

# The New York Review of Books

## The Question of Orientalism

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Imagine a situation in which a group of patriots and radicals from Greece decides that the profession of classical studies is insulting to the great heritage of Hellas, and that those engaged in these studies, known as classicists, are the latest manifestation of a deep and evil conspiracy, incubated for centuries, hatched in Western Europe, fledged in America, the purpose of which is to denigrate the Greek achievement and subjugate the Greek lands and peoples. In this perspective, the entire European tradition of classical studies—largely the creation of French romantics, British colonial governors (of Cyprus, of course), and of poets, professors, and proconsuls from both countries—is a long-standing insult to the honor and integrity of Hellas, and a threat to its future. The poison has spread from Europe to the United States, where the teaching of Greek history, language, and literature in the universities is dominated by the evil race of classicists—men and women who are not of Greek origin, who have no sympathy for Greek causes, and who, under a false mask of dispassionate scholarship, strive to keep the Greek people in a state of permanent subordination.

The time has come to save Greece from the classicists and bring the whole pernicious tradition of classical scholarship to an end. Only Greeks are truly able to teach and write on Greek history and culture from remote antiquity to the present day; only Greeks are genuinely competent to direct and conduct programs of academic studies in these fields. Some non-Greeks may be permitted to join in this great endeavor provided that they give convincing evidence of their competence, as for example by campaigning for the Greek cause in Cyprus, by demonstrating their ill will to the Turks, by offering a pinch of incense to the currently enthroned Greek gods, and by adopting whatever may be the latest fashionable ideology in Greek intellectual circles.

Non-Greeks who will not or cannot meet these requirements are obviously hostile, and therefore not equipped to teach Greek studies in a fair and reasonable manner. They must not be permitted to hide behind the mask of classicism, but must be revealed for what

they are—Turk-lovers, enemies of the Greek people, and opponents of the Greek cause. Those already established in academic circles must be discredited by abuse and thus neutralized; at the same time steps must be taken to ensure Greek or pro-Greek control of university centers and departments of Greek studies and thus, by a kind of academic prophylaxis, prevent the emergence of any further classical scholars or scholarship. In the meantime the very name of classicist must be transformed into a term of abuse.

Stated in terms of classics and Greek, the picture is absurd. But if for classicist we substitute “Orientalist,” with the appropriate accompanying changes, this amusing fantasy becomes an alarming reality. For some years now a hue and cry has been raised against Orientalists in American and to a lesser extent European universities, and the term “Orientalism” has been emptied of its previous content and given an entirely new one—that of unsympathetic or hostile treatment of Oriental peoples. For that matter, even the terms “unsympathetic” and “hostile” have been redefined to mean not supportive of currently fashionable creeds or causes.

Take the case of V.S. Naipaul, author of a recent account of a tour of Muslim countries. Mr. Naipaul is not a professor but a novelist—one of the most gifted of our time. He is not a European, but a West Indian of East Indian origin. His book about modern Islam is not a work of scholarship, and makes no pretense of being such. It is the result of close observation by a professional observer of the human predicament. It is occasionally mistaken, often devastatingly accurate, and above all compassionate. Mr. Naipaul has a keen eye for the absurdities of human behavior, in Muslim lands as elsewhere. At the same time he is moved by deep sympathy and understanding for both the anger and the suffering of the people whose absurdities he so faithfully depicts.

But such compassion is not a quality appreciated or even recognized by the grinders of political or ideological axes. Mr. Naipaul will not toe the line; he will not join in the praise of Islamic radical leaders and the abuse of those whom they oppose. Therefore he is an Orientalist—a term applied to him even by brainwashed university students who ought to know better. Their mental confusion is hardly surprising in a situation where a professor in a reputable university offers and gives a course on “Orientalism” consisting of a diatribe against Orientalist scholarship, a demonology of those engaged in it, and the final comment: “And now there is something else I must tell you. Even here, in this university, there are Orientalists”—the last word uttered with the sibilant fury to which the final syllable lends itself.

What then is Orientalism? What did the word mean before it was poisoned by the kind of intellectual pollution that in our time has made so many previously useful words unfit for use in rational discourse? In the past, Orientalism was used mainly in two senses. One is a school of painting—that of a group of artists, mostly from Western Europe, who visited the Middle East and North Africa and depicted what they saw or imagined, sometimes in a rather romantic and extravagant manner. The second and more common meaning, unconnected with the first, has been a branch of scholarship. The word, and the academic discipline which it denotes, date from the great expansion of scholarship in Western Europe from the time of the Renaissance onward. There were Hellenists who studied Greek, Latinists who studied Latin, Hebraists who studied Hebrew; the first two groups were sometimes called classicists, the third Orientalists. In due course they turned their attention to other languages.

Basically these early scholars were philologists concerned with the recovery, study, publication, and interpretation of texts. This was the first and most essential task that had to be undertaken before the serious study of such other matters as philosophy, theology, literature, and history became possible. The term Orientalist was not at that time as vague and imprecise as it appears now. There was only one discipline, philology. In the early stages there was only one region, that which we now call the Middle East—the only part of the Orient with which Europeans could claim any real acquaintance.

With the progress of both exploration and scholarship, the term Orientalist became increasingly unsatisfactory. Students of the Orient were no longer engaged in a single discipline but were branching out into several others. At the same time the area that they were studying, the so-called Orient, was seen to extend far beyond the Middle Eastern lands on which European attention had hitherto been concentrated, and to include the vast and remote civilizations of India and China. There was a growing tendency among scholars and in university departments concerned with these studies to use more precise labels. Scholars took to calling themselves philologists, historians, etc., dealing with Oriental topics. And in relation to these topics they began to use such terms as Sinologist and Indologist, Iranist and Arabist, to give a closer and more specific definition to the area and topic of their study.

Incidentally, the last-named term, Arabist, has also gone through a process of re-semanticization. In England, in the past, the word Arabist was normally used in the same way as Iranist or Hispanist or Germanist—to denote a scholar professionally concerned with the language, history, or culture of a particular land and people. In the United

States, it has come to mean a specialist in dealings with Arabs, particularly in government and commerce. For some, though not all, it also means an advocate of Arab causes. This is another example of word pollution, which has deprived us of the use of a necessary term. The term Hispanist does not mean an apologist for Central American tyrants or terrorists, an admirer of bullfighters, an observer or practitioner of Spanish affairs, or a purveyor of bananas. It means a scholar with a good knowledge of Spanish, specializing in some field of Spanish or Latin American history or culture. The word Arabist ought to be used in the same way. This, however, is probably a lost cause and some other term will have to be found. Some have even suggested the word Arabologist, on the analogy of Sinologist, Indologist, and Turcologist. This term might bring some gain in precision but also a considerable loss of elegance. A not unworthy group of scholars, engaged in the study of a truly great civilization, deserves a somewhat better label.

The term Orientalist is by now also polluted beyond salvation, but this is less important in that the word had already lost its value and had been in fact abandoned by those who previously bore it. This abandonment was given formal expression at the Twenty-ninth International Congress of Orientalists, which met in Paris in the summer of 1973. This was the hundredth anniversary of the First International Congress of Orientalists convened in the same city, and it seemed a good occasion to reconsider the nature and functions of the congress. It soon became clear that there was a consensus in favor of dropping this label—some indeed wanted to go further and bring the series of congresses to an end on the grounds that the profession as such had ceased to exist and the congress had therefore outlived its purpose. The normal will to survive of institutions was strong enough to prevent the dissolution of the congress. The movement to abolish the term Orientalist was, however, successful.

The attack came from two sides. On the one hand there were those who had hitherto been called Orientalists and who were increasingly dissatisfied with a term that indicated neither the discipline in which they were engaged nor the region with which they were concerned. They were reinforced by scholars from Asian countries who pointed to the absurdity of applying such a term as Orientalist to an Indian studying the history or culture of India. They made the further point that the term was somehow insulting to Orientals in that it made them appear as the objects of study rather than as participants.

The strongest case for the retention of the old term was made by the Soviet delegation, led by the late Babajan Ghafurov, director of the Institute of Orientalism in Moscow and

himself a Soviet Oriental from the republic of Tajikistan. This term, said Ghafurov, had served us well for more than a century. Why should we now abandon a word that conveniently designates the work we do and that was borne with pride by our teachers and their teachers for many generations back? Ghafurov was not entirely pleased with the comment of a British delegate who praised him for his able statement of the conservative point of view. In the vote, despite the support of the East European Orientalists who agreed with the Soviet delegate, Ghafurov was defeated, and the term Orientalist was formally abolished. In its place the congress agreed to call itself the “International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa”—an expression that is far more acceptable, provided that one does not have to send telegrams and is sufficiently acquainted with French academic jargon to know that the human sciences consist of the social sciences with a leavening of the humanities.

The term Orientalist was thus abolished by the accredited Orientalists, and thrown on the garbage heap of history. But garbage heaps are not safe places. The words Orientalist and Orientalism, discarded as useless by scholars, were retrieved and reconditioned for a different purpose, as terms of polemical abuse.

The attack on the Orientalists was not in fact new in the Muslim world. It had gone through several earlier phases, in which different interests and motives were at work. One of the first outbreaks in the postwar period had a curious origin. It was connected with the initiation of the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, a major project of Orientalism in the field of Islamic studies. The first edition had been published simultaneously in three languages—English, French, and German—with the participation of scholars drawn from these and many other countries. It took almost thirty years and was completed in 1938. The second edition, begun in 1950, was published in English and French only, and without a German member on the international editorial board.

The Muslim attack was launched from Karachi, the capital of the newly created Islamic republic of Pakistan, and concentrated on two points, the lack of a German edition and editor and the presence on the editorial board of a French Jew, the late E. Levi-Provençal. The priority, indeed the presence, of the first complaint seemed a little odd in Karachi, and was clarified when in due course it emerged that the organizer of this particular agitation was a gentleman described as “the *imam* of the congregation of German Muslims in West Pakistan,” with some assistance from a still unreconstructed German diplomat who had just been posted there. This was a time when the mind-set of the Third Reich had not yet entirely disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

The episode was of brief duration and aroused no echo or very little echo elsewhere in the Islamic world. Some other campaigns against Orientalists followed, most of them rather more local in their origin. Two themes predominated, the Islamic and the Arab. For some, who defined themselves and their adversaries exclusively in religious terms, Orientalism was a challenge to the Islamic faith. In the early Sixties a professor at Al-Azhar University in Egypt wrote a little tract on Orientalists and the evil things they do.<sup>2</sup> They consist, he said, mainly of missionaries whose aim is to undermine and ultimately destroy Islam in order to establish the paramountcy of the Christian religion. This applies to most of them, except for those who are Jews and whose purpose is equally nefarious. The author lists the Orientalists who are working against Islam and whose baneful influence must be countered. He provides a separate list of really insidious and dangerous scholars against whom particular caution is needed—those apparently who make a specious parade of good will.

They include among others the name of the late Philip Hitti of Princeton. The author of the booklet describes him as follows:

A Christian from Lebanon.... One of the most disputatious of the enemies of Islam, who makes a pretense of defending Arab causes in America and is an unofficial advisor of the American State Department on Middle Eastern Affairs. He always tries to diminish the role of Islam in the creation of human civilization and is unwilling to ascribe any merit to the Muslims.... His *History of the Arabs* is full of attacks on Islam and sneers at the Prophet. All of it is spite and venom and hatred....

The late Philip Hitti was a stalwart defender of Arab causes, and his *History* a hymn to Arab glory. This response to it must have come as a shock to him. Similar religious complaints about the Orientalist as missionary, as a sort of Christian fifth column, have also appeared in Pakistan and more recently in Iran.

Committed Muslim critics of Orientalism have an intelligible rationale when they view Christian and Jewish writers on Islam as engaged in religious polemic or conversion—indeed, granted their assumptions, their conclusions are virtually inescapable. In their view, the adherent of a religion is necessarily a defender of that religion, and an approach to another religion, by anyone but a prospective convert, can only be undertaken for defense or attack. Traditional Muslim scholars did not normally undertake the study of Christian or Jewish thought or history, and they could see no

honorable reason why Christians or Jews should study Islam. Indeed, one of the prescriptions of the *dhimma*, the rules by which Christians and Jews were permitted to practice their religions under Muslim government, forbids them to teach the Koran to their children. Medieval Christians had a similar view. When they began to study Islam and the Islamic scriptures, it was for the double purpose of dissuading Christians from conversion to Islam and persuading Muslims to adopt Christianity. This approach has long since been abandoned in the Christian world, except in a few outposts of religious zeal. It remained for much longer the prevailing perception of interdenominational relations in the Muslim world.

A different approach, expressed in a combination of nationalist and ideological terminology, is to be found among some Arab writers. Curiously, most of those involved are members of the Christian minorities in Arab countries and are themselves resident in Western Europe or the United States. A good example is an article by a Coptic sociologist living in Paris, Anouar Abdel-Malek, published in the UNESCO journal *Diogenes* in 1963, that is, a year or so after the publication of the Cairo pamphlet. In this article, entitled “Orientalism in Crisis,” Dr. Abdel-Malek sets forth what became some of the major charges in the indictment of the Orientalists. They are “Europocentric,” paying insufficient attention to the scholars, scholarship, methods, and achievements of the Afro-Asian world; they are obsessed with the past and do not show sufficient interest in the recent history of the “Oriental” peoples (more recent critics complain of the exact opposite); they pay insufficient attention to the insights afforded by social science and particularly Marxist methodology.

Dr. Abdel-Malek’s article is written with obvious emotion, and is the expression of passionately held convictions. It remains, however, within the limits of scholarly debate, and is obviously based on a careful though not sympathetic study of Orientalist writings. He is even prepared to concede that Orientalism may not be inherently evil, and that some Orientalists may themselves be victims.

A new theme was adumbrated in an article published in a Beirut magazine in June 1974 and written by a professor teaching in an American university. One or two quotations may illustrate the line:

The Zionist scholarly hegemony in Arabic studies [in the United States] had a clear effect in controlling the publication of studies, periodicals, as well as professional associations. These [Zionist scholars] published a great number of books and studies

which impress the uninitiated as being strictly scientific but which in fact distort Arab history and realities and are detrimental to the Arab struggle for liberation. They masquerade in scientific guise in order to dispatch spies and agents of American and Israeli security apparatuses, whose duty it is to conduct field studies all over the Arab states.... These are astonishing facts of which Arab officials should keep track if they are to distinguish between legitimate and honest research conducted by some American professors on the one hand, and that conducted by students and professors motivated by American security and hegemony on the other. These officials should not allow Arab wealth to support American and Israeli interests. They should carefully and honestly scrutinize every appeal for material or for moral support. They should never allow Arab money to be used for weakening, defaming, or compromising the Arabs.<sup>3</sup>

This is a key text, which may help us considerably to understand the politics of academic development in Middle Eastern studies in the period that followed.

Another attack against “the Orientalists” came from a group of Marxists. Their polemics reveal several oddities. One is the assumption that there is an Orientalist conception or line to which all Orientalists adhere—an illusion which even the most superficial acquaintance with the writings of Orientalists should suffice to dispel. Most of these critics are not themselves Orientalists. This does not mean that they reject the Orientalist doctrine or orthodoxy, which in fact does not exist; it means that they do not possess the Orientalist skills, which are exercised with little difference by both Marxist and non-Marxist Orientalists. Most serious Marxist writing on Middle Eastern history is the work either of Marxists who are themselves Orientalists, trained in the same methods and subject to the same disciplines as their non-Marxist colleagues, or of authors who rely on the writings of Orientalist scholars, both Marxist and non-Marxist, for the materials on which they base their analyses and conclusions.

A good example of this is Perry Anderson’s intelligent book *The Lineages of the Absolutist State*. Though interesting and thoughtful, it bases its treatment of Middle Eastern and in general Islamic matters exclusively on secondary sources, i.e., on the works of the Orientalists. There is no other way—unless of course the scholars are willing to resort to the desperate expedient of acquiring the necessary skills and reading the primary sources. But this, besides being difficult and time-consuming, would have the further disadvantage that the scholars themselves would then be exposed to the charge of Orientalism. Marxist scholars like Maxime Rodinson in France and I.P.

Petrushevsky in Russia have made major contributions to Middle Eastern history which are recognized and accepted even by those who do not share their ideological commitments or political allegiances. They in turn, in their work, show far more respect for fellow Orientalists of other persuasions than for fellow Marxists with other conceptions of scholarship. So far there have been very few attempts by the anti-Orientalists in the West to produce their own contributions to Arab history. When they have tried, the results have not been impressive.

The main exponent of anti-Orientalism at the present time in the United States is Edward Said, whose book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, was heralded by a barrage of book reviews, articles, and public statements. This is a book with a thesis—that “Orientalism derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only India and the Bible lands” (p. 4). To prove this point, Mr. Said makes a number of very arbitrary decisions. His Orient is reduced to the Middle East, and his Middle East to a part of the Arab world. By eliminating Turkish and Persian studies on the one hand and Semitic studies on the other, he isolates Arabic studies from both their historical and philological contexts. The period and area of Orientalism are similarly restricted.

To prove his thesis, Mr. Said finds it necessary to date the rise of Orientalism from the late eighteenth century and place its main centers in Britain and France. In fact, it was already well established in the seventeenth century—the chair of Arabic at Cambridge, for example, was founded in 1633—and had its main centers in Germany and neighboring countries. Indeed, a history of Arabic studies in Europe without the Germans makes as much sense as would a history of European music or philosophy with the same omission.

Mr. Said attempts to justify this procedure:

I believe that the sheer quality, consistency, and mass of British, French, and American writing on the Orient lifts it above the doubtless crucial work done in Germany, Italy, Russia, and elsewhere. But I think it is also true that the major steps in Oriental scholarship were first taken in either Britain and France [sic], then elaborated upon by Germans.... What German Oriental scholarship did was to refine and elaborate techniques whose application was to texts, myths, ideas, and languages almost literally gathered from the Orient by imperial Britain and France. [Pp. 17-18; p. 19]

It is difficult to see what the last sentence means. Texts, in the sense of manuscripts and other written materials, were certainly acquired in the Middle East by Western visitors. But the collections in Germany, Austria, and elsewhere are no less important than those of “imperial Britain and France.” How precisely does one “gather” a language, literally or otherwise? The implication would seem to be that by learning Arabic, Englishmen and Frenchmen were committing some kind of offense. The Germans—accessories after the fact—could not begin to do their work of “refinement and elaboration” on these languages until the British and the French had first seized them; the Arabs, from whom these languages were misappropriated, along with myths and ideas (whatever that may mean), were correspondingly deprived.

The whole passage is not merely false but absurd. It reveals a disquieting lack of knowledge of what scholars do and what scholarship is about. The reader’s anxiety is not allayed by the frequent occurrence of stronger synonyms such as “appropriate,” “accumulate,” “wrench,” “ransack,” and even “rape” to describe the growth of knowledge in the West about the East. For Mr. Said, it would seem, scholarship and science are commodities which exist in finite quantities; the West has grabbed an unfair share of these as well as other resources, leaving the East not only impoverished but also unscholarly and unscientific. Apart from embodying a hitherto unknown theory of knowledge, Mr. Said expresses a contempt for modern Arab scholarly achievement worse than anything that he attributes to his demonic Orientalists.

This theme of violent seizure and possession, with sexual overtones, recurs at several points in the book. “What was important in the latter [sic] nineteenth century was not *whether* the West had penetrated and possessed the Orient, but rather *how* the British and French felt that they had done it” (p. 211). Or again:

...the space of weaker or underdeveloped regions like the Orient was viewed as something inviting French interest, penetration, insemination—in short, colonization.... French scholars, administrators, geographers, and commercial agents poured out their exuberant activity onto the fairly supine, feminine Orient. [Pp.219-220]

The climax (so to speak) of these projected sexual fantasies occurs in Mr. Said’s bravura piece, where he reads an elaborate, hostile, and wholly absurd interpretation into a lexical definition of an Arabic root which I quoted from the classical Arab dictionaries.<sup>4</sup>

The limitations of time, space, and content which Mr. Said forcibly imposes on his subject, though they constitute a serious distortion, are no doubt convenient and indeed necessary to his purpose. They are not, however, sufficient to accomplish it. Among the British and French Arabists and Islamicists who are the ostensible subject of his study, many leading figures are either not mentioned at all (Claude Cahen, E. Levi-Provençal, Henri Corbin, Marius Canard, Charles Pellat, William and Georges Marçais, William Wright, all of whom made important contributions) or mentioned briefly in passing (R.A. Nicholson, Guy Le Strange, Sir Thomas Arnold, and E.G. Browne). Even for those whom he does cite, Mr. Said makes a remarkably arbitrary choice of works. His common practice indeed is to omit their major contributions to scholarship and instead fasten on minor or occasional writings.

An example of this is his treatment of the nineteenth-century English scholar Edward Lane, who is discussed—and incidentally maligned—for his book on the modern Egyptians. This work, a byproduct of his stay in Egypt in the 1830s, is interesting and in many ways useful. It pales into insignificance in comparison with Lane's lifework, his multivolume Arabic-English lexicon, which was and remains a major achievement of European Orientalism and a landmark in Arabic studies. On this Mr. Said has nothing to say.

All of this—the arbitrary rearrangement of the historical background, and the capricious choice of countries, persons, and writings—still does not suffice for Mr. Said to prove his case, and he is obliged to resort to additional devices. One is the reinterpretation of the passages he cites to an extent out of all reasonable accord with their authors' manifest intentions. Another is to bring into the category of "Orientalist" a whole series of writers—litterateurs like Chateaubriand and Nerval, imperial administrators like Lord Cromer, and others—whose works were no doubt relevant to the formation of Western cultural attitudes, but who had nothing to do with the academic tradition of Orientalism which is Mr. Said's main target.

Even that is still not enough, and to make his point Mr. Said finds it necessary to launch a series of reckless accusations. Thus in speaking of the late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth-century French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy, Mr. Said remarks that "he ransacked the Oriental archives.... What texts he isolated, he then brought back; he doctored them..." (p. 127). If these words bear any meaning at all it is that Sacy was somehow at fault in his access to these documents, and then committed the crime of tampering with them.

This outrageous libel on a great scholar is without a shred of truth.

Another, more general accusation against Orientalists is that their "economic ideas never extended beyond asserting the Oriental's fundamental incapacity for trade, commerce, and economic rationality. In the Islamic field these clichés held good for literally hundreds of years—until Maxime Rodinson's important study *Islam and Capitalism* appeared in 1966" (p. 259). M. Rodinson himself would be the first to recognize the absurdity of this statement, the writer of which had obviously not taken the trouble to acquaint himself with the work of such earlier Orientalists as Adam Mez, J.H. Kramers, W. Björkman, 'V. Barthold, Thomas Arnold, and many others. All of them dealt with Muslim economic activities; Arnold was an Englishman. Rodinson, incidentally, makes the interesting observation that with some of Mr. Said's analyses and formulations carried to the limit, "one falls into a doctrine altogether similar to the Zhdanovist theory of the two sciences."<sup>2</sup>

A historian of science is not expected to be a scientist, but he is expected to have some basic knowledge of the scientific alphabet. Similarly, a historian of Orientalism—that is to say, the work of historians and philologists—should have at least some acquaintance with the history and philology with which they were concerned. Mr. Said shows astonishing blind spots. He asserts that "Britain and France dominated the Eastern Mediterranean from about the end of the seventeenth century on [sic]" (p. 17)—that is, when the Ottoman Turks who ruled the eastern Mediterranean were just leaving Austria and Hungary. This rearrangement of history is necessary for Mr. Said's thesis; others are apparently due to unpolemical ignorance—for example his belief that Muslim armies conquered Turkey before North Africa (p. 59)—that is to say, that the eleventh century came before, the seventh, and that Egypt was "annexed" by England (p. 35). Egypt was indeed occupied and dominated, but was never annexed or directly administered. In another remarkable passage, he chides the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel because, even after he "had practically renounced his Orientalism, he still held that Sanskrit and Persian on the one hand and Greek and German on the other had more affinities with each other than with the Semitic, Chinese, American, or African languages" (p. 98). Mr. Said seems to object to this view—which would not be challenged by any serious philologist—and regards it as a pernicious residue of Schlegel's former Orientalism.

Mr. Said's knowledge of Arabic and Islam shows surprising gaps. The one Arabic phrase which he quotes is misspelled and mistranslated (p. 129) and several of the few other

Arabic words which appear on Mr. Said's pages are similarly misrepresented. He explains the Islamic theological term *tawhid* as meaning "God's transcendental unity" (p. 269), when in fact it means monotheism, i.e., declaring or professing the unity of God, as the form of the Arabic word indicates.

The same kind of insouciance extends to other aspects of Mr. Said's writing. On page 167 he quotes several verses from Goethe in the original German and then adds an English translation incorporating a grotesque elementary error. "*Gottes ist der Orient! / Gottes ist der Okzident!*" does not mean, as Mr. Said appears to believe, "God is the Orient! / God is the Occident!" but "God's is the Orient, God's is the Occident," i.e., both East and West belong to God.

The Germans are not the only scholars omitted from Mr. Said's survey. More remarkably, he has also omitted the Russians. Their contribution, though considerable, is less than that of the Germans or even of the British and the French. It could, however, have been very useful to him in another sense, in that Soviet scholarship, particularly in its treatment of the Islamic and other non-European regions of the Soviet Union, comes closest—far more so than any of the British or French scholars whom he condemns—to precisely the kind of tendentious, denigratory writing that Mr. Said so much dislikes in others. Curiously, however, the Russians, even in their most abusive and contemptuous statements about Islam, enjoy total exemption from Mr. Said's strictures.

This omission can hardly be due to ignorance of Russian; such disabilities have not inhibited Mr. Said's treatment of other topics, and in any case summaries of relevant Soviet scholarly works are available in English and French. The political purposes of Mr. Said's book may provide the explanation. Said, it may be recalled, believes that South Yemen is "the only genuinely radical people's democracy in the Middle East."<sup>6</sup> A writer who is capable of taking these words at face value is likely to be willing to let Academician S.P. Tolstov, who saw Muhammad as a shamanistic myth, and Professor E.A. Belayev, who described the Koran as the ideological expression of a slave-owning ruling class, full of slave-owning mentality, slip by without even a slap on the wrist.

One final point, perhaps the most astonishing. Mr. Said's attitude to the Orient, Arab and other, as revealed in his book, is far more negative than that of the most arrogant European imperialist writers whom he condemns. Mr. Said speaks (p. 322) of "books and journals in Arabic (and doubtless in Japanese, various Indian dialects and other Oriental languages)...." This contemptuous listing, and especially the assumption that what

Indians speak and write are not languages but dialects, would be worthy of an early-nineteenth-century district commissioner.

Even more remarkable is Mr. Said's neglect—or perhaps ignorance—of Arab scholarship and other writings. "No Arab or Islamic scholar can afford to ignore what goes on in scholarly journals, institutes, and universities in the United States and Europe; the converse is not true. For example, there is no major journal of Arab studies published in the Arab world today" (p. 323). The first statement is hardly a reproach; the rest is simply untrue. Mr. Said is apparently unaware of the enormous output of journals, monographs, editions, and other studies being published by universities, academies, learned societies, and other scholarly bodies in many different Arab countries.<sup>7</sup> He is apparently equally unaware of the large and growing literature of self-criticism produced by Arab authors who try to examine some of the failings and weaknesses of Arab society and culture and in so doing make, in a much more acute form, many of the observations for which Mr. Said attacks the Orientalists and for which he accuses them of racism, hostility, and a desire to dominate. He does not even seem to know the considerable body of writing by Arab authors on the subject of Orientalism; at least, he does not mention it.<sup>8</sup>

The inadequacies of Mr. Said's book are further clarified by its author's inability to deal with critical comments. To these his responses have been bluster and abuse, sometimes diluted with obfuscation. An example occurs in Mr. Said's discussion of the treatment of the Iranian crisis in the American press. When this first appeared in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, I wrote to the editor as follows:

In "Iran," Said quotes two brief passages from my writings, links them together and conveys the impression that they embody a comment on recent events in Iran. In fact, the two phrases occur separately, in a book published thirty years ago, and refer to some aspects of the decline of Islamic civilization in the late middle ages. The *New York Times* article from which Said took these phrases makes no such linkage and conveys no such impression.

Said's only reply was that I should direct my complaint to Flora Lewis (the author of the article in *The New York Times*) "since it was she who used those phrases from his work, not I." It was indeed Flora Lewis who used them, and Said who misused them, as my letter indicated. But even if Said, despite his professed expertise on Orientalists and their writings, had indeed been misled by the newspaper article, this would not justify his

repeating the error when he republished more or less the same article in *Harper's*<sup>2</sup> and again when he incorporated it in his book *Covering Islam*.

This same book, *Covering Islam*, provides many examples of Mr. Said's disdain of facts. One must suffice—his treatment of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University. "Princeton" says Mr. Said, "has a renowned and very respectable Program in Near East Studies; called until recently the Department of Oriental Studies, it was founded by Philip Hitti almost half a century ago. Today, the program's orientation—like that of many other Near East programs—is dominated by social and policy [sic] scientists. Classical Islamic, Arabic, and Persian literature, for instance, are less well represented in the curriculum and on the faculty than are modern Near Eastern economics, politics, history, and sociology" (p. 136).

The statement is untrue in almost every particular. The former Department of Oriental Studies was split in 1969 (hardly recently) into two departments, of Far Eastern and Near Eastern Studies. The Department of Near Eastern Studies consists of fifteen professors, of whom the great majority deal with history and literature and with premodern periods and not one can be described as a "policy scientist." The "Program in Near Eastern Studies" is an administrative device ensuring contact and cooperation between the Near Eastern specialists in the department and scholars in other departments with a Middle Eastern interest.

From his discussion of the Princeton seminars, Said seems not to have looked at the papers or even the program with the result that his statements about them are confused, contradictory, and remarkably inaccurate. Thus he asserts that at a seminar and conference on slavery in Africa "no scholars from the Arab Muslim world were invited" (p. 137). In fact, a distinguished Arab Muslim historian from the Sudan was one of the planners of the seminar. He spent several months at Princeton preparing the conference and delivered its inaugural lecture. He and other Muslim scholars would hardly have taken part in a project whose purpose, in Said's words, was "to worsen relations between African and Arab Muslims" (p. 137). Said's treatment of other academic activities shows the same obsessive search for hostile motives, the same contempt for fact, evidence, and even probability.

Despite a predominantly unfavorable response among reviewers in learned journals (with the curious exception of *The Journal of the American Oriental Society*, the house organ of American Orientalists), Said's *Orientalism* has had a considerable impact. Its success

—whether of esteem or of scandal—raises interesting questions concerning the American academic establishment on the one hand and the Arab world on the other.

The first poses the more difficult problem, to which various solutions have been proposed. Some observers have seen the welcoming of Said's book as the manifestation of "*le vice anglo-saxon*"—a masochistic desire for flagellation. This interpretation found some support in France, where Said's book made less of an impression and where even *Le Monde* gave it a somewhat negative review. Others attribute its success to its harsh strictures on textual and philological scholarship, which indirectly provide a warrant for ignorance—and the ignorant form a large constituency, not unrepresented in the universities. It is much less trouble to qualify as an Arabophile than as an Arabic scholar.

More curious is the question concerning the Arab world. Orientalists in Europe and America have dealt with all the cultures of Asia—China and Japan, India and Indonesia; and in the Middle East their studies are by no means limited to the Arabs but have included the Turks and Persians as well as the ancient cultures of the region. There is a radical, one might almost say a complete, difference in the attitudes of virtually all these other peoples toward the scholars who study them from outside. The Chinese, the Indians, and the rest are not always admiring of the Orientalists who deal with them. Sometimes they simply ignore them, sometimes they regard them with a kind of tolerant amusement, sometimes they accept them in the way that Greek scholars have accepted the Hellenists. The violent and vituperative attack on Orientalists is limited—apart from the Muslim reaction against the perceived threat from a rival faith—to one group and one group only among the peoples whom the Orientalists have studied, namely the Arabs. This raises the interesting question of whether the Arabs differ significantly from other Asian and African peoples, or whether the Arabic specialists differ in some significant way from other Orientalists.

Some help in answering this question may be found in another important fact—that this hostility to Orientalists is by no means universal or even dominant in Arab countries. Many of the Orientalists most violently attacked by the Saidian and related schools have taught generations of Arab students and have been translated and published in Arab countries. Perhaps I may be excused for mentioning that six of my own books, including some to which Mr. Said takes the strongest exception, have been translated and published in the Arab world—one of them indeed under the auspices of the Muslim Brethren. In general, serious scholars in Arab universities have been ready to take account and make use of Orientalist publications and even to participate extensively in international



gatherings of Orientalists.

The critique of Orientalism raises several genuine questions. A point made by several critics is that the guiding principle of these studies is expressed in the dictum “knowledge is power,” and that Orientalists were seeking knowledge of Orientalist peoples in order to dominate them, most of them being directly or, as Abdel-Malek allows, objectively (in the Marxist sense) in the service of imperialism. No doubt there were some Orientalists who, objectively or subjectively, served or profited from imperial domination. But as an explanation of the Orientalist enterprise as a whole, it is absurdly inadequate. If the pursuit of power through knowledge is the only or even the prime motive, why did the study of Arabic and Islam begin in Europe centuries before the Muslim conquerors were driven from Eastern and Western European soil and the Europeans embarked on their counter-attack? Why did these studies flourish in European countries that never had any share in the domination of the Arab world, and yet made a contribution as great as the English and French—most scholars would say greater? And why did Western scholars devote so much effort to the decipherment and recovery of the monuments of ancient Middle Eastern civilization, long since forgotten in their own countries?

Another charge leveled against the Orientalists is that of bias against the peoples they study, even of a built-in hostility to them. No one would deny that scholars, like other human beings, are liable to some kind of bias, more often for, rather than against, the subject of their study. The significant difference is between those who recognize their bias and try to correct it, and those who give it free rein. (Accusations of cultural bias and political ulterior motives might also gain somewhat in credibility if the accusers did not assume for themselves and accord to the Russians a plenary indulgence.)

Beyond the question of bias there lies the larger epistemological problem of how far it is possible for scholars of one society to study and interpret the creations of another. The accusers complain of stereotypes and facile generalizations. Stereotyped prejudices certainly exist—not only of other cultures, in the Orient or elsewhere, but of other nations, races, churches, classes, professions, generations, and almost any other group one cares to mention within our own society. The Orientalists are not immune to these dangers; nor are their accusers. The former at least have the advantage of some concern for intellectual precision and discipline.

The most important question—least mentioned by the current wave of critics—is that of

the scholarly merits, indeed the scholarly validity, of Orientalist findings. Prudently, Mr. Said has hardly touched on this question, and has indeed given very little attention to the scholarly writings of the scholars whose putative attitudes, motives, and purposes form the theme of his book. Scholarly criticism of Orientalist scholarship is a legitimate and indeed a necessary, inherent part of the process. Fortunately, it is going on all the time—not a criticism of Orientalism, which would be meaningless, but a criticism of the research and results of individual scholars or schools of scholars. The most rigorous and penetrating critique of Orientalist scholarship has always been and will remain that of the Orientalists themselves.

#### LETTERS

*Orientalism: An Exchange* August 12, 1982

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1. 1  
Pakistan press, spring and summer 1955, especially editorial and news columns in *Morning News* (Karachi), August 24, 1955, and two letters by Sh. Inayatullah published in the *Pakistan Times*, September 1 and September 28, 1955. ↵
  2. 2  
Muhammad al-Bahi, *Al-Mubashshirun wa'l-Mustashriqun wa-mawqifuhum min al-Islam* (Cairo, n.d., ca. 1962). ↵
  3. 3  
Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, *Al-Adab*, Beirut, vol. 12, no. 6 (June 1974). ↵
  4. 4  
In a discussion of some Islamic terms for "revolution," I began the examination of each term—following a common Arab practice—with a brief look at the basic meanings of the Arabic root from which it was derived. One passage, introducing the term most widely used in modern Arabic, ran as follows: "The root *th-w-r* in classical Arabic meant to rise up (e.g. of a camel), to be stirred or excited, and hence, especially in Maghribi usage, to rebel. It is often used in the context of establishing a petty, independent sovereignty; thus, for example, the so-called party kings who ruled in eleventh-century Spain after the breakup of the Caliphate of Cordova, are called *thuwwar* (singular *tha'ir*). The noun *thawra* at first means excitement, as in the phrase, cited in the *Siháh*, a

standard medieval Arabic dictionary, *intazir hatta taskun hadhihi 'l-thawra*, wait until this excitement dies down—a very apt recommendation. The verb is used by al-Ijī, in the form *thawaran* or *itharat fitna*, stirring up sedition, as one of the dangers which should discourage a man from practising the duty of resistance to bad government. *Thawra* is the term used by Arabic writers in the nineteenth-century for the French Revolution, and by their successors for the approved revolutions, domestic and foreign, of our own time." ("Islamic Concepts of Revolution," in *Revolution in the Middle East and Other Case Studies*, edited by P.J. Vatikiotis [Rowman and Littlefield, 1972], pp. 38-39.)

This definition, in both form and content, follows the standard classical Arabic dictionaries, and would have been immediately recognized by anyone familiar with Arabic lexicography. The use of camel imagery in politics was as natural for the ancient Arabs as horse imagery for the Turks and ship imagery among the maritime peoples of the West.

Said understood the passage differently: "Lewis's association of *thawra* with a camel rising and generally with excitement (and not with a struggle on behalf of values) hints much more broadly than is usual for him that the Arab is scarcely more than a neurotic sexual being. Each of the words or phrases he uses to describe revolution is tinged with sexuality: *stirred*, *excited*, *rising up*. But for the most part it is a 'bad' sexuality he ascribes to the Arab. In the end, since Arabs are really not equipped for serious action, their sexual excitement is no more noble than a camel's rising up. Instead of revolution there is sedition, setting up a petty sovereignty, and more excitement, which is as much as saying that instead of copulation the Arab can only achieve foreplay, masturbation, coitus interruptus. These, I think, are Lewis's implications, no matter how innocent his air of learning, or parlorlike his language" (pp. 315-316). To which one can only reply in the words of the Duke of Wellington: "If you can believe that, you can believe anything." ↩

5. 5

Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l'Islam* (Paris, 1980), p. 14. The "two sciences" of Zhdanov and his successors and imitators have been variously defined, according to the ideological alignments, the political purposes, and the social or even ethnic origins of the scientists. ↩

6. 6

*New York Times Book Review*, October 31, 1976. ↩

7. 7

Such as for example the *Review of the Arab Academy* (Damascus), *al-Abhath* (Beirut), the *Review of Maghribi History* (Tunis), and the bulletins of the Faculties of Arts and of Social Sciences of Cairo, Alexandria, Baghdad, and other universities. ↩

8. 8

For example, the writings of Tibawi and Khatibi, and Najib al-Aqqi's three-volume Arabic work on Orientalism and Orientalists, surely the most comprehensive treatment of the subject in any language. ↩

9. 9

*Columbia Journalism Review*, March-April and July-August 1980; *Harper's*, January 1981. Another example may be found in Mr. Said's encounter with Malcolm Yapp in the *Times Literary Supplement* (London), October 9, November 27, and December 4, 1981. ↩