surprising in a journalist, and his whole career testifies to his appetite for expertise

²⁶ Robert L. Tignor, 'The "Indianization" of the Egyptian administration under British rule', *American Historical Review*, 68 no. 3 (April 1963), 636-61.

²⁷ C. A. Bayly has extended understanding of this issue in important ways, and corrected a tendency to oversimplify it, in his study of the 'information order' of pre-imperial British India, *Empire and Information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). The period in question in *Empire and Information* is pre-Kipling and pre-Cromer, but Bayly touches on many of the issues raised here. Of particular relevance is his contention that the information revolution and the accumulation of institutional knowledge on which British authority depended in India were punctuated by knowledge gaps and 'information panics' (*Empire and Information*, 165-79).

(the combination of intelligence and experience), preferably of an arcane and professional kind. Expertise sustained the personnel of British India, where a relative handful of white officials exercised hegemony over a huge and varied population, and it conferred on them a sort of class identity.

Who is more knowing than Kipling's Strickland? Strickland is an English police officer in India, a character who recurs in a number of Kipling's stories, and always with the authority that comes not only from his office but more importantly from his knowledge of India.²⁸ The tale 'Miss Youghal's Sais' (1887) gives us most information about him. 'He held the extraordinary theory that a Policeman in India should try to know as much about the natives as the natives themselves.'²⁹ He has spent seven years educating himself to this end, and is a compendium of linguistic knowledge and ethnographic lore, for he has not only witnessed but also participated in various cults and occult ceremonies, of which Kipling gives a preposterous catalogue with his usual relish.

He was initiated into the *Sat Bhai* at Allahabad once, when he was on leave. He knew the Lizard-Song of the Sansis, and the *Hállí-Hukk* dance, which is a religious can-can of a startling kind. When a man knows who dance the *Hállí-Hukk*, and how, and when, and where, he knows something to be proud of. He has gone deeper than the skin. But Strickland was not proud, though he had helped once, at Jagadhri, at the Painting of the Death Bull, which no Englishman must even look upon; had mastered the thieves-patter of the *chángars*; had taken a Yusufzai horse-thief alone near Attock; and had stood under the sounding-board of a Border mosque and conducted service in the manner of a Sunni Mullah.³⁰

And much more besides. Here indeed is the Orientalist as agent, the man of fieldwork experience, in the know. Baroque elaborations of this fantasy of incorporation and control were to appear in a later generation in the legend of Lawrence of Arabia, and in John Buchan's *Greenmantle*. There were two well-known real-life precedents for Strickland.

²⁸ Strickland first appeared in 'Miss Youghal's Sais', in the *Civil and Military Gazette*, 25th April 1887, reprinted as the fourth story in *Plain Tales from the Hills*. He also figures in 'The Bronckhorst Divorce Case', 'A Deal in Cotton', 'The Mark of the Beast', 'The Return of Imray', and *Kim*, and finally in 'The Son of his Father' in *Land and Sea Tales for Scouts and Guides* (1923).

²⁹ Rudyard Kipling, *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1890) ed. H. R. Woudhuysen with an introduction and notes by David Trotter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 51.

³⁰ *Plain Tales*, 51-2.

One was the legendary ‘thug-buster’ W. H. Sleeman, who was credited with extirpating thuggee in a vigorous campaign of intelligence-gathering and policework in the 1830s. It is a thoroughly Kiplingesque (and of course Foucauldian) story, for the campaign depended on the creation of a body of Western knowledge about a shadowy oriental ‘mystery’ – in the double sense, for thuggee was seen as both an enigma and something like a trade guild – and then a transformation of existing legal structures of authority to master it. Sleeman’s agents had to create a knowledge of thuggee in order to bring it under control, and his apparent success in this perilous enterprise made him one of the heroes of British India in the East India Company days.³¹

Another real-life precedent for Strickland was Richard Burton, who famously made the pilgrimage to Mecca in Oriental disguise, and whose writing is discussed in *Orientalism* as the history of a consciousness negotiating its way through an alien culture by virtue of having successfully absorbed its system of information and behaviour.³² Said adds, though, that Burton’s knowledge is informed by a European’s self-awareness of society as a collection of rules and practices. ‘In other words, to be a European in the Orient, and to be one knowledgeable, one must see and know the Orient as a domain ruled over by Europe.’³³ This is obviously also the case with Kipling’s policeman Strickland. When he solves the mystery of the disappearance of Imray, a government official (in ‘The Return of Imray’), he is able to reveal not only that Imray was murdered by his Indian servant, but also why – the servant believed Imray had cast the evil eye on his child, who subsequently died. Strickland concludes that Imray lost his life ‘simply and solely through not knowing the nature of the Oriental’.³⁴ If anyone knows the nature of the

³¹ See Radhika Singha, ‘“Providential” Circumstances: The thuggee campaign of the 1830s and legal innovation’, *Modern Asian Studies* 27 no. 1 (1993), 83-146. Singha’s conclusion is that the success of the campaign was outstandingly inflated.

³² ‘Burton’s freedom was in having shaken himself loose of his European origins enough to be able to live as an Oriental. Every scene in the *Pilgrimage* reveals him as winning out over the obstacles confronting him, a foreigner, in a strange place. He was able to do this because he had sufficient knowledge of an alien society for this purpose.’ Said, *Orientalism*, 196. Before famously taking part in the pilgrimage to Mecca, Burton while serving in the Indian Army had gone undercover to investigate the Indian underworld, submitting a report to the Government of India. The adventure seems to have led to a mistrust by his superiors that damaged his career prospects.

³³ *Ibid.*, 197.

³⁴ Rudyard Kipling, *Life’s Handicap* (1891) ed. A. O. J. Cockshut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 203.

Oriental, it must be Strickland. He knows how to interrogate Imray's servant and trick him into a confession, because his knowledge makes Strickland an insider to the discourse of the Indian irrational, what the modernizing British dismissed as 'superstition'. 'Only such as are served by devils,' says the culprit admiringly, 'only such could know what I did.'³⁵

In another and yet more Gothic story from *Life's Handicap*, called 'The Mark of the Beast', it is again Strickland's knowledge of the East that tells him that his friend Fleete's lycanthropy is the result of a spell cast upon him by a leper he has inadvertently insulted in a drunken escapade in the temple of Hanuman. Strickland (this is very much to the point) also knows *what to do*, and his police experience again comes in useful when the leper is captured, interrogated, tortured, and forced to lift the curse, after which Strickland closes the case by returning to the temple to offer redress for the pollution of the god. His expertise is specifically in those areas of dark alterity where the irrational, religious and superstitious life of the Orient makes it most mysterious, and closed, to western eyes.

Strickland then ought to be a great asset to British authority over India. He is, as Dante says of Aristotle, *il maestro di color che sanno*, a master of knowledge. However, he has acquired his expertise, at some personal risk, through a kind of transgression, and at a price. For he has developed an 'outlandish custom of prying into native life'.

When a man once acquires a taste for this particular amusement, it abides with him all his days. It is the most fascinating thing in the world – Love not excepted. When other men took ten days to the Hills, Strickland took leave for what he called *shikar* [hunting], put on the disguise that appealed to him at the time, stepped down into the brown crowd, and was swallowed up for a while.³⁶

To acquire his knowledge of the Orient, Strickland has to become part of it, to be engulfed in the brown crowd. He acquires orientality, literally leaving behind the uniform of his office and the complexion of his ethnicity. But although he thereby becomes an

³⁵ Ibid., 202.

³⁶ Kipling, *Plain Tales*, 52. Like his almost exact contemporary Dr Jekyll (1888), Strickland's clandestine excursions on the wild side arouse suspicion in his professional colleagues.

authority, he does so at the price of a double alienation. For he alarms his own people, who can't see why he doesn't sit in his office and write reports like everyone else, while at the same time earning the animosity of Indians. 'Natives hated Strickland; but they were afraid of him. He knew too much.'³⁷ He has sacrificed or lost a part of the ethnic identity which sustains his kind. He has turned something of a witch-doctor himself, and is accompanied by a huge dog alleged to speak to him in a language of her own and believed by 'the natives' to be a familiar spirit.³⁸ When Fleete bays at the moon, the English doctor diagnoses hydrophobia; but Strickland knows that it is magic. The English doctor, if it were left to him, would have continued to treat the case as a medical – that is, scientific – problem and Fleete would have died, another casualty of the white man's burden. Strickland undoubtedly saves the life of the lycanthropic Fleete, when he recognizes that his friend is the victim of the leper's magic, and forces the leper to lift his curse. But for Strickland, to accept the challenge of the Silver Man's magic, which is the only way to save Fleete, is also to be interpellated as an oriental subject, so that when he competes with the leper's magic he has already capitulated to the leper's vision of the world, and agreed to play the deadly game according to his rules, admitting the inadequacy or irrelevance in this case of the enlightened discourses and practices of Western medicine, godliness and law, all three of which are scandalized by Strickland's unorthodox measures. To combat the Silver Man's magic and save Fleete, Strickland orientalises himself, and in doing so he makes the narrator his accomplice. 'Then it struck me,' says the narrator, 'that we had fought for Fleete's soul with the Silver Man in that room, and had disgraced ourselves as Englishmen for ever...'.³⁹ This knowledge has led to a fall.

Here we are in the presence of a recurring theme of Kipling's Indian writing, a chronic problem that besets his English characters. In order to control their subject people, they need to know them. Power depends on knowledge, and knowledge is acquired at close quarters. Yet they cannot afford to abolish the prestigious distance that sustains their authority. They must keep a certain aloofness, even at the price of allowing an

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Kipling, *Life's Handicap*, 193.

³⁹ Ibid., 190.

epistemological no-go area into which their enquiries cannot reach.⁴⁰ The Earl of Cromer, with his views on mud and what it is apt to do, would no doubt counsel Strickland against his taste for stepping down into the brown crowd. Strickland's superiors certainly feel his researches have gone too far; consequently he is considered 'a doubtful sort of man' (as Burton was), and passed over for promotion. When he marries an English girl, it is 'on the strict understanding that Strickland should drop his old ways, and stick to Departmental routine, which pays best and leads to Simla' – in other words, to promotion.⁴¹ At the end of 'Miss Youghal's Sais', we are told that Strickland is losing his knowledge of the Indian underworld, 'the slang, and the beggar's cant, and the marks, and the signs, and the drift of the under-currents'; to fit into the career environment of British India, he has naturally selected to become a conventional bureaucrat, dutifully filling in his Department returns, and renouncing his wanderings and his discoveries. The circulation of paperwork has replaced the acquisition of ethnographic experience as his speciality, and his bureaucratic duties, as well as the disapproval of Mrs Strickland, presumably keep him in the office and insulated from the brown crowd. We must assume that now he will smoothly ascend the ladder of promotion towards a higher and higher ignorance. Too much knowledge is surplus to requirements. The acquisition of knowledge can effect a kind of assimilation; it puts separation, and therefore power, at risk. It may be better not to know.

We might add digressively that the traffic of knowledge in the other direction is equally problematic for Kipling's English, as shown in his unremittingly hostile representation of western-educated Indians. Balfour too was to maintain that Egyptian nationalism was the unfortunate consequence of Orientals' acquisition of western political ideas, a knowledge that was in a fundamental sense foreign to them, unoriental. Many imperialists, including Cromer, deplored the policy of modernization through English famously championed by

⁴⁰ See Douglas Kerr, 'Three ways of going wrong: Kipling, Conrad, Coetzee', *Modern Language Review* 95 no. 1 (January 2000) 18-27. See also John W. Griffith, *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: 'Bewildered Traveller'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁴¹ Kipling, *Plain Tales*, 56.

Macaulay in the eighteen thirties, on the grounds that it led to the acquisition of inappropriate knowledge.⁴²

Strickland, in the interest of his career, draws back from the frontier of knowledge. Had he pressed on, the gulfs might indeed have washed him down. Kipling gives us an example of the Faustian damnation awaiting a man who pursues knowledge of the Orient too far. This is McIntosh Jellaludin in 'To be Filed for Reference', the last story in *Plain Tales from the Hills*. This is a man who has sacrificed everything – career, status, reputation, prosperity, friends, health – to pursue knowledge, and is thoroughly assimilated and 'sunk' into the East, adopting an Oriental name, wife, and religion, and living in poverty and dirt as a Mahomedan *fakir*. 'He used actually to laugh at Strickland as an ignorant man – "ignorant West and East" – he said.'⁴³ The point about McIntosh Jellaludin is that his knowledge takes away his Englishness (which survives in scraps of classical learning and a pompous way of speech), and destroys him. In the end he is wasted, helpless, on his deathbed, and he entrusts 'the Book' of his experience to the narrator, who is quick to disclaim responsibility for it: 'McIntosh Jellaludin and not I myself wrote the Book of Mother Maturin'.⁴⁴ In the end, Kipling never published the book whose paternity he denies in this story, and which was to be a novel of the Indian underworld. It seems his father advised against it.

Not knowing the Oriental

'Knowing the Oriental' was essential in order to control the Orient. Knowing the Oriental too well weakened that epistemological and political barrier whose function was to keep people, rulers and ruled, in their proper places. Ignorance, and a protestation that the East was fundamentally unknowable, might be a strategy for avoiding too assimilative a contact, and too symmetrical a dialogue, with it. Yet there it was, in its

⁴² 'For more than half a century we have, perhaps unavoidably, been teaching English through the medium of English literature, and that literature, in so far as it is historical, may easily be perverted from a disquisition on the advantages of steady progress achieved by a law-abiding nation into one which eulogizes disrespect for authority, and urges on the governed the sacred duty of throwing off the yoke of unpalatable Governors.' Cromer, *Ancient and Modern Imperialism*, 106.

⁴³ Kipling, *Plain Tales*, 275.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

fascination, seemingly wanting to be known, not just textually but experientially. If a character like Strickland risks a Faustian fate, his courage and curiosity also make him a hero, faced with a temptation of the kind Tennyson's (and Dante's) Ulysses was familiar with. Who could resist? Not Trejago, in Kipling's 'Beyond the Pale', who gains access to the world of the pretty Indian widow Bisesa through his knowledge of Oriental topography, language, and customs. He stumbles at night, in the oriental disguise of a boorkah, up a dark alley where Europeans never go, and woos her in her own language at the bedroom window through which he will be given access to her. Trejago knows Bisesa, penetrating in secret into the sequestered world where he has discovered her. Yet when tragedy strikes and her family take a terrible revenge, Trejago does not know enough to rescue her. The window is barred against him, and he cannot even find the front door of the house where she is being kept, and punished, 'in the City where each man's house is as guarded and as unknowable as the grave'.⁴⁵ It had seemed Trejago's knowledge had opened the mysteries of the Orient to him, but in fact he had scarcely broached it, gaining access instead into a potentially infinite regress of the unknown. Beyond the reach of his Orientalist knowledge, out of his sight, stretches the Oriental interior, the inside of Durga Charan's house where the mutilated Bisesa must spend the rest of her life standing, here, for that vast Hinterland of experience forever receding before Trejago and his kind. Knowing the Oriental too intimately could be risky; on the other hand, the Oriental can never be known *enough*.⁴⁶

This area of darkness, incommensurable and invincibly strange, is the other kind of ignorance – we might call it sublime ignorance – that besets Western writing about the experience of the Orient, punctuating it with blind spots, indecipherable signals, untranslatability, impenetrable thickets of the unknown, beyond representation, gestured at throughout colonial and Orientalist discourse with helpless capitulations to the mysterious, the inscrutable, the ineffable, the veiled East. The mapping (not the filling in) of these blank spaces is a project that could tell us a good deal about the history of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁶ 'Beyond the Pale' is presented as a cautionary tale about a man who 'knew too much' (the same phrase as was to be applied to Strickland) and 'saw too much' (ibid., 162), but complicated by the fact that the narrator who makes these judgements is manifestly at least as knowledgeable about 'native life' as Trejago.

western attempts to know the oriental. The vaunted imperial gaze is often contemplating something it does not know and cannot represent. Kipling, again, gives a sort of emblem of this in one of his earliest stories, 'The City of Dreadful Night' (1885), an atmospheric piece in which the narrator, one sweltering sleepless night, wanders the Indian city, taking in its sights. 'The pitiless Moon shows it all.'⁴⁷ He climbs one of the minarets of the Mosque of Wazir Khan, which affords him a panoptic view of the moonlit scene exposed before him. We may recognize this as a variation on the triumphalist 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' vantage, influentially analysed by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes*.⁴⁸ This is a story about appropriation and knowledge. The city, presumably Lahore, is converted into Western discourse, textualized and rebaptized with the title of a fashionable Victorian poem. The colonial interloper occupies the commanding perspective of one of the mightiest religions of India. The inhabitants of the city exist in the story as a spectacle for his contemplation, and in the moonlight they seem ghostly, like the dead, less fully human than their observer. But while this is a story of the authoritative colonial vantage, it is also about ignorance, not knowing the Oriental.

The Muezzin stumbles down the dark stairway grumbling in his beard. He passes the arch of the entrance and disappears. Then the stifling silence settles down over the City of Dreadful Night. The kites on the Minar sleep again, snoring more loudly, the hot breeze comes up in puffs and lazy eddies, and the Moon slides down towards the horizon. Seated with both elbows on the parapet of the tower, one can watch and wonder over that heat-tortured hive till the dawn. 'How do they live down there? What do they think of? When will they awake?'⁴⁹

My point is that, at least as long as he remains up there, he will never know.

⁴⁷ *Life's Handicap*, 273. There are extremely interesting similarities between this scene of the contemplation of moonlit Oriental sleepers, and the magnificent passage that opens Chapter 3 of Conrad's *Lord Jim*, in which Jim on the bridge of the *Patna* looks down on the Muslim pilgrims asleep on deck.

⁴⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) 201-8.

⁴⁹ *Life's Handicap*, 275.