The King of Alsander by James Elroy Flecker: Romanticism in an Unromantic Age[1]

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Introduction

Literary success is a fickle matter. From Philip Massinger to Winifred Watson, there are thousands of talented authors who are, today, inexplicably relegated to only being mentioned in the footnotes of broader discussions. One early twentieth-century writer who has certainly suffered from decades of neglect and its associated slights is the poet and playwright James Elroy Flecker (184-1915). Flecker was a contemporary of W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound who managed to achieve fame in his day and briefly afterwards, but has since faded from public view. Had he lived longer and been able to develop his considerable poetic gifts, however, there is every chance that he may well have come to be regarded as the equal of the leading writers of his day.

Many writers have a masterpiece by which they are often defined and, for Flecker, that is his play *Hassan*. This, along with a very few of his poems that continue to be anthologized in surveys of verse, seems to be what has kept his name from falling into complete obscurity. In fact, there is even some crossover, as, for example, the Second Edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* (the Rumpolean "Quiller-Couch" version) has only his "Rioupéroux," a brief, descriptive pair of stanzas which originally appeared his 1907 collection *The Bridge of Fire*, and "Hassan's Serenade," which appears in Act One, Scene One of the play. *Hassan* itself has endured a series of evaluations and re-evaluations over the nearly one hundred years since its publication. From rapturous reviews by enchanted audiences to blistering attacks from critics, it is hard to think of many other works which have so suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous revisionism.

Despite his most famous play and a few of his poems being still known, however, few today realize that Flecker was also a novelist, a translator,

an essayist, a critic, and even an occasional pedagogue. His works include some superb translations of Baudelaire and Catullus, various writings gathered posthumously in the *Collected Prose* (1922), the educational text *The Grecians* (1910), and the novels *The Last Generation* (1908) and *The King of Alsander* (1914).

Flecker's Life and Tastes

As noted above, Flecker was born in 1884, in the same year as Harry Truman, Armedeo Modigliani and Hermann Rorschach, just to give some context. After an indifferent schooling at Dean Close and Uppingham, he studied Classics at Oxford, where he did his best to be a kind of Wildean decadent. He also ran up considerable debts, leading to an increasingly strained relationship with his father, the somber Head of Dean Close School, where Flecker had undergone his early training, and proved himself to lack sufficient devotion to his studies to graduate with anything more than a Third in Greats.

From here, he spent a term teaching at Holly Hill School in Hampstead, where he was, by all accounts, a gifted and popular teacher, studied Oriental Languages at Cambridge, and subsequently entered the Foreign Service. He turned out to be ill-suited to the rigours of Government work abroad. He was to spend time in Constantinople and Beirut, with those around him growing increasingly worried as he failed to achieve the necessary linguistic qualifications for his position, but tuberculosis ended his career – and life – early. He contracted consumption over the course of his travels and, while his sickness forced him to rest in England and on the Continent, he went back to Beirut for a while. Whilst there, he became friends with T.E. Lawrence, a relationship that has been dramatically fictionalized in Martin Booth's 1989 novel *Dreaming of Samarkand*. The consumption could not be cured, and Flecker eventually went to Switzerland in a last attempt at recovery. He died there in January of 1915. Lawrence himself expressed deep sadness at Flecker's passing in a subsequent essay.

A thread that runs through biographies of Flecker, with greater or lesser explicitness, depending on the period in which they were originally written,

is a suggestion of his homosexuality – or, at least, his sexual ambiguity. A particular object of his affections was John (Jack) Beazley, also a poet and a Classicist, with whom Flecker had been at Oxford. Their friendship was to define both of their lives at the time and their connection seems to have been exceptionally close, to the point of being described by one critic as “what may have been a homo-erotic relationship” (Martin 89). This may go some way towards explaining why Flecker kept so much of himself apart from many of his contemporaries and acquired a reputation for being difficult.

The present author has written elsewhere (“The Golden Road to Nowhere” and “Fleckerania”) on how Flecker has often suffered at the hands of his biographers, and even some who apparently admired him during his lifetime, such as Douglas Goldring, had little that was kind to say about him after he was dead. Indeed, in the first of those discussions, it was argued that Flecker, although living in the time of the modernists, could temperamentally be considered either an Aestheticist or Romantic (48).

Flecker was certainly not a wholehearted endorser of the poetry of his day. To Harold Monro[2], the publisher of *The Poetry Review*, he wrote:

> I like Ezra Pound as a joke - but good God they take him seriously ... anyone could write Pound - I’ll offer you six pages of undistinguishable Ezra at a guinea a page any time you like ... (qtd. in Sherwood 198)

He was even more scathing in a letter to Marsh, which contains the sentence “If I write my projected Futurist poem beginning “I slobber on the Parthenon” I shall send you a copy” (qtd. in Sherwood 198).

At least some critics have expressed similar sentiments in the decades after Flecker’s death. In a discussion of the Persian *ghazal* form, John Whitworth notes that “Ezra Pound asked rhetorically, ‘Who reads Flecker now?’ One answer is that I do, and more often than I read old Ezra” (136). This may, however, be a misremembered quote from John Heath-Stubbs’ poetic tribute to Flecker, “To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence,” in which he writes “For Who reads Elroy Flecker now?” (qtd. in Munro 10).

The King of Alsander

The novel *The King of Alsander* had a typically (for Flecker) convoluted birth. Ronald Gillanders notes that "It seems to have been unfortunate from the start, for Flecker recalled in a letter that he lost the first three chapters of it on the way to Paris in what must have been the summer of 1906" (364). From here, the work underwent a continuous process of editing and bouncing from publisher to publisher that was to take eight years. After interest in it from Secker and, later Dent, the novel was finally published in the United Kingdom by Max Goschen and in New York by G.P. Putnam's Sons, both in 1914. Here are a few comments on the work by some of his leading biographers:

> "…the least satisfactory of his literary productions." (Gillanders 364)
> "…only an ardent Flecker enthusiast would claim that it deserved more than passing attention." (Munro 93).
> "…an unsatisfactory and unequal performance." (Goldring 168)

The book appears to have no modern edition today save for facsimiles available through various Print on Demand re-printers such as "Forgotten Books." The discussion here, however, is based on a copy of the first US edition of 1914.

The novel follows the exploits of Norman Price, the son of a shopkeeper living in Blaindon, a rustic, utterly mundane fictional village "some ten miles from the sea, in an undulating, but not terrible, country" (1). Despite his humble birth, Norman is an energetic, handsome young man who dreams of great things. A mysterious Poet appears and persuades him to leave for a mysterious city called Alsander, which he does immediately, rather to his own surprise.

Norman arrives at the city, having seduced – or been seduced by – a girl called Peronella, and immediately finds himself embroiled in a lover's quarrel, as well as political intrigue. He is invited to a meeting of "The Society for the Advancement of Alsander" and informed that he is a candidate for the crown, with the actual king having gone mad and thus being unable to rule, at which point Norman is stripped naked and whipped, then dismissed by the Society's

members as unsuitable. Furious, he finds the British Consul (a satiric portrait of both a bureaucratic type and bureaucracy in general, doubtless based on Flecker's own time in the Foreign Service). From here, he becomes more deeply enmeshed in political turmoil and is eventually placed upon the throne via subterfuge, with the general population thinking that he is actually the long-absent mad king, having undergone a cure in foreign lands.

Despite his efforts to maintain the façade and being an excellent ruler, Norman's role in the deception is eventually discovered and leads to a kind of civil war, in which his former lover Peronella takes the side of those who would depose him. However, Norman has won the heart of cross-dressing Princess Ianthe, who becomes Queen upon the death of the genuine King. The King, in fact, attacks a statue in his madness during the battle, which falls on him and kills him. Thus, Ianthe takes Norman to be her husband, allowing him to resume the throne and truly become the King of Alsander.

At the end of all of this, the Poet returns to Blaindon and it is revealed both that Norman, despite his mundane name, is half human and half faerie, and that the Poet is an aspect of the Egyptian goddess Isis:

> …a white woman rose, huge and glorious, from the waves, with a horned helmet on her brow and spread over the sky like light till she filled the world. (348)

The whole story sounds like a magnificent mess, and indeed it is in strict terms of narrative, but it is redeemed by Flecker's sparkling prose and side observations. Gillander's criticism was based on E.M. Forster, noting that such "'bar-parlour chattiness'…has the effect of beckoning the reader away from the narrative to an examination of the novelist's mind" (375), but it is precisely this quality which gives the novel its force and joyousness. The story is convoluted and melodramatic, and much of the dialogue ridiculously artificial. There is also an extended sado-masochistic digression on flagellation in the middle of the novel. Gordon A. Craig notes that "Flecker seems to have been incapable of resisting opportunities to write at length about whipping ...

[which appears to] reflect his sexual preferences" (127).

The characters are oddly realized and their motivations obscure. Still, there is a pleasure in reading the novel which comes almost entirely from the language used throughout. Flecker is a master of combining a witty prose style with a kind of eloquent poetic description that leaves the reader unsure of whether he is ironic, sincere, ironically sincere, or perhaps even sincerely ironic.

Romanticism

Romantic elements make up a significant part of both what might be considered an overall tone of Menippean satire and the moments of earnest beauty in this work. Norman Price, at the outset, is set up as a man out of his place and time, suffering from wanderlust. As he leaves Blaindon, he announces his intention to discover a new life to the locals in the pub. Instead of congratulating him or expressing admiration, they laugh at him until he leaves. Flecker's description of this moment is as follows:

> Another peal of laughter, during which Norman disappeared, a baffled Byron, punished by the native humour of honourable working men for trying to produce a cheap effect. (27)

The comparison to Bryon is not accidental. Consider the archetypal Byronic hero, Childe Harold. There are definite similarities between Norman and the choleric protagonist of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, although the phlegmatic nature of the former provides a key to the shift of the Romantic topos in *Alsander*. Byron describes a hero wearied both by war and overindulgence, yet Flecker offers a Romantic protagonist who is suffering from the burdens of the dreary realities of his time.

Even the underlying conceit of the novel, which is that the irrational act of wandering off and abandoning everything in one's life to search for a city in which one's fortune may or may not be made, and which may or may not even exist, is based on the preferencing of intuition over rationalism, of what Tim

Milnes has called a "'counterdiscourse' of the late Enlightenment" (53). In such a context, Norman's act takes on a kind of heroism wholly consistent with the *Sturm und Drang* of the late eighteenth century. Realism is abandoned, or, at least, challenged in a return to Romantic form. This is apparent as early as the author's Preface to the novel, which asks rhetorically "*What has grim iron-banging England to do with sunshine, dancing, adventure, and, above all, with Poets?*" (vi).

The name of Flecker's hidden princess is another reference to several facets of Romanticism, as well as a classical allusion. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Ianthe is a Cretan woman who becomes the bride of Iphis, a girl who is transformed into a man due to the intervention of the goddess Isis. "Ianthe" seems to have been a popular name in Romantic circles. In another reference to Byron from Flecker, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage has a dedication to "Ianthe", which was Byron's pet name for Lady Charlotte Harley (she was only eleven at the time). Ianthe is also the name of a woman transported from her own body and taken on a kind of tour of the universe by Queen Mab in Shelley's poem of the same name. Shelley, in fact, named a daughter for this character. In poor Polidori's (this is a reference to Mary Shelley's description of him) Gothic romance *The Vampyre*, Aubrey meets a Greek woman called Ianthe on his travels. The poet Walter Savage Landor even chose the name to describe one of several women whom he – rather one-sidedly – loved deeply and who inspired much of his verse.

Another element of the work which is central to Romantic thought, of course, is revolution. Indeed, the French Revolution is mentioned in *Alsander*, most notably in the line "Oh, you Englishmen; you have never realized that the French Revolution has occurred" (194), and in the rising up of the populace once Norman's imposture is uncovered. The Revolution which takes place in the novel is an inversion of the people overthrowing the constraints of upper-class tyranny and oppression. It offers a kind of satire of the liberal undercurrents – perhaps what one might even call the champagne socialism – of Romanticism. In a way, Norman, the archetypal working class hero, actually achieves social revolution by his deceit, but the people of Alsander rise up

against him upon discovering this. Flecker thus takes upon himself, perhaps with a certain amount of wry irony, the mantle of what P.M.S. Dawson has identified as the second generation of (primarily upper-class) Romantic poets (58), in which Byron and Shelley stood at the vanguard. The latter famously ended his 1821 *A Defence of Poetry* with:

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. (qtd. in Archer 259)

As Hancock has noted of Shelley, "[t]he Goddess of Revolution rocked his cradle" (7). Indeed, in *Alsander*, it is the poet who drives the action. He sends Norman to the city and sets everything in motion. This is acknowledged by other characters as the political plot unfolds. Arnolfo — actually Ianthe in disguise — says to Norman "Continue to play the part the Poet assigned to you, that is all" (195).

There are many elements of satire in the work, mostly Menippean and Horatian. Flecker's criticisms of the trends of modern literature offer the strongest examples of this, but his characterizations are also rather mocking. The bureaucratic type appears in the consular clerk and others, the interventionism of the church is satirized through Father Algio (who comes to regret his interference), and the most delightful satiric portrait of all is the Consul, who is clearly enjoying a sinecure:

> "Ah, my dear sir, we must keep up appearances, you know…I may tell you that I have been here two years and have not written an official letter since the day I announced my arrival. Such a change from Pernambuco, my previous post. There I never had a minute!" (166-167)

All of this is Flecker's rejection of the mediocrity, of the mundane nature of everyday existence, in favour of whimsy and fancy.

Flecker himself breaks the wall between reader and author throughout the work, speaking directly from time to time. On one of these occasions, he launches directly into a florid passage which is a direct satire and yet evocation of Romanticism's most purple prose:

> …the stilted style of this century can ill express the fluctuations of our hero's feelings.
>
> "Who is there" (I should have written in 1820), "or what man of feeling and imagination can be found who. Upon contemplating the ineffable grandeur and unspeakable majesty of Nature, does not ardently aspire to hold at the same moment communion with some divinely tender female heart, to read in those liquid eyes his own reflections purged of their dross and transmuted into gold, to press those sensitive fingers and thereby lose himself in rapture among the gorgeous scenes that astonish and confound his gaze, to seal those fluttering lips with the memory of an unforgettable moment?"
>
> To resume the use of the English language, Norman felt lonely … (35)

Here, one sees the tension between narrative styles underpinning the work. The knowledge that literature has moved on, yet the desire for a kind of reaching back to this past. It acts as a backdrop to the novel as a whole. This might seem to be satire, but when one considers the style used by Flecker when he is writing seriously, it is just as florid and melodramatic:

> …he was half delirious with the silence; the dread prediction of his mother's death, the wild story about his friend, rang in his ears; the house of the Fairies danced before his eyes; and he feared his fateful companion. The wizard forms of the hedges threatened John Gaffekin, the harvest moon, golden and vast, seemed to shine hot upon his hatless brow. He kept comparing the trickling of the roadside brook to the tricking of the little

> thoughts in his head; he could not get rid of this grotesque companion, and grew more afraid. (345)

Conclusion

The King of Alsander is an interesting literary experiment. In many ways, it follows the traditions of what has come to be known as the Ruritanian form, drawing upon elements of Anthony Hope's 1894 adventure novel *The Prisoner of Zenda*. British Ruritanian works are commonly understood as existing in a kind of fanciful historical and spatial limbo, and often "offer [their protagonist] the possibility of class ascendancy" (Sargeant 12). Clearly resonating with this style, one can argue that, in terms of both its date of publication and its content, Flecker's novel seems delicately poised at a transitional point between Hope's *Zenda* and a number of later openly satirical entries to the genre. These include such works as *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, a lyrical novel from 1923 by Ronald Firbank which takes place in a fictionalized Pisuerga, which Sarah Barnhill has described as "a cross between Kismet and the Hanging Gardens with a good dose of Vienna and Versailles thrown in" (292), and *Venusberg*, a comedy of manners set in an unidentified Baltic country that is clearly an amalgam of several, written by Anthony Powell and published in 1932.

The transformed ideals of Romanticism that one finds in Flecker's novel are not as pure, perhaps, as those which underpinned the first flowerings of the movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. *Alsander* might be an attempted return to form, but cannot forget or ignore the intervening rise of Realism. Flecker's Romanticism is of a self-aware type, yet nonetheless feels genuine. It is a quixotic version of Romanticism that knows itself to be a throwback, but seemingly does not care. In that sense, perhaps, the act of writing such a novel is as much a triumph of imagination and passion over reason as Norman's abandonment of his comfortable life in the fictional, yet for a British reader, immediately familiar village of Blaindon.

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[1] This paper is based on one given at the Romantic Legacies International Conference held at National Chengchi University in Taipei, Nov 19, 2016.

[2] In "Fleckerania," the present author speculated on a connection between the poet Harold Monro and the critic John M. Munro (19). However, this was based partly on a misspelling of the former's last name in the book by the latter (142) as well as in a few other sources. I would like to take this opportunity to note and apologize for the error.

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