Intellectual Discourse, 2000
Vol 8, No 2, 121-132

Arab-Islamic History and the Orientalizing Imagination

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Abstract: *While such critics of Orientalism as Said and Meyer have shown, the inescapable intellectual frameworks which imprisoned the Western mind in its treatment of the East, this essay specifies "historical" Orientalism as a touchstone to deepen and sharpen our awareness, not only of the mechanic of Orientalist thinking, but also of the various motives and hidden compulsions that made the shapers of public opinion tackle the Arab-Islamic past. An array of writings is analysed and investigated to come out with fresh conclusions that invite inspiring and dialectic-developing arguments.*

As the intellectual outcome of the European affiliation of power with knowledge, Orientalism is a Western cultural phenomenon, which is particularly related to the colonial and post-colonial perception of the Orient, its people and history. Orientalism, states Edward W. Said, is "a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')."[1] As the "strong" and the "familiar" entity, the West finds it automatic and, at times, imperative that the "oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks."[2] The frameworks of containment and representation take various forms and apply different techniques. Among the major frameworks are historical presentations and representations. Eric Meyer has recently reduced Said's argument into the compact structure of a sentence. "Considered as a single meta-grammatical sentence," states Meyer, "the ideological syntax of the narrative of Romantic Orientalism might be reduced to the structure of Hegel's *Philosophy of History,* in which the West as

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subject defeats the East as object in the battle for world-historical ascendancy."[3] According to this logic, the Orientalist historiography of Eastern civilizations expresses an imperial desire: to subject the "other" and the "other's" past to the imperial will, and to come out with a new "world history" in which the Western power becomes the historical necessity in a new "world order." Orientalist historiography, in general terms, demonstrates this essential imperial motive, although it also envelops a variety of personal and social compulsions related to the Orientalist himself. But Orientalist historians, together with the majority of the romantic imaginative writers who tackled the East, can rarely escape the imperial will, which aims at

> a form of a world historical narrative in which European modernity supersedes a spurious Oriental despotism as the dominant cultural system. The genuinely liberating impulse of Romantic Hellenism thus subsists within and serves to legitimate an imperial narrative that portrays the extension of European dominance over the East as historically inevitable.[4]

I have considered this "imperial will" as inescapable for both the professional Orientalists[5] and the romantic writers who deal with the Eastern historical materials at large, because the psychological impact of the imperial—with its cultural and economical benefits—has been so imposing that the Western mind as a whole found itself within a general "spirit" (i.e. something of a *zeitgeist*) which looks down on the East. Moreover, Orientalist writings have often demonstrated a residual fear of Islam and an archetypal pattern of aggressiveness towards it as an important historical phenomenon, which endangered the West for centuries. "Most of the great philosophers of history from Hegel to Spengler," affirms Said, "have regarded Islam without much enthusiasm,"[6] a situation which externalizes the buried, though effective, European memories. The fear of Islam and of its irresistible Arab host during the Middle Ages[7] persisted during the colonial and post-colonial periods when Europe became stronger than Asia and Africa. I believe that the Western animosity to Islam is, whether conscious or subconscious, a form of a collective psychological revenge. This is an apt conclusion based on the phenomenon, which Said specifies in the following, seemingly sweeping, generalization:

> I have not been able to discover any period in European or American history since the Middle Ages in which Islam was generally discussed or thought about *outside* a framework created by passion, prejudice, and political interests. This may not seem a surprising

> discovery, but included in it is the entire gamut of scholarly and scientific disciplines which, since the early nineteenth century, have either called themselves collectively the discipline of Orientalism or have tried systematically to deal with the Orient.[8]

Said's "essentialist" framework which traces an omnipresent imperial awareness in every piece of Western writing on the Orient is largely not baseless. But his final accusation is also unfortunate for Oriental cultures at large and for Oriental histories in particular. The ultimate meaning of Said's and, of course, Meyer's polemic is: every Orientalist is a participant in an Occidental imperial and cultural campaign to control and exploit the East. As an intellectual movement, and as a cultural phenomenon, Orientalism, especially literary Orientalism, has been of considerable merit for the Orientals. It is useful not because it serves imperial interests, but because it envelops a complex range of cultural, personal and hereditary compulsions, which are productive and significant for the intelligentsia of the Eastern countries. In spite of their conscious/unconscious prejudice, Orientalists have offered us foreign perspectives and coercive challenges which have enriched our approaches to our culture and history. Many examples of clever Eastern writings on Oriental history can be traced to the prejudiced and "suggestive" Orientalist writings. Said's generalization, no matter how true it is, could lead to depriving the Eastern cultures of this useful (aggressive, impulsive, suggestive) Orientalist challenge. My point is: Said's accusation, that Orientalism supplies agents and expertise to empire,[9] endangers the uses which the Orientals can make of Orientalist literature. The accusation could lead to a termination of Orientalism through specifying the imperial motive, and through overlooking the other motives and compulsions which contributed to the making of the Orientalist effort. His association between Orientalism and imperialism has already led some Orientalists to be embarrassed and hesitant to write on our cultures. This is an undesired result. Nowhere is this fear of "Orientalism" more clearly stated than in an American Orientalist's letter to the writer of the present words. Bernard Weiss uncovers a truant fear of the label "Orientalist":

> Edward Said has, of course, put Orientalism in the headlines, so to speak, and since then none of us can go on with his work without giving attention to it. Since Orientalism has acquired a certain notoriety, some of us try to dissociate ourselves from it, which is probably unfortunate... I once was interviewed by someone from *Ruz*

> *al-Yusuf* in Cairo and soon realized during the conversation that I had better made it clear that I was not an orientalist (*mustashriq*), lest my name be blackened, at least in Egypt.[10]

My point, simply stated, is that there are certain motives and compulsions, that have affected the Orientalist reception and presentation of Oriental histories, which are not purely imperial. These compulsions have to be studied carefully not only because they are important, but also because they help us complement the Western image of the East. One such compulsion is personal ambition. Arab and Islamic materials have been used as a virgin field, which provides new themes and opportunities for some of the authors who desire to excel and utilize "raw" materials outside the exhausted materials of the industrial world. In a letter from Charles Doughty to his fellow Orientalist Horgarth, he states his reasons for writing his "classic" *Arabia Deserta*:

> The *Arabia Deserta* volumes had necessarily a personal tone. A principal cause of writing them was, besides the interest in the Semitic life in tents, my dislike of the Victorian English; and I wished to show, and thought I might be able to show, that there was something else.[11]

In another revealing letter to Hogarth, Doughty stresses similar aspiration for fame and for enriching the English literary tradition. For him, the "matter of Araby" could be used to make possible a revitalization of the literary excellence of medieval English.

> In writing the volumes *Arabia Deserta* my main intention was not so much the setting forth of personal wanderings among a people of Biblical interest, as the ideal endeavour to continue the older tradition of Chaucer and Spencer, resisting to my power the decadence of the English language: so that whilst my work should be also my life's contribution so far to literature.[12]

This personal ambition applies to one of the most prominent historians, Gustav Weil, whose *History of the Caliphate* was largely meant by him to rival Von Ranke's *History of the Popes*.[13]

This impulse is true of Washington Irving, who cannot be easily categorized as a servant of empire, though he may share the over-all "Western" sense of superiority. In a letter to Prince Dolgorougki (January, 1829), he comments on his *Conquest of Granada* as a "kind of experiment in literature."[14] The experimental urge to tackle Arab

historical materials becomes clear in one of his best books *The Alhambra,* as he dedicates the book to his Russian friend:

> You then urged me to write something illustrative of these peculiarities; 'something in the Haroun Al-Rashid style,' that should have a dash of that Arabian spice which pervades everything in Spain.[15]

But Irving's writings on Arab history exceed the literary aspiration, which this history provides, because his histories are controlled by an American self-image, which he portrays through Arab past for various purposes. Arab history in general, and Arab history in Spain in particular indirectly reflects his country's self-image, in addition to expressing the historians' fears and aspirations for what that self-image would preferably be in the future. To establish this self-image, Irving suggests a parallelism between the Arab's occupation and settlement in the Iberian peninsula for eight centuries on the one hand, and the Americans' possession of the new continent on the other. For him the Arabs "deserved this beautiful country," because they, "won it bravely; they enjoyed it generously and kindly."[16] This statement implies that the European conquerors also deserve the new continent. The "new nation" which is created by the Arabs' settlement in Spain, that which Irving calls "Morisco-Spaniard,"[17] parallels the new nation which is born in America, which is also a mixture of various races. Irving's approach to Arab history is, therefore, linked with his belief that the new American republic is the outcome of a rare marriage of two different races in the ancient world: the Arabs (the East, Asia, the Semites, Islam) and the Spaniards (the West, Europe, the Goths, Christianity). He gives this marriage an emblematic expression through the use of the "bridge pinos" which symbolically links Spain, the Moors, and Columbus on one hand, and the New World on the other. Pinos is the "scene of many a bloody encounter between Moor and Christian, and remarkable for having been the place where Columbus was overtaken by the messenger of Isabella, when about to abandon Spain in despair."[18]

For Irving, as for very many American authors, the Oriental past is essential for the American vision of what Beongcheon Yu calls "the world circle."[19] Geographically, the world circle was incomplete without the discovery of America; and, historically, it was completed through the confrontation /marriage of East and West (in Spain) to give birth to the future (America). Thus, Oriental history serves a

personal compulsion to state an American myth. In Irving's parallelism between the Morisco-Spaniards and the Americans, there is a persistent desire to instruct the fellow-Americans through retreating to a historical experience, which is similar to theirs. And in both situations, Oriental history is part of the effort to portray a self-image: the desired self-image parallels the tragic down-fall of their empire.

The compulsion to use Oriental history to portray the self-image is crystallized in Thomas Carlyle's account of Muhammad and the early Arabs. But here the self-image is deliberately made ugly because Carlyle wanted to criticize his society of *laissez-faire* and utilitarianism by contrasting it with the ideal of the Arab hero and his hero-worshipping people. Meant to demonstrate the dim self-image of the Victorian society, early Islamic society, its ethics and spirituality, is channelled into a critique of Victorian life and values:

> You shall not measure them; they are incommensurable: the one is death eternal to man, the other is life eternal. Benthamee Utility, virtue by Profit and Loss; reducing this God's world to a dead brute Steam-engine the infinite celestial Soul of Man to a kind of Hay-balance for weighing hay and thistle on, pleasure and pains on.[20]

This is followed by a bright picture of the Arabs:

> Above all things, it has been a religion heartily *believed*. These Arabs believe in their religion, and try to live by it! No Christians, since the early ages, or only perhaps the English Puritans in modern times, have ever stood by their Faith as the Moslem do by theirs, believing it wholly, fronting Time with it, and Eternity with it. This night the watchman on the streets of Cairo when he cries, 'who goes?' will hear from the passenger, along with his answer. 'There is no God but God, *Allah Akbar*.' Islam sounds through the souls...[21]

In addition to this desire to criticize contemporary Britain through surveying an Oriental historical ideal, Carlyle has a persistent compulsion, which should be associated with his criticism of the British people who were unable to discover and respond to their heroes, unlike the Arabs. The underlying compulsion, as David De Laura points out, is Carlyle's presentation of himself as the ultimate hero of the hero-lectures.[22] Here the self-image is reshaped to be a remedial measure, which proposes a new leadership.

There is also a great deal of collective, psychological complexities involved in the Orientalist uses of Oriental history. As Southern has cleverly shown in his excellent work *Western Views of Islam in the*

Middle Ages, the Western idea of Islamic past since the medieval era was one of fear.[23] After the nineteenth century, when the West became superior (stronger), and when the Islamic world appeared increasingly frail and inviting foreign exploitation, some historians tackled Arab-Islamic past out of a desire, probably a subconscious desire, to bestir the forgotten medieval fear of Islam. This process of preparing the history of Islam involves purifying Europe from its long-forgotten fear: it is something of an exorcism, if I may use this expression in such a context. Like a psychoanalyst who empties the memory of his patient from its sub-conscious fears and complexities, such historians tried to overcome the collective fear (an archetypal pattern, to use Maud Bodkin's expression)[24] by exposing it, belittling it, and by showing its insignificance. The attraction of Arab history for some liberal writers falls within this category of the cathartic and the self-purifying effort. Within this compulsion to free the European subconsciousness from its ancient residual fear, one could read many Orientalist works that express a strong depreciation of Islamic and Oriental past. In this connection, I would like to specify Cardinal Newman's work on the *History of the Turks in Their Relations with Europe,* which I am going to allude to very soon.

Eclecticism is another phenomenon in so far as the compulsions of Western writers are concerned. When writers tackle historical or general subjects they often select a certain Oriental personality, or Oriental saying, presenting this personality (or saying) as the focus of the writer's admiration. The reader would inevitably develop two impressions. The first is that the writer has a wide knowledge, which exceeds the limits of his own culture (exposition of the writer's education); and the second impression is that there is nothing in Oriental history, which deserves to be recalled except for this personality (or saying). This is especially true of Carlyle's *Heroes;* while his great heroes are all European, only one Oriental hero is presented within his tapestry of great men. One could not escape the feeling that, while Europe is historically able to produce a great number of heroes, the whole of the Orient, ancient and modern, could not produce but one hero who is comparable with the European heroes. This method of an implicit devaluation of Oriental history and genius is cleverly woven in Emerson's web of historical discourses. When he chooses wise statements of Oriental heroes, within the context of a general subject and in the middle of a great number of Western historical personages, the impression left for the reader is that

Oriental history is not worth being referred to except for the allusions included in the author's text.

When dealing with the Arabs in his history of the Turks, Newman treats them favourably as a nation with a "national interior," a nation which is creative and prone to refinement and civilization.[25] But Newman presupposes, suggestively, that since the downfall of their state (caused by the Turks, according to him), the Arabs remained a static nation, frozen in its ancient shape. To further prove that the Arabs were victimized by the barbarian Turks is a situation which implies two points: firstly, that the Arabs should be liberated from the Turkish yoke by a Western (Catholic) intrusion and, secondly, that they are to be given guidance under the mandate of the Western powers. Newman's apparent motives for studying Oriental history are: to distort the Turks, to mobilize European states and sentiments against the Ottoman foe, and to rescue the subjects of the Turkish empire by freeing (and, of course, colonizing) them. But in addition to these motives, there is an implicit compulsion, which can be sensed by the careful reader. It is that to achieve all the goals against the Turks, Europe must identify itself with the Roman Catholic Church. While his *Apologia pro vita sua* offers an apology for his conversion to Catholicism, his *History of the Turks* offers a "potential" apology for Europe's conversion to Rome.

Empire-building, which is basically a process of annexation, of foreign regions, gave the European elite a feeling that the process of annexation involves a parallel annexation of the cultural heritage of the colonized nations. Thus, while Seeley, in *The Expansion of England,* visualizes a "world state" through the alleged unconscious movement in English and world history to a "Greater Britain" (the God who is revealed in history meant Britain to become a federal empire),[26] other historians considered the past of the Orientals as part of the West's possessions. That is why some writers adopted a paternal and "omniscient" narrator's attitude to Eastern peoples and cultures. "We treated them as children," writes Harriet Martineau while talking about her Middle-Eastern tour, "and this answered perfectly well."[27] The high esteem Western historians express for ancient Eastern civilizations envelops an implicit feeling that from the time these great civilizations ended, Easterners remained frozen in a state of childhood (not in the Wordsworthian sense, of childhood, of course). Here, the motive is to belittle contemporary Orientals through contrasting them against their ancient grandfathers. This also implies that the study of

Eastern histories is the study of the childhood of the human civilization, the civilization that became sophisticated and refined only with European progress.

Nowhere is the Orientalist's sense of "paternalism" shown more coercively than in the writings of Bernard Lewis, a leading figure in the "guild tradition of Islamic studies"[28] at Princeton. He has a thesis: the Orientalists are not servants of the empire.[29] To verify this thesis, he surveys the merits of Orientalist historiography; and he attempts to contrast the Orientalist histories of India with the "suppressed" histories written by Muslim Indians. His purpose is to demonstrate that the Orientals at large, and Muslim Indians in particular, are unable to write proper history unless they "enjoy" the paternal protection of Britain. It is, according to Lewis, only with the British occupation of India that a proper Indian history was possible. Moreover, British culture is responsible for making the Indians aware of history.[30] He later tries to prove that the Orientals have no sense of their own history because they have no sense of identity. "In the vast continents which Europeans called Asia and Africa," says Lewis, "there was not and could not be any comparable sense of identity."[31] He believes that "only Europe represented a kind of real historical entity, with a common culture derived from Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian roots and a common sense of its own identity."[32] Dismissing Oriental historiography as nothing, he finds it his culture's humanitarian duty to give the Oriental an identity by bestowing a "history" on him:

> It was not until modern times that European influence, European power, and finally European scholarship persuaded the inhabitants of Asia and Africa that they were Asians and Africans, and that this fact had some political and historical significance.[33]

Although it is not possible to specify every one of the Orientalists' motives and compulsions in such a limited paper, it is feasible to trace certain patterns in the career of the Orientalists' treatment of Oriental histories. To be sure each writer requires a case-study to uncover his or her compulsions. One of the significant patterns, as Said observes, consists of a general framework which, encouraged by colonial and scientific progress, approaches Oriental histories externally as part of a Western "masculine" will to dominate a passive, "feminized" and "sleeping" East. This is true of the majority of Orientalist historians, from Lord Macaulay[34] to Bernard Lewis. Another pattern is that which is suggested by the same sense of superiority, and which conceives the

Oriental past as a virgin field to be approached by the Orientalist on behalf of the Oriental. Our histories are also attractive for some Orientalists because they "correspond" to their desire to enact the drama of personal aspiration and ambition, a situation, which uncovers an individual and experimental compulsion to prove the ability of the self. The emergence in the nineteenth century of the European nation-states gave rise to chauvinism. Given an unprecedented techno-scientific progress, the European nation-states inspired and encouraged the pursuit of a history, which reinforces the Aryan myth. Renan and Gobineau used Oriental history and heritage to respond to an essential motive: to prove that the Semites are mediocre in their abilities to rationalize and think scientifically. This trend largely contributed to the growth of the Nazi and Fascist ideology. Annexation of oriental lands meant the annexation of Oriental cultures "by analogy." Some Orientalists considered themselves responsible for providing histories for the colonized nations. These histories appeared to revolve round one central desire, a desire that aims at proving that all universal history develops to attain a zenith in the European modern civilization. Oriental histories were seen as necessary only as ancillaries for a Eurocentric culture. Oriental history also provided the opportunity for some Orientalists to portray the self-image (as a desired image, as an undesired image, and as a contrast). For the American writers, Oriental history is part of the history of the old world. It is, therefore, a source of instruction, and the root of the New World that Columbus, the first American, discovered.

Whether useful or not? Orientalist histories *are* useful, not only because they show us the image of our past through a different and biased perspective, but also because Orientalist motives and compulsions, distortions and prejudices, provide the Oriental writers with the counter-compulsion and with the incentive to research their own history in an enlightened and objective manner.

Notes

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 43.

2. Ibid., 40.

3. Eric Meyer, "*'I Know Thee Not, I Loathe Thy Race':* Romantic Orientalism in the Eye of the Other" *ELH* 58 (1991): 568.

4. Ibid., 661.

5. By "professional Orientalists" I mean writers whose only specialization is the Orient or an Oriental field, not writers who wrote about, or tackled the Orient as a digression from their major argument or as means to support a certain opinion. Men such as Lawrence of Arabia and Charles Doughty are professional Orientalists.
6. Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1981), 13.
7. R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 13 and 29.
8. Said, *Covering Islam,* 23.
9. Said, *Orientalism,* 196-7, 222-225 and 237-46.
10. Bernard Weiss' letter of Sept. 12, 1991. Weiss is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Utah.
11. Quoted in D.G. Hogarth, *The Life of Charles Doughty* (London: OUP, 1928), 114.
12. Ibid.,114-5.
13. See D.M. Dunlop, "Some Remarks on Weil's History of the Caliphs," in *Historians of the Middle East* (eds.) B. Lewis and P.M. Holt (London: OUP, 1962), 329.
14. Quoted in Pierre Irving, *The Life and Letters of Washington Irving,* vol. II (N.Y.: G.P. Putma, 1863), 366
15. Washington Irving, *The Alhambra* (N.Y.: The Continental Press, n.d.), dedication page.
16. Quoted in Pierre Irving, *The Life and Letters of Washington Irving,* 322.
17. Washington Irving, *The Alhambra,* 34.
18. Quoted in Pierre Irving, *The Life and Letters of Washington Irving,* 287-8.
19. Beongcheon Yu, *The Great Circle: American Writers and the Orient* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1983), 228.
20. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History,* in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle,* vol. V. (ed.) H. D. Traill (N.Y: Ams Press, 1980), 76.
21. Ibid.
22. David De Laura, "Ishmael as Prophet: Heroes and Hero-worship and the Self-Expressive Basis of Carlyle's Art," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 2 (Spring, 1969): 705-6 and 725-32.
23. Southern, *Western Views,* 29.
24. For an idea about archetypal criticism, consult: Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (London: OUP, 1963).
25. John Henry Newman, *Historical Sketches,* vol. 1 (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1970), 210.

26. Quoted in Paul Turner, *English Literature, 1832-1890, Excluding the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 9.
27. Quoted in Ibid., 273.
28. Said, *Covering Islam,* 129.
29. Bernard Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), 87-8.
30. Ibid., 88-90.
31. Ibid., 100.
32. Ibid.
33.Ibid.
34.For an idea about Macaulay's opinion of Oriental historiography, consult: Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Speeches by Lord Macaulay with his Minute on Indian Education* (London: OUP, 1935), 351.