

***Poe's "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," Macaulay  
and Warren Hastings -  
from orientalism to globalisation?***

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"Chaque époque rêve la suivante / Each epoch dreams the one to follow"  
(Jules Michelet, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999: 150))

Edgar Allan Poe is not a writer generally associated with India - a country he never visited - and it is relatively little known that one of his tales is partly set there. The story in question, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1844), in fact shifts dizzyingly between British, American and Indian worlds, and may be read today as both a *mise en abyme* of the nineteenth-century colonialist-orientalist project, and yet, in certain remarkable aspects, anticipating elements of the dynamic of today's knife-that-cuts-both-ways globalisation and India's surprising participation in it. Significantly, the orientalism of Poe's text links it to two major figures of empire, through quotation of one writing about the other. As has been long known to Poe scholars, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," in its Indian section – set in Benares (now Varanasi) in the late eighteenth century – quotes, tacitly but at length and all but verbatim, from an essay of 1841 on Warren Hastings, one of the most notorious of Britain's empire-builders in India, penned by none other than Thomas Babington Macaulay, best known in India's annals as the author of the "Minute on Indian Education" of 1835 which laid the bases of English-language instruction in the subcontinent. The convergence of Macaulay and Hastings in this one text by Poe, a writer whose privileged access to the unconscious has been amply demonstrated by psychoanalytic criticism, throws up dream-images of the East-West encounter that continue to reverberate today.

"A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" is told by an unnamed first-person narrator, an American who recounts an incident of 1827 from Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>1</sup> The tale centres on Augustus Bedloe, a wealthy young American, and his personal physician, a Briton called Templeton. Bedloe suffers from neuralgia and takes morphine to alleviate his pains, also receiving hypnotic treatment from Templeton. One morning, he sets out for a walk alone in the Ragged Mountains outside the town. He returns in the evening and tells the narrator and Dr Templeton of a remarkable adventure: at a certain point in his excursion, he suddenly found himself, no longer in Virginia but in India, on a hill overlooking a holy city. Bedloe entered the city and found himself in the midst of an armed combat between British troops and the local

population. Suddenly "imbued with personal interest" in the events and possessed by a "deep sensation of animosity" to the Indian crowd around, he joined the British side, "arming myself with the weapons of a fallen officer" (Poe, 1978a: 946). He and his fellow officers barricaded themselves in a kiosk, from where they witnessed the escape of the city's ruler across the river. Soon after, the dreamer returned to the streets, to be killed by a poisoned, serpentine arrow. He then left his adoptive body, became Augustus Bedloe once more and returned home. Templeton explains that what Bedloe has dreamt corresponds, in minute detail, to Benares in 1780,<sup>2</sup> at the moment of the revolt of the Rajah Cheyte Singh against the financial exactions of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal, and to the experiences of Templeton himself, then a British officer, and a companion of his named Oldeb. The fugitive ruler was Cheyte Singh. While Bedloe was in the mountains, Templeton had been writing down his memories of Benares, which he had transferred to his patient's mind by hypnotic suggestion. In the dream, the American Bedloe had become the Briton Oldeb. A week later, the narrator reads in the newspaper of Bedloe's death, from a poisonous leech administered by Templeton following a cold he had contracted in the mountains. The dream thus not only re-ran Oldeb's death but anticipated Bedloe's own.

Poe's plot brings together three different cultural spaces - Britain, the US and India - in a highly suggestive dream topography. The text has been subjected to diverse interpretations and combines a number of thematic strands. It has been read in terms of psychotherapeutic practice both nineteenth-century (mesmerism)<sup>3</sup> and twentieth-century (psychoanalysis, notably by Freud's disciple Marie Bonaparte),<sup>4</sup> and also of homoeroticism;<sup>5</sup> while, on the terrain of literary intertextuality, in the Spanish-speaking world Rubén Darío, in his 1913 essay "Edgar Poe y los sueños," compared Poe's narcotic-oneiric narrative to the dream explorations of Thomas De Quincey.<sup>6</sup> Despite the interest of those readings, however, what will concern us here will be the tale's historical, Indological and orientalist dimensions.

The American author's lack of personal knowledge of India was compensated, certainly in terms of nineteenth-century orientalist discourse, by what the Poe scholar Mukhtar Ali Isani, writing in 1972, called his "substantial preparatory research and ... careful and legitimate use of historical matter" (Isani, 1972: Internet reference). As Poe exegetes have known since at least 1899<sup>7</sup> and Isani shows in detail, Poe's description of India and Benares draws substantially on Macaulay's well-known essay of 1841 on Warren Hastings.<sup>8</sup> That text, ostensibly a review of G.R. Gleig's *Memoirs of the Life of Warren Hastings* (also published in 1841), is effectively a sequel to Macaulay's essay of the previous year on another of British India's founder-figures, Robert Clive. The two pieces were among their author's most popular works in his lifetime, both being reprinted as separata on multiple occasions,<sup>9</sup> and are classical embodiments of British imperial discourse on India. The Hastings essay,<sup>10</sup> while not Poe's sole source for the Indian elements in his tale, is

certainly the most important, connecting with key moments in the history of British domination in the subcontinent.

Macaulay's text is essentially a biography of Hastings, with little reference to the book supposedly under review. It charts Hastings' career as Governor-General of the Bengal presidency for the British East India Company (and suzerain of the two other presidencies, Bombay and Madras – thus, in effect, the ruler of British India) from 1773 to 1785, and his various actions extending the Company's territory and sphere of influence and entrenching its finances. These included the dethronement of Cheyte Singh, Rajah of Benares – in 1781 (not 1780 as Poe has it) - on dubious grounds on non-payment of tribute (Hastings was under instructions to fill the Company's coffers by fair means or foul and at native expense). This and others of the Governor-General's actions were perceived in British political circles as ethically suspect even by imperial standards, and on his return Hastings faced an impeachment procedure in Parliament. The trial dragged on over ten years and ultimately failed, but it remained a *cause célèbre* of the early years of British power in India. The Cheyte Singh episode was one of the main incidents taken up by Hastings' impeachers, one of whom was the conservative (but not automatically pro-imperial) philosopher Edmund Burke.

Poe made copious use of two passages from Macaulay's essay. The first is the Cheyte Singh episode and the description of Benares that precedes it (Macaulay, 1888b: 672-31); the second is an evocation of India as understood by Burke, as one who had read much on the subject but had never been there (Macaulay, 1888b: 642-43). In his dream, Bedloe first realises he is in India when he hears a "wild rattling or jingling sound, as if of a bunch of large keys," upon which "a dusky-visaged and half-naked man rushed past me with a shriek," fleeing a hyena (Poe, 1978a: 943-44). Macaulay's Burke passage speaks of "the jungle where the lonely courier shakes his bunch of iron rings to scare away the hyaenas" (Macaulay, 1888b: 643). Next, Bedloe says:

I found myself at the foot of a high mountain, and looking down into a vast plain, through which wound a majestic river. On the margin of this river stood an Eastern-looking city, such as we read of in the Arabian Tales (Poe, 1978a: 944-45).

The river is the Ganges, the city Benares: "Eastern-looking" prepares the reader for an orientalist experience, an element underscored by the phrase "Arabian Tales," an obvious reference to the *Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>11</sup>

Bedloe's impressions of Benares from above, far removed indeed from Raja Rao's inside view of the holy city more than a century later in his fiction of 1989, *On the Ganga Ghat*<sup>12</sup>, are visibly and consciously exoticist. Poe writes:

The streets seemed innumerable, and crossed each other irregularly in all directions, but were rather long winding alleys than streets, and absolutely swarmed with inhabitants. The houses were wildly picturesque. On every hand was a wilderness of balconies, of verandahs, of minarets, of shrines, and fantastically carved oriels. Bazaars abounded; and there were displayed rich wares in infinite variety and profusion - silks, muslins, the most dazzling cutlery, the most magnificent jewels and gems. Besides these things, were seen, on all sides, banners and palanquins, litters with stately dames close veiled, elephants gorgeously caparisoned, idols grotesquely hewn, drums, banners, and gongs, spears, silver and gilded maces. And amid the crowd, and the clamour, and the general intricacy and confusion - amid the million of black and yellow men, turbaned and robed, and of flowing beard, there roamed a countless multitude of holy filleted bulls, while vast legions of the filthy but sacred ape clambered, chattering and shrieking, about the cornices of the mosques, or clung to the minarets and oriels. From the swarming streets to the banks of the river, there descended innumerable flights of steps leading to bathing places, while the river itself seemed to force a passage with difficulty through the vast fleets of deeply burdened ships that far and wide encumbered its surface. Beyond the limits of the city arose, in frequent majestic groups, the palm and the cocoa, with other gigantic and weird trees of vast age; and here and there might be seen a field of rice, the thatched hut of a peasant, a tank, a stray temple, a gipsy camp, or a solitary graceful maiden taking her way, with a pitcher upon her head, to the banks of the magnificent river. (Poe, 1978a: 945)

The details are drawn largely from Macaulay, whose account of Hastings' entry into Benares includes the following:

... half a million of human beings ... crowded into that labyrinth of lofty alleys, rich with shrines, and minarets, and balconies, and carved oriels, to which the sacred apes clung by hundreds ... The broad and stately flights of steps which descended from these swarming haunts to the Ganges were worn every day by the footsteps of an innumerable multitude of worshippers ... All along the shores of the venerable stream lay great fleets of vessels laden with rich merchandise ... in the bazaars, the muslins of Bengal and the sabres of Oude were mingled with the jewels of Golconda and the shawls of Cashmere. (Macaulay, 1888b: 627)

Macaulay's Burke passage also offers close parallels:

the strange vegetation of the palm and the cocoa tree ... the thatched roof of the peasant's hut ... the drums, and banners, and gaudy idols ... the graceful maiden, with the pitcher on her head, descending the steps to the river-side, the black faces, the long beards, the yellow streaks of sect, the turbans and the flowing robes ... the spears and the silver maces ... the close litter of the noble lady ... the wild moor where the gipsy camp was pitched. (Macaulay, 1888b: 643)

Poe's description of Benares, like Macaulay's before him, may in many ways be read as a clear instance of nineteenth-century orientalism.

Here and in the first place I use the term in the by now familiar sense popularised, notably in postcolonial studies circles, by Edward Said's book *Orientalism* of 1978 – that is, of, whether consciously or unconsciously, exoticising, stereotyping and thus subalternising the 'East' – assuming that, in Said's words, "the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West" (Said, 1995: 40-41). Indeed, Poe's text is in some ways more orientalist than Macaulay's. The British writer already deploys many of the predictable clichés: teeming millions ("innumerable multitude"), labyrinthine streets, fabulous wealth ("rich merchandise"), alien beliefs seen as superstition ("gaudy idols"), irreducible alterity (as in the "gipsy camp"). Macaulay, however, employs concrete details (place-names like Oude and Cashmere, "the yellow streaks of sect") that Poe does not: Poe's India is more dreamlike, less well-defined, and thus more exoticist in an oneiric, fabular sense ("wildly picturesque" houses, "weird trees") that flows from the initial reference (not in Macaulay) to the "Arabian Tales." Noticeably, where Macaulay simply mentions the "sacred ape," Poe speaks of the "*filthy but sacred ape*,"<sup>13</sup> in an embellishment that needs no further comment.

However, before dismissing Poe's entire text as belonging to a totally negative orientalist register, it is desirable to look more closely at the tale's intertext, and concretely at the positioning of his source, Thomas Macaulay, regarding the orientalist phenomenon. Said himself adverted a posteriori against reductionist readings of his argument that exhibit "a fixation on the binary opposition between the West and the Orient and a tendency to homogenise both categories" (Said, 2005: 219);<sup>14</sup> what is needed is awareness of the historical specificities around a given text. The term "orientalism" itself has more than one meaning: in addition to that popularised by Said today, there is also the specifically British-Indian, nineteenth-century sense of "orientalist" as opposed to "anglicist," i.e. one believing Indians should be governed through the medium of Persian, Arabic or Sanskrit rather than English.<sup>15</sup>

Macaulay himself was no orientalist in either of the above senses.<sup>16</sup> He spent the years 1834 to 1838 in India, based in Calcutta as a member of the East India Company's Supreme Council,<sup>17</sup> but his interest in the country seems to have been almost entirely political and administrative rather than cultural (his well-known dismissal of classical Indian literature is not backed up by any detailed discussion of it)<sup>18</sup>. He notes the orientalism of Hastings, an enthusiastic student and promoter of Persian<sup>19</sup>, as well as that of his impeacher Burke, but does not share it: the two purple patches pillaged by Poe are the only flamboyantly orientalist passages in the entire Hastings essay.

Macaulay was the architect of two major phenomena both liberal and imperial, the Penal Code (drafted by him between 1835 and 1837 and still in force today),<sup>20</sup> and the position of English at the heart of Indian education. On the latter point, he was a firm "anglicist" whose "Minute on Indian Education" of 1835, drawn up in his capacity as President of

the Committee of Public Instruction, swung the balance in favour of the English-medium model. This text is above all famous for its oft-quoted and controversial programmatic aim:

... to create a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. (Macaulay, 1835: Internet reference)

It is less often observed that Macaulay was promoting English not so much against Indian vernacular languages as against the "orientalist" claims of Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. He strongly praised Indians' "fluency and precision" in English, and believed that using English would enable the vernacular tongues to modernise and acquire "terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature" (Macaulay, 1835: Internet reference). Indeed, Chandra Bhan Prasad, a leading Dalit commentator,<sup>21</sup> has recently suggested that "the full text of Macaulay's Minute shows him passionately arguing for modern scientific education for native Indians" (Prasad, 2004: 94). Curiously, Karl Marx, a writer not often linked with Macaulay, noted in an 1853 article the rapid progress being made by Indians in both science and engineering and in mastery of English – declaring, in terms recalling Macaulay's, that "a fresh class is springing up, endowed with the requirements for government and imbued with European science," and predicted that India would in time reclaim its due place in the world economic system: "We may safely expect to see, at a more or less remote period, the regeneration of that great and interesting country" (Marx, 1853: Internet reference).<sup>22</sup>

Today, Marx's prediction is in course of vindication. Macaulay's project of exposing India to technology and English is now reaping an unintended whirlwind. Globalisation, in its dimension of what the British commentator Anthony Giddens has called "reverse colonisation" (Giddens, 2002: 16-17), or what is now seen by some in India as the process by which "the margins have now ceased to be the pilgrims of the darkness" (Siddiquie and Kumar, 2006: 22),<sup>23</sup> now generates such phenomena as the subcontinental presence in Silicon Valley, the buyout of Britain's steel industry by Indian interests, or, notably, the ever-growing weight of Indian Writing in English in the contemporary Anglophone canon. Indeed, Cheyte Singh reappears as a character, in 1995, in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Vikram Chandra's epic novel that combines modernity and empire and, like Poe's tale, sweeps in India, the US and Britain.<sup>24</sup> Poe's dream-narrative imports India into the heart of the US, and incarnates a British soldier in the body of an American who dreams his death at the hands of an Indian. In history, Hastings in the end defeated Benares and Cheyte Singh; but in Poe's tale's culmination, it is Singh and India who, even if temporarily, overpower the British,<sup>25</sup> as Bedloe-Oldeb falls. Beyond the orientalist surface, Poe's tale of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be read as anticipating momentous future global developments. The US which, half a century after Poe, followed Kipling's famous injunction of 1899 to "take up the white man's burden" from the British,<sup>26</sup> now finds its domination

challenged on the global stage by the India once subjected by the likes of Hastings and Macaulay.<sup>27</sup>

It was Walter Benjamin, quoting Jules Michelet, who suggested that each epoch dreams its successor.<sup>28</sup> In the ragged interstices of Poe's surprising tale, the creative work of the dream-discourse triumphs over orientalist ideology, as the sleep of the Anglo-American colonists brings forth the unexpected and subversive colours of a future, more equitable global order.

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<sup>1</sup> Poe was (briefly) a student at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in 1826.

<sup>2</sup> Poe's dating is a year out: the Benares events actually took place in 1781.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lind, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bonaparte, 1971: 567-68.

<sup>5</sup> This point is made by Bonaparte (1971) and following her by Beaver (introduction to Poe, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Darío, 1976: 94; De Quincey, 1971: 110-11 (the latter, significantly, concerns De Quincey's "Oriental" dreams).

<sup>7</sup> According to Isani, the Poe/Macaulay resemblance was first pointed out by Henry Austin ("Poe as a Plagiarist and his Debt to Macaulay," *Literature* [New York] 2, 1899: 82-84). Isani names another five Poe commentators who make the same point. He further points out that the name Bedloe appears incidentally in the Hastings essay (Isani, 1972: Internet reference).

<sup>8</sup> Poe reviewed Macaulay's *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* in *Graham's Magazine* (June 1841), though his review does not specifically mention the Hastings text (see Poe, 1841).

<sup>9</sup> See Trevelyan, 1900: 263n.

<sup>10</sup> Isani suggests that Poe even went beyond Macaulay's text and incorporated elements from Gleig's book itself and from Hastings' own *A Narrative of the Insurrection which happened in the Zemedyary of Banaris in the Month of August 1781* (Calcutta 1782) (Isani, 1972: Internet reference).

<sup>11</sup> Poe knew the *Thousand and One Nights* well enough to write a year later, in 1845, a pastiche "Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" (see Poe, 1978b).

<sup>12</sup> See Rao, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Said's disclaimer in the 1995 afterword to *Orientalism*. The present analysis of Poe's text might be read in the spirit of the "contrapuntal" model of reading classic Western texts proposed by Said in 1993 in his "sequel" to *Orientalism, Culture and Imperialism* (see Said, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> For an account of the Orientalist/Anglicist debate and its resolution under Governor-General William Bentinck (1828-1835), in favour of the Anglicists and in the wake of Macaulay's "Minute," see Spear, 1978: 123-28. Said briefly mentions Macaulay's text and the controversy in *Orientalism* (Said, 1995: 152, 366n).

<sup>16</sup> Despite his dismissal of Indian literature and his role in framing Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (see note 20 below), Macaulay cannot all told be dismissed as a blinkered reactionary: he was in many ways a straightline nineteenth-century liberal, certainly much less conservative than the Southern gentleman Poe. It is clear from Trevelyan's *Life and Letters* that he opposed slavery and supported Jewish and Catholic civil rights and parliamentary reform. In India, apart from his educational and legal work, Macaulay also produced an important and influential "Minute on the Freedom of the Press" (Trevelyan, 1900: 282-83).

<sup>17</sup> See Trevelyan, 1900: 261-337.

<sup>18</sup> Macaulay famously wrote in the "Minute on Indian Education": "I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." (Macaulay, 185: Internet reference). However, Trevelyan's *Life and Letters*, which names any number of classical and modern Western works consumed by the avid reader that was Macaulay, contains barely a mention of any oriental text read by him other than – significantly for the Poe connection – the *Thousand and One Nights* (the "Arabian Nights" are mentioned twice on the same page by Trevelyan, quoting Macaulay directly – see Trevelyan, 1900: 297).

<sup>19</sup> "His enlarged and accomplished mind sought in Asiatic learning for new forms of enjoyment" (Macaulay, 1888b: 600). Indeed, Hastings went so far as to found a college of Arabic and Persian studies in Calcutta (see Spear, 1978: 126). Macaulay, though, makes it clear in the Hastings essay that in his own (obviously Eurocentric) view Hastings was *overvaluing* Oriental learning.

<sup>20</sup> In 1835 Macaulay was charged, as president of the Indian Law Commission, with drawing up an Indian Penal Code which would apply uniformly in all three British presidencies. The Introductory Report to his proposed draft bill was submitted in 1837. The Penal Code was finally enacted in 1860. As an ironic element in the intertext of Poe's tale and in view of the homoerotic reading that has been given to the Templeton-Oldeb/Bedloe relationship, we may note that India's still-extant prohibition on same-sex intimacy stems from Section 377 of the Penal Code. The wording of the equivalent provision (Clause 361) in Macaulay's draft differs from the 1860 text of Section 377 (which is still law), but the basic ideological position is the same.

<sup>21</sup> Since 1999 Chandra Bhan Prasad has been the author of a weekly column on Dalit issues in Delhi's long-established newspaper *The Pioneer*. His columns are collected in *Dalit Diary* (2004).

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<sup>22</sup> Original text in English. The perspective suggested here would be rather different from Said's critical reading of Marx on India in *Orientalism* (Said, 1995: 153-56), perhaps reflecting today's significantly changed global context.

<sup>23</sup> "In spite of the best efforts of [those] who have a vested interest of tilting their scales in favour of the developed and against the developing countries, the margins have now ceased to be the pilgrims of the darkness. They have now started threatening the Euro-American-centric West or have already started the process of de-centering. The examples of success stories of China, India, Japan, Korea, etc., are cases in point." (Siddiquie and Kumar, 2006: 22).

<sup>24</sup> In Chandra's novel, Cheyte Singh appears as Cheit Singh: "the Rajah was threatened by his eastern neighbour, that profiteering hungry amoeba-like being that had not yet metamorphosed into an empire, the East India Company" (Chandra, 1996: 126). For links between Poe's tale and Chandra's novel (which also makes use of the *Thousand and One Nights*), see Rollason, 2000: 146-47. For a detailed discussion of Chandra's text in its relationship to empire, see Sales Salvador, 2004: 509-27.

<sup>25</sup> Cheit/Cheyte/Chait Singh is still remembered in Varanasi as a symbol of anti-British resistance, and I am informed (by the Varanasi-born writer Sunny Singh - personal communication, 2007) that to this day there is a Chait Singh Ghat in the city, corresponding to the former site of his palace and the ramparts from which he is believed to have jumped on horseback into a flooded Ganges.

<sup>26</sup> Kipling's poem was written in the context of the Spanish-American War and signals the transition from British to US domination at global level.

<sup>27</sup> As a final twist in the tale's intertext, we may note that in 1886 the Statue of Liberty was erected on *Bedloe's Island* (now Liberty Island) in New York's harbour, and the little-known but telling fact that its French architect *Auguste Bartholdi* actually based it on the figure of an Egyptian (thus 'Oriental') peasant woman, originally intended for the Suez Canal (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue-of-Liberty#History>).

<sup>28</sup> See epigraph.