

La Renaissance orientale

BY RAYMOND SCHWAB.

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It is most appropriate that M. Raymond Schwab should have written this book. Everything favoured such an undertaking: the contact he had, when young, with Elémir Bourges, his long familiarity with orientalists, and several introductory publications (which were the basis of his book on Anquetil-Duperron, in which he depicts the austere and noble figure of a scholar pioneering in the discovery of Indian and Persian texts). But to succeed in this task, required, besides, an interest in scholarly research and the gift of bringing to life both famous and unknown figures and of grasping the pattern of past ideas.

From the end of the eighteenth century, at the time when the major

deciphering of the manuscripts gave access to Oriental literature, the influence exercised by these new texts was profounder than appeared to be the case. This influence did not manifest itself, as has too often been believed, merely in a trend to exoticism. This was only its superficial reflection, the relative importance of which has been rightly estimated by M. Schwab in this stout volume. It was expressed rather in a series of interrelations and contacts, by means either of the spoken or the written word, between scholars (or well-informed amateurs) on one side and writers and artists on the other; and it acted through salon conversations and through the reports of travellers and other often scarcely

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known informants. It is one of the merits of this work that men such as Lanjuinais, Pauthier, d'Eckstein, and, a little later, J. J. Ampère or Fauriel, receive their due as heralds and purveyors of orientalism.

India occupies a privileged position in this book, less as a result of personal predilection than because of the author's partiality in favour of spiritual values. In this realm no other country's contribution can match that of India. If eighteenth-century rationalism could remain satisfied with China, the 'romantic century' needed rather India and Sanskrit literature which is its principal treasure. This treasure was discovered in 1780, simultaneously in the shape of didactic treatises and specimens of lyric poetry (especially *Sakuntalā*, which has been the dream of all the Romantics). Later, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, came the *Veda* hymns, the Great Epic, then the *Puranas*, and finally Buddhism, which can scarcely have begun to be generally known before Burnouf's *Histoire de Buddhisme* (1844).

What strikes the student of Indian culture is how few texts and, originally, what little trustworthy information was responsible for letting loose such a wave of feeling. Among the translations of Indian texts available between 1780 and 1840, those which show any merit, whether literal or literary, are quickly listed: the graceful renderings of poetry which we owe to William Jones, despite their inaccuracy; and the admirable French translation of the *Bhagavata-Purana* or of the *Lotus de la Bonne Loi* by the great Burnouf. Almost all the rest is unreadable. But those who

are not specialists are not concerned with accuracy. The early, idyllic *Veda*, which was accepted up to about 1870, is no less enchanting than the ritualistic and classificatory *Veda* which has since been identified.

The 'renaissance' came to a close with the end of the nineteenth century; and Nietzsche, Wagner, and Tolstoy were probably its last protagonists. By that date whatever was capable of assimilation had been absorbed. It is the end of a cycle of which the beginning goes back to Herder and the young Goethe. What could still be absorbed from this literature was too technical to pass directly into the stream of general culture.

The evidence of disaffection is marked by the intrusion of occultism. No doubt, esoteric movements have not been lacking in any age. M. Schwab recalls that a number of the earliest orientalist societies were members of secret societies such as the *Ordre des Illuminés*, the Rosicrucians, Masonic Lodges, or Saint-Martin's theosophy. But the perversion of Oriental values dates from the twentieth century, under the influence of traditionalist neo-Buddhist and neo-Vedāntic movements, dubious accretions which falsify the true India. Pseudo-Indian theosophy, the origin of which goes back to 1875, coincides with the appearance of stricter philological methods in the West, particularly in France where the teaching of Oriental subjects was resuscitated about that time. Since then, scientific knowledge and pseudo-scientific visions have followed separate paths. M. Schwab was right to bring his account to a close before the tide began to turn and

before (as he himself once put it) pre-tentiousness turned to pretence. Thus his book reaches its conclusion in a joyous and serene mood.

The 'Oriental renaissance' (this felicitous term has been borrowed from a phrase coined by Edgar Quinet) has admittedly a long prehistory. It all came very near to being discovered in the eighteenth century, through the combined efforts of the missionaries (particularly the French) established in India, Western scholars like Anquetil and de Guignes, who were interested in Asiatic origins, and native 'pandits' open-minded towards the West, such as Maridas Poullé of Pondicherry, whose meeting with de Guignes is considered by M. Filliozat as the beginning of Indian studies.

But it is not with the history of Oriental studies (which has partly at least already been written) that M. Schwab is primarily concerned, though he often refers to this aspect of the subject, so much as with establishing the ways and means whereby this 'rediscovered knowledge' becomes part of the tradition of humanism.

If, during the earliest exchanges, the English were pioneers in deciphering the texts, and later, with Burnouf, the centre of gravity moved for some time to Paris, it was nevertheless principally the Germans who stimulated thought and fomented ideas. It does not follow, however, that there is any special affinity between the Teutonic soul and the East, despite everything that has been said, even in France (by Quinet and many others) in support of this confused thesis. Hugo, as quoted by M. Schwab, indeed went so far as to

say that 'India ended up by becoming Germany'. The affinity is much more between India, or even the East in general, and the romantic disposition: 'The East, Supreme Symbol of Romance', is the title of M. Schwab's final chapter. But an infatuation based on such fragile foundations is certainly to some extent the result of illusion and misunderstanding. The curiosity, however, is at least of a high standard and the enthusiasm which here and there oversteps the limitations of knowledge can rediscover with sure insight the abiding character of Asian genius.

M. Schwab has considered all the familiar sources of correspondence and conversation. Minor works, detached ideas, and hidden intentions often show evidence of an influence which novels and poems have not retained. It would be futile to try to assess this influence in Hugo (insofar as it was Indian) from the single case of 'Suprémacie' (in the *Légende*), which is an adaptation of the *Kena-Upanishad*, when in Lamartine or Michelet, who were after all no more impressionable than Hugo, the main stream of Indian influence flows, as it were, unabated.

What is to be found more often than direct influence is rather an affinity of feeling and a convergence of thought. There is no common measure between what Browning can have known of India, and the 'Vedāntic' character of his work, which has moved Indians more than once to consider him one of theirs. What is looked for in the East, and above all in India, is something already present and found in oneself. India serves as an alibi; it is the mythical realm crystallising a certain

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literary esoterism and all the diffuse, undeveloped tendencies, negatively defined by M. Schwab in the term 'anti-occidentalism'.

The 'Oriental renaissance', then, though partly a result of known contacts and direct literary links, is a kind of impregnation of Western thought by the East. Its effect was that one fine day the *homo classicus* of the eighteenth century (however intense his curiosity

about distant civilisations) appeared to have vanished. M. Raymond Schwab has retraced the fresco which depicts this mental voyage, this journey in space and, above all, into the past to rediscover archaic forms and the accompanying progressive desertion of the 'Rome-Versailles axis' under the influence of the East. Moreover, he has conceived and executed this work, as was appropriate, in the spirit of a poet.