

# Dialogue through Historical Allusions: James Elroy Flecker's System of Poetic Communication in "War Song of the Saracens"

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes James Elroy Flecker's "War Song of the Saracens", a poem with an ostensible wealth of historical allusions, as its historical contents happen to communicate additional material to what is visibly present in the text. The more we dig into the significance of the historical contents, the further we realize that Flecker utilizes the said allusions to help him create his patterns of lexical clusters, as well as verbal, linguistic, and communication choices that remain largely and distinctively his trademark. The selected poem for this analysis should mean much to the scholars from our part of the world, because it represents an example of how a well-informed, scholarly poet could handle the sophisticated turns of events in an unbiased manner. It also shows how Flecker was able to deal deftly and skillfully with issues that were, and continue to be, culture-specific. The outcome is an aesthetically distinguished poem that has its particular coding system in conducting its discourse. The allusions are part of the coded process. The poet's speaking voice, reincarnating the spirit of bygone heroes, as will be revealed in the analysis, uses the language of history to have his dialogue with the recipients. The eventful and central utterance of the poem, found in line Nine "and by God we will go there again", is proven to be the gist of the entire communication delivered via the thinly disguised connotations, aided by the sincerity of the tone.

## Background

James Herman Elroy Flecker (1884-1915) was a British poet, scholar, playwright, and diplomat. He contributed to Georgian poetry and published poems influenced by the last years of the "Aesthetic Movement". As Harry Blamires states in his *SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE* (Methuen & Company, London 1997), "His [Flecker's] pulsing, seductive rhythms effectively evoke an atmosphere of oriental mystery and strangeness" (P.419). His "War Song of the Saracens" abounds with historical allusions from the days of old; the days of the heroic conquests from the first Hegira Century. The historical allusions selected for the poem are highly representative of the main course of the Caliphate history. They concentrate on the uninterrupted, unceasing, and unbroken sequence of victories of the Caliphs' empire.

This poem belongs to the kind which F.W. Batson (1968, p.90) implicitly speaks of as absent by "an analysis of familiar poems or passages of English poetry" discovers the presence of the "Semantic Gap" [emphasis belongs to Batson] and urges that something ought to be done "to remedy this deficiency", although he has no "rough-and-ready answers". Long before Batson wrote this book indicating the gaps in English poetry, Flecker seems to have found the answer in intergrafting British poetry with the Traditional Arab Heritage.

## General Notes

In his "Music of Poetry" (1942), T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) voices the following opinion:

A poem may appear to mean very different things to different readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant." (P.58)

Eliot carries on drawing near the other side of meaning, i. e., interpretation. He explains:

The reader's interpretation may differ from the author's and be equally valid- it may even be better. There may be much more in a poem than the author was aware of. The different interpretations may well be partial formulations of one thing; the ambiguities may be due to the fact that the poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can. (P.58)

In the light of the quotations above, Flecker's poem ought to have meanings beyond the one which is already visible, and which may give the impression that the "Song" is a sort of mnemonic versification to celebrate the national victories of the past, much like occasional odes do. Yet, when the text is out of the author's hand, it must be assumed that it will be the property of the reading public, who may read into it the extra levels of meaning, to interpret it in a variety of ways alien to the poet's original intention. The poem, from the view point of its built-in epistemological features, rather than from its aesthetic attributes, will be dependent on and conditioned by the readers' interpretation aided or hindered by the textual inroads, the subtexts, or what Eliot calls "ambiguities", which will be seen in this paper from the perspective of Julia Kristeva's terminology used in her "Revolution in Poetic Language".

Furthermore, the poem under scrutiny is far from being an ordinary discourse. Thus; it also fulfills the Bakhtinian understanding of defamiliarization, which demonstrates itself quite clearly in Flecker's poetic atmosphere and scope of referential priorities. It is, above all, an utterance that finds its procedural approach to the achievement of defamiliarized communication within an outwardly familiar historical context so far as the initiated reader is concerned. The numerous points that are culture-specific in the verses will not be the chief bone of contention unless to those alien to the cultural framework of the text that reflects an oriental background honestly, free from "all the visions of the Orient fabricated by Orientalism", as Edward Said thinks in his *ORIENTALISM* Page 179 in his discussion of the orientalist's

structures. This will be displayed in the analytic process of the poetic text in relation to its contextual range.

Having said that, Flecker's poem seems to have attracted little attention from the specialists in English Language and Literature as well as specialists in cultural studies, although it continues to be one of his most frequently anthologized works. This may be because the poem has its own context, its own scope of reference, its own Chain-of-Being; alien to those wined and dined entirely in the Grecian-Roman Tradition and the fabricated visions of the orientalists. Thus, it is a matter of consequence to deal with this poem as its sphere of reference and focal emphasis is our own part of the world. However, our analysis can hardly be exhaustive. Still, it will capture the source of the ultimate, total, universal effect which transcends the boundaries of one nation to speak in name the of the entire world and all of mankind within that wide world. It follows that, Flecker's communication is dispatched within a delivery system unusual to the Anglo-Saxon recipient. It is the system of the Saracens.

## The Definition of the System Revisited

According to R.L. Trask, the system of language can be described as a combination of elements "with each element being chiefly defined by its place within the system by the way it is related to other elements" (2007, p.290).

We shall see that the backbone of flecker's poetic system relies on historical allusions, which achieve the unity of the poetic discourse through the conceptual integration of unfamiliar events to the westerners. Analogies, ambiguities, and logical arguments are aided by connotations and entailments to impart a unified, open-ended, and consistent discourse in line with the truth known in the real world, the discourse world, and the text world.

## The Poem

This poem is a text abundant with references and inner signs and signals that may baffle even those who have a degree of familiarity with the cultural background of the text. The word "Saracen", for instance, is one such instance.

*The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*, written by Flecker's contemporary Walter W. Skeat (1835-1912) explains this word as such:

Saracen (Latin word derived from Arabic), Meaning an Arab or one of the Eastern people. It comes from the Arabic word Sharqiy, i.e., Eastern=Arab. Sharq =East, rising sun. The Arabic root Sharaq, it rose. (P.414)

Indeed, the above *Dictionary* provides the Triple-lettered stem of the verb (al jathr al-thulathy) rather than the additional extra -letter derivation called "the quadruple" or al- mazed al-ruba'iy". This stem explains the word to mean People of the East. Thus, while it refers to the Arabs in general, it does not exclude any ethnicity or social group living under the protection of the vast Arab Empire of the Caliphs. From the title, we understand that the verses will be packed with references and inroads to subtexts for those who want to go deeper into the built-in universe of the text which gives the justified impression that it is based on and dependent for its survival on the true historical accounts of the Caliphate.

History is present in numerous verses in the poem. Certain historical events are chosen by the poet as the bright moments symbolizing much of the Caliphate history. This enables the poet to utilize the frame of reference as the core to the actual text, contents, and context, to go hand in hand as a triumvirate poetic entity rooted in the discourse of the Orient's chronicles. Apart from this, the poem manages to explain itself to a fair extent. However, it would communicate better, and have a profounder, more effective dialogue with the recipient if the latter were cognizant of the rich heritage of the East. Again, this matter is culture-specific.

According to F. W. Bateson "the relevant point of connection between the poet and his reader [is] the text, the precise words that the poet used [.]" (p.7). Thus, Flecker's dialogue with the reader relies heavily on historical allusions to communicate his discourse with his recipients, or readers in Bateson's words.

## Contents of the Poem

As already indicated, the earliest head-spot calling for attention is found in the title: "War Song of the Saracens". It is not presented as a war cry or a war declaration, but simply a song suited for heroes and acts of heroism. The contents of the eighteen-lined poem include elements of narrative. Nevertheless, the poem is not basically a narrative poem in the strict and traditional sense. The purpose of the poet is not to tell a story, but to use the story for a higher purpose. Thus, the narrative is not an end in itself, but rather a mode and a method as the means to achieve another end. One of the links which the poem has with the narrative method is keeping in pace with the chronological order of the chain of events that illustrate the far-reaching conquests from the first Hegira century battles till the time Flecker himself died, that is during World War I.

## The Historical Account and Indication

The presence of the contents connected to history in this poem sends a genuine message to the recipients, by way of the pronoun "we" from the first verse to the last. The summary of these contents may run thus. The People of the East led an honest, dignified, unsophisticated lifestyle. Moreover, in every battle they fought, they emerged as victors. These victories are not a false claim. The battles of Merou (in Persia), Balghar (Bulgaria), Rum (Byzantium), Jalula (Mesopotamia), Stamboul (Istanbul), Indus (India), and Spain (Andalus, Grenade) are evidence. In between the verses narrating the past victories of the People of the East, there is an indirect moral of the historical lesson. It is eloquently expressed in line Nine, exactly in the centre of the poem:

*We have marched from the Indus to Spain, and by God we will go there again.*

As it is well known traditionally, that men of honors do not take an oath in vain. Thus, this is not only an oath but a prophecy. This is a convenient example of the illocutionary force of a speech act, in relation to an utterance

made with a performative verb such as any statement understood to bet, promise, or warn something(See *An Introduction to Language* by Fromkin&Rodman,Page228).

Flecker's handing of the historical allusions fulfills Paul Simpson's recommendation of the cognitive element in literature:

" Clearly, we have some cognitive fault that not only allows us to track the progression of character and narrative , but also to make inferences about the forward development of a plot even when it is, so to speak, un-narrated" (Simpson, p.90).

## Discussion of the poem

Flecker calls into poetic existence a dramatic situation which turns into an occasion to make important statements, ask questions, and express a number of opinions of a universal essence. It is interesting that he utilizes this Eastern heritage to voice the most humane ideas of compassion, affection, sympathy, and justice. He ,particularly, focuses his poetic energy in the said text on the value of Truth ,Power, Glory, and Good Government, or what the Arab philosophers called "the Virtuous City "or Al- Medina Al- Fazila in the terminology of Al Faraby (See *Guide to Philosophy* for further information). The spirit guiding the people is that of singing. Hence, the word "song" is apparent first in the title and last in the final line as the ultimate lexeme used there.

As the historical content is revealed rather than concealed, explicit rather than implicit, and disclosed rather than covert and undisclosed, the keynote relevance goes beyond the events recorded in the chronicles of the past. To put it in a representative fashion, the keynote stages in the poem are these:

1. We are the Saracens. This is represented by these lexical and semantic items from line One:

*"We are...faster than fate."*

2. We lead a simple lifestyle. This essential point is represented by these words from Line Two:

*"Not on silk...we lie"*

3. We liberated the world. This is expressed in these words from Line Eight:

*"...we have brought our star to shine on ...Rum.*

4. We will do that again. This is explicit in line Nine:

*"...by God we will go there again."*

5. This is not for personal glory: it is for God's sake. This sincere belief is expressed by implication or entailment in line Eighteen, the last verse in the poem:

*"...the Glory to God in our song."*

As a matter of fact, the intended message of the poem can be found in the above. As Fromkin and Rodman explain in a related literary context," Part of the meaning... entails or implies the existence of the referent within the current context.Fromkin&RodmanP.229" In all the other lines and many of the other words, there are significant allusions as well as further elaborations. But the foundation or the cornerstone cannot be missed here. It is in the words from the lines above, that we come across the utterances that have an encoded message to communicate, and truly make a difference in the overall poetic effect.

## Features Enhancing the poet's Intention

In order to facilitate the readers' reception of the message, the poet demonstrates a skilful use of lexical items, rich with connotations as well as suggestive power. We shall indicate the most noteworthy spots to point out that the poet achieves the poetic effect through these means. Here are the notable lexical items:

1. "*Faster*" and "*late*" in Line One.

This combination is technically called " Binary Opposition". While the items in the binary opposition 'may seem to be mutually exclusive, they most probably form one shared Chora'(see *Key Terms and Theories connected with Postmodernism*. Roya Yaghoubi. Page9).

2. '*Ivory gate*', '*Pale Kings of the sunset*' (Line Two)

In reality substantiated and documented by historians such as Gibbon and Toynbee, the implication seems to be that the kingdoms, rather than the kings were sick, coming to the end of their cycle of existence; much like the sunset indicates the course of the day is run. Thus, it shows the end of the life-span in the moribund authorities of the decadent systems.

3. '*We sleep by the ropes*' in line Five.

This is a direct allusion to the hardship and simple lifestyle of the Eastern people. They are not accustomed to expensive bedsteads or rich, silky bed sheets. They simply rest, when necessary, in the least sophisticated manner.

4. '*we have stood ...where the waters of Destiny boom.*' In Line Ten.

This sends the unequivocal message that the People of the East are unafraid of Fate. They are brave.

5. '*...death...and the sword... of doom*' in Line Twelve . It is an emphasis to line Ten above.

6. '*...medicine bitter and strong*' in Line Fourteen.

This utterance deserves and merits particular attention, because, on the one hand it embodies the 'ambiguities' touched upon by Eliot, and incorporates the material which Julia Kristeva discusses under 'chora'.

### Eliminating the Ambiguity of '*medicine bitter and strong*'

Line Fourteen in the poem seems to suggest that the people of the East attained success because, partly, they accepted whatever they were offered. Even if it were bitter, they took it because they knew this would ward off death and perdition. Thus, the reason for their success was their acceptance of the 'medicine', whatever that may be. The poem tells us that the medicine is bitter and strong, and it is the anti-dote to death and perdition. This is an inference from the reference. Apart from these broad outlines, we know very little of the nature and make-up of the said potion. Hence, it is one of the ambiguities spoken of by Eliot in his general discussion of the music of poetry. Substantially, this is one of the areas where Flecker's use of the lexical items embodies the matter which Julia Kristeva discusses as the chora ordering the human drives. So, in her "Revolution in Poetic Language" (Translated by Margaret Waller in Toril Mori's THE KRISTEVA READER), Kristeva takes us beyond the acceptance of the sign 'as a substitute for the extra-linguistic' object of reference. (Page 90).

From Plato's *TIMAEUS*, she borrows the concept of the chora" to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" Page 93. This proves that, among other issues, there is a difference between indeterminate, unsettled articulation on the one hand, and the representation that is the product of the poet's attempt to realize the mental image which he sees with his mind's eye as a formed object. The chora itself is the unnameable, unstable receptacle in prior existence to the nameable entity. Consequently, there is a shared sphere, a zone of hazy, myriad-layered semantic likelihoods that border on the mystery of the chora. The image that Kristeva invokes is that of the inner

continuum of the cosmos within the maternal body, where the chora specifies the process of “a shared bodily space of mother and child, resist[ing] representation ,yet...mystical and...autonomous...”Key Terms,pp16-17.Usually,in pharmacological contexts, medicines are expected to be bitter and strong, resentful, and undelicious. The arbitrary relation between signifier and signified is unsurprising because it is traditionalized and conventionalized as an expectation in advance. This is different from the chora we have here because the context is historical, not pharmacological. Hence, the function of the medicine in this context is not merely a metaphor or exclusively a conceit in the Metaphysical sense. It is generated as an inner facilitating entity in order to attain a “signifying position”KristevaP.94. Accordingly, the actual meaning behind this exceptional expression can be described in the terms which Kristeva used in her discussion of the revolutionized language of poetry: economic and condensed:

“Connections or functions are thereby established between these discrete marks which are based on drives and articulated according to their resemblance or opposition, either by SLIPPAGE or by CONDENSATION. Here we find the principles of metonymy and metaphor indissociable from the drive economy underlying them.”P.96.

It is, therefore, an accomplished achievement that Flecker condenses the documented chronicles and accounts of fifteen Hegira centuries in only eighteen verses, themselves compressible to a smaller number of impressive keynote expressions.

In this context, Flecker produces, out of the ‘real’ world historical framework, three text worlds: “the discourse world, which is the immediate space .... That is inhabited by the author and the reader”; “the text world ... which requires for its understanding a memory of imagination rather than direct perception”; “and “the sub-world”, which is “established when a character [in the text] projects thoughts and reflections” of its own. (Simpson)

## Sense Relations in Coda Lines

The concluding lines are as packed with contextual wealth as the opening ones. Let us stop at the underlying statement of verse seventeen:

*"...the brave... sheered up like a wave."*

This recalls the Arab warfare style and their rules of engagement in the wars of liberation (Al-Futoohat Al-Islamiya), where the fighters came in formations like successive waves. (See Mahmud Shith Khattab Omar: Qadat Fatih al-Sham wa Misr, Beirut, 1965).

The other verse to consider is verse Eighteen, the ultimate line, which reads:

*And the dead to the Desert we gave, and the Glory to God in our Song.*

The verse above is another appropriate and dependable example illustrating the condensed, economized stylistic device called Zeugma. It is defined by M.H. Abrams as

"...expressions in which a single word stands in the same grammatical relation to two or more other words, but with an obvious shift in its significance." (P.315).

Thus, the first verb 'gave' in "the dead to the desert we gave", should serve as the same verb that is absent from "the Glory to God."

In this case, the hypothetical, implicit, verb combination reconstructed from the above would be "We buried our martyrs in the desert and gave God His Glory in our song of divine praise". This can be further reduced to "We gave the Glory to God in our song." This inventive, roundabout expression takes the reader back to the title "War Song of the Saracens". This is because to give glory in a song communicates the same semantic item of the title. Consequently, Flecker managed to find a creative way of expressing his meaning in a novel, unfamiliar way.

## Indications of the Analytic Discussion

Speaking of the permanent values in poetry, F.R. Leavis (1964) in his *Revaluation* affirms that:

"..... The critic ..... endeavors, where the poetry of the past is concerned to realize to the full the implication of

the truism that its life is in the present or nowhere [.]”  
(p.9)

This particular poem fulfils largely the prerequisites of Leavis. Thus, the poem discussed above demonstrates to us that the creative and defamiliarized English in use there is undoubtedly inspired by the historical impact of the Arab culture in the golden age of the Caliphate. The poet does not explicitly say that he is influenced, nor does he state his resources of his accurate information. As he was a scholar in good command of Arabic, we must presume he had firsthand knowledge of such books as Ibn-Al-Athir's *AL KAMEL FI AL TARIKH*, the Introduction to Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Aabd Al-Bir's *Al-Durar fi Al Maghazy wa al-Siyar*, Ibn Katheer's *AL\_BIDAYA WA AL NIHAYA FI AL TAREEKH*, Al Balazzeri's *Futooh al Buldan*, Shams al Deen al Zahaby's *Duwal al Islam*, and al Mawardy's *Al Ahkam Al Sultaniya*, to name some of the likely resources where he could have derived his information. Otherwise, he could have derived the same information from Gibbon's volume Six of *THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*, where he discusses the Arab conquests as one of the reasons why the East Roman Empire collapsed.

In the case of Flecker, unlike historical novelists such as Sir Walter Scott or Bulwer Lytton, the language of genuine historical narrative enriches the text itself, not only as addenda to the setting. To dig into the writer's historical sources will help us discover additional patterns that assisted the poet in making his verbal energy, his lexica, his poetic and his linguistic choices. Still, this poem has received insufficient critical acclaim, which is a sad fact. This poem should be well studied further on as its subject matter is consequential to the people about whom it discourses. What may have hampered the expected occidental evaluation of the poem among the English-speaking critics could have been:

- (a) the remoteness of time and place as a cultural and referential context,
- (b) The difference of value systems between both worlds, i.e., the East and the west.

(c) The unfamiliar social context. Many of the allusions are indeed culture-specific. This may tone down the critical enthusiasm of the critic who comes from a cultural background alien to that of the one described and quoted in the poem.

The poem, throughout its entire verses, has been a dialogue between the sender of the poetic sign, i.e., the poet's persona or the speaking voice, on the one hand, and the recipient of the sign, or the reading public. There are elements which help the text to set a resolved balance between the poetic and the historical, the balance between the readerly text and the writerly text, which can be found in the poet's employment of the Chora. This manipulated variable is well utilized in the manifest coding of the text, to lead into a logical relationship that governs the arbitrary correspondence between the lexical and semantic units in the poetic structure.

This poem also reveals that Flecker is in love with the East, but this is not a biased, partial passion. It is central to his human concerns. The vigour of his imagery and the noble personality traits of the Eastern warrior are stamped on the style of his poetic articulation. The reader is, hence, carried forwards unresisting through the formidable substance of the verses, which attest for Flecker's mastery of rhythmic patterns, aided by suggestive imagery. These elements, put together, help to communicate the meaning through structure. Thus, the speaking voice of the poem conveys the message indirectly, implicitly, or explicitly, in accordance with the context of reference. Moreover, Flecker expresses subtle organization and development of meaning by shifting the structural elements in the verses, or by selecting the words that inspire the desired clusters of meanings. He focuses on the words that produce the right combination of sense and significance.

This is performed and achieved within the framework of cultural admiration and avoidance of negative ambiguity to back up the supporting tone and intonation of the poem. This multiplies the hearer's role to play in making sure that the poetic utterance is correctly decoded and unmistakably understood. Therefore, Flecker's use of his historically-allusive language in a single poem diversifies and transforms the poetic models to express defamiliarized themes and concepts in the course of the poetic communication.

## Results

From the previous sections and the examples presented therein, it becomes clear that Flecker produced his own system of poetic communication which consists of these levels:

1. Historical allusions: these are the backbone of the system as the source of creative ambiguity, analogy, and logical argument.
2. Open-ended universality, aided by the connotations which achieve the conceptual integration of the defamiliarized phenomena.
3. The above points presuppose the entailment of discourse, text, and sub-worlds.

## Appendix

Title: War Song Of The Saracens

Author: James Elroy Flecker

We are they who come faster than fate: we are they who ride early or late:  
We storm at your ivory gate: Pale Kings of the Sunset, beware!  
Not on silk nor in samet we lie, not in curtained solemnity die  
Among women who chatter and cry, and children who mumble a prayer.  
But we sleep by the ropes of the camp, and we rise with a shout, and we tramp  
With the sun or the moon for a lamp, and the spray of the wind in our hair.

From the lands, where the elephants are, to the forts of Merou and Balghar,  
Our steel we have brought and our star to shine on the ruins of Rum.  
We have marched from the Indus to Spain, and by God we will go there again;  
We have stood on the shore of the plain where the Waters of Destiny boom.

A mart of destruction we made at Jalula where men were afraid,  
For death was a difficult trade, and the sword was a broker of doom;  
And the Spear was a Desert Physician who cured not a few of ambition,  
And drave not a few to perdition with medicine bitter and strong:  
And the shield was a grief to the fool and as bright as a desolate pool,  
And as straight as the rock of Stamboul when their cavalry thundered along:

For the coward was drowned with the brave when our battle sheered up like a wave,  
And the dead to the desert we gave, and the glory to God in our song.

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## الحوار عبر التلميحات التاريخية: جيمز إيلروي فليكر و منظومة التواصل الشعري في قصيدة "أغنية حرب الشرقيين"

### المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث بتحليل قصيدة الشاعر البريطاني جيمز إيلروي فليكر ١٨٨٤-١٩١٥ الموسومة "أغنية حرب الشرقيين" المتميزة بثراء في التلميحات التاريخية المستندة على وقائع حقيقية حصلت منذ القرن الهجري الأول. ويركز التحليل على أنماط التكتيف اللفظي واللغوي والخيارات الفنية والمفاهيمية المؤثرة في السياق و قدرته على إيصال الإشارة الشعرية المطلوبة إلى المتلقي. و تم ربط مكونات الأداء الشعري مع مقولات إليوت و باتسون و ليفز و جوليا كريستفا للتعرف على تفصيلات المنظومة الشعرية من حيث قابليتها على التفاعل الإيجابي مع الخصوصية الحضارية العربية الإسلامية ضمن حالة الخطاب الإبداعي ببعديه الجمالي والواقعي. و بما يبرز أيضاً المحتوى الإنساني لهذا النص الشعري البليغ.

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