Orientalism: The romantics' added dimension; or, Edward Said refuted

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There is no more doubt that Western scholarly works in almost all fields of study betray a significant debt to the Eastern culture - Homer's *Iliad* (c.700 B.C.), considered by many to be the corner-stone of Western literary tradition, is an Oriental work, as Wallace Gray has proven.(1) And historians no more doubt the impact of this culture on the Anglo-Saxons: "The Celtic race, its tribal organizations, its tales and traditions all embody Oriental ideas brought by Irish travelers from the most distant East."(2) In early times and later, the East had a lot to offer to the West - perhaps the greatest gift of all was Christianity, which pulled England and the whole West from ages of darkness - and Oriental scholarship played a significant role to promoting this cross-cultural transmission.

However, any serious academic attempt to discuss "Orientalism" in English literature is bound to start with a confutation of the definition made popular by Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism* (1977). My starting point is Said's ending point that we as scholars cannot be indifferent to what we do "if we remember that the study of human experience usually has an ethical, to say nothing of a political, consequence in either the best or worst sense [...]" and that we "should remember that the study of man in society is based on concrete human history and experience, not on donnish abstractions, or on obscure laws or arbitrary systems."(3) To say nothing of its ethical and political consequence, Said's discussion of Orientalism, comprehensive and enticing, seems highly polemical in nature.

Said labels Orientalism as an academic field which serves in a number of academic institutions: "anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient - and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist - either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism." Said believes that since the late eighteenth century the academic and imaginative meanings of Orientalism have been quite "disciplined" perhaps even regulated "traffic between the two." But unfortunately, from then onwards he does not base his work on these definitions; rather he bases it on his third definition (labeled as historical) in which he states that Western Orientalism dealt with the Orient "by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient."(4) Said goes on to assert that the hostile political relationship between the East and the West was from its earliest beginning a hostile relationship between Islam and Christianity. He affirms that Orientalism, which always presented Christendom as superior and as a representation of European domination of the Orient, served to enhance hostility between the two religions, and so between the two "unequal halves" of the world. Said relates this Western attitude to the spread of Islam over a large part of the Western world at the beginning of the fourteenth century, a threat which represented a "lasting trauma" to the Europeans.(5)

This rather provoking view of Said seems somewhat doubtful if one makes an objective investigation of the East-West relationship. The "lasting trauma" which Said talks about was caused by the direct clashes between the Eastern Islamic and Western Christian powers and not between Islam and Christianity. In his authoritative work, *The Arabs and Mediaeval Europe*, Norman Daniel, a scholar whom Said quotes in his work, points out that in those times the dominant belief of both Moslems and Christians was that resemblance rather than difference "dominated the dogmatic, liturgical and moral bases of the two religions."(6) and that it was not abnormal for a Christian ruler to make Moslem allies, or for a Moslem to turn to a European ruler for help, being quite indifferent about culture and religion.(7) Daniel's discussion, geared to prove the above points, presents endless examples of such cooperation between Western Christians and Eastern Moslems and of the compatibility of both religions. The real threat came from the Seljuk, the Mongol, and the Ottoman powers. And the real conflict was not between two religions, as the Crusade (a pilgrimage in arms) tried to popularize, but between world-powers. One must not forget that similar "traumas" were caused earlier by the Greek, Roman, Byzantine and, more recently, the German powers.

Said also insists on limiting Orientalism to the prejudiced Western or Christian study of Islam and the East. He also believes that Western Orientalism has never been a genuine and scholarly study of the East for its own sake and for its cultural richness: "Yet never has there been such a thing as pure, or unconditional, Orient; similarly, never has there been a nonmaterial form of Orientalism, much less something so innocent as an 'idea' of the Orient."(8)

This view, however, cannot be accepted for three reasons:

- First, it is wrong to assume that Oriental scholarship is limited to the study of Islam, when in fact Biblical scholarship is an integral and consequential part of Orientalism. Students of Christian theology (like Bede, and later Shelling, Hegel and several others) were certainly Oriental scholars because they were obliged to study the Biblical history of the East.
- Second, there is no doubt that a recognizable part of Western works was motivated by religious and political propaganda and appeared throughout the ages with distorted images of Islam, the East and its cultures; however, this movement cannot be termed "Orientalism", rather it is "False Orientalism".(9)
- Third, if one accepts durability as a standard of authenticity - Thomas Carlyle uses this standard to prove the authenticity of the Prophet Mohammed and Islam in his *Heroes* - and Hegel's view that whatever is true has the force to develop, Orientalism could not have lasted this long and developed had it been built only upon falsification and distortion.

Like other "-isms", Orientalism has been abused from the early ages and up till the present. However, concrete in itself and developing,
Orientalism can better be seen as an organic movement whose durability is ample proof of its universal authenticity. "Orientalism" proper is a nexus of knowledge and a cornucopia of rich material produced by different kinds of researchers and scholars genuinely interested in one of the wealthiest cultures of the world, the Oriental culture. This genuine scholarly movement became a fully established Western field of study in the second half of the eighteenth century, but it was recognized as far back as the fifteenth century, when Western travelers to the Orient were pilgrims and scholars who sought the Holy Land or the wisdom of the East. "In the East they learned Syriac, Hebrew, and later on Arabic, and thus they prepared the way for the future Orientalism in Ireland," says M. Mansoor.

Oriental material appeared in the literary works of independent travelers and scholars who liberated themselves from the predominant political and religious prejudice against the East and who sought genuine understanding of the culture of that distant part of the world throughout the ages. The abundance of Oriental material reached a peak in the late eighteenth century. Said himself acknowledges this fact and gives a long list of genuine Orientalists and discusses their authentic presentation of the Orient; yet he finds that in such a relatively insulated and specialized tradition as Orientalism, "there is in each scholar some awareness, partly conscious and partly unconscious, of national tradition, if not of national ideology." Indeed, Said's definition and discussion of Orientalism imply his keen consciousness of his national ideology.

Said could not deny, however, the great impact of Orientalism on Romanticism; he admits that the first was a powerful shaper of the second: "It is difficult nonetheless to separate such institutions of the Orient as Mozart's from the range of pre-Romantic and Romantic representations of the Orient as exotic locale. Popular Orientalism during the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth attained a vogue of considerable intensity." However, he doubts the interest of William Beckford, Lord Byron, Thomas Moore, and Goethe in Oriental matter for its own sake; he believes that it was more like an outlet to their concern in "Gothic tales, pseudomedieval idylls, visions of barbaric splendor and cruelty. [...] Sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy: the Orient as a figure in the pre-Romantic, pretechnological Orientalist imagination of the late-eighteenth-century Europe was really a chameleonlike quality called (adjectivally) 'Oriental'."

However, the Romantic interest in the Gothic has no direct relation to the Orient; it is directly related to a revival of interest in Medieval church architecture, which itself is indirectly related to Oriental architecture. In his The Genius of Christianity (1802), Chateaubriand makes it clear that the poets and novelists of the age had a natural return toward the manners of their ancestors when introducing "dungeons, spectres, castles, and Gothic churches, into their fiction, - so great is the charm of recollections associated with religion and the history of our country." Said thus mixes the Romantic writers' tendency to medievalize with their earnest proclivity to Orientalize.

In fact, the first quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed two significant strains of Orientalism in Romantic literature. The growing popularity of the Oriental tales, especially the Arabian Nights, stimulated a burst of Orientalism in prose-fiction. The natural proclivity of the Romans for the exotic generated the second wave in the form of poetry. Just as the Romantic writers of prose-fiction were fascinated with the original structure of the Oriental tales, the poets of the period were deeply preoccupied with the remote and exotic in order to stir their imaginative powers and to suggest the added dimension they were seeking. To the Romans, the East was a model world of exoticism, and what helped popularize such an image of the East was a very old Western tradition which started way before politics and trade had forced the Orient on the attention of the Western peoples; it started with the Westerners' amazement that the East, and not the West, should have been the birthplace of almost all ancient civilizations and of heavenly religions, particularly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

One can easily imagine how peoples emerging from ages of barbaric superstition, their spirits haunted by myths of heroes battling against forces of Nordic night, could be seized with wonder at Bible stories of the supernatural powers of Christ. Samuel Chew comments that these stories, together with the influx of supposed relics brought from the Holy Land during the Crusades, "had their part in filling the popular imagination with [positive] dreams and fantasies of the East." These dreams and fantasies, besides the stories brought home by Western travelers (pilgrims and scholars) to the Orient, found their way into the minds of the Westerners; thus, their admiration of the East as the Sacred Land and as an exotic world of wonder and wisdom was deeply rooted in the Western mentality.

Ever since this image of the East had invaded the popular notions of the Western publics, several British and Continental literary figures had sought to satisfy their publics by making allusions to the exotic East. Louis Wann notes that between 1558 and 1642 the major British playwrights produced no less than forty-seven plays dealing with Eastern material. "The production of oriental plays was not due to the fancy of any one author or group of authors," Wann says; it was due to the interest of the Elizabethan audience in Oriental matter. It was public interest which stimulated writers to allude, authentically or sometimes otherwise, to the mysterious Orient. Some British and Continental literary figures sought to cash in on this popular craving, despite their own lack of personal or scholarly interest, much like modern advertisers trying to sell their wares. Such writers cannot and should not be categorized as "Orientalists." But the writers who were stimulated by personal interest to investigate and study the East, and those who resided there for first hand observation and education were genuine Oriental scholars.

Besides, with the tide of Romanticism at the turn of the nineteenth century, several literary writers went ahead of their public expectations by fully integrating Eastern material into their works, firing the imagination with its exoticism, instead of merely using it as decoration. Further, it is my firm conviction that this shift stimulated even more than ever before a truly scholarly attitude to the East devoid of the traditional Western conventions. William Jones, the leader of Eastern scholarship in the eighteenth century, had already predicted this change when he declared in the second half of the century: "If the languages of the Eastern nations were studied in our European seminaries of learning, and the knowledge of Oriental matters was cultivated in youth with the same zeal and diligence that the study of Latin and Greek is now pursued, we should have a more extensive insight into the history of the human mind, we should be furnished with a new set of images and similitudes; and a number of excellent compositions would be brought to light, which future scholars might explain, and future poets might imitate."
The world of the Arabian Nights, both visionary and concrete, imaginary and realistic, supernatural and natural, enabled William Beckford to escape the onerous demands of his distinguished and wealthy family. Lewis Melville asserts that the *Arabian Nights* "had fired his youthful mind and held his imagination captive; their influence over him never waned all the days of his life."[20] Aged seventeen, he went on a tour to Switzerland (1777) and Venice (1780), after which his "knowledge of the East began to show signs of becoming encyclopedic."[21] Four years later, as one of the people best informed about the East then in England, Beckford was ready to start on his one and only masterpiece.

Beckford's extensive use of Eastern material rendered *Vathek* a major source for Oriental matters; yet, it was, as Conant testifies, to remain "a sporadic and isolated phenomenon in eighteenth-century fiction."[23] And until Lord Byron gave it great publicity in the notes to his own Oriental tales, *Vathek* was ahead of its time for it addressed the needs not of its own age but rather of the following one.

During the early nineteenth century, travel to the Levant became increasingly popular, and travel accounts were recognized as a distinct type of literature. Investigating the great influence of this travel movement on the social and literary activities of the time, Wallace Cable Brown explains: "The great vogue for writing and reading of Near East travel books between 1775 and 1825 naturally had a marked influence on contemporary thought and activity"; he emphasizes the strong influence of such books on the literature of the period, because "these travel books helped to create at home a large body of poetry and prose of which this region is the theme or background."[24] Brown's note is significant as implying that the Romantics were interested in Eastern matter for personal literary reasons and not for religious and/or political propaganda. In fact, the Romantic tendency to secularize traditional theological concepts pushed religious issues to the background. Besides, on a more scholarly level, the translation of Eastern religious and literary works into English by such scholars as James Atkinson, Edward William Lane, W. Gibb, Richard Burton, and Godfrey Higgins prompted a deeper understanding of Eastern civilization.

In literature, Romantic writers of prose-fiction followed the tradition of Beckford, but none surpassed him, as most of them were particularly interested in the original structure of the Oriental tale. Isaac Disraeli in his *Anastasius; or, Memoirs of a Greek Citizen of the World* (1760), Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), and most particularly Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), which deserves particular attention as it was the first Romantic work of prose-fiction promoting Orientalism.

Orientalism in Romantic poetry, however, had a more significant function: it became an essential poetic feature. For the Romantic poets the East with its topography and peoples was an existing exotic mystery by itself, liberating them from the chains of classical traditions. On this same issue Maryanne Stevens comments: "One of the preoccupations which profoundly affected the Western understanding of the Near East was the belief that this region could satisfy the West's urge for exotic experience. Exoticism meant the artistic exploration of territories and ages in which the free flights of the imagination were possible because they lay outside the restrictive operation of classical rules."[26]

In *The Prelude*, the Orient inspires William Wordsworth with a sense of wonder and strangeness, when by the seashore reading a book, he passes into a dream, in which he finds himself in a waterless sea, a desert, and beholds an Arab Bedouin who bears a stone and a shell in his hands. The stone is "Euclid's Element," and the poet perceives it to be a book of "geometric truth"; the shell is a book of poetry which prophesies the destruction of the world by a deluge. This vision "reaches the very 'ne plus ultra' of sublimity," says DeQuincey.[27] In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Eastern visionary poem*, *Kubla Khan* (1797), actual Eastern places and events are utilized to create an exotic and supernatural world which embodies the poet's most sublime thoughts about the power and function of man's imagination. Historic Eastern matter, evoking the excitement of the remote and exotic and creating a sense of "strangeness in beauty", flashes back and forth in a work bearing the core of Coleridge's vision, which transcends the consciousness of the poet. In *Ozymandias* (1817-1818) Shelley asserts an "antique land" in order to reveal the emptiness of pomp and power. In this sonnet Shelley
creates a sense of remoteness, antiquity, and wonder by utilizing Eastern images borrowed from a historic figure and an actual setting in order to reach a high level of awareness. John Keats presents his conception of art in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819). From a variety of authentic sources, Keats contemplates a Grecian urn with two scenes: the first showing an ancient Greek wedding rite; and the second exhibiting an ancient religious ritual, a sacrifice at an altar. These scenes epitomize the Romantic search for an ultimate Truth as the first picture implies the infinite superiority of art over death, and the second affirms that art creates eternal realities.

No one, however, made a better contribution to the promotion of Orientalism for its own sake and as a distinctive Romantic feature than Lord Byron. He turned to the East because it was powerful, wise, and sensuous, yet lively, beautiful and primitive - a beckoning world of allure and strong passion. For Byron, as was the case with all Romantic poets, strong passion was the essence and poetry of life; in the East he could live his immediate state of existence in a world far away from the restricted and formal life of England. His travels in the East were to leave their lasting stamp on his personal life and poetic career. "Like the later French romantic writers Chateaubriand and Lamartine, Flaubert and de Nerval, Byron's journey to the East was partly a private pilgrimage into the exotic recesses of his own mind" to discover the mysteries of his immediate state of being. They stimulated Byron to write four Oriental verse tales: The Giaour, The Bride of Abydos, The Corsair, and The Siege of Corinth, which had their main source in the exotic Orient. In his tales Byron created Eastern characters dwelling in genuine Oriental settings and alluded to real Eastern customs and costumes; he also employed Eastern images and phraseology.

But more than anything else, he contemplated themes revealing his most passionate and intense Romantic views: man's search for his true identity in a world of mysterious conflicts and opposites. To Byron Time, which preoccupied the Romantics with its mystery and immense temporal experience, seemed to start and stop in the world of Hassan and Leila, or Giaffir, Selim and Zuleika, or Conrad, Medora and Gulnare, or Alp and Francesca, who in the search for their positions in their world, live the most elementary, unsophisticated yet immensely passionate moments. Anything and everything is possible in a world, where every moment brings an original experience, and every new experience draws man closer to his true identity. In this sense, Orientalism pulled Byron towards the realms of higher states of awareness and stimulated his poetic genius to bring about that added dimension he eagerly sought in his personal life as well as in his works.

Indeed it is difficult to read extensively in the works of the Romantics without coming away with the feeling that there emanates from their writings a sense of determination to explore the mysteries of existing yet obscure realities. Their insistance on a voyage or a pilgrimage away from conventional civilization manifested itself in two forms: a physical (Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage) and/or a mental (Coleridge's The Ancient Mariner) quest toward the exotic and mysterious. George Poulet introduces his article, "Timelessness and Romanticism," by saying: "Romanticism is first of all a rediscovery of the mysteries of the world, a more vivid sentiment of the wonders of nature, a more acute consciousness of the enigmas of the self.* It is a rediscovery of oneself and the world, a resurgence of wonder and freedom, and an attempt to break the confines and limitations of the traditional, to go beyond it, and to break the confines of time and space, the present time and space, of the traditional religious and political life. Consequently, the Romanticist sought new and old dimensions - not imaginary by themselves as much as stimulating and firing his imagination; the old dimension, he found in a medievalizing tendency; and the new dimension, in an Orientalizing urge. To the Romantic writer the tendency to reconcile and unify the inner elements of the psyche was reflected in an outer drive to unite all aspects of nature. Both Hegel and Schopenhauer advance the view that separateness in the world is an illusion. Thus Romanticism does not separate the world into an Occident and an Orient. When Lord Byron swam across the Hellespont, Wordsworth dreamt of the desert and the Arab Bedouin, and Coleridge had his dream of Xanadu, they were celebrating the unification of both worlds, the first in actual reality, the other two in their imagination. Besides, the idea that the Orient represented emotion and freedom, primitive yet passionate and powerful, attracted the Romanticists. And the tendency to naturalize and idealize was exotic by itself. The Orient gave the Romantic writer the chance to break the current classical forms which limited his imagination; it set his wild inner sense of the present free. If Romantic literature, as Bernard Blackstone believes, is a literature of movement, of pilgrimage and quest, then the Orient made it possible for the Romantic writer to move freely either in actual reality or on the wings of imagination.

When Alfred de Musset made his metaphoric definition of Romanticism, he had the Orient in the back of his mind:

"Romanticism is the star that weeps, the wind that wails, the night that shivers, the flower that flies, and the bird that exudes perfume. Romanticism is the unhoped-for ray of light, the languorous rapture, the oasis beneath the palm-tree, ruby hope with its thousand loves, the angel and the pearl, the willow in its white garb. Oh, sir, what a beautiful thing! It is the infinite and the star, heat, fragmentary, the sober (yet at the same time complete and full); the diametrical, the pyramidal, the Oriental, the living nude, the embraceable, the kissable, the whirlwind."[30]

The Romantic star, wind, night, flower, and bird seem to have found their true infinite dimensions in the East, which was devoid of classical rules and traditions and fertile in primitive passions and desires. The Romantics’ interest in originality and in rendering the familiar unfamiliar and vice versa, their venturing on the wings of their imaginative powers to the depth of their souls to discover their true identities, their basic preoccupation with creating new realistic and imaginative exotic worlds, and their excitement at eliminating the apparent contradictions and fusing the opposing in a unified entity rendered Orientalism, "the oasis beneath the palm-tree, [...] the Oriental," a major Romantic feature sought by the writers of the period to suggest their added dimension. This authentic temperament toward the Orient motivated Western scholars to further their study of a culture which still has much to offer.

Notes

(1) See Wallace Gray, Homer to Joyce (London, 1985).


Orientalism is a 1978 book by Edward W. Said, in which the author discusses Orientalism, defined as the West's patronizing representations of "The East"—the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. According to Said, orientalism (the Western scholarship about the Eastern World) is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies who produced it.
which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to power. Compared with Oriental studies or area studies, it is true that the term Orientalism is less preferred by specialists today, both because it is too vague and general and because it connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism. Nevertheless books are written and congresses held with "the Orient" as their main focus, with the Orientalist in his new or old guise as their main authority. Silvestre de Sacy’s Chrestomathie arabe or Edward William Lane’s Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians—considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world.

Introduction. 13. Said (2000) agrees with Foucault that "discourse Abbasi, Coleridge’s Orientalist View of Mahomet 3 is not only that which translates struggle or systems of domination, but that for which struggles are conducted (p. 243). The interaction of the Western Christianity and Eastern Islam was the confrontation of two world powers or two cultural histories and thus it served as a source for poetic inspirations. Orientalism: The Romantics’ added dimension; or, Edward Said Refuted. EESE, 3(1), 1-6. Payne, R. (1987).
Orientalism is a 1978 book by Edward W. Said, in which the author discusses Orientalism, defined as the West's patronizing representations of "The East"—the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. According to Said, orientalism (the Western scholarship about the Eastern World) is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies who produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to power. Orientalism book. Read 843 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. More than three decades after its first publication, Edward Said's gro...Â The notion that Said is anti-Western or Pro-Islam is such a bizarrely inexplicable misreading that the only reason a reader could come away from the book with that belief is if they brought in a huge set of prejudices and then ignored everything Said actually wrote. First, they must assume that 'East' and 'West' are terms that have well-defined geographical and social meanings, and then ignore the fact that Said repeatedly states that, to him, 'East' and 'West' are just convenient ideas, not real, solid entities--that it is ridiculous to talk about India, China, and the Mid