

# Enlightenment Fact, Orientalist Fantasy: Dialogues of Colonial Encounter in Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary* (1811)

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## ABSTRACT

Dialogue dominated the cultural life of eighteenth-century Britain. It embodied what Jürgen Habermas describes as “communicative reason” and, as a literary genre in its own right, it played an important role in the evolution of the English novel. The formal dialogue appears as an embedded genre within many novels of the period. Romantic-period novels often take this armature but complicate it.

In Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary*, two voices confront each other through the characters Hilarion and Luxima, a Western missionary and an Indian woman and seer. Formal dialogues do appear as means of communicating their faiths to each other but there is also that sense of dialogue where opposing perspectives become reconciled as the lovers themselves overcome cultural barriers. The novel also performs an implicit examination of dialogue by its concentration on the uses of persuasive language.

This essay explores how multiple oppositions of reason/sensibility, East/West, male/female, Christianity/Hinduism move towards their sublation through formal dialogues and a wider Bakhtinian dialogism that pervades the novel. Despite elevating “rational” Christianity over “superstition,” the narrative also portrays “feminine,” sensual passion as preferable to “reason.” The dominant strain of rationality is perhaps dialogically undermined by this other, which dwells in the realm of fantasy rather than utilitarian fact.

I demonstrate how the novel stresses dialogism itself as a virtue, contrasted with practices of coercion. This fuels a partial critique of both colonialism and masculine values. Owenson's critics frequently drew attention to the “luxuriant redundancies” of her style. But this fantastic subversion of novelistic facticity is a crucial part of her staging of antinomies and multiple voicing.

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Dialogue flourished in the long eighteenth century in Britain, facilitated by the institutions Jürgen Habermas notably catalogued in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Dialogue prevailed both as the spirit of what in Habermas's later work is known as "communicative reason" and as a genre in itself, where it played an important role in the formation of the English novel.<sup>1</sup> The formal dialogue (as the representation of argumentation, of a reasoned exchange of ideas in the manner of Plato) was a highly popular genre. The dialogue appears embedded within many novels of the period as one of the various genres that became incorporated into this most heterogeneous of forms. Gary Kelly has pointed out that dialogues frequently feature in the Jacobin novels of the 1790s (121-22, 163-65), but I have observed this structure throughout the early English novel, and I believe it to be an important constituent genre. It is particularly evident in radical novels such as Robert Bage's *Hermesprung* (1796), as Kelly notes, but also in such liberal works as Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) and even (though often as parody) in novels that target these such as Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Young Philosophers* (1800). Mikhail Bakhtin and John Paul Hunter among others have seen the novel as an assemblage of diverse component genres—the diary, the spiritual autobiography, and so on; the dialogue is such an element and has previously been neglected (Bakhtin 320-21; Hunter 51-54). It is frequently inextricably bound up with the idea of mutual companionship between the sexes, where courtship even takes on the form and content of rational dialogue. Romantic-period novels often take this armature but complicate it.

In the Preface to Sydney Owenson's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827), Owenson makes a fervent claim to her right to engage in dialogue in the public sphere, despite the threat of being "accused of unfeminine presumption in 'meddling with politics'" (41). She does this in the name of "human sympathies," directed against "human wrongs," and for the cause of a colonized nation, Ireland. This novel depicts the transition from "the ancient despotism of brute force, and the dawning reign of public opinion" (41). That key term of discursive democracy, "public opinion" is repeated throughout this

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<sup>1</sup> This term has been widely applied to the later work; thus, the subtitle of Habermas's collection of introductions to a collection of his works: *Philosophical Introductions: Five Approaches to Communicative Reason* (2018); see, in particular, pp. 86-94. Habermas has been criticized, notably by feminists, for holding too exclusive a concept of the public sphere (see the debates in Calhoun). However, I draw here on his later theory, which is less subject to this criticism and has been developed fruitfully by feminist thinkers such as Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib.

novel and in other writings and her concern with the opposition between coercion and dialogue is a central theme of this essay.

In Owenson's 1811 novel *The Missionary*, two voices confront each other through the characters Hilarion and Luxima, a Western missionary and an Indian woman and seer. Hilarion hopes to convert Luxima to Christianity and, through her influence, the rest of her nation. They become romantically involved, defying the conventions of both their cultures. Formal dialogues do appear as means of communicating their faiths persuasively to each other but there is also that sense of dialogue where opposing perspectives become reconciled as the lovers themselves overcome cultural barriers. The novel also performs an implicit examination of dialogue by its concentration on the uses of persuasive language.

This essay explores how multiple oppositions of reason/sensibility, East/West, male/female, Christianity/Hinduism move towards their sublation through dialogism. For example, despite elevating "rational" Christianity over "superstition," the narrative also portrays "feminine," sensual passion as in some ways preferable to reason. The dominant strain of rationality is dialogically undermined by this other, which dwells in the realm of utopian fantasy rather than utilitarian fact. This establishment of opposing forces in dialogue tends to subvert the prevalent ideologies of colonialism. Through dialogic sympathy between cultures, it both respects the particular identity of Indian culture while adumbrating a universalist humanism. "Sympathy" is a key term in the theories of sensibility as developed by David Hume, Adam Smith, and Edmund Burke. Sympathy is intimately bound up with dialogism; it may be considered a vital precondition for dialogue and I will show how Owenson makes use of this relationship.

I set out the antinomies enumerated above and point to their place in systems of power as dramatized in the novel and reveal Owenson's utopian intimations of reconciliation or even transcendence in the politics of the personal and the colonial. These concerns are pursued in Owenson's other novels, though not as persistently, or perhaps as schematically, as in *The Missionary*. I will draw attention to such parallels on occasion, though I have not the space to pursue them more thoroughly.

I show how various modes of dialogue pervade the novel. It is not simply characterized by multiple voices and perspectives in the way that Bakhtin suggests is true of novels generally. In *The Missionary*, dialogism in Bakhtin's

broader sense is used to question the dialogue in the primary, formal sense (that is, the representation of rational debate as a genre), in that argumentation and intellectual reasoning between speaking subjects is highlighted and closely examined.

I also demonstrate how the novel stresses dialogism itself as a virtue, contrasted with practices of coercion. This corresponds to the distinction Jürgen Habermas makes between communicative and strategic action. For Habermas, strategic action is opposed to communicative action, whereby actors are concerned with the fulfilment of their own goals rather than with the coordination of actions through common understanding. Within strategic action, Habermas identifies “latently strategic action” in contrast to “open strategic action” and, again within strategic action, distinguishes between “manipulative action” and “systematically distorted action” (“What is Universal Pragmatics?” 93n2):

Whereas in systematically distorted action at least one of the participants deceives *himself* about the fact that the basis of consensual action is only apparently being maintained, the manipulator deceives at least one of the *other* participants about her own strategic attitude, in which she *deliberately* behaves in a pseudoconsensual manner. (93n2)

With this background of a dialectic between dialogic reason and coercive deception, *The Missionary* conducts a partial critique of both colonialism and patriarchal values. Owenson’s critics frequently drew attention to the “luxuriant redundancies” of her style as alien, irrational, too nonutilitarian, and too feminine (Wright, “Appendix B” 300). Her writing is full of “excess of ornament” and “foreign phrases;” one critic feigns incomprehension, pretending her language is not English; for another, “her faults are chiefly of her sex and her country” (she is too female and too Irish [302, 311]). Some critics openly identify subversive tendencies and condemn them: “Jacobinism—Falsehood—Licentiousness, and Impiety” (302). Thus, her own writing is allegedly involved with the Oriental/feminine side of the antinomies she sets up. Her “idle raptures” are opposed to “common sense” and “self-denial” (297)—oppositions which Owenson will employ and challenge throughout the novel itself (the passivity behind “raptures” may suggest both

the possession of women and imperial conquest as well as irrationalism). Owenson's style and her depiction of a paradisiacal Orient introduces a fantastic, utopian voice set against that of novelistic facticity and is a crucial part of her staging of oppositions and multiple voicing.

## I. Orient and Occident

Nigel Leask says that "it should not be forgotten that the 'positive' knowledge of Hindu culture, emblemized in the figure of Morgan's Luxima, was the product of an instrumentalist construction of the Indian Other . . ." (102). *The Missionary* is "a source-book of orientalist stereotypes articulated as metaphors of gender" (126). But Owenson, as I show, undermines these stereotypes and challenges instrumental reason itself. Likewise, Balachandra Rajan says "The sculptured antitheses so vividly prominent in her tableau rule out the possibility of any equitable relationship between their 'finely opposed' polarities" (136). Yet these antitheses are somewhat slippery and Owenson does suggest the utopian possibility of transcending these polarities.

"Cashmire," where most of the plot takes place, has not been touched by "the spirit of invasion, or the enterprise of commerce" (Owenson, *Missionary* 83); it is uncontaminated Otherness that has not yet encountered the West. Hilarion intends to preach "a self-denying faith" to a region of "perpetual enjoyment and luxury" (83). Thus, one contrast is immediately established—a spatial one that refracts the other oppositions, notably ascetism and hedonism here. However, the reciprocal influence of East on West is also established where the former is said to contribute "wealth and luxury" and influence "manners and habits" (85). Asia and Europe interpenetrate each other.

Hilarion arrives in Kashmir which, with its "enchanted scenes" and "fairy forms" (Owenson, *Missionary* 104), has itself all the alien nature of an earthly paradise. It is compared explicitly to "the regions of the blest" (105) and the land seems to bring forth fruit spontaneously as in many a utopia:

the luscious milk of the cocoa-nut, the fruit of the bread-tree, the nutritious grains of the wild rice plant, the luxurious produce of innumerable fruit-trees, and the pure bath of the mountain spring, were luxuries, supplied by Nature . . . . (107)

The land is “delicious,” “soothing,” “tranquil,” “luxurious” (104). Thus, it is feminized, and Hilarion himself becomes passive and feminized: he “had no power to resist the soft” and “new emotions” which overwhelm him (105). Julia M. Wright claims that Owenson “maintains the feminization of the Orient” (*Ireland* 97); she does, yet the feminization of Hilarion, as representative of the West, undoes the stark opposition. And, as Wright says, the discourse of *The Missionary* is “shaped by sensibility” and “allows the feminization of the colonized to elicit sympathy and moral approbation on terms with political effects” (97).

Owenson sets out the antinomies definitively on the first encounter of Hilarion and Luxima, equating them both with their regions of origin and in gendered terms, “finely opposed, the noblest specimens of the human race” (*Missionary* 109), and gendering the regions in the process. So Luxima—and the East—is “lovely and luxurious,” characterized by “softness”; “a creature formed to feel and submit,” whereas Hilarion is formed “to command” (109). Power as masculine and political domination is implicated in this along with domination of the woman. It is clear that Hilarion is physically attracted to Luxima: he falls into a reverie and, after she has left, picks up a ceremonial wreath she has dropped, “which breathed of the musky odors which had effused themselves of the tresses of the Indian . . .” (110). She too has displayed her attraction by blushing modestly—a conventional sign of desire in the discourse of sensibility (which forms an important voice in the novel, as Wright argues).

The ambiguity of Luxima is suggested by her name: it is an anglicization of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune. “Lux” also at first hints at “luxury,” which at that time had a sense of lasciviousness, but it is, of course, Latin for “light” and this can connote either divine revelation or the intellectual illumination that characterizes Western Enlightenment thought. It also suggests a symmetry between her and Hilarion’s characterization as Lucifer (“light bearer”), to which I refer below.

## II. Christian and Hindu

The respective creeds of Luxima and Hilarion are likewise established in gendered terms, and the oppositions of mind and body, reason and sensibility introduced. Luxima is introduced with her grandfather associating the Vedantic creed with femininity; it is “the religion of mystic love; a creed adapted to the

warm imagination, the tender feelings, and pure principles of an Indian woman . . .” (Owenson, *Missionary* 88-89). It is an immaterialist doctrine (and not dissimilar to Christianity, though lacking “but the holy impress of revelation” [89], as Hilarion notes). Luxima’s first appearance in her role as “the Prophetess . . . of Cashmire” has a prelude describing the “slow, languid, and peaceful” movements of dancers, enacting the history of a religion that is “tender and fanciful” (90)—these are conventionally feminine traits. This arouses in the audience “emotions which belonged not all to Heaven” (90). So the bodily, it is implied, is caught up in the spiritual, and that bodily aspect is female.

Yet there is an ambivalent oscillation between asceticism and sensuality. Thus, though Owenson describes “the caressing fibres of the camalata,” the flower dedicated to Camdeo (the Hindu equivalent of Cupid, the love god), she says its odors “soothed rather than intoxicated the senses” (*Missionary* 90). It seems that the sensuality originates in Hilarion himself, who feels at first “horror and disgust,” and who is (Owenson declares with irony) “above all the pomp and passions of life” at these ceremonies, where “the music, the perfumes, the women, the luxury, and the splendor” have “almost disordered his imagination” (91). The “very air” of the country bestows “enjoyment, even over the awful sanctity of religion” (91). These responses reveal Hilarion performing Christian self-denial; his original namesake was a fourth-century anchorite, an ascetic saint who suffered and resisted sensual temptation. Hilarion consciously models himself on his “patron saint” and aims to live “superior to nature, and to nature’s laws, . . . to subdue, alike, the human weaknesses and the human passion” (73). This rejection and conquest of the bodily is in opposition to a femininity that is inseparable from the land itself, which determines the cultural production of its religion.

The two religions are further contrasted by Hilarion in terms whereby the “true religion” of Christianity is “awesome and sublime” (rather than, in Burke’s schema, the feminine beautiful [Owenson, *Missionary* 140]); it is thus overtly aligned with masculinity and domination. Luxima is later described as “picturesque, . . . almost *fantastic*” (202), her aesthetic qualities contrasted to Hilarion’s utilitarian denial of fantasy and sensuality. Hilarion admits to her that his manners are “severe” and “rigid,” owing to his being “unused to any intercourse with thy sex, and wholly devoted to the cause” (140). By contrast, Hinduism in Hilarion’s view is “rhapsody” and “enthusiasm” (140). These two



terms recur through the novel, often indicating disapproval from a Western perspective but rendered ambivalent by Owenson.<sup>2</sup>

Owenson shows the coercive power of Hilarion's speech and its repression of the feminine and she may here be registering disapproval: "The rigid doctrines he preached, subdued her enthusiasm" (*Missionary* 140). "Enthusiasm," as Jon Mee argues in *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation*, is a very ambivalent term in this period and Owenson demonstrates this instability by transposing it between the couple, associating it with Hilarion's austere dogmatism as well as with the femininity of Hinduism. The encounter with Luxima leads Hilarion to re-evaluate the notion of "pleasure and sin as inseparably connected" and to conceive instead "sources of blameless pleasure" (Owenson, *Missionary* 141). Wrestling with this idea, he attempts to reinforce, in a long passage of internal dialogue, the strict separation of spheres where "it is instinct to desire, it is reason to resist" (142).

Owenson, I think quite deliberately, harnesses conventions about the East and femininity together in order to subvert them: thus Luxima "appeared a splendid image of the religion she professed—bright, wild, and illusory; captivating to the senses, fatal to the reason, and powerful and tyrannic to both" (*Missionary* 147-48). However, the depiction of Hinduism as sensual and irrational in contrast to Christianity will be qualified and subverted. There is an interesting reversal there in that "tyrannic" about the political power relationship and the dominant forces of the occidental over India, Christian over Hindu, and man over woman. Thus, we might be tempted to see *The Missionary* as a dialogue between East and West, colonizer and colonized, masculine and feminine, sense and sensibility. And it is these things, but I want to show how Owenson complicates all these antinomies, with dialogue within the poles as well as between them.

### III. Persuasion and Rational Dialogue

In Owenson's later novel *Florence Macarthy: An Irish Tale* (1818), the formal dialogue appears embedded quite clearly as rational exchanges between Fitzwalter and De Vere on such topics as the rights of man. (Jenny McAuley, in her introduction to the novel, enumerates some of the set dialogues in the

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<sup>2</sup> Owenson's own novel *O'Donnell: A National Tale* (1814) was itself disparaged by a reviewer as a "rhapsody" (Wright, "Appendix B" 300).

work [xiv]). There is also a brilliantly satirical *anti*-dialogue on literary criticism, illustrating Owenson's concerns with the distortion of communication as well as its value (*Florence Macarthy* 137-44). In that novel, General Fitzwalter finds in Lady Clancare "a congeniality of feeling and a reciprocity of intelligence" (288). This aspiration towards mutuality expressed in terms of a romance plot, and a rationalism enlarged by sensibility, is common in many progressive novels of this period (Bage's *Hermsprung* is an excellent example) and also informs *The Missionary*. However, in *The Missionary* it is also in service as an imagined reconciliation between colonizer and colonized. Wright argues that, in such national tales as Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), "the conventions of the marriage plot or the *bildungsroman* served the further purpose of exploring cultural differences and the possibility of reconciliation between a dominant and an oppressed national group" (*Ireland* 9). *The Missionary* is not quite a national tale; it is rather a generic modulation of it, but it echoes that theme of reconciliation through the romance plot. *The Missionary* follows the schema outlined by Katie Trumpener in her discussion of the national tale, with Luxima's aestheticized prophecies approximating to the appeal of "bardic nationalism" she identifies in *The Wild Irish Girl* (Trumpener 140-41). However, the "contrast, attraction, and union of disparate worlds" (141) does not achieve the reconciliation depicted in the latter novel. This harmony is only adumbrated in the utopian realm and there is no resolution through marriage. The reality of colonial domination triumphs and the power of superstition persists.

Balachandra Rajan says of the interaction between Luxima and Hilarion, "This is not simply the meeting of East and West. It is also the meeting of Adam and Eve and a meeting arranged under Miltonic auspices" (130). He says further: "In using descriptions of Satan to characterize Hilarion . . . she locates her novel deftly in the cross play between romantic revaluations of Satan and Milton's not altogether decisive treatment of the imperial-commercial mission as Satanic" (134-35). The Miltonism also draws our attention to Owenson's concern with rhetoric and persuasion. Thus Hilarion's "eloquence was irresistible," "more dazzling than judicious, more affecting than correct" at times, but it "persuaded when it failed to convince" (Owenson, *Missionary* 83). This is one example of the undermining of the strict dichotomies of masculine, Western-Christian reason and its feminized Other; Hilarion plays Lucifer in this Eden as well as Adam, employing sophistry rather than dialectic. This

inauthentic variety of persuasion rather than rational conviction approaches Habermas's notion of manipulative action.

The two principal religions of East and West also confront each other in dialogue (Islam is another issue; the novel does touch on it later). However, Owenson also examines the degree to which each creed itself is dialogic. Thus, in the novel, various pundits arrive at a festival to hold "controversial arguments" (Owenson, *Missionary* 92) about the "various sects" of Hinduism. There is polite pluralism, but not genuine engagement in dialogue at work in these debates: "The religious disputants spoke in orderly succession, without appearing to feel or excite enthusiasm, contented to detail their own doctrines, rather than controvert the doctrines of others" (93). In one sense, the Indians are dialogic in a way that the Christian West is not; Owenson stresses their tolerance. The Jesuits "were permitted, by the tolerant Gentiles, . . . to enjoy, with unrestrained freedom, the exercises of their religion" (86). There is an implied contrast with Christianity there; note also the alignment with calm rationality rather than enthusiasm, undermining the polarity of rational West and irrational East once more. "The tolerance of the followers of Brahma" is demonstrated by their not molesting one who "daringly appeared among them, openly to dispute the doctrine" of Hinduism (87). And yet, they are not committed here to dialogical reason; they listen to Hilarion's disputations out of mere "curiosity" and "indolently rejected what they took not the trouble to examine or dispute" (87).

Hilarion joins in this debate to proselytize for Christianity. Owenson is very concerned with his rhetorical effects. First, his very appearance is persuasive: "he imposed conviction on the senses, ere he made his claim upon the understanding" (Owenson, *Missionary* 94). Note that his eloquence initially proclaims itself on the body rather than through the rational faculties. There is a dialogue that is expressed apart from speech. He exhibits conventionally feminine symptoms of tears and blushing, "tears of holy zeal, the glow of warm enthusiasm" (94); the "feminine" enthusiasm of Hinduism has now attached itself to Christian fervor. Again, the dichotomy of body and sensibility against reason is involved.

Hilarion again invokes the Burkean sublime; he speaks of "symbolic images of the divine attributes" as "dark, uncertain, and obscure" (Owenson, *Missionary* 94), but which can be illuminated by revelation. Yet his own rhetorical style is clearly associated with sublimity too, resembling "those great

elementary conflicts, whose sounds of awe come rolling grandly, deeply on, breathing the mandate of Omnipotence” (94). Those “elementary conflicts” might well serve as a metaphor for polemical debate itself. If he succeeds in persuading, it is not through rational conviction, but through the “glow of warm enthusiasm which kindled around him a corresponding ardour” (94).

Note that Hilarion is the only one to argue against the other competing doctrines; the Guru of Cashmire (Luxima’s father) has, in his pluralism, tolerated “wild mysteries” with as much respect as the “pure truths” of Christianity (Owenson, *Missionary* 94). The Guru speaks, in a “rhapsody which made no claim on the understanding” and, through “the indolence of the Indian mind,” Hilarion’s eloquence is forgotten (95). Yet Owenson does not demonstrate that Hilarion’s discourse is rational in a way that would be in opposition to the feminized “rhapsodies” of his opponents. In fact, she suggests otherwise: “some *believed*, who sought not to *comprehend*; others were persuaded, who could not be convinced . . .” (94). This failure of reason is, in part, owing to the irrational “dreadful fear” stirred up by Hindu culture, but Hilarion’s discourse seems to be inadequate too: “the truths, so bright and new, now offered to their reason, were not sufficient in their effects to vanquish prejudices as dark and old . . .” (94).

Luxima, in her role as priestess, has her own persuasive powers, tied up with her physical beauty (as Hilarion’s are connected to his stature). She is possessed of “mystic charm,” has lips which belong equally to “human tenderness” as “religious love” (Owenson, *Missionary* 97), confusing the distinction of soul and body again. Perhaps, says the Pundit (a cynical observer), it may be her womanliness rather than her status as Priestess that attracts acclaim, receiving “an homage which the woman only excites” (97). The aestheticized, oracular Luxima is a “wild Indian girl,” positioned in opposition to a functionalist colonizing spirit as is Glorvina in *The Wild Irish Girl*. Thus, she embodies Trumpener’s bardic nationalism in some ways, educating the colonizer into the appreciation of a different culture.

Hilarion observes how deeply engrained superstition is: “The religion of the Hindus gave him the strongest idea of the wild extravagance which superstition is capable of producing” (Owenson, *Missionary* 102). He notes the difficulty of eradicating “those principles impressed on the character without any operation of the reason . . .” (102). But he realizes that this is true of both Christianity and Hinduism and “equally applicable to human character in the

West and in the East . . .” (102). Owenson suggests that Hilarion’s “observation of novel prejudices in others, not stronger, perhaps, but different from his own” leads him to a relativism where, though Hindus have “submitted their reason to the tyranny of a baseless illusion,” he himself has been “governed by a dream” (presumably the superstition of Catholicism [102]). Hence, in the dialogic encounter with another culture, mediated by the bardic Luxima, the self-aggrandizement of the colonist is undermined.

#### IV. Coercion and Empire

Dialogism is explicitly contrasted to the domination of empire in Owenson’s writing. In *The Life and Times of Salvator Rosa* (1824), Austrian tyranny “has retrograded civilization . . . by interdicting all freedom of discussion and play of thought” (qtd. in Wright, Introduction 12). Turning to Islam, the other great religion implicated in the history of domination in the region, we can see how Owenson connects political power with communicative reason or its absence. This enables a critique of colonialism in general, including Owenson’s recurrent concerns throughout her novels with Ireland. Islam and the “Imposter of Mecca” are characterized negatively: “Bold in error, dauntless in imposition, enslaving the moral freedom of mankind, and spreading . . . the wild doctrines he had invented, over the greatest empires of the world . . .” (This is free indirect discourse rather than authorial comment, expressing Hilarion’s sentiments [Owenson, *Missionary* 80]). Yet there is also an implicit critique of empire more generally. Thus, Hilarion is not so different to Mohammed, and has a moment of awareness of his potential for domination: “for what had Timur boasted, or Mahomet possessed, that nature had denied to him?” (81). He, too, has “a tongue of fire” and other “endowments, which, coming from God himself, give to man so dangerous an ascendant over his species . . .” (81). So, rhetoric comes under suspicion and is implicated in imperial conquest.

The novel stresses dialogism itself as a virtue, contrasted with the usual practices of coercion such as the armed power of Islam but also the practices of Christians. In the final part, Hilarion has met two Jesuit members of the Inquisition (the very name of which implies a one-sided speech act). An adversarial dialogue takes place between them on the tolerance of others’ faiths and the zeal of proselytizing (This is clearly set out in almost Socratic form as

a series of questions and responses [Owenson, *Missionary* 224-28]). There, Hilarion criticizes the coercion of the Jesuits, arguing that the “force and artifice to which they resort” leads to resistance and consequently the “loss of life and property” (226). The Hindus’ faith has “resisted the sword of Mahmound and arms of Timur” (226) and a more reasoned approach is needed by the advocates of Christianity if it is to be persuasive. Hilarion’s responses are a critique of the methods of missionaries and, implicitly, of colonizers.

Owenson’s writings are much concerned with the colonial relationship between England and Ireland; it is reasonable to relate this to the colonial matter of *The Missionary*’s India. Owenson represents Irish problems in an Indian setting; yet it is more than that and is clearly an exploration of themes of exoticism and specifically Indian issues which then cast light back on the colonial subjection of Ireland. There are precedents for this: Joseph Lennon points out that “Long before it was treated as Celtic, Irish culture was linked to the ‘Orient’” (Introduction xv). Ireland and India are bound by sympathy; Wright argues that “key anti-imperial Irish writers identified India and Ireland as bound by sympathy because of their shared oppression . . .” (*Ireland* 17).

Owenson’s other novels focus on Ireland, yet this wider anticolonialism often surfaces in those too. Owenson’s note in *Florence Macarthy* links anticolonial struggles in Latin America to Irish resistance: “It is natural that the natives of an oppressed country should sympathize with the oppressed wherever they may exist” (281n1). In *The Missionary*, the same principle is applied to India. However, if Owenson is allegorizing the domination of either Ireland or India by England, then she complicates it by setting the novel in the past and substituting Catholic Portugal, making the imperial force itself founded in enthusiasm and sensibility since Catholicism is seen through Protestant eyes as irrational. Thus, says Wright of fiction from this period, “In many anti-Catholic depictions, Catholics obey the Pope, not Civil Society or individual will, and do so as a matter of faith rather than reason” (The Catholicism of the native Irish adds further complexity to the comparison, of course [*Ireland* 9]). By rendering the colonial power irrationally Other in this way, Owenson unsettles any straightforward reading that pits reason against feminine passion, or the alignment of these with West and East. A key component of Owenson’s critique of imperial domination and its concomitant instrumental reason is Enlightenment sensibility which, in Wright’s words, “proved a useful tool for imagining, and polemically addressing, the complexities of Irish affiliations

with . . . distant colonies” (18). As Wright argues further, “Economic predation, religious intolerance, and military imperialism are opposed to sensibility . . . and dramatized in the terms of the orientalist East” (23).

## V. Sensibility and the Dialogue of Passion

The aspiration towards “mutual intelligence of mind and feeling” between the sexes is a crucial value for Owenson, as evidenced in *The Wild Irish Girl* where this is what Horatio finds in dialogue with Glorvina, with whom “nothing could be more interesting, yet more *enjoué*, than her manner and conversation” (83). This “mutual intelligence” is associated with those key words “sympathy” and “sensibility” and also with a bodily dialogue that supersedes “the inadequacy of language” (150). Likewise, in her mutual debates with Hilarion, Luxima argues for an interdependence of reason and sensibility:

if it is a virtue in thy religion to stifle the best and purest feelings of the heart, that nature implants, how shall I believe in, or adopt its tenets?—I whose nature, whose faith itself, was love—how from thee shall I learn to subdue my feelings, who first taught me to substitute a human, for a heavenly passion? (231)

The Enlightenment notion of sympathy is not antipathetical to reason; it is a necessary supplement. As Owenson says in one of her poems, “*Reason herself bows to Sympathy’s spell*” (“Fragment” 324). Sensibility can transcend cultural difference, though it can serve empire as well as resistance; the “rival and competing constitutions of sensibility” that Markman Ellis describes spread over the range of political opinions from radical “Jacobin” writings to those of their most extreme foes (190).<sup>3</sup> However, Wright argues that it may enable one “to imagine a fundamental similitude between human beings that is grounded in sympathy and affect rather than a shared culture . . .” (*Ireland* 2-3). This is the foundation of non-manipulative dialogue. Wright goes on to say that it “provides a philosophical basis for transcending divisions such as ‘race,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘nation’ in ways that both trouble imperial hegemony and

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<sup>3</sup> The complexities of the term are discussed by Janet Todd, G. J. Barker-Benfield, and John Mullan among others. Chris Jones draws out the radical strand of sensibility.

facilitate cross-cultural identifications such as those which Irish writers pursue in various texts about India” (3). Owenson is one of these writers.

As I have said, sympathy and dialogue are closely involved with each other. Terry Eagleton argues that the various theories of sensibility developed from Shaftesbury’s moral sense philosophy have an ideological function in imagining a harmonization of the atomized individualism of bourgeois society. Shaftesbury’s philosophy “can supply just the felt, intuitive links between individuals that the middle class urgently needs” where neither “market place or political state” (36) can provide such coherence. Yet, “If the moral sense philosophers help to oil the wheels of political hegemony, they also provide, contradictorily, what can be read as a discourse of utopian critique” (38). Luke Gibbons finds this critique in Burke, especially in the context of colonized India and Ireland; a very similar utopianism is at work in Owenson’s novel.

Gibbons situates Burke’s philosophy (and that of Hume and Smith) in the context of the peripheral cultures of Ireland and Scotland as modern Britain emerged (86). Sympathy as a process of exchange in contrast to the sovereignty of the individual is seen, in Smith, as a reflection of Scotland’s own surrender of sovereignty and the benefits of trade. Gibbons reveals an anxiety behind Smith’s project over assimilation to English culture and the need to temper Scottish mores (95). Owenson, from the Celtic fringe of Ireland, displays less of this anxiety, defending the “barbarism” of Indian (and implicitly Irish) culture, with less accommodation towards propriety. Smith’s impartiality in sympathy, while universalizing and escaping local prejudices, paves the way for the impersonality of commercial exchange and facilitates empire (96-98). Burke’s theory of the sublime is, in contrast, less optimistic. According to Gibbons, Burke’s attention to the suffering of the oppressed draws on his aesthetics (101); he describes vividly and with moral outrage the cruelties of colonialism in India (113-14). Gibbons identifies a “colonial sublime” in Burke’s accounts of the atrocities committed against colonized populations (108-11). But this colonial sublime may incite sympathy for the suffering of others and urge us to redress wrongs. Gibbons discerns a further aspect of sublimity in Burke through a “sympathetic sublime,” which enables the extension of sympathy to other cultures and puts our own into question (105-06). Thus, Burke’s theory of sympathy is not individualist like those of Hume and Smith but approaches “a communalist sense of sympathy and the self” (112). Gibbons sees this as an extension of Enlightenment rather than a reaction



against it, and one that involves “cross-cultural solidarity” (113). There are clear parallels between Gibbons’s account of Burke’s “sympathetic sublime” and Owenson’s exploration of dialogic sympathy. I have cited above her appeal to “human sympathies” in the dialogic sphere of “public opinion” in the Preface to *The O’Briens and the O’Flahertys*; this announces her communalist and anti-colonialist position.

Owenson, however, while employing Enlightenment sympathy against colonialism, does point to the absence of humanist universalism in Indian society, too. On Hilarion’s grasping her arm, Luxima feels defiled through the violation of caste. Hilarion tells Luxima that “a religion which creates distinction between the species cannot be the religion of truth . . .” (Owenson, *Missionary* 112). Ironically, of course, despite the universalist protestations of Christianity, this could apply equally to the latter in its role as colonial tool. The rationalist universalism here does secure Owenson’s approval, it seems, though the narrative will show that, again, the distinctions between Christianity and Hinduism are not so clear-cut. There is a set formal dialogue between Hilarion and Luxima on how benevolence is expressed in the religion of each and it is Luxima who seems more persuasive (214-15). Luxima argues for an innately human principle of universal sympathy, not too distant from that held by Enlightenment thinkers of the West: “If thou art prone to pity the wretched, and aid the weak, it is because thou wast thyself created of those particles which, at an infinite distance, constitute the Divine essence” (214). Hilarion disputes this, denouncing feeling: “*all* sentiments merely of the heart are dangerous, and to be distrusted” (215). Luxima responds with a defense that embraces their own romantic ardor as part of divine sympathy, uniting the particular with the universal:

it is alone the presence of *him she loves*: it is that mysterious sentiment of the heart . . . which resembles . . . the *primordial idea*, which, in the religion of my fathers, is supposed to have preceded *time* and *worlds*, and from which all created good has emanated. (215)

Yet, immediately afterwards, they encounter a casteless pariah who saves her life. An Indian emerges from the undergrowth. On seeing Luxima’s mark of a higher caste, he prostrates himself in reverence. She shrieks in fear. With

“a timid and respectful accent,” he appeals unequivocally to those universalist sentiments: “I am . . . an outcast! An alien! I claim no country. I *own no kindred*, but still I am human, and can pity in others the suffering I myself endure” (Owenson, *Missionary* 216). But, though “an *outcast* herself, the unconquerable prejudice and religious pride of the cast she had forfeited, still operated with unbated influence on her mind” (216). Hilarion, however, welcomes him, for he has actually saved Luxima from a serpent. Here, the positions are reversed: the “pride” and “bigotry” that Luxima has been socialized into “still over-ruled the reason of the Christian neophyte” (217). Luxima’s fearful ingratitude and her prejudices about caste contradict the humanity she has advocated. Owenson now discerns reason and sympathy in Christianity and irrational prejudice in Hinduism. This constant vacillation between contraries results in a universalist humanism that surveys both East and West critically.

Thus, Christian reason is dissected with equal acuteness. Owenson is critical of Hilarion’s passionless, disembodied faith early on for its “abstraction of mind,” unreceptive of pleasure in the love of God, yet unconsciously taking pleasure in admiration (*Missionary* 84). Owenson thus shows Hilarion to be a complex, flawed character—a subject split between reason and sensibility and unaware of that dialectic (which will be played out on a large scale in this novel). He lies readily open to psychoanalytic interpretations. It does seem that Owenson is describing an event that breaks through the armor of someone rigidly repressed: “The rapid vicissitude of feeling . . . was so new to a mind so firm, to a soul so abstracted, that for a moment he felt as though his whole being had suffered a supernatural change” (95). Hilarion is almost comically in denial about his amorous nature: “though he had conquered all human affections in himself . . . sometimes he remotely guessed at the happiness such a feeling might bestow on others less anxious for perfection . . .” (116). Such deceptive self-persuasion is characteristic of Habermas’s systematic distortion, opening up a connection between that and the manipulative action of colonial rhetoric.

Owenson displays a dialectical skill in moving between the mental and physical, simultaneously, and humorously, revealing Hilarion’s self-deception: “he believed a communion with a mind so pure, would counteract the influence, while it added to the charm, of a form so lovely” (*Missionary* 146)—observe the unconscious contradiction. Hilarion’s struggle against passion will distort the dialogue between him and Luxima. Thus, he talks to Luxima in “a language not usually his own—a *language of sentiment*” (119) in order to move her

feelings. This is a complex speech act that seems simultaneously manipulative—selecting a particular rhetoric for its efficacy—and unwittingly authentic, as it stems from his own unacknowledged passion. Their dialogue is bodily:

though her words were few, reserved . . . the warm blush of sudden emotion, the playful smile of unrepressed pleasure . . . expressions of strong and tender feelings, which, in an advanced state of society, are obscured by ceremony, or concealed by affectation, betrayed . . . a character, in which tenderness and enthusiasm, and genius and sensibility, mingled their attributes. (120)

There is here a suggestion of Rousseauvian primitivism that exalts Indian culture above Western sophistication, which has repressed authenticity.

Owenson has Hilarion argue to himself that dialogue between the two is impossible; sensibility and desire interfere:

To argue with her was impossible: for there was an incoherence in her ideas, which was not to be reconciled . . . . To listen to her was dangerous, for the eloquence of genius and feeling . . . gave a force to her errors, and a charm to her look, which weakened event the zeal of the priest, in proportion as it excited the admiration of the man. (*Missionary* 127)

This reveals not incoherence or the lack of dialogic competence in the Indian, as Hilarion assumes, but the barriers to dialogue created by his own desire and his resistance to it. Thus, the narrowness of Western, priestly rationalism is shown to be inadequate and a barrier to mutuality, whereas Luxima expresses an authenticity through a feminine and “oriental” mode which incorporates sensibility.

Hence, one way in which Owenson subverts the dichotomy of masculine intellect and Western dominance versus feminine feeling and colonial subservience is in her description of Hilarion’s obvious refusal to initially recognize his passion for Luxima: “He would not submit to the analysis of his feelings, and he was determined to conquer;” he “resisted their pleadings, with all the despotism of a great and lofty mind, created equally to command others

and itself” (Owenson, *Missionary* 133). The masculine notion of command and of intellectual dominance of passion is correlated with the political terms “conquer” and “despotism.” But Hilarion will undergo a radical conversion through the collapse and reformulation of these categories. Romantic love overcomes the prejudice of the colonial mission: “he now lived in a world of newly connected and newly modified ideas” where “the vows that bigotry exacted . . . had lost their influence over the passions of the man” (145).

Each of the pair have their own *internal* dialogue, which reveals them as radically free and capable of reaching out to the other beyond their habitual social roles; we repeatedly encounter lines like “the impulse of the man” set in opposition to “the decision of the Priest” (Owenson, *Missionary* 134), mirrored in Luxima’s consciousness as “the feeling of the woman and the pride of the Prophetess seemed to struggle in her bosom” (139). Hilarion’s inner turmoil is depicted as a conflict between culture and nature:

Peace had fled the breast of the man of God! It had deserted him in wilds, which the tumults of society had not reached . . . . He had brought with him into deserts, the virtues and the prejudices which belong to social life in a certain stage of its progress; . . . . Nature, reclaiming her rights, . . . now taught him to feel her power, through the medium of the most omnipotent of her passions.  
(144-45)

Note here that historical relativizing, echoing Rousseau once more, that indicts his own society, at “a certain stage,” (145) and which hints at a more emancipated state through the influence of nature, love, and sensibility.

Sensibility has a close relationship with enthusiasm. I have already noted how Owenson distributes this quality between opposite poles in such a way that it confounds the accepted oppositions. Enthusiasm in *The Missionary* becomes subject to Owenson’s dialectical division, alternating between Hilarion and Luxima, Christian and Hindu, West and East, with no settled compass point. Jon Mee’s discussion of the topic shows how “the discourse of sensibility deserves to be understood as a process for regulating enthusiasm” (49). And yet, sensibility is itself unstable and the literature of this period often “betrays a fear within the culture of sensibility about its own excess and degeneration

into enthusiasm” (52). Owenson draws attention to this instability and puts both concepts into question.

“Enthusiasm” is a term frequently applied to Hilarion; early on he is characterized by “fervid enthusiasm,” which is intimately connected to both his “rigid self-denial” and “eloquence,” aspects which are central to his narrative (Owenson, *Missionary* 74). Already, this enthusiasm is described as being developed at the expense of what “his habits had subtracted from his passions” and “taken from his heart” (75). His “religious melancholy and gloomy enthusiasm” is bound up with his “pursuit of inference” and “abstract principles” and fostered by his being “excluded from all social intercourse” (76). Thus, his enthusiasm is asocial and undialogic in character and there is an implicit critique of a particular kind of abstract rationalism.

Hilarion’s character has been formed by the influence of the sublime landscape of Portugal on his native “complexional enthusiasm” (Owenson, *Missionary* 73). In an apostrophe to “the magnificent assemblages of great and discordant images,” Owenson lists such archetypal examples of the sublime as mountains, “subterraneous thunder,” “ruins,” and “monastic gloom” (72). She asks, “What a powerful influence were not your wilderness and your solemnity, your grandeur and your gloom, calculated to produce upon the mind of religious enthusiasm . . . ?” (72). But he has “lost sight of the true object of human existence”; his enthusiasm “disdains the ordinary business of life, with that profound sensibility which unfits for its pursuits” (73). Enthusiasm and sensibility here are associated in a destructive way.

Owenson paradoxically connects Hilarion’s enthusiasm with the narrow rationalism of the scientist, against the natural sexual impulse: “he resembled the *enthusiast* of experimental philosophy, who shuts out the light and breath of heaven, to inhale an artificial atmosphere . . .” (*Missionary* 145; emphasis added). Sensibility has thus become transformed into its antithesis, abstract reasoning—an abstraction from both empirical, material reality and, significantly, from the dialogism of “social intercourse” (76). This rationalism is removed from the bodily and from dialogic engagement. The encounter with Luxima will precipitate a radical revision of this, Nature having “breathed upon his feelings her vivifying spirit” (145).

Hilarion’s “complexioned springs of passion” have been regulated by his monastic life, so he has trained himself to mistrust spontaneous impulses and becomes zealous only after, “suspicious of himself” (Owenson, *Missionary*

100), he has carefully and rationally examined it. He “frequently meditated himself into passion” (101). Here there is an apparent synthesis. But Owenson is perhaps disingenuous and Hilarion not as “tranquilized and subdued” (100) as he thinks. For Luxima now comes to occupy his thoughts incessantly.

However, Hilarion will accuse Luxima of enthusiasm too, and endeavors to quell it with his sublime rigidity. Fired with “enthusiasm” (aligning her with Hilarion), Luxima’s imagination becomes “disordered”; she utters “rhapsodies in accents so impressive . . . that the mind no longer struggles against the imposition of the senses” (Owenson, *Missionary* 100). Again, Luxima declaims, “with enthusiasm” on “the doctrine of mystic love, which unites its followers to each other, and to the Source of all good” (140). Hilarion rebuts this as “rhapsody” and “the eloquence of an ardent enthusiasm,” as opposed to “true religion” which is “awful and sublime,” involving “sacrifices of the earthly passions, and the human feeling” (This is clearly not the “sympathetic sublime” that Gibbons talks of [140]). And yet the “enthusiast votarist” of Hinduism is contrasted with the Catholic enthusiast; the Hindus take “refreshing pleasure” from diving into the river; it is a pleasure of both “the soul and the frame” and purifies both (85). This monism is in contrast to the troubled dualism of the Westerner.

The pre-eminence of human intellect is shown to be unstable because of the presence of passion. Humankind alone is subject to sentiment, left “a stranger to thyself, lost in the wild vicissitudes of feelings . . .” (Owenson, *Missionary* 161). Though “one fixed immutable law of harmony and order, regulates and governs the whole system of unintelligent creatures,” human beings are free from that determinism and have “no part in the splendid mechanism of nature . . .” (161). Yet this radical freedom, of pure intellect removed from mechanical causality, is, in Hilarion’s internal meditation on humanity’s place in the universe, contradicted by the anarchy of passion: “Viceregent of Heaven! Thou rulest all that breathes, save only thyself . . . thou art the slave of instinct . . .” (161-62). The imagery of political power, of colonial viceregent deposed by the oppressed slave, passion, indicates the instability of both instrumental reason and of empire.

Hilarion eventually recognizes that human suffering stems not from innate propensities but from the systematic distortion of the separation of feeling and reason and from the divisions between humanity that doctrine and empire have perpetuated: “he now saw that the sufferings of man resulted less from the

constitution of his nature, than from . . . those illusions which the law of human reason, and the impulse of human affection equally oppose” (Owenson, *Missionary* 239). Now that the passion between him and Luxima has made them “*victims of mistaken zeal*,” he sees “those false distinctions, which superstition has executed between the species, as the source of the severest sufferings to which man was condemned” (239). A rational sensibility, cultivated through the mutual dialogic encounter between the lovers, foreshadows a utopian transcendence of the “false distinctions” between colonized and colonizer, man and woman, fostered by domination and by superstitions both Oriental and Occidental.

## VI. Conclusion

The novel ends with an insurrection by the Indians which is brutally suppressed and which parallels the successful overthrow in 1668 of Spanish domination in Portugal (Owenson, *Missionary* 259). Luxima dies, revealing that her apparent conversion to Christianity was not absolute but more an expression of her love of Hilarion. Her last words are an appeal to him to use his rhetorical powers to preach to both Hindu and Christian, urging the one to overcome caste divisions and the other to mitigate their zeal (257). He becomes a recluse, “whose religion is unknown” (260).

As Padma Rangarajan argues, *The Missionary* defies the usual trajectory of the oriental tale, “melding aspects of the national tale with the oriental and, most tantalizingly, dangling the promise of potential union even to its very end” (98). Rangarajan cites Luxima’s dying words, which call on Hilarion to use his persuasive powers to engage dialogically with both Hindus and other Christians, “to soothe away . . . the stubborn prejudice which separates the mild and patient Hindu from his species” and to “check the Christian’s zeal” (257). Yet note that Hilarion does not fulfil this utopian promise of fostering dialogue; he chooses instead solitude and dies without carrying out Luxima’s injunction.

Hilarion reprimands Luxima for conflating divine and earthly love: “You are confounding ideas which should be eternally distinct and separate” (Owenson, *Missionary* 169). I maintain that Owenson is herself confounding separate ideas, or rather bringing them into dialogue with each other so that their apparent opposition is sublated by new, more universalist ideas. Thus, Rajan says, “her novel is both enriched and fissured by its participation in two

discourses: a literary discourse of world humanism . . . and an imperial discourse gendered so as to offer India the enlightenment of feminine submission to Western overlordship” (135-36). However, the strict polarity of a feminine India and masculine colonizer has, I have shown, been undermined.

In *The Wild Irish Girl*, the heroine, Glorvina anticipates the goal of “universal philanthropy” (Owenson 187), and in what may be a happy accident, the hero, Horatio says he “could have soon delivered a logical essay on identity and diversity” (62). But the reconciliation of such opposites as identity and diversity as leading towards that “universal philanthropy” is, I argue, central to Owenson’s work, in *The Wild Irish Girl* and other novels, and particularly in *The Missionary*. The critical theorist Seyla Benhabib, drawing on Habermas’ work on communicative reason, asks the question, “Is universalism ethnocentric?” in the light of the “global dialogue across cultures and civilizations” (25). She argues for “a recognition of the radical hybridity and polyvocality of all cultures; cultures themselves, as well as societies, are not holistic but polyvocal, multilayered, decentered, and fractured systems of action and signification” (25-26). *The Missionary*, I argue, is a persuasive demonstration of the possibility of transcending the opposition between cultural identity and universalism in order to realize that recognition that Benhabib adumbrates here. It draws on the sympathetic sublime identified by Gibbons in Burke and exemplifies the critical force in sensibility that Eagleton uncovers. Yet this sublation remains in the utopian realm, foreshadowed by the very language of fantasy and enlightened sensibility, in a narrative that was denounced as “beyond all bounds of consistency and probability” (thus defying novelistic conventions of verisimilitude [Wright, “Appendix B” 298]). However, this vision is crushed by the brute fact of Empire. Thus, the novel abruptly falls out of the dreamlike, fantastic mode and ends in hard factuality. The missionary and colonial projects have been profoundly undermined, but the dialogic alternative has not been realized. The fact of domination persists despite the subversion of Owenson’s polyphonic amatory fantasy.



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# CONTRIBUTOR

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