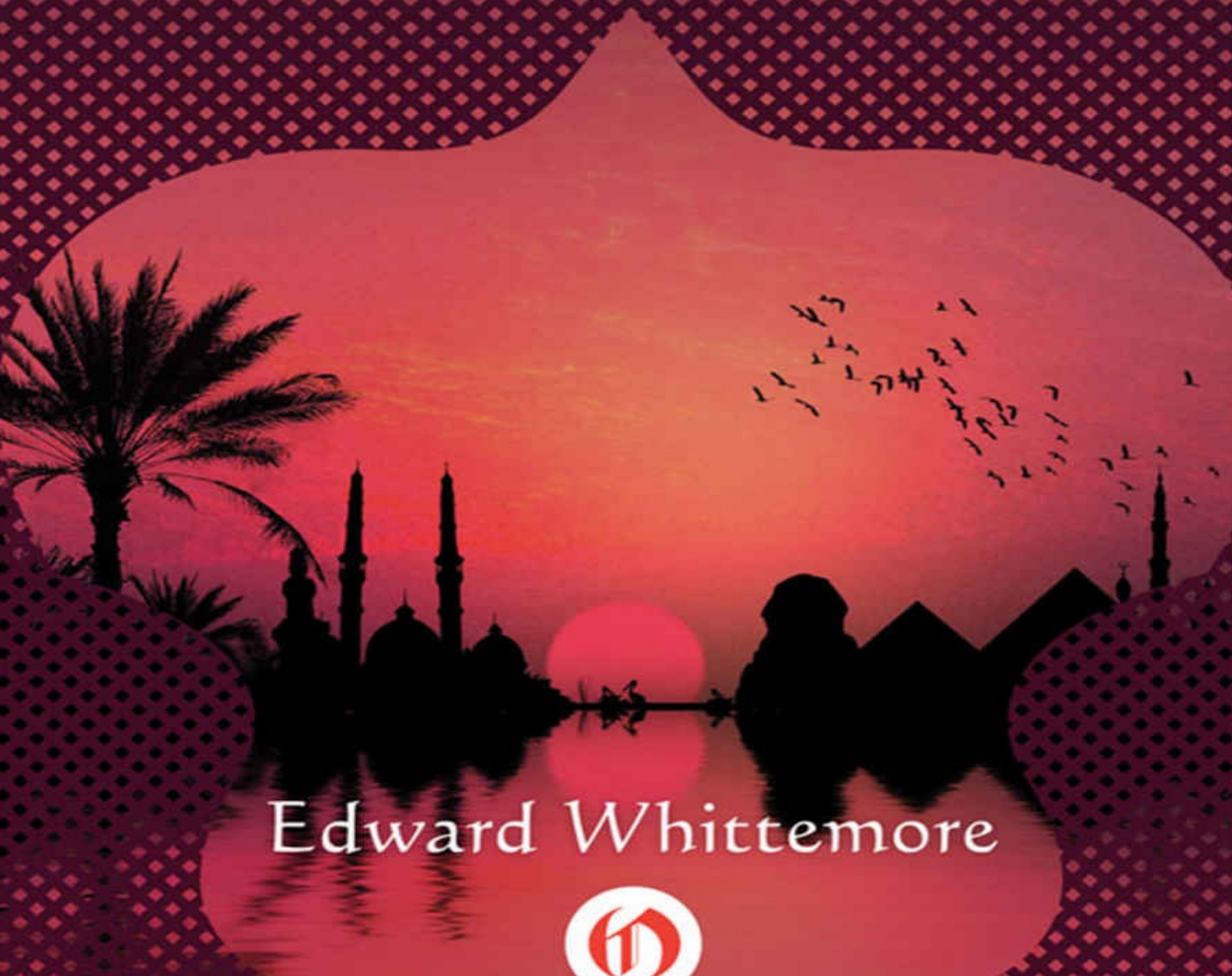


Book Three of the Jerusalem Quartet

# Nile Shadows



Edward Whittmore



# PRAISE FOR THE WRITING OF EDWARD WHITTEMORE

## *Quin's Shanghai Circus*

“A profoundly nutty book full of mysteries, truths, untruths, idiot savants, necrophiliacs, magician dwarfs, circus masters, secret agents ... A marvellous recasting of history in our century.” — *The New York Times Book Review*

## **The Jerusalem Quartet**

“Whittemore’s colorful characters ... wrestle fitfully with meaninglessness, time, and the grim realities of war... . As in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, characters return in name and shape through their progeny, while people, events, and certain phrases are regularly reintroduced, giving you the feeling that you are wandering through a labyrinth of memory.” — *The New York Times Voice Literary Supplement*

“The four books which make up the Jerusalem Quartet are among the richest and most profound imaginative literature... . A superlative body of work.” —Jeff VanderMeer

“An epic hashish dream ... cosmic ... fabulous ... droll and moving.” —*The New York Times Book Review* on *Sinai Tapestry*

“An author of extraordinary talents, albeit one who eludes comparison with other writers... . The milieu is one which readers of espionage novels may think themselves familiar, and yet it’s totally transformed—by the writer’s wild humour, his mystical bent, and his bicameral perception of history and time.” —*Harper’s* on *Jerusalem Poker*

“The final book in what is one of the most wonderful achievements in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature... . Without illusion, but with supreme intelligence and a generous heart, Whittemore shows us just how painful, beautiful, and surprising ... life’s reversals can be, and how our struggles with ourselves and others can ultimately seem to change time itself.” —*The Philadelphia Inquirer* on *Jericho Mosaic*

# Nile Shadows

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**Edward Whitemore**











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# Edward Whittmore (1933–1995)

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## Foreword by Tom Wallace

“SOME TWENTY YEARS AFTER the end of the war with Japan a freighter arrived in Brooklyn with the largest collection of Japanese pornography ever assembled in a Western tongue. The owner of the collection, a huge, smiling fat man named Geraty, presented a passport to customs officials that showed that he was a native-born American about as old as the century, an exile who had left the United States four decades before.” Thus begins *Quin’s Shanghai Circus*; it ends with the large funeral procession held in Asia since the thirteenth century.

The year was 1974, the author of *Quin’s Shanghai Circus*, Edward Whittmore, a forty-one-year-old former American intelligence agent; he and I had been undergraduates at Yale back in the 1950s, but then we had gone our separate ways, he to the Marines and then the CIA and I to a career in book publishing in New York City. Needless to say, I was pleased that my old Yale friend had brought his novel to me and the publishing house of Holt, Rinehart and Winston where I was editor-in-chief of the Trade Department. I was even more delighted when the reviews, mostly favorable, started coming in, capped by Jerome Charyn in *The New York Times Book Review*: “*Quin* was a profoundly nutty book full of mysteries, truths, untruths, idiot savants, necrophiliacs, magicians, dwarfs, circus masters, and secret agents... a marvelous recasting of history in our century.”

In the next fifteen years Whittmore went on to write four more wildly imaginative novels, his *Jerusalem Quartet: Sinai Tapestry, Jerusalem Poker, Nile Shadows, and Jericho Mosaic*. Reviewers and critics compared his work to the novels of Carlos Fuentes, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut. *Publishers Weekly* called him “our best unknown novelist.” Jim Houghan, writing in *Harper’s Magazine*, said Whittmore was “one of the last, best arguments against television.... He is an author of extraordinary talents.... The milieu is one in which readers of espionage novels may think themselves familiar, and yet it is totally transformed by the writer’s wild humor, his mystical bent, and his bicameral perception of time and history.”

Edward Whittmore died from prostate cancer in the summer of 1995 at the age of sixty-two, not much better known than when he began his short, astonishing writing career in the early 1970s. His novels never sold more than 5000 copies in hard covers, three were briefly available in mass market paperback editions. But the *Quartet* was published in Great Britain, Holland, Spain, Italy, Greece, Scandinavia, Russia, Poland, and Germany where Whittmore was described on its jacket as the “master American storyteller.” The jacket on the Polish edition of *Quin’s Shanghai Circus* was a marvelous example of Japanese erotica.

Whittemore graduated from Deering High School, Portland, Maine in June 1951 and entered Yale that fall, a member of the Class of 1955. Another Yale classmate, the novelist Ric Frede, labeled Yale undergraduates of the 1950s “members of the Silent Generation.” The Fifties were also the “Eisenhower Years,” that comfortable period between the Second World War and the radicalism and the campus unrest of the 1960s. Ivy League universities were still dominated by the graduates of New England prep schools. Sons of the East Coast “establishment,” they were closer to the Princeton of Scott Fitzgerald and the Harvard of John P. Marquand than the worlds of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. They were “gentlemen” and athletes but not necessarily scholars. Often after receiving “gentlemanly C’s” at Yale and the other Ivys, they went on to careers on Wall Street or in Washington; to the practice of law, medicine, or journalism. They entertained their families and friends on the playing fields of Yale as well as at Mory’s. They ran *The Yale Daily News*, WYBC (the campus radio station), *The Yale Record* (the humor magazine), *The Yale Banner* (the year book), and sang in various Yale music groups. They were usually members of a fraternity and were “tapped” by one of the six secret Senior Societies.

By the Yale standards of the day, Whittemore was a great success, a “high school boy” who made it. Affable, good-looking and trim, he presented a quizzical smile to the world. He casually wore the uniform that was “in”: herringbone tweed jacket, preferably with patches at the elbow, rep tie, chinos, and scruffy white buck shoes. In a word, he was “shoe” (short for “white shoe,” a term of social approval). He was not much of an athlete, but he was a member of Zeta Psi, a fraternity of hard-drinking, socially well-connected undergraduates. At the end of Junior year he was tapped for Scroll and Key.

But his real distinction was that he was the Managing Editor of the 1955 *Yale News* Board at a time when *News* chairmen and managing editors were as popular as football team captains and the leading scholars of the class. During the immediate postwar years and the 1950s the *Yale News* produced such prominent writer-journalists as William F. Buckley, James Claude Thomson, Richard Valeriani, David McCullough, Roger Stone, M. Stanton Evans, Henry S.F. Cooper, Calvin Trillin, Gerald Jonas, Harold Gulliver, Scott Sullivan, and Robert Semple. They would make their mark at *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The National Review*, *Harper’s*, and the television networks, and go on to write many books.

I met Ted early in the spring of Freshman year. We were both “heeling” the first *News* “comp” and as was usually the case with survivors of that fierce “competition” to make the *News*, we remained friends throughout our years at Yale. It was assumed by many of us on the *News* that Ted would head for Wall Street and Brown Brothers Harriman, a blue-chip investment firm where Old Blues from Scroll and Key were more than welcome and where Ted’s older brother later was a partner. Or at the very least, he would get on the journalistic fast-track somewhere in the *Time-Life* empire founded by

an earlier *News* worthy, Henry Luce.

But we were wrong. Whittemore, after a tour of duty as an officer in the Marines in Japan, was approached there by the CIA and spent the Kennedy years working for the Agency in Europe. During those years Whittemore would periodically return to New York City. “What are you up to?” one would ask. “Oh, this and that.” For a while he was running a socialist newspaper in Rome. After he left the Agency there was a stint with the Addiction Services Agency in New York City. Later, there were rumors that he had a drinking “problem” and that he was taking drugs. He married and divorced twice. He and his first wife had two daughters. And then there were the women he lived with after the second divorce. There were many; they all seemed to be talented—painters, photographers, writers, sculptors, and dancers. There were more rumors. He was living on Crete, he had no job, no money, he was writing. Then silence. Clearly, the “fair-haired” undergraduate had not gone on to fame and glory.

It was not until 1972 or 1973 that Ted surfaced in my life. He was back in New York on a visit. On the surface he appeared to be the old Ted. He was a little ruffled, but the wit, the humor, the boyish charm were still there. Yet he seemed more thoughtful, more reflective, and there was Carol, a woman with whom Ted had become involved while in Crete and with whom he seemed to be living. He was more secretive now. And he had the manuscript of a novel he wanted me to read. I thought the novel was wonderful, full of fabulous and exotic characters, brimming with life, history, and the mysteries of the Orient. The novel that came to be called *Quin's Shanghai Circus* went through three more drafts before we published it in 1974. Set in Japan and China before and during the Second World War, two drafts even began in the South Bronx in the 1920s and involved three young Irish brothers named Quin. By the time the novel came out only one Quin remained and the Bronx interlude had shrunk from eighty pages to a couple of paragraphs.

As mentioned, *Quin* was a bigger success with the critics than it was in the bookstores. Readers loved the novel, even though there were not nearly enough of them. But Whittemore was not deterred. Less than two years later he appeared in my office with an even more ambitious novel, *Sinai Tapestry*, the first volume of his Jerusalem Quartet. Set in the heyday of the British Empire, it takes place in Palestine during the middle of the nineteenth century. Foremost among the larger-than-life characters were a tall English aristocrat, the greatest swordsman, botanist, and explorer of Victorian England; a fanatical trappist monk who found the original Sinai Bible, which “denies every religious truth ever held by anyone;” and an Irish radical who had fled to Palestine disguised as a nun. My favorite was (and still is) Haj Harun, born three thousand years earlier, an ethereal wanderer through history: now an antiquities dealer dressed in a faded yellow cloak and sporting a Crusaders’ rusty helmet while pursuing his mission as defender of the Holy City. He had several previous incarnations: as a stone carver of winged lions during the Assyrian occupation, proprietor of an all-night grocery store under the Greeks, a waiter when the Romans were in power, and a distributor of hashish and goats for the

Turks. Before I first went to Israel in 1977, Whittemore, who was then living in New York, gave me the names of several people in Jerusalem. One was named Mohammed, the owner of an antiquities gallery. When I finally tracked him down in the Old City I saw before me a fey character who, if he had been wearing a faded yellow cloak and a rusty helmet, would have been a dead ringer for Haj Harun.

Clearly Ted had been caught up in a new life in Jerusalem. During the preceding years when he had been living modestly in Crete he had the opportunity to do a great deal of reading and thinking. Crete had a rich history. It had been occupied by the Romans, conquered by the Arabs, Byzantines, and Venetians before becoming part of the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century. Now it was a quiet, out-of-the-way Greek island with few distractions for a penniless American expatriate. In other words, a perfect place for a former intelligence agent to take stock and decide what history was all about, to re-examine what he had learned as a Yale undergraduate.

While in Japan in the 1960s Whittemore had written two unpublished novels, one about the Japanese game of Go, the other about a young American expatriate living in Tokyo. In Crete he began to write again, slowly, awkwardly, experimenting with voice, style, and subject matter, distilling his experience in the Agency into that sweeping raucous epic, *Quin's Shanghai Circus*. By the time he embarked on the Quartet, he was more assured, he was a more polished writer, and he had found a subject that was to engage him for the rest of his life: Jerusalem and the world of Christians, Arabs, and Jews; faith and belief; mysticism and religious (and political) fanaticism; nineteenth century European imperialism, twentieth century wars and terrorism. But above all Jerusalem, the City on the Hill, the Holy City. The novels would still be full of outrageous characters, the humor was still often grotesque and macabre, and there was violence aplenty. But there was also a new understanding of the mysteries of life.

The new novel, finally published in 1979, was *Jerusalem Poker*, the second volume of the Quartet. It involves a twelve-year poker game begun in the last days of December 1921 when three men sit down to play. The stakes were nothing less than the Holy City itself. Where else could a game for the control of Jerusalem be played but in the antiquities shop of Haj Harun? Actually, Ted did not come to live permanently (that is "permanently" according to his ways) in Jerusalem until he was well into writing the Quartet. His knowledge of Jerusalem was based initially on books, but later on he wandered endlessly through the crowded, teeming streets and Quarters of the Old City. Merchants of every kind, butchers, tanners, glass blowers, jewelers, silversmiths, and even iron mongers spoke nearly every known language and dressed in the vibrant and exotic costumes of the Middle East. I once remarked to Ted while we were making our way along a narrow passage in the Arab Quarter, that I fully expected we would run into Sinbad the Sailor coming the other way.

The next time I visited Jerusalem, Ted had settled down with Helen, an American painter, in

spacious apartment in a large, nineteenth-century stone building in the Ethiopian Church compound. The apartment overlooked a courtyard full of flowers and lemon trees. Over one wall there loomed the Cistercian convent, and around the corner there was a synagogue full of Orthodox rabbinical students praying twenty-four hours a-day, or so it seemed to me. And standing or quietly reading in the courtyard were the Ethiopian monks. One morning I woke at six in my sunlit room and heard the Cistercian nuns singing a cappella. They sounded like birds and I thought for a moment I was in heaven.

After a midday nap we usually headed for the Old City, invariably ending up in the same cafe, a pretentious name for what was little more than an outdoor tea garden where hot tea and sticky buccellotti were served. The proprietor sat at one table interminably fingering worry beads and talking to friends, an ever-changing group of local merchants, money changers, students, and some unsavory hard-looking types. They all seemed to have a nodding acquaintance with Ted, who knew as much, if not more, about the Old City as its inhabitants.

By 1981, Whittemore was living in a studio apartment on Third Avenue in New York City. And he was writing steadily. I had left Holt earlier that spring for another publishing house and a young colleague, Judy Karasik, took over the editorial work on Whittemore's new novel, *Nile Shadows*. After Ted died, she wrote the epilogue to this novel. It is one of the most moving accounts of an editor working and personal relationship with an author I have ever read. She should have given it as an eulogy at Whittemore's funeral twelve years after *Nile Shadows* appeared.

*Nile Shadows* is set in Egypt, it is 1942 and Rommel's powerful Afrika Corps is threatening to overrun Egypt and seize control of the entire Middle East. A group of Whittemore's characters, some old, some new, hold the fate of the world in their hands. At the very beginning of the novel, Stern, an idealistic visionary in *Sinai Tapestry* turned gun-runner a half century later, is killed by a grenade thrown into the doorway of a backstreet bar. Violence as well as mysticism dominates Whittemore's novels. In *Quin's Shanghai Circus* he had described with horrible abandon the "rape" of Nanking and in *Sinai Tapestry* the sack of Smyrna in 1922 when the Turks butchered ten of thousands of Greek men, women, and children. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer said of *Nile Shadows*: "One of the most complex and ambitious espionage stories ever written." And a critic in *The Nation* said: "Whittemore is a deceptively lucid stylist. Were his syntax as cluttered as Pynchon's or as conspicuously grand as Nabokov's or Fuentes', his virtually ignored novels might have received the attention they deserved."

But sales still hadn't caught up with the critics. By the spring of 1985, Ted was finishing the novel that was to be called *Jericho Mosaic*, the fourth of the Jerusalem Quartet. I was in Israel for the biennial Jerusalem International Book Fair. Afterwards, Ted suggested we drive down to Jericho, the oasis to the southeast of Jerusalem from which most of the caravans of Biblical times set out for the Levant, Asia Minor, and Africa. On the way we visited several Greek Orthodox monasteries in the

Judean wilderness. Since they were built into solid rock at the bottom of isolated ravines reachable only on narrow paths, we had to leave the car up on the road and scramble down hillsides more suitable for mountain goats than a novelist and a New York editor. However, once we made it safely to the bottom, the monks proved to be extremely hospitable. Whittemore was a frequent visitor and the monks seemed to enjoy his company.

After being shown around the rocky quarters, not much more than elaborate caves, and consuming some dreadful retsina (the monks didn't drink it themselves) we continued to Jericho and a typical lunch of dried figs, a bread-like pastry and melon and hot fragrant tea. Then we made our way to the Negev. Over the years Ted had befriended some of the local Bedouins and we were greeted like old friends at several encampments. We spent one night at an Israeli meteorological center/desert inn near a Nabatean ruin. There seemed to be antennae and electric sensors everywhere, and as we used to say in those days, gray men in London, Washington, Moscow, and Beijing could probably hear every sparrow-fart in the desert. In retrospect, I sometimes wonder if Ted had ever really retired? Was he still, in this case, visiting his "controller," and using me as his cover?

Several months later, when Ted sent me a post card urging me to save a spot on an upcoming list for his next novel, the design on the card was a Byzantine mosaic of "the Tree of Life" Ted and I had seen on the stone floor of a ruin in Jericho. I took it to the art director at Norton where I was then senior editor. He agreed with me that it would make an excellent design for a book jacket. All we needed was a manuscript.

*Jericho Mosaic* arrived before the end of the year, a fitting culmination to Whittemore's marvelous Quartet. In my opinion, *Jericho Mosaic* is the most original espionage story ever written. The novel is based on events that actually took place before the Six Day War and Whittemore demonstrates his total knowledge of the craft of intelligence and its practitioners, his passion for the Middle East, his devotion to the Holy City, and his commitment to peace and understanding among Arabs, Jews, and Christians. The novel and the novelist maintain we can overcome religious, philosophical, and political differences if we are ready to commit ourselves to true understanding for all people and all ideas.

This humanistic message is imbedded in a true story involving Eli Cohen, a Syrian Jew who sacrificed his life (he managed to turn over to Mossad the Syrian plans and maps for the defense of the Golan Heights) in order that Israel might survive. In the novel Whittemore tells the story of Halim (who is clearly based on Eli Cohen) a Syrian Jew who returns to his homeland from Buenos Aires where he has been pretending to be a Syrian businessman to forward the Arab revolution. Halim becomes an outspoken advocate for Palestinian rights, he is the conscience of the Arab cause, "the incorruptible one." But Halim is an agent for the Mossad; his code name is "the Runner," his assignment to penetrate the heart of the Syrian military establishment. At the same time the novel is



profound meditation on the nature of faith in which an Arab holy man, a Christian mystic, and a former British intelligence officer sit in a garden in Jericho exploring religion and humanity's relationship in its various facets.

There were fewer reviews of *Jericho Mosaic* and even fewer sales than before. Arabs and Jews were involved in a bloody confrontation on the West Bank, there were lurid photographs in the newspapers and magazines and on television every day, and even more horrific stories. The times were not propitious for novelists defending the eternal verities, no matter how well they wrote. One critic did, however, proclaim Whittemore's Quartet "the best metaphor for the intelligence business in recent American fiction."

Shortly after *Jericho Mosaic* was published Whittemore left Jerusalem, the Ethiopian compound, and the American painter. He was back in New York living during the winter with Ann, a woman he had met years before when her husband had been teaching at Yale. In the summers he would take over the sprawling, white, Victorian family home in Dorset, Vermont. The windows had green shutters, and an acre of lawn in front of the house was bounded by immense stately evergreen trees. Twenty or so rooms were distributed around the house in some arbitrary New England Victorian design, and the furniture dated back to his grandparents, if not great-grandparents. Ted's brothers and sisters by now had their own houses and so Ted was pretty much its sole occupant. It was not winterized and could only be inhabited from May through October. But for Ted it was a haven to which he could retreat and write.

In the spring of 1987 I became a literary agent and Ted joined me as a client. American book publishing was gradually being taken over by international conglomerates with corporate offices in Germany and Great Britain. They were proving to be more enamored of commerce than literature and it seemed to me I could do more for writers by representing them to any of a dozen publishers rather than just working for one.

I regularly visited Ted in the fall in Dorset. "The foliage season," late September, early October is a very special time of year in New England: crisp clear days, wonderfully cool moonlit nights. We walked the woods and fields of southern Vermont by day, sat in front of the house after dinner on solid green Adirondack chairs, drink in hand and smoking. Actually I was the one drinking (usually brandy) because Ted had stopped years ago. While we talked I would smoke a cigar or two, Ted would merely smoke one evil-looking cheroot. Comfortably ensconced on the lawn near the United Church, where his great-grandfather had been a minister, within sight of the Village Green and the Dorset Inn, our talk would turn to books and writing, family and friends. To his family, Ted must have cut a romantic figure, the Yale who had gone off to the CIA, had, so to speak, burned out, had come home via Crete, Jerusalem, and New York as a peripatetic novelist whose books received glowing reviews that resulted in less than glowing sales. But they, and "his women," supported him and continued to believe in him.

It was during these early fall visits that I discovered that his Prentiss great-grandfather had been a Presbyterian minister who had made his way up the Hudson River by boat from New York to Troy and then over to Vermont by train and wagon in the 1860s. In the library of the white, rambling Victorian house in Dorset there were shelves of fading leather-bound volumes of popular romances written by his great-grandmother for shop girls, informing them how to improve themselves, dress, and find suitable husbands. I gathered she was the Danielle Steele of her day, and the family's modest wealth was due to her literary efforts and not the generosity of the church's congregation.

We talked about the new novel. It was to be called *Sister Sally and Billy the Kid* and it was to be Ted's first American novel. It was about an Italian in his twenties from the Chicago of the roaring Twenties. His older brother, a gangster, had helped him buy a flower shop. But there was a shoot-out and the older brother was dead, and Billy has to flee to the West Coast where he meets a faith healer not unlike Aimee Semple McPherson. The real-life McPherson disappeared for a month in 1926, and when she returned claimed she had been kidnapped. The stone house in which Billy and his faith healer spend their month of love (from the beginning it is clear that the idyll must be limited to one month) has a walled garden behind it full of lemon trees and singing birds. Although that house is in southern California, the garden bears a close resemblance to another garden in the Ethiopian compound in Jerusalem with a synagogue on one side and a Cistercian convent on the other.

Then one day in early spring 1995, Ted called me. Could he come by the office that morning? I assumed it was to deliver the long-awaited manuscript. There had been two false starts after *Jericho* and *Mosaic*. Instead Ted told me he was dying. Would I be his literary executor? A year or so earlier Ted had been diagnosed as having prostate cancer. It was too far along for an operation. His doctor had prescribed hormones and other medication and the cancer had gone into remission. But now it had spread. Less than six months later he was dead. They were terrible months for him. However, during those last weeks and days while he slipped in and out of consciousness, he was looked after by Carol who had never really left his life.

There was a hushed memorial service in the United Church in Dorset that August. Afterwards, a reception was held on the large lawn in front of the family house. It was there that the disparate parts of Ted's world came together, perhaps for the first time; there was his family, his two sisters and two brothers and their spouses, nieces, and nephews with their own families (but not Ted's former wives or the two daughters who had flown to New York to say "goodbye"); there were neighbors, Yale friends, and a couple of colleagues from the Lindsay years. Were there any "spooks" in attendance? One really can't say, but there were eight "spooks" of a different sort from Yale, members of the 1950 Scroll and Key delegation. Ann and Carol were, of course, there.

Jerusalem and Dorset. The beautiful Holy City on the rocky cliffs overlooking the parched gray-brown desert. A city marked by thousands of years of history, turbulent struggles between great empires and three of the most enduring, vital religions given by God to mankind. And the summer

green valley in Vermont (covered by snow in the winter and by mud in the spring) where Dorset nestles between the ridges of the softly rolling Green Mountains. Once one of the cradles of the American Revolution and American democracy, and later a thriving farming and small manufacturing community, it is a place where time has stood still since the beginning of the twentieth century. One was the subject of Whittemore's dreams and books; the other the peaceful retreat in which he dreamed and wrote the last summers of his life.

Ted had finally come home to New England. It had been a long journey: Portland, New Haven, Japan, Italy, New York, Crete, Jerusalem, New York, and now Dorset. Along the way he had many friends and companions; he was not a particularly good husband or father and disappointed many. But gradually he had found his voice, written his novels, and fallen in love with Jerusalem. I would like to think that Ted died dreaming of his Holy City. In a sense he was at one with that stonecutter turned medieval knight, turned antiquities dealer, Haj Harun. For Whittemore was the eternal knight-errant who "made it" at Yale in the 1950s, "lost it" in the CIA, and then made himself into a wonderful novelist with the voice of a mystic. The voice of a mystic who had absorbed the best of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His great-grandfather the minister and his great-grandmother the writer would have been equally proud of him. His spirit rests peacefully in Dorset, Vermont.

Tom Wallach  
New York City, 2000

# *Nile Shadows*: The Improbable Art of Edward Whittemore

WHAT TO MAKE OF A book like *Nile Shadows*, or an author like Edward Whittemore? No matter how determinedly catholic we like to think our literary tastes, there are some works that leave our inner critic feeling uncomfortably at a loss when it first encounters them. “Yes, but is it any good?”, it keeps asking with tireless persistence as the rest of us answer that question by happily turning page after page. Like many authors belonging to that large and unfortunate caste, “the unjustly neglected,” Whittemore suffers from being an embarrassingly good read. He also suffers from a bigger crime, that he is almost impossible to pigeonhole. Reviewers’ comparisons bounce from Pynchon to Nabokov, Greene to Calvino and Fuentes to Vonnegut, only to hastily assert that he is, of course, very much his own man. Reading Whittemore, I found myself adding my own—a touch of Hesse here, a dash of Robertson Davies there, yet without what could be termed a debt to either of them. Each new reader will inevitably supply more.

So what is it that makes *Nile Shadows*, and the rest of Whittemore’s works, so infinitely flexible? Are they simply baggy monsters into which one can throw whatever one wants? In a sense they are, and it’s not a criticism to say that Whittemore is probably one of the baggiest writers this century—his books represent that most vain of ambitions and the downfall of more than one literary great: a complete explanation of everything. Nothing less than a unified theory of human history is what Whittemore is after, and it’s a sign of his mettle that he realizes such an ambition is doomed from the start, yet undertakes it anyway. *Nile Shadows* is set in an anxious Cairo of 1942, awaiting the arrival at any moment of Rommel and his Panzer divisions from out of the desert. The distant rumble of gunfire and armored vehicles is the rumble of history itself, bearing down on Whittemore’s characters as they engage in their desperate machinations to avoid defeat. And yet what do those characters do in the face of such pressure? They talk, is what they do, and they talk and talk and *talk*. Each conversation leading on to something else, which in turn leads to something else, and suddenly a new character is introduced—a thumbnail sketch surely, a literary prop, no more—but no, suddenly he starts growing in front of our eyes, acquiring a languorous history stretching out over pages and pages while we think, Quick! Do something! The enemy is coming!

At times there is something outright perverse about this compunction to hold forth. When Joe O’Sullivan, the novel’s protagonist, encounters the mysterious Ahmad, undoubted possessor of vital information about the man he has been sent to uncover, we get the following:

Well now, so you’ve come from America, have you?

Yes, murmured Joe, his eyes drifting around the room in a trance.

Well now, isn't that a strange coincidence? The world is really very small. It just so happens I once was given a complete edition of the collected letters of George Washington, some thirty-odd volumes in all, and they certainly added up to some fascinating reading.

They did?

Oh very. Let's see now. Did you know, for example, that Washington's false teeth were made from hippopotamus teeth? He also used teeth made from walrus tusks and elephant ivory and even cow teeth, but he always preferred Hippo. He claimed it gave him a superior bite and chew. With Hippo, he said, even peanuts and gumdrops were possible.

Even peanuts and gumdrops? murmured Joe. President Washington?

So he stayed with Hippo whenever he could.

And this sixteen pages into a conversation that has already touched on Ethiopian nationalism, the history of Cairo's sex trade, the Ahmadmobil (Ahmad's failed fish and chip enterprise) and Ahmad's even greater failure as a poet.

The conversation can be serious, too, taking on the form of a grave philosophical discourse as the characters take turns to expound their views of life. When Joe finally comes face to face with his elusive prey, Stern, the chit chat gives way to pure oratory:

Revolution, said Stern. We can't even comprehend what it is, not what it means or what it suggests. We pretend it means total change but it's much more than that, so vastly more complex, and yes, so much simpler too. It's not just the total change from night to day as our earth spins in its revolutions around a minor star. It's also our little star revolving around its own unknowable center and so with all the stars in their billions, and so with the galaxies and the universe itself. Change revolves and truly there is nothing but revolution. All movement is revolution and so is time, and although those laws are impossibly complex and beyond us, their result is simple. For us, very simple.

And yet, this is where Whittemore's great strength comes in: just as we are beginning to accept that this is more a philosophical treatise than a spy story, a pleasant meta-fiction, Whittemore suddenly pulls the strings taut with a dramatic piece of action worthy of Le Carré (more comparisons). When Joe first arrives at the dubious Hotel Babylon, for example, there is this description:

The door burst open under his hand and Joe went flying across the room, hurling his valise at the screen in the window. The screen and the valise disappeared and he dived after them, landing with a roll on the soft earth behind the hotel as a dull thud went off in the room above him. He was on his feet at once, in a crouch, but there was nothing to see. He was standing in a small courtyard strewn with debris. A door behind him led back into the hotel. Another door faced him

from the far side of the small courtyard. Joe picked up his valise and crossed to the door in the far wall. He tried the handle and the door opened. Stairs led down to the basement.

This heady mixture of the philosophical and the dramatic runs throughout the book, the one underlying the other, and the result, unlikely though it may be, is a seamless unity rather than an awkward tugging of opposites. Life is talk, after all, lots of it—crude, bawdy, serious, occasionally transcendent—and that’s what Whittemore gives us. It’s also a world of action and of unthinkable violence—in this century particularly like no other—and Whittemore gives us that, too. Because of the stream of conversations, memories, theories and thoughts that make up so much of the book, it is easy to overlook the significant amount of violence contained within it. The book begins with an act of extreme violence, in fact, a hand grenade casually tossed into a bar that instantly kills one of the main characters, setting off a chain of events linked in almost unimaginable ways to this moment. Then there’s Stern, the elusive agent O’Sullivan is sent out to hunt down, who may or may not be giving secrets away to the enemy. Stern, a Christ-like figure who seems to have taken all the woes of humanity upon his shoulders (he even has a stigmata of sorts), is haunted in particular by the memory of his having once slit a dying girl’s throat as an act of mercy, a grisly scene that reemerges repeatedly throughout the book, bubbling up from Stern’s tormented mind, as fresh for him each time as it is for us.

Something else apart from this heady fusion draws us in to *Nile Shadows*, though, and that’s a certain compulsive quality that, as in all great novels, appears to be beyond the author’s control. On the one hand Whittemore is the master story teller, weaving his tale of good and evil with its great cast of characters over its great span of time, while on the other he is also telling a much simpler story, a story about himself, one feels, and telling it again and again. If every fictional character is unavoidably a portrait of its author, then Whittemore seems to have taken this to a pathologically extreme. Young or old, good or bad, male or female, they’re all flat-out Whittemores on the page; unabashed author substitutes. You don’t need to be aware of all the biographical details of the author’s life (there are plenty in the prologue and epilogue of this new edition) to realize that something is afoot here. This is a book in which every character, literally or metaphorically or both, is a secret agent, presenting one face to the world and another to themselves. There’s Joe and Stern, who between them in their lifetime have disguised themselves as endless apparitions, from gun runners to beggars, antiques dealers to morphine addicts, and more besides. There’s Liffy, the jovial chameleon, named coincidentally after Dublin’s famous river, and like that other great Everyman, Bloom, also a Jew. And there’s the mysterious Bletchley, his face hideously disfigured by a bullet during the First World War, who’s every facial expression is a grotesque inversion of his true feelings. “It’s all a matter of man seeking his true home ...” as Joe says.

Once again, Whittemore escapes what might be a fatal mistake in another author. Far from the

funhouse hall of mirrors one might expect from such endless fracturing, the compulsive replication of this same idea only intensifies the book, turning it into a single mirror and magnifying the image. What is the true nature of man? How close can one ever come to it? Is there something worthy and strong enough inside that will outlast our more barbaric impulses? The repetition of these themes by so many voices exerts a hypnotic sense in the end, like listening to an endless choral chant. It might almost be called “the poetry of self-exile”, if that didn’t strike too pretty a note for a book that for all its abstract bent is so firmly planted on the ground of historical fact and place.

And here we come to the deepest concerns of Whittemore’s mind, for historical fact and place are as much his obsession as his loftier flights of imagination, indeed they are inextricably linked to them. The real protagonists of the *Quartet* are surely the parched and beautiful deserts of the biblical land with their oases and ruins, and above all the Holy City of Jerusalem itself. Whittemore is profoundly in love with these, and it’s a love that shines forth in all the books. Much of the “talky” nature of the book comes not just from his characters’ endless speculations and declarations, but from their loving memories of past nights spent idling by the Nile, or the magnificence of the pyramids at dawn, or the smell of a scented garden during some long-ago secret assignation. What you come to realize as you read, unconsciously at first, and then with growing awareness, is that these are not really digressions at all, but rather the very meat of the book. The land speaking to the people, and the people speaking to each other in an endless cycle is the closest definition of what it’s all “about”, if one needs to pursue its meaning into some final corner. The book, and the whole *Quartet*, is a monument to digression, to the necessity of the circuitous and the roundabout as the only way to truth. Certainty of vision, unquestioned clarity of purpose, leads only to oppression—as the ruthless and single-minded Nazi presence hovering in the background serves to remind us.

What this amounts to, and what makes the critic with his nose for genre and structure so nervous, is that by all accounts this shouldn’t be a good book at all, should in fact be a really terrible book, and the *Quartet* a rambling, self-indulgent mess. It’s too clogged up with words to be straight forward action adventure, it’s too in love with the power of old-fashioned story telling to be a safe member of any experimental literary camp, it’s too bawdy to be a tastefully controlled work of the intellect (while other work about the primacy of Man’s soul contains a sizable section on the history and art of prostitution?), and it’s combination of travel and digression, action and introspection, while the comparisons remind one in flashes (those comparisons again) of writers like Chatwin and Theroux, are too loose and too much under the sway of Whittemore’s pack-rat, all-encompassing, constantly changing focus of attention. In the end, against all odds, the book works because something binds together its lofty ambitions and disparate parts and makes it, if not a whole, then at least the tantalizing shape of something about to come into being at any moment. That something is the force of Whittemore’s integrity of vision.

Ben Gibber

Ben Gibberd is a freelance writer and editor who lives in New York City. He is currently working on a book about Manhattan's shoreline with the photographer Randy Duchaine.



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