Revisiting Persian Architectural Myth through Byronic Gaze in Robert Byron's The Road to Oxiana

Dr. Bahman Zarrinjooee[1]

Abstract

Architecture is a cryptogram through which intellectual travellers decipher the myth and read the history of countries to/in which they travel. This paper focuses on the significance of Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* (1937) regarding the aspects of power hidden beyond architectural myth, as a *leitmotif*, in the social strata of Persia. It investigates Byron's reaction to the diverse aspects of power, displayed in Persian architecture and the strategies which demonstrate power relations in a thick description and visualized fragmentary illustrations of Persian architecture before and after Islamic periods. Byron's familiarity with the Persians is through deciphering the narrations narrated in their architectures, as a nation's heritage, which represent the nation's past and present history, codes and conventions, desires and motivations of the people. Having an eye on Clifford Geertz's studies and Homi K. Bhabha's theories, the paper approaches one of Byron's objectives in Persia through discovering the source of Islamic architecture. In dealing with architecture, signs and objects, Byron acts as a cultural critic, whose focus is on the hidden meanings behind each sign and on decoding them based on his own understanding. Byron, indeed, reads different architectural constructions in Persia, traces their palimpsest meanings manifested in their interior and exterior structure, illustrates the significance of such monuments and buildings in constructing and rewriting power, and translates these cultural codes for his specific readers.

Keywords: Persia, Architecture, Myth, Cryptogram, Islamic Architecture

1. Introduction

Foregrounding travel as a cultural practice, James Clifford proposes that travel and travel writing are intimately related to cultural studies.

[1] Postgraduate Department of English Language and Literature, College of Humanities, Boroujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd, Iran. E-mail: bzarrinjooee@yahoo.com, Cell-phone: +98 9163653877

Cultural interpretation is concerned with political, aesthetic, or ethical spheres of human life. Scott Wilson studies and reads history, as a master signifier or as a "discourse, consisting of realist narratives," (122-3); and as Clifford Geertz states, history is basically a "semiotic" system or a "web of significance" (5) that is essentially a narrative account; it is the product of a national heritage written by/through a culture. The architecture, relics and monuments of a land, describing the past and the present, are its constitutive elements, what Geertz calls, the "people's ethos" meaning "the tone, character, quality of their life, worldview, its moral and aesthetic style and mood" (89-90). When these cultural products or architectural signs are deciphered and recounted by a travel writer they suggest the cultural vicissitudes, the narration of a nation, a nation's history and its life in continuum. The decoding of these monuments is crucial in the process of understanding and reconstructing the past. They give some intelligible explanation of the objectives and intentionality forged and fused into them at their time of construction; they reveal simultaneously their mutual interrelationship with the social order. Although the tyrants desire to write on the body of the societies subjectively, history records the important events as they actually happened rather than ought to take place, it narrates the narration of the nations and the tyrants. History, as a significant narrative form, is the organizer and definer of documents, and a mass of relevant elements, forming totalities.

The buildings, monuments, signs, and customs, existing in every social and cultural structure, reveal their encoded meanings and thoughts. They are, according to Wilson, being "political and politically" analyzable, since they are "historical and historicizable" (121). Having an eye on Michel Foucault, we can observe that Robert Byron, in *The Road to Oxiana* (1937, *RO*), gazes at such signs from behind or beyond in order to find the hidden layers of meanings, and searches for the "mentality of the civilization," (1998: 430) while establishing a system of relations and the possibility of significations in the master signs. Architecture is one of the artistic and aesthetic ways through which man can find a unique opportunity to preserve and express his social, tribal, municipal, imperial, and religious principles and translates an "inward meaning into visible form" (Byron 1964: 19). Byron, in *First Russia, then Tibet* (1985, *RT*), praises architecture as "being the most functional of the arts" particularly "the art of the mass" (*RT* 55-6).

This paper investigates Byron's aesthetic analysis of the grandeur of designs in architecture, and the process by which he demonstrates the power relations through thick description, and clipped "photographic illustrations," (Pfister 476) of "Persian pre-Islamic and Islamic architecture" (Zarrinjooee 181). Byron argues that the significant issue in designing architecture is to study the building's historical antecedents or background in relation to the objectives in its construction, in *The Appreciation of Architecture* (1932, *AA*), he writes that the people who made the monuments, "with the religious, social, and political thought of the time [...] contributed to and reinforced the personal impulse of the architect" (*AA* 16). *The Road to Oxiana* carries a full range of signs of Persian and Islamic architecture in the historical descriptions and in "the photographic illustrations of the travelogue that takes us from one building to the next" (Pfister 476). As Byron states, even the stones of Persia function as the "symbols and symptoms of the moral and intellectual health or pathology of the society that produced them" (ibid). These monuments provide an extraordinary archive by which Byron traces the archaeology of the Persians through a "diagnostic method" concerning Persian architecture. For him the Persian architecture is linked with the political themes and he "turns the aesthetic appreciation of buildings, ornament and sculpture into Ideologiekritik" (ibid). From his viewpoint, the Persian architecture is in fact encapsulated by aesthetic theories, political and religious ideologies.

Byron, through a Barthesian method, transforms Islamic architecture and monuments "from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation" (2001: 94). Architectural sign or myth is significant, because it imparts meaning immediately; it is a "kind of speech" (ibid 95). Persian architecture, having a continuous history of more than 6,000 years, from at least 5000 BC to the present, attracts many European travellers, particularly Byron, to undertake journeys to this country. Persian architecture is tied to the general history of Persia, to the dominance of ideologies in the Persians' life style, to the vicissitudes of Persian culture and aesthetic art, to the Persians' worldview, to the Persian aestheticism, and to the mass of concepts of Persian pre-Islamic and Islamic worlds, and Byron by visiting and gazing at the world of Persian architecture tries to illustrate these principles.

1. Method: Geertzian Cultural Studies and Foucauldian Discourse

A traveller or travel writer, in the process of encountering the cultural systems, is continuously in quest of approaching, decoding, analyzing, highlighting and rendering the relationships and values of the signs and their meanings in a social and cultural context. Geertz defines culture as a purely "symbolic system," whose meaning is "'stored' in symbols" (17, 126-7). Man can therefore, through analyzing the cultural patterns and ordered clusters of imperative symbols, make sense of the events in his life. In cultural studies, Geertz believes that, "the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts, and the aim is not therapy but the analysis of social discourse" (26). Based on these ideas we make a cultural analysis which, in Geertz's words, means "guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses" (20). We focus our guesses on Byron's artistic interpretations of Persian architecture and culture. Byron, like a cultural critic, reads and translates the implicit and encoded significances of the architectural constructions, unlike those travel writers whom he considers as blind as the mere tourists or "public opinion" (*AA* 9).

Architecture is a discourse of expressing and rendering the various invisible layers of power in every society, as Arthur Upham Pope argues, in Persia, for instance there are great buildings which "were personal monuments, demonstration of power, personality, rivalries, taste and status," indeed, their extremely huge "size tells the imperial story" (2, 10). Similarly, John Ruskin states that all monuments and buildings show "man either as gathering or governing; and the secrets of his success are his knowing what to gather, and how to rule" (104). Ruskin adds that every kind of artistic or fine "architecture is in some sort the embodiment of the Polity, Life, History, and Religious Faith of nations" (264); in spite of the aesthetics of the buildings, they suggest the principal power that ordered them inherently to be constructed. This form of architecture symbolizes the innate desire, ambition, nature, ideal, weakness, strength and the history or narration of a nation and State. Foucault also adumbrates that, at the end of the eighteenth century, architecture changes to be political and it functions as the "aims and techniques of the government of societies" (1991: 239). The mutual relationships between architecture, monuments and the original power of a dynasty are very relevant to the quality and size of the structures erected in Persia, predominantly during the Achaemenid, Sasanian, Saljuq, Gaznavid, Monghol, Timurid, and Safavid periods.

Concerning architecture as a cultural model, Ruskin, Byron and Foucault's remark indicates the construction of a city and its architecture in relation to power; it means that the cities act as the astonishing simulacra "for the governmental rationality" or "the whole of the territory" (Foucault 1991: 241). The historical monuments of a country are cultural cryptograms that reflect the implied attempts of the rulers at eternalizing their political strategies. Consequently, each State shapes and reshapes the architecture and introduces a new technique for the architectural constructions.

Through gazing at Persian architecture and through deciphering their codes, Byron rewrites Persian national narration, shows its cultural elaboration, and considers architecture as a novel communicational system of signs, analyzing it with the stress upon power relations, because he believes that "art cannot flourish without political, or at least civic stability" (*RO* 255). The history of architecture has a close relationship with the changes of the States and each tyrant engraves his will-to-power upon the body of the art of a country. Knowing these monuments takes place in an incessant dependence upon the States and the natural environment; without accepting the power relations and the impacts of environmental factors no understanding may occur. Absolutely for the same reason, architecture has a referential, aesthetic and expressive role, so does a culture as a multidimensional phenomenon; indeed, Byron, as an intellectual traveller with a Barthesian gaze, traces these dimensions, and the dominant authority of power in Persian culture.

2. Byron's Quest for Deciphering Persian Cultural Myths

Byron, as a self-taught critic of architecture, is concerned with rendering or deciphering two imperative cultural monuments or myths in Persia, firstly, the per-Islamic architecture, and secondly, "the origin and character of Islamic architecture" (Zarrinjooee 183). The crucial point of reading these monuments for him is to discover the various reasons of their construction and the power relations by the controlling rulers and the religious leaders in Persia at that time. He visits Persian monuments and architecture in order to enter into contact with and participate, imperceptibly but with an aesthetic knowledge, in the history of Persia. Therefore two great eras straightforwardly leap into his vision.

The first one is the pre-Islamic era when Persia was under the rule of the three classical Persian tyrannies; i.e., the Achaemenian, the Parthians and finally the Sasanians, resulted in the emergence of Persepolis, Pasargad, and Susa. The second one is the Islamic era, when Persia was under the rule of Islamic dynasties, led to the emergence of the miscellaneous splendid Islamic monuments and architecture. Byron's quest begins from encountering Persian architecture and history from 5000 BC to the Pahlavi dynasty. His descriptions of Persian cultural myths point up the history of Persian architecture and the rise and fall of dynasties in Persian history. Although *The Road to Oxiana* does not embody a precise chronological history of Persia, the Persian renaissances in architecture are portrayed through tracing the architectural signs of great dynasties, from the Achaemenids, the Sasanians, the Saljuqs, the Gaznavids, the Mongols, the Timurids, and the Safavids.

Byron proves that the architecture, the cultural sign or object, and the people's behaviour have their own histories and create their own specific discourses which promote definite sorts of power relations. The architecture of a country, H. Aram Veeser writes, is "ideologically marked" (22) and Jeremy Hawthorn believes that it "cannot be examined 'in itself' in terms of a self-identical meaning," but rather it "must be understood to produce a meaning through its relations to 'institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification," as well as "modes of characterization'" (33). The monuments and architecture of an era are, therefore, in proportion to their original power, while representing the birth and decline of the dynasties.

Byron, like a Foucauldian critic, renders and analyzes the architecture of Persia from various perspectives. In one of his reports, in Persia at Kazerun, he encounters the ruins of the palace of Shapur I and deciphers it at three levels: firstly as "documents, these reliefs give a detailed picture of Sasanian fashions in harness, hats, trousers, shoes, and weapons"; secondly as "monuments, they are an interesting survival of that uncouth impulse which prompted the early monarchies of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Iran to hew themselves immortality out of the living rock"; and thirdly as "works of art, they have borrowed from Rome, possibly through Roman prisoners, and mask their barbarous ostentation under a veneer of Mediterranean stateliness and opulence" (*RO* 176).

The architectural codes, for Byron, function as a symptom of a large cultural unity, a cultural myth, a master sign, and an inevitable link between past and present, a public expression of national genius and the spirit of a nation. In Persia, for instance, the Sasanian architecture and monuments can document "an obscure passage of history at the junction of the ancient and modern worlds" (*RO* 165); however, Byron traces aesthetically and politically the momentous impacts on Persian architecture from ancient time until it reaches the Safavid.

Many critics have worked on Byron's quest for the origin and character of Islamic architecture, including Christopher Sykes (1907-1986), Paul Fussell (1924-2012), Charles Bruce Chatwin (1940-1989), Manfred Pfister (1943-), and Christoph Bode (1952-). Fussell, for instance, argues that how Persian architecture, particularly Persian mosques and the famous tower of King Qabus, motivates Byron to travel to Persia, as he writes, "[i]t was a photograph of the Gumbad-i-Kabus alone, Byron writes, that drew him to Persia" (95). He continues that Byron praised Islamic architecture, because it provided him with a great opportunity to study the beauties of "colored[sic] architecture" and "Islamic building" (Fussell 94). Pfister explains Byron's enthusiastic concern within Islamic architecture in Asia, especially in Persia and believes that this aesthetic form of art cannot "be found in the west and even less so in a British Empire that advised razing to the ground 'the most glorious productions of Mohammadan architecture' for strategic reasons" (475). Elsewhere, Indira Ghose and Manfred Pfister write that "[w]hat draws Byron to the East is 'that Central Asian virility'," which refers to virility of the Gunbad-i-Qabus, and they argue that this Persian tower "produced an architecture that is, in its firm, clear and simple shapes, far superior to the feebly decorative structures of Western and Islamic architecture" (161).

Byron's quest in Persia is twofold: first it refers to his ambition in studying Mongol architecture, and finding out the origins of complicated façades of Islamic architecture. Byron, after seeing the photographs of Gunbad-i-Qabus, a Saljuq tomb-tower, was inspired to travel to Persia to search for a variety of monuments and mosques there. When he enters Persia he finds an innovative language of architecture, a language full of complex patterns of codes and meanings, and he aesthetically describes the magnificent monuments, architecture and signs in power relations; seemingly his architectural interpretations are in relation to previous architectural designs and dominant power.

The second reason for Byron's quest is stated in his parodic and satiric letter of application for getting a visa, in which he praises Oxus politically by referring to Matthew Arnold's poem, *Sohrab and Rustum* (1853). He beholds with his own eyes, "the waters of the Amu Darya, famed in history and romance as the river Oxus, and the theme of a celebrated English poem from the sacred pen of Matthew Arnold" (*RO* 290).

The Persian mosques, *de facto*, were unveiled to the world for the first time during the 1930s. At that time, the art critics, interested in Islamic art and architecture from different parts of the world, were also motivated by Persian Islamic architecture, and Byron's endeavour was one of numerous related attempts to introduce the fantastic Persian art and make such an architecture known to the world from a different perspective. He foregrounds the role of Persia in shaping and reshaping Islamic art as a whole after the establishment of the Abbasid dynasty at Baghdad in 750, and before it from about the fourth century BC, and elevates the authority of Persia on the adjacent countries from Hellenistic times onwards, mythologizing Persian artists' creative power in decoration, plans of buildings, types of construction, manner of work and techniques.

3. Visiting Persian Pre-Islamic Architecture

Even though Alexander the Great destroyed and burned the "great palace of the Achaemenids at Persepolis in 330 BC," Arthur Cotterell argues that "there are sufficient remains to form a picture of its classical architecture," and the character of classical tyrannies in Persia (29). Cotterell exemplifies, "Pasargad, along with Susa and Persepolis," and says that they "forcefully express the authority of the King of kings," among them Persepolis, "built between 520 and 450 BC, display[s] the splendour of an empire which for the first time incorporated the whole of West Asia, parts of Europe, Egypt and north-western India" (29, 287-8). By referring to the history of Persia, Byron finds out that in Persian art there is an almost unique ability to make an original form of art and meaning from conjunctions. In spite of being an intercultural art, the Persian art adapts and introduces new ideas, including artistic quotations without quotation marks. Persepolis and other Persian pre-Islamic and Islamic architecture are full of the signs of such innovations; the remnants of the Achaemenids and Sasanians can also trace the impacts of Egypt, Greece, Rome, Babylon and Assyria.

Persian monuments and architecture convey a tripartite dimension of meaning: the first one is the informational dimension or communicational dimension concentrating on the factual and encyclopaedic description of the monuments; the second one is the symbolic dimension, "a regular correspondence between signifiers and signifieds" (Barthes 1994: 196); the third one reflects the underlying ideology and nature of the nation embodied in the monuments, and activates polyphonic voices from the history of the nation and the rise and fall of tyrannies. These three dimensions formulate the structure of Persian monuments and architecture and the superstructure of the cultural discourse of power. Spending his time reading the social and cultural strata in Persepolis, Byron constantly moves further and reads between the lines: "The carvings on the cliff at Naksh-i-Rustam range over twenty centuries, from Elamite to Achemenian to Sasanian. Below them stand two fire-altars of uncertain date and an Achemenian tomb-house" (*RO* 179). He believes that the mountains will no doubt last, the rock-maniacs must be remembered and they all provide unpreserved aestheticism or legal generosity. These historical monuments speak to the spectators and convey "gigantic ideographs, they have recorded a crucial moment in the history of human ideas, when the divine right of kings emerged from pre-history to the modern world" (*RO* 179). In a similar vein, Arthur Upham Pope describes Persepolis and says that it "exhibits magnitude, power and wealth, with a commanding force sufficient to evoke those powers" (18).

Byron analyzes these monuments and signs in relation to the dominant tyranny, discourse and ideology of their time of creation. The monuments and their carvings record the history of the divine right or will, dating from pre-history and reaching the present moment, and narrate the history of power in Persia, from the Elamite to Achemenian and to Sasanian. This historical site is at the same time empty but full; it reflects the very presence of power in man's life, the people's ideology, the tyrant's indifference towards the "*gratitude* of posterity," "divine right," god and king, "pre-history," "human ideas," and eventually, Nietzschean will-to-power. The "gigantic ideographs" record the vicissitudes in man's ideology and worldview particularly throughout Persian history. These ideographs visualize the people's belief and ideals, manifested in the site "begin at the top with the usual pact between god and king—the god at this period being a human scarab"; hence, at one time man perceives God's presence in the form of a "human scarab," whereas at another time this image is moderately changed into a different object and representation (*RO* 179).

Accordingly, it is possible to know the nations, their narrations, their culture, their lives and desires by looking at architecture and reading them.

Byron, indeed, proves that Persepolis is a cultural sign, a myth which expresses political power; it is a sacred national shrine and the spiritual focus of the nation. It is the symbol of the splendours of ancient time, an expression of "political might" and the glorification of "royal pride" (Pope 18). It is an extraordinary ritual city glorifying, as Pope argues, the "divinely sanctioned dynasty, proclaiming the political and religious unity of the state," it concentrates and heightens "empire's appeal to the powers of heaven for fertility and abundance, particularly at the great spring festival of the new year" (16-17). The incredible size of Persepolis affirms the power of people's self-respect; its beauty is the result of self-possession; its "technical skill," "what the French call *faux bons*," the "art," "a soulless refinement," and "a veneer adopted by the Asiatic" illustrates and rehearses the stories of Persian nation, and bring some fundamental questions into Byron's mind that "[how] much did this cost? Was it made in a factory?" or "how many workmen for how many years chiselled and polished these endless figures?" (*RO* 189).

The site also narrates different stories of social classes living during that time. These cultural monuments, with their carvings and cuneiform, metaphorically, narrate the history of Persia. For a traveller like Byron these unmoving, lifeless objects are exposed to come to life and begin to tell their history, the story of those people who designed them, to talk about their sculptors, who well have read the tyrant's passions, and engraved on these lifeless rocks the history of human being and their ideas. The presence of the "Sasanian King," who is "tilting with a losing enemy" (*RO* 180, 181) or receiving homage is the manifestation of the king's desire; it indicates the Sasanian art, representing the kings' will-to-power. Such monuments narrate the mythical and everlasting history of man's life in relation to continuous discourse of power.

Byron knows that these monuments suggest ideas, and utter a political commentary. From Alexander, as its "first tourist," (*RO* 190) up to Byron and after him, the site reveals the unwritten symbolic messages about the history of Persia, showing the vicissitudes of tyrannies, the impact of one tyranny on the previous one: "There used to be a temple round it. One can still see how this stood from the bases of the columns. Since then, it has become the Tomb of the Mother of Solomon. In deference to this transformation, a miniature mihrab and an Arabic inscription have been carved on one of the inside walls" (*RO* 190).

Byron, by thickly describing the intrinsic significance of these signs, mythologizes them and the Persian culture. He never separates them from the Foucauldian discourse of power, but rather he reads them like a book, in which the signs are "caught in a system of references" to other artefacts, they are as a "node within a network" (1972: 23). In a social or cultural structure, these monuments produce a network of power in the people's life controlled by a system which enables them to write, crystallize and eternalize their power by means of monuments and architecture throughout the country.

Byron traces and underlines the history of Persia and Persian architecture through encountering the master signs and argues that "only archaeologists see beauty in Sasanian architecture. The interest here is historical," (*RO* 169) since the monuments and buildings are historical and at the same time historisizable. The architectural designs and monuments are the manifestation of the will of the dominant power; i.e. the changes of the tyrannies transform the structure of the cities based on the tyrant's objectives. The pre-Islamic architecture, then, is a starting point which paves the way for the emergence of the Islamic architecture. Through aesthetic descriptions, Byron transforms the lifeless and silent monuments into oral statements; he creates a kind of speech marked ideologically and changes the monuments into a myth. Byron's view about architecture and his objectives are definitely more critical and different from the mere tourists', because he sees in architecture the evolution of the whole world and discovers the interconnection of the world architectures.

Byron is so much interested in Persepolis' great splendour that recalls the history of the place from which Darius, Xerxes and Alexander were gazing at Asia. Cyrus's tomb is another fantastic building Byron encounters, whose first European warrior or traveller was Alexander the Great, and as the history of Persia moves forward the tomb turns to become "the Tomb of the Mother of Solomon" (*RO* 190). This proves Byron's attempt at discovering the character and origin of Islamic architecture, focusing first on the pre-Islamic architecture and then on its effects on the Islamic architecture.

4. Persian Islamic Architecture Constructing Persian Architectural Myth

Even though, after the invasion of Islam, the victory in the political and religious fields was mostly for the Arabs, in art, thought, and culture, Persia survived powerfully and gained victory. David Talbot Rice (1903-1972) expresses that "Persian art, Persian thought," and even "Persian culture" flourished "anew in the service of Islam, and, impelled by a new and powerful driving force," therefore, "their effect was felt in a widely extended field from the early eighth century onwards" (41). With the emergence of Islam in Persia, numerous artistic renaissances occurred in Persian art and architecture. Persian architects deliberately began to establish new methods in the construction of buildings, accordingly Persianizing the effects. Byron especially highlights the Timurid renaissance, as a significant period in Persian architectural achievement; for example, during the reign of Shah Rukh, the most significant monuments were those erected by Gohar Shad, Shah Rukh's wife, in Herat, and one mosque adjacent to the shrine of Imam Reza at Mashhad.

Realizing the form and meaning of Islamic Architecture is a complex phenomenon related to the Islamic faith. The signification of Islamic architecture, Barthes writes in a different concept, "occurs as soon as it is fabricated" and "normalized" (1994: 182). It shows a prominent sign system of the Islamic world, and illustrates the existence of a cohesive relation with theology, commerce, war, mysticism, power and technology. Persia's huge domes, deriving originally from the rubble masonry domes of Sasanian, are constructed without any support, and decorated with various divine names. They are the paramount signs of *Gestalt* or such an organic unity and beautiful perfect form composed of curves.

Islamic architecture can be considered as a system and an intersection of sacred symbols, a meaningful incarnation and manifestation of the people's ethos, even the embodiment of an ideology. Joseph A. Wilkes and Robert T. Packard write that architecture is a means through which power relations or discourses are "transmitted and shared, and [a] place in which the equality between ruler and ruled [is] manifested" (461). Clifford Geertz argues that as far as the "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos," understanding these symbols is related to "a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic" (89-90). Such symbolic signs are the "tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs" (ibid 91).

These signs have the potential of creating a mutual relationship between "an ontology and a cosmology" or between "an aesthetics and a morality: their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import" (ibid 126-7).

Byron starts his journey, while, as the title of the book, *The Road to Oxiana*, suggests, travelling *en route* to Oxiana in search of the origin and character of Islamic architecture, to express his aesthetic admiration of Persian architecture based on the artistic and cultural renaissances occurred during different periods. Byron encounters Persian masculinity, Persia without having an inferiority complex, and the palimpsest layers of Persian myths. The Persian monuments indicate various oscillations in the life of the tyrants and the appearance and disappearance of different tyrannies, from the tenth century beginning with the Qaznavids (977-1186), the Saljuqs (1038-1194), the Mongols (1256-1353), the Mozaffarids (1314-93), the Timurids (1370-1506), and eventually to the eighteenth century, ended with the Safavids (1501-1732).

Arthur Upham Pope proposes that "during the tenth century Persia again produced its own constellation of poets, philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers, physical scientists, historians, geographers and lexicographers" whereas in contrast, "the same years in Europe were dark indeed" (49). Even though the rulers rivalled each other in patronizing poets, artists and scholars, such as Qabus-ibn Wushmgir, in eleventh century, who was himself a poet, a scholar, an artist as well as a patron of the arts, and a leading advocate of a new authority in astrology. The Gunbad-i-Qabus is actually and initially the core of the motives, stimulated Byron to travel to Persia. In a Geertzian thick description, he visualizes the Gunbad-i-Qabus that stood up against the blue of the Persian mountains.

Byron describes the splendour of the tower and wonders "how the use of brick, at the beginning of the second millennium after Christ, came to produce a more heroic monument, and a happier play of surfaces and ornament, than has ever been seen in that material since" (*RO* 230-31). He compares and ranks the tower with the great buildings of the world, and refers to Alexander's Wall or the prehistoric remains around the site to indicate the *history* of the land. Manfred Pfister considers it "the telos of Byron's quest," and shows Byron's comparison with what is the "greatest in Eastern *and* Western architecture" (Pfister 476-7).

Pope argues that the tower reflects the "mortal combat with Fate, as it were, a monarch-poet wrestling with eternity," (44) and this shows the period, its local style and the genius of the individual architect. This tower is a cultural, mythic sign of the Saljuq architecture being "noble and powerful, structurally inventive and sophisticated," indeed "neither sudden nor accidental" (Pope 49). It can be perceived as the "culminating expression of a Persian renaissance that had begun in the early tenth century with the Samanids," thereafter, "reached its apex under the Seljuks" (ibid). The expansion of the Islamic empire opened up new horizons of communication through religious architecture; therefore, the mosque, as a master cultural and religious sign, being "spiritually coextensive with the whole life of the people, becomes physically integrated with" the life of the cities (ibid 39). The presence of Islamic or religious architecture in Persia means the disappearance of the classical dynasties and the acceptance of Islam. This led to the emergence of varieties of Islamic constructions in Persia reflecting the processes of crystallising a new ideology.

The first Islamic monument or construction, Byron encounters in Persia, belongs to 14th century and is "a fluted grave-tower at Ray about six miles off, whose lower part is Seljuk; and another at Veramin further on" (*RO* 48). He refers to the physical description of these constructions plus the innovations created by the Persians or other nations throughout history, like the construction of the dome, especially blue domes, by Persian architects. Byron also puts emphasis on the material used in Persian architecture, since different materials indicate different periods in the course of the buildings' construction. Each period introduces a new material to the architecture to reflect the characteristics of a specific tyranny in the country. Byron emphasizes the external and internal factors and their amalgamation in the architectural design.

The mosque of Gohar Shad, with its "sea-blue" dome, built between 1405 and 1418, is another magnificent architecture Byron thickly describes during his sojourn at Mashhad (capital city of Razavi Khorasan Province, north-east of Iran). The Shrine of Gohar Shad is "the finest example of colour in the whole Mohammadan architecture" (*RO* 238). Byron has pointed out that the "use of coloured mosaic out of doors reached its climax at the Timurid Renascence" (*RO* 244). He adds there are four buildings as the finest buildings in Persia, including the Gunbad-i-Qabus, "the small dome-chamber in the Friday Mosque at Isfahan, the Mosque of Gohar Shad [at Mashhad], and the Mosque of Sheikh Lutfullah at Isfahan" (*RO* 245).

His emphasis on Gohar Shad's innovations and their impact on architecture prove that in opposition to those travellers who consider the Orient as feminine, disordered, chaotic or without any novelty, Persian architecture is observed and portrayed by Byron as masculine, ordered and beautiful. Byron believes that the historical monuments, as a part of world culture, reflect the history of the artistic renaissances of architectural designs and the vicissitudes of dynasties in the history of Persia. He is surprised by the blindness of those travellers who are unable to connect themselves with the external factors and the changes in the material, design and construction of the monuments.

5. Conclusion

For Byron, the Eastern culture is metaphorically an open text, studied, analyzed, and deciphered by him word by word, and sentence by sentence; in turn, his travel books might be metaphorically considered as lands and cultures to be traversed. His cultural reading or rendering by means of his intensive gaze is a "conductor of the desire to write" (ibid 1989: 41). It is a personal desire to write about Persia, a desire to reveal Persia, its glory, masculinity, beauties, and a desire to make it global and universal; Byron's reading Persia is a desire for rewriting and representing Persia. Byron reads the culture of the travellees (every architectural or cultural sign observed by the traveller in the country in/to which he travels), like a discourse, a text, a language, the "inflection" of an ideology, more specifically, "a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating" (Barthes 2001: 116-19). He reads Persian culture in order to uncover the origin of Islamic architecture and to begin to write or rewrite it. His writing is a dynamic writing which fills the gaps and reveals the invisible layers of culture; his desires are unrolled and directed to a new writing, an(other) writing; this is a writing which produces a sort of proliferation and multiplicity. There is a will-to-write beyond it; this desire is definitely immortalized by writing *The Road to Oxiana*. Byron decides to write and to speak about his journeys, and his travel account is the representation of the various voices he has heard and recorded. The objects, signs, buildings, monuments and cities are a few examples to reveal such unheard melodies or voices heard by him. If Byron asks himself the question, "[do] people travel blind?" (*RO* 202), he puts emphasis on the way of gazing and reading the travellees. He knows the ways of reading and gazing and behind his gaze and reading there is a Barthesian desire; there is a will-to-read or a will-to-gaze.

Byron's gazing and reading take place within a peculiar and weird structure, dominated by his *will-to-read* and the *will-to-be-read*.

Byron's gaze is trained and undoubtedly imbued with historical, architectural, cultural, political and mythical information. Through his critical gaze, he reads the Persian people, their culture, and architectures, and spends the rest of his time and life reading cultures, architectures and the people's life, reading their gestures, appearances, behaviours, signs and images. Subsequently, in order to decode the travellees, he reads between the lines, and searches for the social, ideological, religious, and moral values and ideographs implied in the strata of Persian culture and uncovers their hidden messages. He is in fact very much concerned with the "study of the landscape and natural characteristics of the countries, both from pictures and from descriptive writing" (*AA* 15-16). In *The Appreciation of Architecture*, he suggests that the forms in "natural surroundings, both in broad effects of landscape and in the details of flowers, trees, and animals, and even of the race itself," (*AA* 13) can have an impact on the architects. Hence, the existing forms are "modified and expanded" by the architect's "intellectual capacity and by contemporary taste" (*AA* 13). Confirming his claims, Byron refers to other parts of East such as Egypt and its natural pyramids; he vigorously pays more attention to the effect and relationship between landscape and the invention of a new sort of architecture and generalizes this theory to all genres of art.

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