

## **Rihani and Carlyle on Revolution and Modernity**

*By Geoffrey P. Nash*

Towards the end of his life, Carlyle is reported to have said: ‘A century from now all Europe will be republican and atheist – nothing can stop that.’ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Carlyle scholars were very largely concerned with the question of Carlyle’s reaction to modernity.<sup>1</sup> Professor G. B. Tennyson (1971), for example, created a fictitious antagonist of Carlyle named Dr Felix Modernity for whom Carlyle’s great fault was his fascist, illiberal tendency, and concluded that what critics of his ilk most disliked about Carlyle was ‘The very thing that I have described as central to Carlyle – his conviction that man has forgotten God...Carlyle must inevitably appear to such a man as anti-modern’(26). God, as we know, did not unmake the man when he made the prophet. All too often the dark times through which the prophet lives redound upon the man. Carlyle’s times, as well as our own, were ones of change and turmoil. At the very beginning of the Victorian Age, he was probing the continuing impact of what Hobsbawm (1962) has called the Age of Revolution. Both key transformational components Hobsbawm notes of this period - the industrial and political - are writ large in Carlyle’s writings of the 1830s, above all in his *History of the French Revolution*.

The subject of my paper encourages me to engage in a multiplicity of temporal perspectives as well as cross-cultural ones. Inclusion of Thomas Carlyle as an intertextual fixture within Rihani’s writings predicates a further diachronic shift to the early twentieth century, the epoch in which Rihani – who has also been designated a prophet - was composing his first essays on cross-cultural literary and political subjects. And to the last

quarter of the nineteenth, when the legacy of the ideas and events which Carlyle had struggled to make malleable, in turn begins to impact belatedly on the thinking of Near Eastern intellectuals. In his preface to *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia* published in 1914, Edward Granville Browne traces the concept of fatherland (*watan*), nation (*millet*) and liberty (*hurriyat*) that were invoked from the 1860s by the Young Ottoman thinkers and reformers, notably the poet, Namik Kamal Bey, back to ideals of the Enlightenment and French Revolution (xxxvi-xxxvii).<sup>2</sup> Rihani's compatriots Shibli Shumayyil and Farah Antun likewise drew their inspiration from the same source.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Rihani himself composes his *Naqd ta'rikh al-thawra al-faransiya ta'lif tomas carlyle* (hereafter referred to as 'Critique of Carlyle's *French Revolution*') publishing it in New York in 1902. In my paper, I shall look specifically at Rihani's reaction to this work of Carlyle, locating it and his later writings on political revolution, notably the *Descent of Bolshevism*, within the context of Arab modernism, a trend in which Rihani played a significant part. I shall be arguing that these writings of Rihani, including his political and social observations of the early 1900s recorded in *ar-rihaniyat*, are part of a larger discourse of Arab modernism that engages dialogically with the ideals of western politics spawned by the French Revolution, and sets about applying these to the traditional and moribund societies of the Near East

Early in 1840, Carlyle's friend, the Italian revolutionary Guiseppe Mazzini, wrote a review of *The French Revolution* in which he argued that there were two kinds of popular historian; the materialist who attempts to give only the objective facts, and the artist who attempts to dramatize the subjective element within great events. Mazzini accepted that of the two, Carlyle was undoubtedly the artist, but why, he asked, did this 'poetic

historian abdicate his responsibility to provide an active program for revolutionary activity that could apply to Austrian oppression as well as to Bourbon stupidity?' He concluded that 'Mr Carlyle does not recognize in a people and a fortiori not in humanity, a collective life. He recognizes and is occupied with individuals only...God and the individual man - Mr Carlyle sees no other object.' For Mazzini, Fred Kaplan adds, 'rather than discover the causes of the Revolution, Carlyle had brilliantly illustrated its scenes. What was wanting was "a progressive school of historians with a Philosophy of History"' (Kaplan: 1983, 276-77). In his Critique of Carlyle's *French Revolution*, written over sixty years later, Rihani again adopts the criticism of the revolutionary idealist. He goes further than Mazzini in condemning the author's 'non-alignment,' and his distorting employment of scorn and derision. Where Voltaire's ridicule was volcanic, Carlyle's was merely obscure. As for Carlyle's non-alignment, this was more like lassitude – he treated the greatest revival in the world as though it were a domestic crime. Carlyle thought the Revolution was a sudden event with no connection to anything before or after. He did not look into the causes. History, Rihani goes on to claim, should be for the edification and education of future generations, and he repeats Mazzini's charge that Carlyle did not see the individual as part of society, nor believe in the improving movement of history - the Revolution had had no lasting effect. In this very early engagement with the writing of Carlyle, Rihani's endorsement of the French Revolution as a great awakening within history and a source of progress is quite evident. At this precise moment, Rihani was involved in a revolution of his own in attacking the backward and fissiparous character of his fellow Syro-Lebanese immigrants in America, and of course a similar revolutionary posture can be found in Jibran's early Arabic writings attacking the corruption of his

native Syria. Rihani was possibly no less a romantic than the patriot Mazzini, but he was also in a position to appreciate the artist in Carlyle and does him greater justice in the homage he paid to the Scot's great mystical-philosophical poem *Sartor Resartus* by incorporating its form and rhetoric into his own *Book of Khalid*, which he published in 1911. 4 What I want to argue, however, is that while Rihani's ideas on politics and on literature undoubtedly developed between the writing of the Critique on *The French Revolution* and *The Descent of Bolshevism*, which was published in 1920, his support for ideals of liberty and nationality remain a constant and were obviously formative in his later period as a Pan-Arab nationalist. In the first twenty years of the twentieth century, we can see Rihani adding to his desire for the political reform of the eastern world a reiterated expose of the materialism of western society and politics. During this period – as one of the chapters of *The Book of Khalid* expresses it – Rihani was interested in revolutions both material and spiritual. Also in *Ar-rihaniyat* he foregrounds the hard superficiality of western politics, which is characterized as a self-serving activity in which the political reformer is a person who condemns the government and calls for change so that he may hold office himself. Even as the socialistic trends of the time clearly gained his sympathies, Rihani repeatedly discerns a lack in all political programs which is at base a neglect of the spiritual dimension: 'all forms of spiritual perfection [he wrote] are derided by the politician as trivial matters to be ignored, for them men's stomachs and their material needs, the ambitions of their particular political parties and their fanaticism, are the most important things in life' (1998, 28). Rihani's attitude at this point may be summed up in Khalid's apothegm 'I am for a reformation by emigration, and quietly, peacefully this can be done; the emigration of the mind before the revolution

of the state' (1911, 290). It is at this moment that Carlyle's influence may be said to have gained, in that the spiritual is placed above the political, partially if not wholly reversing Rihani's negative reading of Carlyle in 1902.

In the articles he published in America during the First World War, however, Rihani speaks of an awakening of the East that joins the political and the spiritual; the youthful enthusiasm for the politics of the French Revolution is blended with the spiritual liberation conceived by Khalid; the East is trumpeted as achieving its awakening from centuries of sleep, and claiming its share in the values of freedom, whether such desires are valorized by Europe or not.

And so we come to that most enigmatic of all the products of Rihani's pen, an essay on the topic of revolution in its own right that, upon first reading, seems to negate the utopian vision of revolutionaries both East and West across the millennium and more the text addresses. The preliminary remarks I wish to make about *The Descent of Bolshevism* concern the political prophecy and conservative exposition of the nihilistic consequences of all attempts at instituting revolutionary change that some have found in it. Such interpretations seem to me to make a nonsense of Rihani's own career as a political activist whose vehement anti-Turkism eventuated in his imprisonment in Mexico barely four years previously. Whatever *The Descent of Bolshevism* is about, it is certainly not about Marxism, and says much more about the past than it does about the future. It is notable that of the different movements that Rihani addresses as being embodiments of anarcho/communistic impulses in previous historical epochs, all but one are oriental. In itself this should give us a clue to the intentions behind the book; it is not obvious that Rihani is situating revolutionary Bolshevism within an oriental context – why then does

he choose to discuss these – on the face of it – peculiar analogues? I would propose that he is using oriental subjects not in order to illustrate timeless mehistorical themes, or cyclical recurrences, but to advert to the conditions of possibility of modernization within the oriental polities themselves. *The Descent of Bolshevism* may be read as a repudiation of oriental anarchy, of the kind of ancient obscurantism and irredentism that Rihani wanted to see banished from the twentieth century Near Eastern scene. The radical modernizing/secularizing project, which he wanted to articulate, was necessarily at best ambivalent, and at worst implicitly antipathetic, towards the recrudescence of irrational disorder that such movements represented. Of the followers of Hassan as-Saba, known to history as the ‘Assassins’, Rihani writes:

“They caused assassination to be committed,” one historian states, “at the solicitation of other princes for motives of interest in which religion had no share.” In other words, they were a corporation of professional murderers, whose services were at the disposal of any prince or ruler... This reign of terror struck the mightiest and the boldest with fear and trepidation. It produced two diseases in the land – mortal torpor and mental paralysis (44).

I would like to look again at the last sentence in particular. Of what benefit could the ‘moral torpor and mental paralysis’ referred to be to a revived Orient? The succeeding chapter begins: ‘Born of mysticism and religious chaos the movements in the East against organized society were nevertheless concealed by the apostles of violence under the cloak of religion’ (47). Rihani understands that such tendencies are inimical to the progress and development of oriental societies and are indeed used for their own interests by those who wish to see such disabling currents continue to remain entrenched within the East.

Read in this context, *The Descent of Bolshevism*, far from being a neo-liberal tract, is linked to Rihani's project of the last two decades of his life: an anti-imperialist and nationalist program which called upon the Arab world to unite and establish strong societies that would be able to withstand the impact of predatory foreign powers. Those two decades would be the terrain on which Arab modernism would work itself out in the context of European control of Arab lands and abortive revolutions in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. Rihani died at a time when not only were the revolutions of the Near East incomplete, but a new stage was preparing in which the modernist project, ever more deeply complicated by the struggle between eastern nations and the spreading power of the West, would be reformulated and by some repudiated. The questions that have long exercised me about Rihani may be related to the following passage from Mehrzad Boroujerdi's aptly subtitled study, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West, The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (1996):

Despite its triumphant political status nativism remains intellectually tormented. It is based on too many untenable, questionable ontological and epistemological premises to sustain itself for long. Its nostalgia for the past, attachment to things native, idealization of identity, and ethical-romantic rejection of modernity (to say nothing of the reign of terror and political repression it has set in motion) are all problematical (179).

Where did Rihani stand with regard to nativism? Was his stance one of unremitting support for modernity? When it comes to contextualizing Third World Nationalist intellectuals in genealogical terms, Rihani clearly misses out on any direct linkage with nativism. He was, to begin with, of a much earlier generation than the Jalil Al-e Ahmads,

Ali Shariatis, or Sadeq al-Azms. As far as the religious aspect was concerned, being a renegade Arab Christian his native Maronite community held next to no capital for Rihani, either socially, culturally or politically. 5 Rihani, of course, stayed within a mystical theism which, he argued, was an oriental's birthright. But the ease of such classifications should raise warning signals. In fact I become increasingly inclined to foreground his stance in the 1930s – a decade that fate decreed would be his last – if not as a negation of his earlier *mahjar* universalism, then at least as a change of direction in which he chose to enter the dark channels of his times and became a political prophet where before he had been a cultic or spiritual one; a polemicist where he had once favored synthesis; and an agitator, where formerly he had striven to unite. Need we remind ourselves of the speech that led to his expulsion by the French from Lebanon? The confrontation with Bisharra al-Khoury over the 'tears and moaning' school of literature? The brush with the Shi'a over the sanitation of Kerbila? And, above all, the intensification of his propagandizing of the Palestine issue, that had begun as long ago as the exchange with Teddy Roosevelt in 1917 and the article, 'The Holy Land: Whose to Have and to Hold?' It is in this decade that Rihani comes up with the encapsulation of Zionism as 'a dream of conquest, a dream of empire, ...supported by British bayonets and American money,' and formulation of the European mandates as offering 'democratic government and the highest culture' which 'in the hands of the foreigners in control, [were the] most effective instruments of tyranny and exploitation' (1967, 25; 1939, 454). Rihani had written in 1939 that the people of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine 'were beginning to look for salvation in every direction but the West' (loc.cit.) Even the pro-British George Antonius warned his former employers in 1940 that there was



undisguised admiration for Nazi Germany in Iraq and Egypt. It would appear that Rihani was also prepared to keep an open mind about Franco. Is this an indication of the path Pan-Arabism would take in the 1950s and 60s in its identification with military regimes?

In the article 'My East and West', published in 1936, Rihani, according to Walter Dunnavent (1991), 'struggles desperately to keep alive his ideals of the East, the West, and the synthesis of East and West' (220). Prophets do not indeed choose the times through which they live. If Rihani died tragically and suddenly in 1940, he at least missed the collapse of his secular Pan-Arab dream, as well as the fulfilment of his 'prophecies' of calamities in the Near East; of which, in Arab terms, perhaps the greatest calamity was the return to nativism in all its factious manifestations. Rihani and Carlyle have more than a little in common then. They both started out with respective idealisms that might have reformed the world – Carlyle, to reformulate spiritual belief in an age of modernity; Rihani to lay the foundations of East-West understanding. That both their maturities were lived out within epochs in which their nourishing narratives could scarcely thrive, is not to be laid at their door. Of Carlyle, Raymond Williams (1961) wrote: 'the faults, alike of the man and of his influence, remain obvious. But there is one common word of his which continues to express his essential quality...*reverence*, not for him, but in him: the governing seriousness of a living effort, against which every cynicism, every kind of half-belief, every satisfaction in indifference, may be seen and placed, in an ultimate human contrast'(98). What of Rihani? At the close of his long essay on Charles Dickens Orwell claims: 'When one reads any strongly individual piece of writing, one has the impression of seeing a face somewhere behind the page. What one sees is the face the writer ought to have. Well in the case of Dickens I see a face that is not quite the face of

Dickens's photography, though it resembles it...he is laughing, with a touch of danger in his laughter, but no triumph or malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened. The face of a man who is generously angry - in other words of a nineteenth century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls' (140-41). In these times of pitiful cynicism and hatred, I recommend these words to you as a refraction of Ameen Rihani.

## Notes

See Albert LaValley (1968), David Daiches (1963), and G.B. Tennyson(1971).

‘Although Namik Kemal held firm convictions about the need to respect the Islamic foundations of Ottoman society, his ideological solution to the problem of Ottoman territorial disintegration was of European inspiration’ Cleveland (2000, 85).

See Sharabi (1970) chap.3.

For the influence of Carlyle on *The Book of Khalid*, see Geoffrey P. Nash (1993).

Boroujerdi makes it clear that the Iranians remained bonded, culturally at the very least, to their native Shi’ism as the ground of their rejection of western modernity (albeit that in a good number of cases, their positionings were worked out by the aid of the tools of western philosophical procedures).

On Rihani and the Arab struggle during the European Mandates see Nash (1998), Chap. 4.

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