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The Conflict Between East and West (In Urdu Literature)¹

LORD MACAULAY has said ...

Ibn Rashīq² has said ...

Not only Urdu criticism but also our creative work has been embroiled in this dilemma for the past one hundred years. Sometimes we think that since Lord Macaulay arrived riding on a train he must be right; and sometimes the memory of the happy days of old, full of tranquility and ease, makes us feel that truth must assuredly lie with Ibn Rashīq. Most important of all, regardless of the fact that a home-cooked chicken from one's own coop tastes like *dāl*, it's still a chicken.³ Then they say, well, hop aboard the train, but bring your hookah along—consider them both right. But when the two refuse to reconcile, the feud starts all over again: whether one should hold onto the hookah, or the train ticket.

This conflict has split our people into three literary groups, with their boundaries so fluid and permeable that at times all three appear to be fused into one. One group says that the train of the English is a good thing, so their literature must be good too, and likewise their literary

¹“Mashriq aur Maghrib kī Āvēzish (Urdū Adab Mēñ),” from the author's collection *Vaqt kī Rāgnī* (Lahore: Qausain, 1979), 7–20. Footnotes have been added by the translator.

²Abū ‘Alī Ḥasan b. Rashīq (1000–63/64) was an Arab poet and poetic theoretician from Northwest Africa, famous for his unremitting pursuit of artistic elegance in poetry. His major work, *Al-‘Umda fī Ṣinā‘at al-Shi‘r va Naqdih*, is considered the basic work expounding expertly the principles of poetry as a conscious “art.”

³“*Ghar kī murghī dāl barābar*,” is used to imply that familiar things, however high in value, are nonetheless considered insignificant.

principles. Hence Ḥālī's⁴ famous dictum "Come now, let's follow the West!" This group has another branch. You may include me in it if you like. Anyway, this branch says that, whether we like it or not, the English train has already made us a third, maybe even half English. We cannot therefore not accept English literary values permanently or temporarily. The second group says: well, yes, we *have* ridden the English train, but we remain the same old cobbler aboard the train as before. Why even try to become a Sayyid?⁵ We'll get by with our old Ibn Rashīq. The third group—well, to tell you the truth, it says nothing. If it runs into a Muslim, it greets him with a "Salam!," and if into a Brahman, with a "Ram Ram!" But it does offer this counsel to others: Bear ill will toward neither East nor West. Wherever you find anything good, grab it fearlessly. On the face of it, this is a pretty reasonable counsel, but this is precisely where the whole problem begins: how does one decide what is a good or a bad thing? At any rate, this group expectantly awaits the day when somehow East and West will both come together in literature, so why bother, let's just keep moving along. This group saves us from the agony of thinking—precisely why it is accorded respect everywhere.

The tension between East and West may well have thrown our Urdu literature into a heightened state of convulsion, but what actually happened in the last ten or twelve years is that it began to wither away. Among others, one reason is that, whether defending the East or the West, none of us is really free of bad faith. We seem to trust neither, nor do we bring our hesitancy out in the open. This is why we avoid an exhaustive discussion of the problem just as much as we avoid forming a clear conception of the East and West in our minds. Nonetheless we do perceive some difference between Eastern and Western literatures, even though we shy away from finding out what this difference is and why.

If this literary difference is the product merely of the West's greater progress in material sciences and methods, then one can hardly consider it

⁴Khvāja Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914), poet, essayist, critic, biographer of Ghālib, and famous for his long poem *Madd-o-Jazar-e Islām* (The Ebb and Flow of Islam) and a critical monograph *Muqaddima-e She'r-o-Shā'eri* (Preface to Poetry and Poetics). He was an ardent champion of English literary values and did much to popularize them in Urdu.

⁵A descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad; hence, entitled to respect and an elevated position among Muslims. What is implied here is this: a plebeian should not pretend to be a patrician for he will never be one.

insurmountable. It can indeed be easily fixed. On the other hand, if we want to preserve the spirit of Eastern literature, then all we have to do is dig into our old position regarding the material sciences and, voilà, the spirit of the East will remain alive. But if a transmutation into Western is what we desire for our literature, we just need to wait a little. With committed hard work we will inevitably catch up to the West in forty or fifty years, and then the spirit of our literature will automatically become Western.

But if the matter isn't merely external and superficial and if inner feelings (*kaiḥyāt*) also play a role in literature, we can come up with a different explanation, viz., the East and West have different literary tastes. Our normal experience, however, could easily reveal to us that "taste," once it is isolated from a host of other factors, ceases to be anything concrete in and of itself. And if it really is a matter of "taste," here again time will help. If we keep reading and imitating Western literature for, say, twenty or twenty-five years, our "taste" will unavoidably also change without our being conscious of it in the least. East and West will become one body and one soul, or else our literature will keep moving between two points: following in the tracks of the East for six months, and of the West for another six.

A third point of view for grasping this difference would be sociological. For instance, we can adopt the theory that the difference between the two literatures is the difference between two political, social, and economic systems. So, as long as these systems remain different, their corresponding literatures will remain different, and their union would also inevitably eliminate the difference in the two literatures. Consequently, we must think not about literary values but, rather, about sociological systems. If only the matter were so simple! The main difficulty from a purely sociological perspective is that sociology cannot satisfactorily explain even one of the inner aspects of man's life. And if we truly believe that it can then there is little left for us to do; whatever is required, sociological factors would bring it about through our agency, whether we like it or not.

Some other people say that the difference between East and West is, in fact, a matter of two different traditions. Such people usually equate "tradition" with "habit," i.e., "tradition" is what a certain nation or group has continued to do for one or two hundred years. The story about "habit" is this: no doubt "habit" does become second nature, but what is "secondary" (*ṣānvi*) is not what is "essential" (*lāzimī*) and can easily be replaced with something else. True, we've become accustomed to litera-

ture of a certain kind, but if we forced ourselves to produce a new kind of literature we would become used to it in a short period of time and would start calling this new “habit” a “tradition.”

It is said that behind every poetic taste there lies a particular concept of beauty (*naẓariya-e jamāl*). Perhaps then the difference between East and West can be explained with the help of concepts of beauty. First of all, to begin with it is difficult to say that the West has had a single concept of beauty all along. But let’s not raise this question now, instead let’s just suppose that, with the help of all that several dozen Western thinkers and poets have written about beauty, we have determined a concept of beauty for the West. The amusing thing about the East, however, is that it absolutely does not have an independent philosophy of aesthetics. In the East, aesthetics has always been treated as an adjunct of “divinity” (*ilāhiyāt*). So aesthetics does not enjoy any independent status, but you could, if you wanted, derive it from “divinity.” Inevitably therefore, one must first study religion and non-religion if one wants to grasp the difference between poetic tastes.

If we’re willing not to use the word “religion” with some vague meaning or just for creating atmospherics, but rather to give it the concrete meaning of an aggregate of “beliefs” (*i’itiqādāt*), “acts of worship” (*ibādāt*), and “ethics” (*ikhḷāqiyāt*), as well as a blending of emotion with each of these, perhaps then religion would help us understand something of the difference between the old Eastern and the Western poetry. But this would not be without difficulties. For instance, religion, in the sense we have appropriated for it, exists neither among the Hindus nor among the Chinese. If we want to understand the difference between Eastern and Western literature, then, inasmuch as literature depends on religion, this will only tell us the difference between the literature of Muslims and that of the West. What of the East as a whole then? Should we exclude the Hindus and the Chinese from the East? Or consider the word “East” itself entirely absurd? To each his own melody? The second difficulty is that, if we consider the matter from the perspective of religion, this would no doubt help us in understanding the literature of the past, but it would provide little or no help for the future because nowadays the whole world is uniting in one religion—how to make money. For the past three hundred years Protestant thinkers have been continually playing a joke on their religion by expelling from it first “beliefs,” then “acts of worship,” and finally even “ethics,” all in an effort to harmonize with whatever trends may have gained currency in society. In fact, certain Protestant thinkers have unequivocally stated that religion should keep evolving with

the times, as though religion were not an independent entity but something organic that grows and proliferates. But the second part of this proposition, which these people have glossed over in silence, is that a thing that grows will also wither away and finally die. Anyway, this sort of thinking too has received great acceptance among us. We have, after all, been following one school of Protestant theology or another since Raja Ram Mohan Roy⁶ and Sir Sayyid's times, and we too are progressively becoming harmonized with our time. If the process continues, likely a time is not far off when perhaps only the *names* Christian, Hindu, and Muslim will survive, with the whole world actually following a single religion. If such should happen, the world as a whole will also have an identical literature. And all this mess of East and West will simply evaporate.

If we won't accept even this solution, then all we're left with is Spengler's⁷ old dictum: each society creates its own particular artistic forms which can only be understood from within that society. Well, in that case, we can understand neither old Eastern literature nor Western, and the whole discourse is little more than an exercise in futility.

But let's not admit defeat just yet. The world has sprouted literally hundreds of concepts of literature, and there are also umpteen kinds of poetic taste. Poets, too, have advanced all kinds of claims about themselves. One offers the truth of his emotions, another of his unconscious, still others of the external world, of sensible or imaginal experience, or the truth of purely aesthetic affinities. However, all these claims share one thing in common—"truth." Not one of them ever claims to be speaking falsehood, and even when someone does lie, the lie itself is claimed to be the greatest truth. In short, some concept of "Reality" or other lurks behind every literary work, even though this element alone may not suffice to confer on a piece of writing the status of literature. At the moment there is no need to engage in a debate over whether the manner of feeling produces a particular concept of Reality (*ḥaqīqat*), or the concept of Reality a manner of feeling. It is rather the mutual relationship of the two that is more important for us. Then again, it is easier to define the "concept of

⁶A Brahman, Mohan Roy (1772–1833) worked for the East India Company. He is considered the father of the Hindu Renaissance; to achieve this end he founded the famous *Brahmo Samaj*.

⁷Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), author of the famous *Der Untergang Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West, 2 vols., 1918–22), regarded as his major contribution to social theory.

Reality” clearly than it is to define a “manner of feeling.” And so, we will try to determine from this point of view the difference between East and West.

Their variegated secondary differences notwithstanding, a fundamentally uniform concept of Reality runs through all major civilizations of the East. Here, Reality no doubt has several stages (*darajāt*), all of which, nonetheless, emerge out of the core Reality and are existentially by it. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that Reality is in fact one, and these several stages are merely different forms of its self-manifestation (*zuhūr*). Faizī⁸ has captured the whole idea rather well in the line: “*Yā azalīu’z-zuhur, yā abadīu’l-khifā*” (O Eternally Manifest, O Eternally Hidden). This core Reality transcends all possible determinations and is beyond even the sphere of self-manifestation. Hence it cannot even be described by words. If nonetheless we’re forced to describe it, the most that we can do is add the negative to every determination that we can possibly think of. In Islamic terms this stage, in the scheme of the stages of Reality, is called *‘alam-e lāhūt*⁹ (World of the Divine Nature).

Although this Supreme Reality is above and beyond the sphere of manifestation, it does nonetheless show itself, which is why it is split into a variety of stages. The first stage is entirely without forms or shapes, but here we do seem to edge a step closer to “determinations.” This then is the *‘alam-e jabarūt* (World of Omnipotence). Now forms appear in two distinct ways, each occupying a stage of its own: first a subtler manifestation (*zuhūr-e laṭīf*) occurs and this stage is called *‘alam-e malakūt* (World of the Permanent Sovereignty), then comes the corporeal manifestation (*zuhūr-e kaṣīf*), the stage called *‘alam-e nāsūt* (World of human nature).

All Eastern civilizations teach about these stages of Reality using a geometrical diagram of a large circle enclosing a smaller circle, within that circle a yet smaller circle, and so on, until the central dot is reached. This dot and the outer large circle are in fact one and the same thing. On the one hand, all of these smaller circles are circumscribed by the large circle,

⁸Abu’l-Faiz (1547–95), who wrote under the pen names of Faizī and Fayyāzī, was the poet laureate of Mughal Emperor Akbar. An erudite scholar, he was also an accomplished translator and poet who wrote ghazals, *qaṣīdas*, and *maṣnavīs* in Persian.

⁹For a better understanding of this and other similar terms, see the glossary in Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Thorsons Publishers Limited, 1976), 114–26.

and on the other, they could not have come into being without the central dot. As a result, it can be said that, while we can split Reality into stages and circles, in each stage or circle Reality remains, in effect, the same.

This then was the concept of Reality. As for the method of reaching out to Reality, this too is identical in all civilizations of the East. The five senses, emotion, imagination—certainly all of these can help, but Reality is truly cognized by the intellect (*'aql*) alone. Here “intellect” does not represent the analytical/rational faculty, but rather pure intellect, for which another word, “heart” (*qalb*), is also used. It is Europe that has foisted “sense” and “emotion” on the heart, and nowadays we too are following in the tracks of Europe. However, in the East the primary meaning of “heart” is “pure intellect,” as per the *ḥadīṣ-e qudsī*:¹⁰ “the intellect is inside the heart.” Then again, “cognition” (*irfān*) itself has a particular meaning among us. True cognition is that where the knower, the thing-to-be-known, and the knowledge of the knower are all merged into a unity.

“Cognition” occupies the highest place in the East’s scale of values. Man’s foremost duty is to know the Reality, so any human activity which brings man closer to Reality will naturally have more value. By the same token, the farther human activity takes man away from Reality, the less value it will have. All human engagements, whether external or internal, have always been evaluated against this scale.

Inasmuch as literature too is a human activity, the same standard also applies to it. The East has characterized poetry as “part of prophecy” (*shā’erī juzvīst az paighambarī*), but it has never accorded poetry the highest place in man’s life, unlike Europe where, in the past one hundred and fifty years, some people have done so. Since the Supreme Reality is ineffable and gnosis of Reality (*irfān-e ḥaqīqat*) is not a matter for words, poetry simply could not have received the highest rank. In Europe it did sometimes acquire the same station as prophecy, but among us “part of” is as high as it could ever rise. However, in our system of values, even this “part of” is of some moment. Poetry is a prisoner of words, it cannot therefore go beyond “determinations,” and certainly it cannot reach *‘ālam-e lāhūt*. But, in its role as a “signifier/symbol” (*‘alāmat*), it can point to the *‘ālam-e lāhūt* and help, to a degree, in acquiring gnosis. Thus,

¹⁰Technically a saying/tradition of Prophet Muḥammad in which God speaks in the first person through the mouth of the Prophet.

within its own limits, poetry enjoys a firm position and value that cannot be denied. Although never the possessor of the highest station in the East, poetry also was never rejected callously as it has been by many European thinkers since the time of Roger Bacon.

Another gain is that if purely literary values have been accorded respect anywhere, it's in the East and not in the West. On the face of it this sounds rather absurd. But try to consider the place of poetry on the Eastern scale of values. First of all, the East has never entrusted poetry with the most sublime mandate of providing gnosis of Reality; hence, it has also not demanded of poetry the kinds of things that some Westerners have since the Romantic period. In other words, in the East poetry has never been coupled together with realism as it has been in the West. The result is that it has fared comparatively better there in maintaining its purely literary character. Then again, due to its exaggerated emphasis sometimes on reason, sometimes on emotion, and sometimes on morality, the West has imposed all kinds of non-literary limitations on literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sometimes it threw out certain expressive styles from the domain of literature, and sometimes certain subjects. Take, for instance, the whole fuss over pornography—purely a creation of Western civilization. Of course some people in the East have also criticized literature for such things from time to time, but on balance, literature has enjoyed comparatively greater freedom in the East, where all kinds of styles and subjects have been accepted with an open heart and good cheer. The reason for such openness of heart is nothing other than this very belief that all the stages of Reality emanate from a single fundamental source (Reality), and the lowliest of the stages of the corporeal world (*'ālam-e kaşīf*) is ultimately connected with the Supreme Reality so absolutely no reality can be rejected or disowned. A line of poetry can be about any of the stages of Reality, and its value will be determined according to the nature of that stage. Even if a verse has to do with the meanest stages of the corporeal world, it cannot be expelled from the domain of poetry so long as it lives up to the literary standard. In sum, the East has accorded literary standards the free status which they have been denied by Western civilization up until now.

This does not mean that the East has acknowledged a purely aesthetic point of view or the concept of “art for art's sake.” The latter could only have occurred to minds inhabiting the Cartesian world. Even though the East showed regard for pure literary values, it nonetheless also imposed its scale of values on literature because this scale gathered up every human activity within its orbit. The relative importance and value of a thing—of

everything in fact—depends in the East on its placement within a given stratum of Reality. If it belongs simultaneously to several strata, its value will change in each stratum, though the thing itself will remain unchanged. The same goes for “words.” In the East a word has many meanings, each of which is determined in keeping with its strata of Reality. Take, for instance, the word “*zāt*” (self/essence). Among us this word can only be used for God, but when it begins to come down the ladder of “manifestation,” then, on the very bottom step of that ladder, one can also hear a phrase such as “*kuttē kī zāt*” (the *zāt* of the dog).¹¹ So, while the word remained unchanged, its meaning was determined according to the stratum of Reality in which it was used.

The position of poetry also is determined accordingly in the East. Maulānā Rūm [i.e., Rumi] composed poetry, so did Mīr,¹² and so did Čirkīn.¹³ The East does not expel any of them from the kingdom of poetry, but neither does it accord them uniform importance. The West, on the other hand, would have had no qualms about ejecting one, maybe even two, from that kingdom altogether. Or, if not that, would have had no qualms in acknowledging all three as great poets. From the Eastern perspective, what is common among all three is their poetry, and what changes is the value of their respective poetry.

To put this Eastern attitude into a theoretical framework, one might perhaps say that any *she’r* (verse) that satisfies the literary criteria falls squarely within the domain of poetry, and of great poetry if it also helps in some way the gnosis of Reality. In the latter it is “part of” prophecy, that is, the poet has indeed been visionary (*āgē nīkal gayā hai*). If, on the other hand, it remains within the *‘ālam-e nāsūt*, its value will inevitably be less, though in the human world its value would remain intact. Further, if it represents the lowliest manifestations of *‘ālam-e nāsūt*—the most pro-

¹¹Unlike Western culture, in Muslim culture the dog is considered a filthy, lowly animal.

¹²Muḥammad Taqī Mīr (1722–1810), a major Urdu poet. He was a favorite of ‘Askarī. For an exhaustive treatment of his verse from the perspectives of Urdu and Western literary critical theories, see Shamsu’r-Raḥmān Fārūqī, *She’r-e Shōr-Āngēz*, 4 vols. (New Delhi: Taraqqī-e Urdū Bureau, 1990–94); also Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Three Mughal Poets: Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

¹³Bāqar ‘Alī Čirkīn. He earned a name for himself writing in a frivolous vein about the lower half of the human anatomy and its activities.

fane acts and coarsest desires of man in other words—and makes no effort to rise above them, then, even though it remains well within the range of poetry, its value would have to be judged very low and inferior.

Here let me remind you en passant that the last one hundred years have also witnessed many efforts among us to assess the value of poetry on the basis of the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad (*aḥādīṣ*). Whether we are conscious of it or not, we too live in the world of Descartes and study the Qur’ān and Ḥadīṣ from the perspective of the West. Consequently, some people have concluded that Islam declares poetry unlawful (*ḥarām*)—why, because the Prophet had dubbed Imra’u’l-Qais¹⁴ the leader of those earmarked for hell. Conversely, others have pronounced it perfectly lawful (*ḥalāl*)—why, because the Prophet himself used to hear poetry recited to him. A third group, perceiving the contradiction between the two verdicts, decided to keep quiet out of politeness. A fourth group immediately produced a moral explanation of the contradiction strictly according to Western reasoning: whatever action incites us to do good deeds is good, and it is bad if it tempts us to do evil. The place of “morality” and “acts” in Islam can be surmised from a statement of the Prophet made on his way home from a successful campaign against the enemies: “From a lesser struggle (*jihād-e aṣghar*), we are now moving toward a greater struggle (*jihād-e akbar*).” We see all these contradictions when we quietly hand our mind over to the West, forgetting the concept of the stages of Reality that is the foundation of all the concepts of the East.

The whole purpose underlying this discussion is this: without keeping that concept in sight it is not possible to apprehend the “spirit” of Eastern literature. Everything besides that concept—the entire gamut of expressive styles, similes, metaphors—is merely secondary and extraneous. And if you do not accept that concept, you also cannot maintain the Eastern spirit in literature. Only three possibilities exist when that concept is abandoned, viz.: along with the concept also give up all the expressive styles of the East, turn away even from one’s own literary tradition and grab whatever elements from wherever to produce an altogether new kind of literature; or just abandon the primary and basic meanings and simply regurgitate the external styles, in which case only the husk will

¹⁴He was one of the seven major pre-Islamic Arab poets. His panegyrics (*qaṣā’id*) are famous for his great virtuosity and abandon, and reflect the pre-Islamic Arab ideal of *muruvva* (manliness) at its best.

remain in literature and the kernel will disappear. This situation, however, cannot endure for long. If one keeps merely repeating the external styles, then, as a result, either literature will itself slowly atrophy and die or new meanings will, on their own, creep into the old styles, and these new meanings will ultimately change the styles too, leading to the emergence of a new kind of literature. The third possibility is retain the old styles but invest everything with different meanings. Here, too, the result will be identical to the second situation—either complete confusion or else the development of a new kind of literature.

And the most unpleasant conclusion from this lengthy discussion is that every literature is founded upon a particular concept of Reality, and its expressive styles too grow out of this fundamental concept, therefore, they are secondary in importance and become lifeless once they are wrenched away from that mother concept. If one holds dear the particular “spirit” and “atmosphere” of Eastern literature, it is then incumbent upon one to maintain the old concept of Reality. But this “maintaining” would necessarily require keeping one’s distance from all those things that are considered to be manifestations of Western progress. This, of course, does not mean that those people who believe in the Eastern concept of Reality lack the ability to manufacture washing machines, but rather that such people are never encumbered by the need to use one. This is no mere bravado; it is indeed fact. The Chinese invented gunpowder and the printing press but, in view of the potentially dreadful consequences of these inventions, they never tried to popularize them. Easterners had known about America centuries before Columbus, but they didn’t go there to rob and plunder its inhabitants. Well, what else? After all, Eastern concepts are notorious for producing this sort of inertia and indolence.¹⁵

But if we cannot breathe without “action,” and are also unable to hold onto the old concept of Reality, it’s best that we not lose any sleep over keeping the “spirit” of Eastern literature alive. This is the truth of the

¹⁵Cf. “If China did not expand most of her many inventions, it was because she lacked the original impetus which leads from the universal to the particular and gives a significance to such discoveries. Thus, the invention of printing was applied only in a very limited way to the printing of books—the discovery of gunpowder was limited almost entirely to fireworks—the construction of the compass never made of the Chinese a great seafaring people.”—William S. Haas, *The Destiny of the Mind: East and West* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), 136.

matter. If we tried to keep our “tradition” alive by force, at first, for a while, we would continue to believe that we are producing Eastern literature. Later, the old literature would survive merely as an echo, and, finally, one day it would be metamorphosed into something else—meaning, it would come to acquire the precise coloration of the West, inwardly as well as outwardly. If, in the end, this is going to happen anyway, why tell lies to ourselves. Why not jump headfirst into the enterprise starting today, and jump into it consciously.

Well then, we now know what Ibn Rashīq was all about. Let’s attend to Lord Macaulay a bit. He thinks, and we along with him, that both Western civilization and Western literature have been following a single track throughout. The reality, however, could not be more opposite. The West subscribed to the same concept of Reality as the East during the Middle Ages, except that this concept endured among us up to the nineteenth century without competition, and even today the majority of people still believe in it. But, already from the fourteenth century, weakness had started to settle in the roots of this belief in the West. Another clarification is in order. Even during the Middle Ages the West hadn’t fully grasped this concept with all its ramifications. Anyway, during that time the concept did prevail in both places which is why Western literature, during the Middle Ages, was comparatively closer to its Eastern counterpart. Just as today we are borrowing thoughts, manners of expression, metaphors, and literary principles from Western literature, so did Westerners back in those days borrow from Arabic literature, for instance, in regard to principles of criticism.

The place of literature in life was the same for the West as it was for the East. Both Chaucer¹⁶ and Boccaccio,¹⁷ having finished writing their books, asked God’s forgiveness for the fact that during their engagement with literature they had neglected attending to their duty, which amounted to a great sin.¹⁸ In spite of the profound similarity between the literatures of the East and West during that time, there was also a small difference. Even though, since the nineteenth century, the West has con-

¹⁶Geoffrey Chaucer (1342/3–1400), author of *The Canterbury Tales*, was the greatest poet of England before Shakespeare.

¹⁷Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) was a poet and scholar, and the renowned author of the earthy tales of *The Decameron*.

¹⁸See “Chaucer’s Retraction,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1, (4th ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979 [1962]), 224.

sidered Eastern people rather too emotional, the fact is that the color of emotion predominated in Western literature during the Middle Ages. Never mind literature, even Western mysticism could not rid itself of this tendency. For instance, St. Bonaventura believed that the special sign of those who were graced with union with God was that they remembered their sins even in that state of union.¹⁹ Since emotion has had great importance in Western mysticism, and emotion is a product of the material world, the West, in the Middle Ages, assigned such a prominent place to “imagery” that nothing remotely resembling that prominence could be found in Eastern literature. (I’m not translating the word “imagery” on purpose, although one could easily replace it with Ibn-e ‘Arabi’s term “*khayāl*” [imagination]). This is not purely my personal opinion. Westerners have, since the nineteenth century, been continually frowning upon what they consider a profusion of simile and metaphor in Eastern literature, and even our own Maulānā Ḥālī felt terribly embarrassed over this “fault.” But a Westerner, one who has tried to understand the East with due seriousness, I mean William Haas, also complains, with reference to the Islamic poetry of Taṣāvvuf, that people in the East have never valued “imagery” for its own sake, instead they have used it metaphorically.²⁰

The difference between the literatures of the East and West appeared when Renaissance Europe started to move away from the concept of Reality that the literatures in question had shared up until then. What transpired in the West after abandoning this concept, and what revolutionary changes occurred in Western society, is a fairly long story. Briefly, and by way of metaphor, one could say that in every household the washing machine replaced God, and the housewife turned into a dry cleaner, and no more. At any rate, here I’m concerned only with literature and will, in what follows, describe only the changes that were wrought in Western literature.

Before we go any further, let me make a disclaimer. I’m only analyzing the major changes that have occurred in Western literature from the perspective of the system of values, and not the status and merit of individual poets and prose writers. During the Renaissance a totally new

¹⁹“... Saint Bonaventura (1221–74) who declared that what alone distinguishes those united with God is the remembrance of their past sins.”—Haas, 189.

²⁰Haas, 130–32, 190.

thing that emerged, not just in Europe as a whole but also in the history of mankind, was the limiting of the sphere of Reality only to the material world. First people said that if there did exist a Reality beyond the world of matter, there was no need to worry one's head over it, and then, from the nineteenth century onward, the West maintained that there was no Reality beyond matter. Period. Right along with this was born the idea that one really ought to consider everything from the point of view of humans, not from the point of view of God. The declaration of the present age, according to D. H. Lawrence, was drafted not by such greats as Martin Luther or Shakespeare, but rather by Alexander Pope²¹ in the following lines: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of Mankind is Man."²²

So, Renaissance literature kept studying "man," considering human experience to be the Supreme Reality. Because implicit in this concept was the notion that man could control natural forces, through the exercise of analytical reason, this element acquired preeminence over all others after the middle of the seventeenth century with the result that literature, the material world, and human experience were all subordinated to "logic" and "analytical reason." By the end of the eighteenth century some people, tiring even of "reason," embraced "emotion" and "imagination." By the middle of the nineteenth century "emotion," too, was thrown overboard, and "sensibility" (*hissiyāt*) moved into its place. The pace of changes gathered momentum after 1915 when people tired of this new sport (i.e., perceptions derived from the "senses") as well, so then the theater (*nāṭak*) of the "unconscious" got underway. Finally, some people objected: why look at everything from man's perspective? After all, there are other realities too, far more basic than man? These people tried to present animals and vegetation according to the experience of these entities themselves and apart from that of man. Another group suggested: why not transform man's experience into mechanical forms? That is, why not consider inorganic matter the most fundamental form of Reality. In short, here is a serial inventory of things that have been considered the most important Reality from the Renaissance down to our own time: man, analytical reason, emotion, sensibility, the unconscious, animals, vegetation, and inorganic matter. The common feature of this series is

²¹Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was an outstanding poet and satirist of the English Augustan period.

²²Opening lines of Pope's poem "Know Then Thyself."

that all its constituents pertain to the material world and represent one form of “matter” or another. The other peculiar feature of these concepts is that they are not amenable to the kind of ordering of realities into stages that was possible under the concepts of “eternally manifest” (*azalīu’-zuhūr*) and “eternally hidden” (*abadīu’l-khifā*). Matter was, of course, considered the ultimate Reality throughout this period, but in actuality each group privileged a particular form of matter and subordinated everything else to it. This is the reason why no group in Western literature and philosophy would even deign to listen to the position of another group, making it difficult to somehow reconcile these various concepts, literary and critical concepts being no exception. Reason, emotion, sensibility—whichever of them had moved to center stage, it brought a new concept in literature in its wake. In general terms, such profound differences are noted among these groups that it is difficult, rather, perhaps impossible, to gather them together in any meaningful unity.

Come now, Hāli, let’s follow the West!

If one were to consider the changes that have occurred in Western civilization since the Renaissance from the point of view of the East, one would inevitably conclude that, as a consequence of viewing the material world and man as the foremost Reality, Western civilization has continually regressed from the perspective of the “Stages of Reality,” and now, after reaching inorganic matter, is even rejecting its hallowed gods: “man” and “life.” If, however, one considers the Eastern concept as just so much superstition, it may be objected: why call these changes a “decline,” a “sliding downward,” why not call this “progress” instead? Well then, let’s see how the prominent icons of Western civilizations have themselves summarized this whole process at the end of each of these changes experienced by their society. At the end of the nineteenth century Nietzsche declared that GOD WAS DEAD; D. H. Lawrence, around 1925, that the literature of human relationships had died; and Malraux,²³ after 1945, that man was dead as well.

It suffices for me to merely reproduce these proclamations. Progress or decline—that’s for you to judge. I’ll refrain from personal comment.

²³Askarī doesn’t give the full name but only “Māl-rō,” which I have identified, purely conjecturally, as André Malraux (1901–76), French novelist and art historian.

At the moment my primary concern is literature. We have noted that without the Eastern concept of Reality in place, the Eastern tradition of literature also cannot be kept alive, for the two are inseparable. If we switch over to the Western concept of Reality, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, our literature will also become a replica of literature in the West. Solely on the basis of “poetic taste” as something independent in and of itself, it would not be entirely correct to assume that Western literary standards cannot be applied to Eastern literature. Diverse literary concepts have been formed in the West on the basis of such elements as reason, emotion, sensibility, the unconscious, etc. Inasmuch as these elements also represent a few, but only a few stages of Eastern Reality, their corresponding concepts can also be applied to Eastern literature, though in a limited and particular sphere. However, in each instance of such application a sizeable portion of Eastern literature would be left out of consideration, and diverse literary elements would lose the value they had once had in the old East. If we did accept the Western concept of Reality, that would be fine too, for then Western literary concepts would be as satisfactory for us as they have been for the West. If we abandon the Eastern concept of Reality in favor of the Western, this would produce only one result: our literature would be reduced to being merely an appendix of Western literature.

If our following of the West is inevitable, then it is incumbent on us to desert our literature and try to determine the trajectory and direction of its Western counterpart. As I explained, Lawrence, around 1925, declared that the literature of human relationships had exhausted its possibilities, and that the creation of another great work on the subject was unlikely. If people didn't deliver themselves out of this bog soon enough, chances were they would either repeat themselves to death or fall headlong into sexual devastation. Lawrence's declaration has come true word for word. The popularity of Françoise Sagan, Beckett, Nabokov, and Lawrence Durrell is a case in point. This sort of popularity lasts for four, maybe five years and then, after earning for its owner an outlandishly high-priced automobile, vanishes into thin air. In short, contemporary Western literature has turned into the proverbial oil-presser's bull,²⁴ and if the situation went on for long, the bull would itself collapse to the ground one day.

²⁴“*Tēlī kā bail*,” said of the blinkered bull that goes round and round in a rut pulling the shaft that is connected to an oil-press.

Anyway, count me among those who hold that if the Eastern way is no longer possible, we must, at any cost and by any means, give the Western method a try for producing literature, because Joyce, Pound, and Lawrence too are, after all, part of the same West. However, even as we adopt the Western method, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that, if we only imitated the current and dominant trends of this literature, the most we could hope to accomplish would be to produce our own copy of what the West has already produced, and when Western literature dies its natural death, our literary death will follow shortly thereafter.

If our own literary method has become impossible for us to maintain and the Western method is fraught with dangers—could we not, perhaps, blend the two and create an entirely new product? But here is the caveat: only such things can be blended together that already share some basic elements in common. On the other hand, the respective concepts of Reality in the East and the West are so starkly opposed to each other that if one of them is right, the other, of necessity, is wrong. Only one or the other can be assumed at any given time, not the two together. The very suggestion of “blending” is patently absurd. The two can be blended only to the extent that one takes the external styles and coordinates of one literature and injects them into the other. But this blending, as is obvious, would only be superficial and external. Ultimately, one's literature will be determined by one thing and one thing alone: which concept of Reality does it offer? Oh well, even the third door is closed. A fourth possibility for the East was suggested by Lawrence himself. He said that only one way was left open for the East to renew itself—that it first soak up the West and then find its own way.

Lawrence also had a suggestion for how the West could renew itself. After declaring that the literature of human relationships had ended, he also said that, if a new and vital literature ever did emerge in the West, it would not be about mutual human relationships, but rather about the mutual relationship between man and God.

Could it possibly mean that the West will again return to the East?

I cannot say what it means. If I knew I would have myself produced this new literature by now. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*