

# Orientalism

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Open University Press  
Buckingham · Philadelphia

1999

# The Concept of Orientalism

The Orient, the land to the east of the West, is a realm of stories. Its actuality has always been encapsulated in forms of storytelling as fact, fiction and fable. It invites the imagination. So let us begin with a story. A French diplomat working in China meets and falls in love with the leading 'lady' of the Beijing Opera. The liaison ultimately causes the diplomat to be tried and convicted for spying. This is the basic narrative of David Cronenberg's powerful film, *M. Butterfly* (1993) based on a play by David Henry Hwang, who also wrote the screenplay. 'Inspired by a true story' *M. Butterfly* presents a complete discourse on Orientalism.

At the outset, Rene Gallimard is a rather lack-lustre minor bureaucrat at the French Embassy in Beijing, an accountant, a dedicated bean counter who is disliked by his colleagues. He is a grey man: the kind of boring, worthy and politely educated person one shies away from at parties. Hwang uses the 'love story' and the biography of Gallimard to spin out the major themes and essential characteristics of Orientalism. The story opens in China in 1964 covering the period up to the onset of the Cultural Revolution before switching to France in 1968, the year of the student revolution. It covers the period of the Vietnam War when France acted as the eyes and ears of America in China. This backdrop enables Hwang to demonstrate the practical application of Orientalism to politics; he is as accurate in identifying the pathology of Orientalism in the Western psyche as he is in deploying its *realpolitik*. The two are not different stories; they are essential combined elements in the whole narrative of Orientalism. The pathology of the Orientalist vision is based on two simultaneous desires: the personal

quest of the Western male for Oriental mystery and sexuality and the collective goal to educate and control the Orient in political and economic terms. By including the references to the student rebellion of 1968, Hwang also includes the use of the Orient as a device for internal criticism and domestic demands for internal reform in the West – the student revolutionaries on the streets of Paris all wave Mao's *Little Red Book*. Orientalism thus serves as both the external individual and collective desire to possess the Orient and the internal desire to appropriate the Orient.

While Gallimard represents the West, Song Liling, the object of Gallimard's desire, is the Western representation of the Orient. Neither the West nor the Orient are monolithic entities; both are complex, ambiguous and heterogeneous. The Orient consisted – and consists – of the great civilizations to the East of the West: Islam, China, India and Japan. Not only could the West not deny them a history, an established place in the scheme of things, but it also had to recognize their power and wealth. And it was their intellectual and military power and economic and cultural wealth that gave rise to Orientalism. As such, Orientalism is geographically bound – it grew out of the fact that the powerful civilizations of the East were a lure to the desires of Western civilization; and the civilizations of the East did not immediately collapse at the onset of Western power. But the West itself was not always 'the West'. The notion of the West as a political entity dates back to the sixteenth century. Before that there was Christendom. And it is in the encounters of Christendom and its closest neighbour, Islam, that the origins of Orientalism, and much of its history, can be traced. While *M. Butterfly* deals with China and, indirectly, with Japan, the original site of Western desire was Islam. It was in its encounter with Islam that the West first developed its vision of the Orient as an unfathomable, exotic and erotic place where mysteries dwell and cruel and barbaric scenes are staged. The Crusades, for example, both initiated and perpetuated the representation of Muslims as evil and depraved, licentious and barbaric, ignorant and stupid, unclean and inferior, monstrous and ugly, fanatical and violent. For Christendom, Islam was the darker side of Europe. The Protestant Reformation and the rise of the Ottoman Empire led to the transformation of Christendom to 'the West'. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 'the West' was largely a geographical designation and was synonymous with 'Europe' and the 'Occident'. The

term 'Europe' has a longer history going back to the ancient Greeks and Romans and had much wider currency.

Only in the aftermath of the nineteenth-century colonial penetration of India, China, and the Middle East did 'the West' take on a more prominent political role, as the signifier of Europe's imperial project. It was at this time that it began to include the United States, previously referred to as the 'New World', and to merge with the concept of 'civilisation', the term coined by the Enlightenment philosophers to describe the aim of social evolution, which they identified with the processes and institutions marking the development of private property, the family, and monetary relations.<sup>1</sup>

Western civilization thus became the yardstick, as Christendom had been earlier, by which Oriental cultures and civilizations were measured. The conceptual category of 'the West' was pitted against the concept of the 'Orient' and the Orient came to signify all that the West was not and some of what the West actually desired.

In *M. Butterfly* the meeting of West and East begins at an Embassy reception. The evening's entertainment is a performance of the death scene from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* by a local artiste, Song Liling. Gallimard admits he has never seen *Madame Butterfly* before. While other members of the audience note the local artiste does not have the voice for the role, Gallimard is entranced to the point of obsession. He approaches Song Liling; and their first conversation sets up the dynamic of the story:

*Gallimard:* I have always seen opera singers as overweight ladies and too much bad makeup.

*Song:* Bad makeup is not unique to the West.

*Gallimard:* I've never seen a performance as convincing as yours.

*Song:* Convincing? Me as a Japanese woman? Did you know that Japanese used thousands of our people for medical experiments during the war. But I gather such an irony is lost on you.

*Gallimard:* No, what I meant was that you made me see the beauty of the story. Of her death. It's pure sacrifice. He is not worthy of it; but what can she do? She loves him so much. It's very beautiful.

*Song:* Why yes! To a westerner.

*Gallimard:* I beg your pardon.

*Song:* It's one of your favorite fantasies. The submissive Oriental woman, the cruel white man.

*Gallimard:* I don't think so.

*Song:* Consider it this way. What would you say if a blond cheerleader

fell in love with a short Japanese businessman. He marries her then goes home for three years during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy and when she learns her husband has remarried she kills herself. Now I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it is an Oriental woman who kills herself for a westerner you find it beautiful.

Now, most educated persons would know that the roles of women in traditional Chinese opera are played by men. It was also the European convention of Shakespeare and Molière. But Gallimard is determined to see Song not just as a woman but as a personification of a particular type of woman: 'the submissive Oriental woman'. Hwang is arguing that what is essential to the obsession of the Orientalist vision is the desire not to know. The object of love is not the physical person of Song Liling, either as man or a man playing the part of a woman. The object of love is Madame Butterfly, the operatic creation, whom Gallimard is determined to find in Song Liling. The supposed knowledge derived from the Orientalist vision is based not on accuracy and utility but by the degree to which it enhances the self-esteem of the Westerner. It achieves this by making fiction more real, more aesthetically pleasing than truth. Orientalism is thus a constructed ignorance, a deliberate self-deception, which is eventually projected on the Orient.

This fiction played a major role in Western scholarly tradition. The representations of cultures and civilizations to the East of the West that Orientalism came to signify were based on constructed ignorance – that is, they were deliberately concocted and manufactured as instruments to 'contain' and 'manage' these cultures and civilizations. As a scholarly tradition, Orientalism was concerned with the study of Asian civilizations, identifying, editing and interpreting the fundamental texts of these civilizations, and the transmission of this scholarly tradition from one generation to another through an established chain of teachers and students. It was largely focused on Islam; and Islamic studies became a major branch of Orientalism. Orientalism thus studied Islam and other civilizations with European ideas of God, man, nature, society, science and history and consistently found non-Western cultures and civilizations to be inferior and backward. It approached the Orient with specific notions of cultural history, the origins and development of religions, the ways in which sacred texts should

be understood and interpreted, political ideas and how human societies evolve and develop. Orientalist scholarship was – is – the scholarship of the politics of desire: it codifies western desires into academic disciplines and then projects these desires onto its study of the Orient. It found Islamic, Chinese and Indian sciences, for example, to be not science and perpetuated the fiction that true science was created by and belonged to the West. Similarly, Islamic law was not law in any real sense; neither was Chinese medicine worthy of being referred to as medicine; and the Indian civilization had no notion of rationality – genuine reason was the sole privilege of Western civilization. On the ladder of evolution, the Orient was consistently way behind the West. Scholarly Orientalism became a highly fortified institution with its own apparatus – methods of teaching, communication network and a system for passing the 'torch' from teacher to student. It acquired its own style of thought and mode of analysis based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the West and the Orient. It became a self-perpetuating and closed tradition which aggressively resisted all internal and external criticism; an authoritarian system that is flourishing as much today as it ever did in colonial times.

Hwang's main concern is to present a study of the psyche of Orientalism through what he takes to be its most significant ingredient, the allure of sex and the fiction of the submissive Oriental woman. His work takes its title from one of the great icons of this Orientalist vision, *Madame Butterfly*; the music and scenario of Puccini's opera runs throughout the film. Madame Butterfly ranks alongside Cleopatra and Mata Hari as personifications of the Orientalist complex, a pathology that finds fullest expression in real people who have literary lives. The interplay of reality with fiction is a central point, the point at which Orientalism attains its full being and potency. In his rendering of *M. Butterfly*, Hwang makes Rene Gallimard the iconic embodiment of the Orientalist, a neat parallel.

For Gallimard, *Madame Butterfly* is memorable for the beauty of its story, which is 'pure sacrifice'. As he develops this idea through the film he expands it to mean the unconditional love extended by Oriental women to men who are unworthy. This is an intoxicating idea for the West. After all, in one sense, it is the exact parallel of Christian theology. While Hwang appears not to be dealing with religion, *M. Butterfly* is an intrinsically religious text. Hwang subtly deploys essential Christian ideas to demonstrate their integral role



in the creation of the Orientalist vision. Pure sacrifice, unconditional love for the unworthy, these are familiar, indeed central ideas within the constellation of Christianity. For Hwang, the fact that the Western male is less besotted with the act of sex than the idea of perfect love is somewhat akin to the passion of a celibate divine. The sexual ambiguity is a major theme of the relationship between Gallimard and Song Liling, whom he dubs 'my Butterfly'. He finds Song Liling's manly body entrancing because it is like that of a 'young girl', the paedophile complex being very near the surface. But the sexual ingredient is much more ambiguous and complicated. The love of children is also conceived as unconditional, and it gives the lover the added facility of being able to mould, educate and inform. The paedophile impulse also adds a new implication to Kipling's notion of the Other, that is the non-west, as 'half devil and half child'. The Oriental women, in Gallimard's vision, offers all these charms, and much more. Orientalism thus constructs the Orient as a passive, childlike entity that can be lover and abused, shaped and contained, managed and consumed.

Gallimard's Butterfly offers him her shame, a modesty that maintains a mystique. When Gallimard first meets Song Liling at the Beijing Opera 'she' is behind a gauze curtain, an image full of overtones of the harem and its hidden delights. While she is a virgin – 'though inexperienced I am not ignorant', Song tells Gallimard – she has been schooled, as an Oriental woman, in exotic arts of love-making and sexual pleasure-giving. Sexual pleasure within the Western psyche is always associated with the notion of Original Sin, within the Catholic psyche it retains the implication that the only perfect life is the celibate life, sex always has the overtones of sin and temptation. Sex then participates in the religious underpinnings of Orientalism. For the Western gaze, the Orient offers exotic, sinful, sexual delights all wrapped in an ancient, mystical and mysterious tradition.

It is important to recognize that Gallimard comes to full possession of Orientalism through another allure, that of the ancient culture and tradition of the Orient. 'His Butterfly' is a performer at the Beijing Opera, a custodian of ancient culture and the home where Gallimard visits 'her' is elegant and traditional. What Gallimard understands of his iconic Oriental woman is a function of her embeddedness within ancient cultural tradition; it forms her character, gives her her knowledge. The façade Gallimard has created

begins to crack with his first encounter with the Red Guards which culminates in their burning of the costumes of the Beijing Opera, recognized from the elaborate, delicate head-dress once worn by 'his Butterfly'. In the horror Gallimard experiences there is a strong implication of nostalgia for ancient tradition, a reminder that the West progresses and changes while the expectation is that the Orient remains unchanging in its adherence to tradition; and hence remains backward and buried in medieval history.

Orientalist scholarship had a particular stance on tradition. To begin with it emphasized ancient over living tradition. It discovered the 'past' of the Orient, a past over which it had more authority and control than the indigenous people. Islamic law, which has a long history and tradition, for example, was not merely studied by Orientalists, they actually constructed it. Legal Orientalism presented Islamic law in an essentialist manner and used this strategy to argue that Muslims are basically conservative tied to backward tradition and customs. In India, Orientalists did not only 'discover' the past, but constructed it in a specifically dualistic form: thus Muslims became foreigners who represented the inauthentic India while the authentic Hindus and their indigenous civilization had to suffer the oppression of the intruders. A new history was fabricated with a Hindu golden age which fell to the age of tyranny of Muslim invasions. When the British began to administer Bengal two of its officials could actually take this dualism to the limits of blindness. Asked to estimate the proportion of the Muslim, inauthentic population of Bengal, what is now Bangladesh, geographer James Rennell and former governor Henry Verdst both told a parliamentary committee that Muslims constituted only one-fifth of the population!<sup>2</sup> Such historic and legalistic constructions were used to characterize Oriental societies as despotic by nature. Oriental despotism was a product of the absence of institutions of civil society without which it was not possible to break free from feudalism. Muslim societies, for example, had no independent cities or rational bureaucracy, or legal stability or an enterprising bourgeois class or the rights and freedoms that go with any legal and civic culture. There was thus a total absence of independent institutions to mediate between individuals and the state. Thus the individual was permanently exposed to the arbitrary rule of the despot. The absence of civic society not only promoted Oriental despotism, it also ensured that Muslim societies could not develop economically.

So, feudalism, despotism and economic backwardness were all intrinsic in the nature of Islam.

Gallimard's veneration of an idealized, iconic Oriental woman also invokes another characteristic of Orientalism – the white man as god syndrome. The white man as god is the teacher beloved, the most natural object of tuition to the unformed child who gives unconditional love and therefore reinforces the sense of self worth of the teacher. The white man mistaken for a god is one of the oldest clichés in contemporary books, cartoons and movies – think of the Rudyard Kipling story made into the John Huston film, *The Man Who Would Be King*; or the adventures of *Indiana Jones in the Temple of Doom*; or almost any adventure that sets off into Darkest Africa. These are not disinterested reports, or literary deceits, but consciously deployed ideology to explain the innate superiority of Europe to all parts of the European psyche. In pre-modern Orientalism, that is when the West was first engaging with the great civilizations of Islam and China, the white man as god is the missionary bringing the Christian message. In his encounter with Africa and the 'New World' of the Americas, the missionary is mistaken by simple, ignoble savages to be god. This myth is based on the legend that the Aztecs permitted a bedraggled band of Spaniards to penetrate to the heart of their empire because they believed them to be the white god which mythology foretold would come from the West. Exactly the same mythological trope is invoked to explain why Hawaiians first accepted and venerated Captain Cook as the god Lono, and then killed him in re-enactment of the ceremonial drama of the Lono myth. Peter Schaffer's play, and the movie thereof, *Royal Hunt of the Sun* uses this conventional European legend, this time concerning the arrival of the Spaniards in the Inca empire, and explores the complex attractions to European colonizers of being taken for gods by simple benighted savages.

In more modern times, the white man becomes the god of scientific wonder and superior technology. The bearers of such advancement must be a thing of wonder for the unsophisticated Other incapable of conceiving such refined marvels for themselves. As Gallimard notes, on a number of occasions in the opera, Madame Butterfly worships the picture of Pinkerton long after he had deserted her. The half child that comes complete with sexual temptation and allure, accoutred with exotic sexual licence, must in these Christian connections awaken the idea of the half devil. There is a

further association to bear in mind. In medieval Western thought the East was the location of the Garden of Eden, so placed on all medieval maps. When Columbus first arrived in the Americas, thinking he had succeeded in reaching the East, the borders of Cathay (China), he identified the outflow of the Orinoco river as the mouth of the River of Paradise which flowed through the Garden of Eden. What else does one find in the Garden of Eden but an Eve ready to tempt man with forbidden knowledge? Hwang is subtly indicating the deep-rootedness of the Orientalist vision in the Western psyche. He is also indicating how it is constructed out of basic tenets of Western thought. Orientalism is not a construction from experience of the Orient. It is the fabrication of pre-existing Western ideas overwritten and imposed upon the Orient. The Orient, as exemplified by its iconic women, is submissive – the only proper response to a 'god'.

Once he has become aware of Madame Butterfly, Gallimard is lost in his obsession and pursues 'his Butterfly'. The important point is the effect on Gallimard of this new possession. The grey man becomes transformed. He looks, dresses and speaks with a new manner, he is promoted at work and placed in charge of intelligence. Most importantly he speaks with confidence and determination about the nature of China, its intentions and the *realpolitik* of East-West relations. The business side of Gallimard's life is an extension of his possession of a true Orientalist vision. Here the half devil/half child partakes of bigotry, racism and chauvinism in another seamless web. The man who possesses the idealized iconic Oriental women finds Orientals *en masse* unappealing as numerous script lines imply. But the most revealing point of knowledge in the world of *realpolitik* comes in the discussion of French colonial history in Indo-China. Gallimard must acquire information on behalf of the Americans who are fighting in Vietnam where France underwent the humiliation of Dien Bien Phu. 'Do you really think those little men could have beaten us without our unconscious consent?', he asks the French ambassador. The influence of the relationship with the Oriental woman underlies all of his political judgements. Again Gallimard tells the ambassador that the secret of China is that deep down it is attracted to Western ways, though it could never openly admit such an enormity. The child is ready to be tutored, the unconditional love for the person of an individual white man is itself an iconic representation of love of the West and

all its ways. So China will eventually open itself to Western business. Further, submissiveness is not merely an aspect of the Oriental woman, it is an integral part of the Oriental character which will always submit to greater force. So for America to triumph in Vietnam it must show force and determination.

Power is an essential ingredient of Orientalism. For amongst the fascinations of the relationship with the iconic Oriental woman is the use of power to be cruel and inflict punishment. This is openly expressed: in their first intimate encounter, Song Liling accuses Gallimard of cruelty and reiterates the point in her letters to him. The Orient offers all the forbidden pleasures of sadomasochism, the pleasure that comes from giving pain. Gallimard enjoys referring to and thinking of 'his Butterfly' as a slave, a slave being one to whom one can be cruel, that one can punish with impunity and whose function by definition is to be humiliated. This is how imperial powers saw their subject people. Orientalism justified both the exploitation of Asian people and their political subjugation.

As counterpoint to Gallimard as the embodiment of Orientalism, Hwang presents Song Liling as far removed from Gallimard's fantasy. Fiction and ambiguity meet in an open discourse. Song Liling is no cipher, but a sentient character caught in the dynamics of his own real world where the fiction of Orientalism is able to serve both his own personal needs, to gain favour with the authorities, and where the very deception of the fiction enables Gallimard to be manipulated as a source of information useful to the Communist authorities. The information Song Liling extracts is precise and accurate, numbers of American troops to be deployed in Vietnam, in contrast to the flights of fancy Gallimard espouses as the fruits of his espionage. The themes of deception, truth and lies, fiction and knowledge, Hwang seems to argue, are central ingredients to the discourse of Orientalism.

The onset of the Cultural Revolution breaks Gallimard's world. In disgrace for his faulty intelligence he is sent home to France. Song Liling is sent to be re-educated as a bourgeois reactionary element after taking leave of Gallimard. Back in France, Gallimard attends a performance of *Madame Butterfly*. Even a heavy dose of reality fails to shatter his dream of the Orient. When Song Liling arrives in France she is able to convince Gallimard to participate in open espionage activities for China. He becomes a dispatch rider and hands over diplomatic pouches for inspection. Not surprisingly,

he is caught and put on trial. The court asks Song Liling, who now appears in his real guise as a man, whether Gallimard was not aware of the deception. His reply is that he never asked and therefore does not know. As Song Liling and Gallimard are taken from the court in the same police van, Song Liling strips naked and offers himself to Gallimard. And Gallimard finally accepts the truth: 'How could you who understood me so well make such a mistake?', he says. 'You show me your true self. What I loved was the lie, the lovely lie'. Orientalism then is the great lie at the centre of the Western civilization: a lie about the nature of the West and about the nature of the great cultures and civilizations to the East of the West, a lie about Us and Them. As a corporate institution – that includes a tradition of scholarship, a framework of analysis expressed through theology, philosophy and sociology, techniques of representation, styles of fiction and travel writing, modes of expressing power and knowledge, and an elaborate system of accounting for differences – for managing and containing the Orient, Orientalism is sustained by a consuming love of 'the lovely lie'.

Imprisoned for treason, Gallimard prepares to perform the death scene from *Madame Butterfly* for the inmates. Conscious that to his fellow countrymen he is a joke, he tells his audience that men such as they should not laugh. The culmination of the film is Gallimard's monologue as he paints himself with stage makeup to become Madame Butterfly. It is Hwang's strongest assertion on the nature of Orientalism: Gallimard has become Orientalism. His final words are: 'My name is Rene Gallimard also known as Madame Butterfly'. The ultimate ambiguity is that the Orientalist is consumed by self-love. Orientalism is a creation of the Western psyche that unleashes power but at the end of the day its most important impact is not in the relations of power and dominance of the real world of politics, economic and military relations. Its greatest potency is within the psyche of the West itself where, as the perfect vision of perfect love, it has the greatest aesthetic power. To live without this vision is not just to lose control over the real world of politics, economic and military power, it is to lose part of the Western self. As Gallimard becomes a bizarre parody of a Japanese woman in a ridiculous wig, Puccini's music plays on. At the crucial moment Gallimard slits his own throat while the inmates of the prison applaud the secret he has shared with them. *M. Butterfly* comes to the chilling conclusion that the West would rather die than give up



its Orientalist vision, even though it is a knowledgeably ignorant fiction, a fiction whose dissembling is known. The created vision of the Orient, Hwang argues, has become an integral part of the aesthetic of the West. In *M. Butterfly* the West chooses death rather than truth on aesthetic grounds. A world without the vision of Orient is too awful a place to contemplate.

## A Short History

Orientalism has a long history, as befits a concept that partakes of the life force of Western self-identification. Conventionally its history is expressed as the emergence of a factual study through solid intellectual advance out of the errors of earlier credulity, ignorance and misunderstanding. Orientalism, in its modern guise, is the product of incremental, progressively more impartial, neutral, rational body of enquiry and learning. The most common allegation made in defence of Orientalism as a rational 'scientized' enquiry is that an object worthy of study, an object that is the Orient, actually exists. An examination of the history of Orientalism as it has actually operated shows this claim to be false, because its predication and assumptions turn out to be illusory. The history of Orientalism shows it is not an outward gaze of the West toward a fixed, definite object that is to the east, the Orient. Orientalism is a form of inward reflection, preoccupied with the intellectual concerns, problems, fears and desires of the West that are visited on a fabulated, constructed object by convention called the Orient. What that Orient is, is a shifting, ambiguous compendium, a thing that identifies whatever the writer, inscriber or supposed observer wishes it to mean or be at the moment. A real, as opposed to a pseudo, history of Orientalism must concern itself with the strands, trends and conventions that have gone into the construction of the movable feast that is the Orient constructed by Orientalists. A history of Orientalism is essentially a history of the ideas that have moved the West, most definitely it is not a history of the closer movement of the West to involvement with or understanding of the East, those details are incidentals. The Orient of Orientalists is a constructed artefact

through which the West explains, expounds, objectifies and demonstrates its own contemporary concerns.

To indicate how history works within the conventions of Orientalism, let us look at two major examples of the genre, one from somewhere after the beginning, the other from only yesterday: *The Travels of Marco Polo*<sup>1</sup> and Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism*.<sup>2</sup> Master Marco Polo's work was enormously popular and authoritative over a period of centuries. Its significance is said to be that it opened Cathay, China, to the Western imagination, placing its *il milione*, millions of stories, where virtually nothing had been previously known. What is known of the book itself is highly ambiguous, no actual original exists, every manuscript that does come down to us is different, containing interpolations, interpretations, mistakes and additions from the various copyists. Greatest ambiguity of all is the recent contention that Marco Polo may never have visited China at all.<sup>3</sup> As with so many early accounts of the Orient this is an irrelevance, myth is not important because it is myth, it is important because of what people do, and think and claim to know, in the name of reality that may be no more than myth. What spread all across Europe, and became a foundational part of the Western canon, is a rumbustuous book that in effect made the Orient a palace of Western desires. What we know of the writing of the book adds two further strands of importance. Marco Polo dictated his book to a hack ghost-writer, Rusticello, while both were prisoners of war. For Marco Polo the book seems to have been intended as a kind of résumé, a verification of his credentials to be a traveller-trader in the service of the high and the mighty. This purpose is effected by detailing the service he performed for the Great Cham, the Kublai Khan, who emerges in the book as the most all-powerful, richest and most revered emperor of them all. Kublai's empire is vast, populous and contains riches undreamed of in Europe. Indeed the East that Polo envisages gets all the best things of the world, only the leavings reach Europe. It is also barbarous and pagan, and therefore free of the conventional restrictions and prescriptions of the Christian world, so Polo tells of the sensual and exotic. The man who returns to report such a palace of desires must be fit to serve the economic, political and informational needs of his own society. A great deal of the form of the book is conventional, that is within literary conventions already well established in Europe. The style is the contribution of Rusticello,

who is thought to be the same Rusticello who wrote Arthurian romances for the court of Prince Edward of England. In which case there is a salient parallel that needs to be made clear. Arthurian romances, at the period Rusticello would have been constructing them, were a means of appropriation by which the colonizing society of Norman England was taking over the literary traditions of its conquered Celtic marches, the place where the Arthurian tradition originates.<sup>4</sup> Rusticello then knew all about assimilating appropriated information into the conventions of dominance. So while the East is bigger, richer and better in some senses, it is also simultaneously remote, subservient and inferior. It is precisely this amalgam that guaranteed the longevity and centrality of the work over the centuries in preference to other reports of China that might be termed more rationalist and better written, yet which sank in the learned imagination almost without trace.

Karl August Wittfogel was almost unique in the annals of Orientalist system builders: he knew Chinese and was therefore able to examine his sources in their original, when writing of China, and he had actually been to China. His major work *Oriental Despotism*, originally published in 1957, was written after a lifetime of study that centred on China. However, to understand the text and thesis advanced by Wittfogel it is much more important to know his autobiography, it alone makes sense of the historical extent of his work and its preoccupations, expressed in his subtitle, 'A Study in Total Power'. Born in Germany, Wittfogel was the son of an Evangelical Lutheran schoolteacher. As a student he gravitated to the Separatist movement of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. After their deaths in 1919 he became a member of the Communist Party. Wittfogel worked as a teacher, playwright and party activist while studying European economic history, Chinese history and language at the University of Frankfurt. His main interest was in Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production, he wanted to advance the study of this concept by synthesizing Marx and Weber. One of his friends in Communist circles was the playwright Bertolt Brecht. In 1931 Wittfogel chaired the discussion after a performance of Brecht's controversial play, *The Measures Taken*, about Russian Comintern revolutionaries in China, controversial for its somewhat heretic Marxist line. Wittfogel himself was considered something of a rebel, vehemently opposed to Nazism he disagreed with the Comintern's decision to avoid a direct conflict with the Nazis. As a result



he was excluded from major conferences on the Asiatic mode of production held in Russia, despite being the acknowledged expert on the subject. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Wittfogel was imprisoned in various SS camps for a year, before being released thanks to international pressure from academics. He then went to China and among other things learned a good deal about the Chinese Communists, whom he tried to convince of the horrors of the Stalinist purge trials, though he declined to meet Mao. When the Japanese invaded China he made his way to the United States, where he settled. He broke with the Communists completely on learning of the Stalin-Hitler pact. After that he made a political journey rightward, becoming increasingly suspicious of left-leaning and liberal intellectuals, supporting the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s and becoming obsessive about the powers of totalitarianism; therefore, *Oriental Despotism*, a study of continuous totalitarianism. The function of China's history, indeed of the history of all the Orient, is to be the precursor of contemporary Communist totalitarianism that is with us still in Maoist China. Wittfogel is a traditional Orientalist also in constructing an Orient that is in effect 'the Indies', that indeterminate usage ascribed to any space beyond Europe that led Columbus to dub native Americans Indians, and still has us calling the islands of the Caribbean the West Indies. He includes in his study not only China but India, the Middle East and Mayan, Aztec and Inca empires. In short Wittfogel's erudition utilizes the Orient as one enormous historical and contemporary cautionary tale for the West. What the Orient has always been so it remains in a seamless tradition.

Marco Polo and Wittfogel remind us that Orientalism is a compendium, one that ranges over all subject areas, is influenced by politics and literary convention just as it works through both and has influences on both spheres in its own turn. The history of Orientalism is the history of the Western self, its ideas, doings, concerns and fashions, and it is present in all its forms whether overt or covert. Conventionally Western history begins with a summation of the legacy of knowledge it retained from ancient Greece and Rome. So a history of Orientalism should commence with the limitations of Greek and Roman knowledge of the Orient, ancient Orientalism. While it is true many features of Orientalism retain the iconoclastic attitudes, ideas and knowledge of Greece and Rome, the convention of beginning a history at that point is merely another

operation of Orientalism itself. The convention serves to demonstrate the Otherness of the Orient, its separation from the Western birth and discrete identity of Western self-consciousness. The convention neatly obfuscates the actual origin of Orientalism in a crisis of Western self-consciousness. The crisis demanded the creation of a conception of the Orient that would permit its palpable threat to the entire edifice of Western understanding to be distanced, denigrated and placed beyond, in the outer darkness where it belonged. Whatever threads of Greece and Rome endure, and they do endure even today, the history of Orientalism begins with the history of Islam, with the crisis of the new, the unprecedented and inherently subversive to which an urgent answer had to be found. Only in the context of this crisis could Europe mobilize all it called its own, including the legacy of Greece and Rome, to create a concept, a form of surrogate self-definition, that is also the convention of description and stance towards that which is not the Western self, or the West, but is the Orient.

### Islam and other monsters

From its inception, Islam presented the Christian world with a 'problem'. What was the purpose of the new revelation to an Arabian prophet over 600 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of God's own son? Islam contained within itself a recognition of Christianity and its legitimacy: it described itself as the summation of the messages brought by Abraham, Moses, Jesus and all the other prophets; it accepted the virgin birth of Jesus and gave him a prestigious position among the prophets; it accepted the Bible as one of the books of God (although contaminated by human tampering). Islam had no 'problem' with Christianity and from its inception kept churches open and provided all the necessary guarantees for the survival of Christianity and its institutions in Muslim lands. But Christianity could not return this ecumenical courtesy. Europe was still proselytizing the Christian faith within its own boundaries, struggling to establish an orthodoxy that came to be based on the exclusive claims of the Christian message and of the Church, as the body of Christ, to be the vehicle of God's providence on earth. When, within 100 years of Islam's inception, Europe found it at its borders, Islam became a political problem. In addition, the achievements of Muslim civilization made Islam an intellectual, social and

cultural problem. Orientalism emerged as Europe's rationale for meeting the challenge of Islam.

The foundation of Orientalism was laid by John of Damascus (d.748), a Christian scholar who was a great friend of the Ummayyad Caliph Yazid. He declared Islam to be a pagan cult, the Ka'aba in Makkah an idol, and the Prophet Muhammad an irreligious and licentious man. He claimed Muhammad cobbled together his doctrine from the Old and New Testaments through the instruction of an Arian monk. The writings and accusations of John of Damascus became the classical source of all Christian writings on Islam. Orientalism has proved to be a most retentive framework, few of its elements have entirely disappeared, so John of Damascus, the earliest exponent, could be said to be the guiding source and spirit of a recent study, *Hagarism* by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook,<sup>5</sup> that employs his structure of argument and assessment of the origin of Islam and, one should add, his animus. The pronouncement of John of Damascus found an echo in Christendom not only because it saw Islam as a distinctly different religion, but also because Muslim society reflected a totally different lifestyle to the one dominant in Europe. As R.W. Southern explained:

For the greater part of the Middle Ages and most of its area, the West formed a society primarily agrarian, feudal, and monastic, at a time when the strength of Islam lay in its great cities, wealthy courts and long lines of communication. To Western ideals, essentially celibate, sacerdotal and hierarchical, Islam opposed the outlook of a laity frankly indulgent and sensual, in principle egalitarian, enjoying a remarkable freedom of speculation, with no priests and no monasteries built into the basic structure of society as they were in the West.<sup>6</sup>

Faced with a rapidly expanding new religion that produced a totally different form of society, which appeared to challenge God's promise to the Christian faithful, what could the leaders of Christendom do? They turned to the Bible. In the Book of Daniel, Paul Alvarus (d.859) discovered that Islam would flourish for only three-and-a-half periods of 70 years each; that is, 245 years in all. As he was writing in 854, and the Islamic calendar began in 622, it was not difficult for him to conclude that the end of the world was at hand. By a curious coincidence, in 852 the Emir of Cordova, Abd ar-Rahman III, died and was succeeded by Mahomet I, who was widely described in Christendom as 'the man of damnation of our time'.<sup>7</sup>

Alvarus and his colleagues possessed a brief biography of 'Mahomet', a parody of the life of Jesus, written by Spanish monks, which gave the year of Mahomet's death as 666 of the Spanish era. The year 666 is, of course, the number of the Beast of Revelations, the Antichrist. The picture was now complete. Thus was born the image of Muhammad as an Antichrist and of Islam as a sinister conspiracy against Christianity. This was, as Southern notes, 'the first and rigidly coherent and comprehensive view of Islam ... to be developed in the West'. It was a product of total ignorance, but an ignorance of a particular kind:

The men who had developed this view were men writing of what they had deeply experienced, and they related their experience to the one firm foundation available to them – the Bible. They were ignorant of Islam, not because they were far removed from it like the Carolingian scholars, but for the contrary reason that they were in the middle of it. If they saw and understood little of what went around them, and they knew nothing of Islam as a religion, it was they who wished to know nothing.<sup>8</sup>

Wilful misunderstanding and knowledgeable ignorance have remained the guiding spirit of Orientalism, it has survived defiantly and remained dominant when alternative information has been readily available. Orientalism is composed of what the West wishes to know, not of what can be known. Once created the Orientalist image grew more and more entrenched as Islam continued to expand.

With the arrival of the Crusades, new imaginative flights of fancy were added to expand the propagandists' image of Islam as a tool to maintain the crusading spirit. Pope Urban preached the first Crusade at Clermont in France in 1096. He anchored the new idea of Crusading in some old and well-established European ideas: good works and pilgrimage. He also established the seminal building blocks of European self-consciousness by asserting the Christian right to dominance over the territory which was the birthplace of Christianity and once part of the Christian Roman Empire. His frame of reference was a monolithic Christendom opposed to a monolithic Islam, its enemy. The preaching of the Crusade provoked a genuine European response, it set a great cross-section of the population on the move for the Holy Land. As Gwyn A. Williams put it: 'A blend of zeal and greed of colonialism and an

aspiration for holiness, the Crusades dominated European imagination'.<sup>9</sup> So great a hold did the Crusades have on the popular imagination that the crusading ethos became a central motif of Western thought and literature that endured centuries after actual campaigns into the Middle East had ceased. The physical place sought by the Crusades was intimately familiar to all Europeans. The Middle East is the land described in the Bible. Pilgrimage literature as devotional text and guidebook was a major genre of European letters, with a marked tendency to concentrate on descriptions of places associated with miracles, long before the Crusades gave a new twist to this tradition. In an imaginative and figurative sense this land already belonged to Christian peoples, the Crusades made a literalist leap by arguing for the right to actual dominance.

The idea of the journey of life as pilgrimage to the heavenly New Jerusalem seamlessly became the Crusading ideal of conquest and dominance aimed at the centre of the Earth, the terrestrial Jerusalem, into the east that became the Orient. The Crusades would have been unimaginable, unthinkable except for the existence of Islam. As deeply as the Crusading motif entered into European consciousness so too did the opposing elements of Islam; they were inextricably bound, the one had no rationale without the other. Whether as triumphalism or valiant defiance of a small, isolated, embattled enclave – and crusading ideas held both notions – the palpable sense of an enemy was essential and entered as deeply into the construction of the Crusading ideal. The black propaganda consciously created to further the cause of the Crusades built on pre-existing knowledgeable ignorance of Islam and radically expanded it. The Crusaders brought with them not knowledge but fairy-tales designed to focus hostility towards those who held sway on the ground where Christ had walked. Now Mahomet was a magician who destroyed the Church in Africa and the East. He attracted converts to his depraved religion by promising them promiscuity. He finally met his end, during one of his fits, with a herd of pigs. At his death a white bull appeared to put the fear of Christ in his followers and carry away Mahomet's laws in his horns. Mahomet's tomb was suspended in mid-air by magnets.

The First Crusade achieved the sack of Jerusalem in 1099. This led to the establishment of Crusader kingdoms in the Middle East that remained in existence for over two centuries; Jerusalem itself

did not fall back into Muslim hands until 1244, Acre fell in 1291. The Crusades were not a simple there-and-back-again pilgrimage journey. It was a process of involvement extending over centuries, constantly replenished by new Crusades and new waves of personnel from Europe. The essential feature of this prolonged involvement is its ideological content that was continually refreshed and reiterated to sustain physical and financial support for Crusading and Crusaders as well as to prevent those resident in the Middle East from 'going native'. So Crusading bequeathed to Orientalism the distorted imagination, constructed misrepresentation that precluded closer contact becoming a vehicle for improved mutual understanding. Indeed, one might say contact itself became the 'problem' that required conceptual distance, the making of Islam 'into something it could not possibly be', as Norman Daniels has called it. One element of this constructed ignorance, as Daniels has shown, was the cycle of popular performance literature known as the *chansons de geste*, where the Prophet Muhammad was first given the Devil's synonym, Mahound. One of the oldest *chansons de geste* is *The Song of Roland*, written by Cretien de Troyes circa 1130. It espouses the Crusading ideal by invoking history, it sets the antipathy to Islam back to the era of the Battle of Rancevals in 778, in the world of Charlemagne, the fictive birth of the idea of Europe. It describes Muslims as pagans who worship a trinity of gods alongside Mohomme. The actual gods Tervagent, Apolin and Jupiter partake of features of Celtic gods, as Gwyn A. Williams argues, so that the development of Arthurian romances and Crusade literature mingles and merges inextricably. While the Crusades were a major movement against Islam, they were also a movement within Europe against enduring pockets of paganism and against heretics. Underlying *The Song of Roland* and the *chansons de geste* in general is the assumption that the world of the 'Saracens' is a mirror-image of Christendom, structured in exactly the same way but inverted in every moral sense. Thus, a valorous Saracen would have been an ideal *chevalier* had he been a Christian. When the hero Roland dies he offers his soul freely to archangels, but when the Saracen Marsilla dies his soul has to be wrestled from him by 'lively devils'.

The long period of interaction with Muslim civilization in Spain and the Crusader kingdoms made Europe a substantial borrowing society from its enemy. The East was rich in gold and jewels and



new products that were avidly introduced into Europe to become necessities. But it was not merely a question of merchandise. The concept of the university was appropriated wholesale in form, terminology and course matter from the *madrassas* as they had developed from the eighth century onwards in the Muslim world. Muslim scholars had retained and built upon the learning of the classical world that had been lost to Europe. So avid was the desire for Arabic learning that underpinned the twelfth-century Renaissance, the age of Aquinas, Peter Abelard and Roger Bacon, that the authorities became seriously worried about the impact these unacceptable, heretical ideas were having on the fabric of learned Christendom. The propagandists had to take to their task again, with even greater vigour. In contradistinction to the passion for Arabic poetry stood the poetics of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321 CE). In canto 28 of *The Inferno* we encounter 'Maometto':

No cask ever gapes by loss of end-board or stave like him I saw who was ripped from the chin to the part that breaks wind; between the legs hung the entrails; the vitals appeared, with the foul sack that makes excrement of what is swallowed. While I was all absorbed in the sight of him he looked at me with hands laid upon his breast saying: 'See now how I split myself; see how Mahomet is mangled!' Before he goes Ali in tears, his face cleft from chin to forelock; and all the others thou seest here were in life sowers of scandal and schism and therefore are thus cloven. . . .

The influence of Muslim philosophers was also being felt. The view of Islamic philosophy articulated strongly by Avicenna (ibn Sina), that man can never have a direct audience with God, began to gain a small foothold in academic quarters of Christendom. It brought forth an orthodox riposte from St Thomas Aquinas, in a lengthy discussion written about 1250. But to defend his theological position, that the souls of the blessed enjoy a direct vision of God, Aquinas had to depend on another Muslim philosopher, Averroes (ibn Rushd). If the error was inspired by Avicenna, the language and methodology of the retort was supplied by Averroes. For Aquinas, Muslims and Jews were invincibly ignorant, having heard the message of Christianity and rejected it, as opposed to the vincibly ignorant peoples, those who had not come into contact with the proselytizing message. Roger Bacon (d.1292) saw it as his task to use Islamic philosophy to launch a mission of preaching

against Islam. 'Philosophy is a special province of the unbeliever: we have it all from them', he declared.<sup>10</sup> But his efforts fell on the ears of a deaf Pope. John Wycliffe, writing in 1378–84, saw Islam not just as theological heresy, but also a heresy at the level of morals and practice. Christianity had become the measure of 'normal' ways of life, life lived according to natural law. John of Segovia (d.1458) thought Islam should be tackled at the fundamental level of the Qur'an. The basic question was, is the Qur'an the word of God or not? If by examination of its text it could be shown to contain contradictions, confusions, errors, traces of composite authorship these should convince anyone that it was not what it claimed to be. The Council of Vienna in 1312 argued that Muslims could not be converted by persuasion or by the sword since their hearts were hardened, they despised the Scriptures, they rejected argument, they clung to the tissue of lies of the Qur'an. Therefore, it was proposed that an academic onslaught should be launched on the Saracens, that Arabic professorships should be established at Paris, Oxford, Bologna and Salamanca. The decree was repeated in Basle in 1343, but the chairs of Arabic did not come into existence until the middle of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The crusading presence in the Middle East opened the way for travel writing to develop as a hybrid form of pilgrimage literature. Those who wrote of their travels were a diverse cross-section of European society: missionaries; men of rank on missions of state; merchants and traders, seeking profit from the undoubted riches of the East; as well as later-day pilgrims in the conventional sense and those making an intellectual pilgrimage – the Grand Tour, travel to broaden the mind, is a tradition born in the medieval period. One might say the guiding spirit of this travel writing is a compilation distilled from Guibert of Nogens and St Bernard. Guibert of Nogens wrote a biography of Muhammad, which he admitted was based on imagination, though he thought it safe to speak evil of someone who was clearly the Antichrist. St Bernard saw Christ glorified in the death of a Muslim. The land where miracles had happened, the Holy Land of the East, effortlessly became a land of wonders. The model was the popular eleventh-century *Wonders of the East*, a forerunner of the medieval bestiaries, that recorded all the varieties of monstrous races of humanity, a concept inherited from classical times, who lurked on the eastern fringes of European

experience. The East referred to in this work is Egypt and Babylonia, the surrounding territory of the centre of the earth, the middle, hence Middle East, that is the Holy Land. As Mary B. Campbell notes, "The East" is a concept separable from any purely geographical area. It is essentially "Elsewhere".<sup>11</sup> For medieval and later Orientalist writers, as for their classical forebears, the location of the monstrous races moved from place to place, from Orient to Orient according to the accidents of contact and interest. It was the existence of the monstrous races, cannibals, troglodytes, dog-headed people and the like, that was essential and enduring, a trope that symbolized conceptual distance, that placed the Orient outside the West and made it meaningful for Western purposes. Travel writing might be called a 'secular' genre but it expressed the secular preoccupations of a particular society, it emerged from the consciousness and imagination of its own contemporary society and deployed that society's values, aspirations and perceptions. It tells us what medieval society thought it important to notice and know. In the medieval period all writing had moral purpose, and the greatest moral purpose of all was the distinction of good and evil, the clear identification of devilish tricks and imitations from heavenly signs. St Augustine himself had given warrant to this outlook, acknowledging the monstrous races as an object lesson, a heavenly sign of God's creative power. They were conceptually rich symbols, engraved on maps, in the marginalia of books to become a consistent part of the expectations of all who travelled beyond the bounds of Europe. The traveller saw what he expected to see, and reported what his audience at home had been conditioned to expect, would be interested in and diverted by. Everything had to be described through the straitjacket of medieval scholastic technique, the ascription of similarity and difference, a technique that underscored and reified Europe as the measure and norm of all things. The Florentine Ricoldo da Montecroce went to Baghdad in 1291 and was totally blind to Muslim learning and intellectual achievements, which at the time represented the zenith of civilization. His major concern was to attack Islam, which he called lax, and Muslims whom he described as confused, mendacious, irrational, violent, obscure and so on. The Irish Franciscan, Simon Semeonis, travelled to Palestine in 1323 with a copy of the Qur'an which he often quoted; but he could not mention the name of Mahomet once without such opprobrious epithets as pig, beast,

son of Beliel, sodomite and so on. And then there was Sir John Mandeville, the doyen and model of all travel writers, patron and archetype of all Orientalists.

Involvement with the Orient of Islam built up such a wealth of material on the East it was not even necessary for a 'traveller' to leave his own fireside. A major part of the Orientalist canon is provided by the speculations, imagination and writing in all genres of those who have never had any direct contact with the Orient except through books. Books speaking to books solidified the distorted imagination of knowledgeable ignorance into the concrete foundations of the Western self-consciousness and its informational repertoire. This is the position held by Sir John Mandeville who, according to his account, left St Albans on Michaelmas 1356. In fact, probably, there was no such person and whoever wrote the most famous and long-lived travel book of all time never went further east than his library. The longevity of Mandeville's *Travels* perplexes many modern scholars, who try to disavow its medieval flights of fancy and search for rationalist underpinnings that were built on by more scientific readers in later ages. It all misses the point magnificently. The last known reworking of *The Travels* was published in 1785, it has stout yeoman Sir John leaving St Albans in 1732! The entire text is presented as contemporary, as if four hundred years had not happened, because in the most important conceptual sense they were quite irrelevant. By 1785 the Enlightenment had happened, science had been born and the whole terrestrial globe had been visited, reported on and after a fashion had become known and/or conquered by Europe. As Percy Adams has made clear travel lies and travel liars were taken for fact, often in preference to what we would call 'reality' readily available from other sources. So Thomas Pennant in his encyclopaedic *Outlines of the Globe* (1798-1800) could describe Mandeville as 'the greatest traveller of his or any other age'. Reading travellers' tales began and remained, indeed remains, guided not by rationalism, scientism and veracity but the conceptual requirements of the Orientalist understanding crafted by the Orientalist imagination, exactly the point understood and exploited by whoever wrote *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*.

The object of *The Travels* is pilgrimage to the Holy Land, so it is founded firmly in tradition. Pilgrimage texts as guidebooks were forms of encyclopaedia; true to the genre Sir John includes Biblical

and classical learning about each place he mentions. These places are suspended in time, the sense of history as change had not yet been invented; there is also a great disinterest in the contemporary life going on in the Middle East, a common feature of much medieval writing. What matters first and foremost is the Biblical association of these places and their association with European history. Sir John therefore records the career of St Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, who invented many of the Biblical locations that became pilgrimage sites and cannot help informing us she was British, the beautiful daughter of King Coel. What is most interesting is that Sir John gives a significantly tempered humanist reading of Islam. He is able to acknowledge Muslim belief in the virgin birth and the respect given to the Virgin Mary and Jesus. He makes a fable from John of Damascus' explanation of the origin of Islam. He read carefully, picking and choosing his sources, distilling from the whole breadth of writing on Islam available. He is able to give a cogent presentation of what Muslims believe that leads him to the, perhaps ironic, conclusion that they are capable of conversion. He also presents an account of Muslim history, an annals of the Sultans, as a bloodthirsty tale of murder, poisonings and rapine. He then presents a private conversation he had with The Sultan – and thus generates a whole genre of Orientalist writing. The Sultan is made to bemoan the corrupted state of Christianity in Europe, a tale the writer cannot deny:

It seemed to me then a cause of great shame that Saracens, who have neither a correct faith nor a perfect law, should in this way reprove us for our failings, keeping their false law better than we do that of Jesus Christ; and those who ought by our good example to be turned to the faith and Law of Jesus Christ are driven away by our wicked ways of living.<sup>12</sup>

The Sultan had obviously learned of the state of Europe from the spies he sent undercover as merchants to 'spot out our weaknesses'. Like so much else he wrote this aspect of Sir John would loom large down the ages of the Orientalist tradition, using the non-Christian non-European Orient to berate the contemporary state of life and society in the West. From the Middle East Sir John goes on to travel over all the known world: to India, China, Southeast Asia ending his journey at the ultimate east, the borders of the terrestrial Paradise.

Encyclopaedic in scope Sir John includes all of the monstrous races in his litany of places to the east of the middle, and much geographic knowledge. *The Travels* was first printed in 1470. It was avidly read by Christopher Columbus who found within it confirmation of the spherical world and the idea that one could sail to the East via the West. Dr Chanca, the ship's surgeon on Columbus's second voyage, in his account of the journey repeats almost word for word a section from Mandeville's *Travels*. The human battery farms where cannibals fatten their victims, which Mandeville located in Southeast Asia, are explained to Dr Chanca by an 'Indian' of the Caribbean, while the interpreter, who spoke Hebrew and Arabic, was absent and the two conversationalists had no mutual language, an apt example of the Orientalist process. Because of its Biblical association, for Europe the Orient was always first and foremost the Middle East. All other Easts were arrived at via this portal. When Columbus followed Mandeville's directions Europe was confronted by a new 'Present Terror of the World', as Francis Bacon called it: Ottoman expansion into Europe. Islam was the major force propelling European exploration of the globe. Driven out of the Holy Land and beset by new inroads that called for pan-European defence in Austria and the Balkans and economically dependent on the Muslim lands, Europe longed to break the stranglehold of its isolation. A compelling motive was to seek direct access to the gold it had to import from the Maghreb to pay for the produce of the East acquired in the Levant and thus change Europe's appallingly bad terms of trade with the Muslim world. Another was the search for Prester John, a supposed Christian monarch somewhere out East, or for the Great Cham of Marco Polo, another potential ally against the Ottomans. Columbus's fortuitous stumbling upon the Americas and the intellectual as well as spiritual ferment caused by the Reformation, which all happened within a generation, enabled Europe to change the dynamic of its relations with the East. Had it not been for the landfall in the Americas the project of attaining 'the Indies' would have been an entirely depressing undertaking. Not only was Prester John not found but the Portuguese coast-hugging voyages eastwards finally made landfall on the most Muslim part of the Malabar coast of India, at Calicut. Vasco da Gama's little flotilla was guided there from the Muslim ports of East Africa by a Muslim pilot. Trading privileges in India had to be arranged with the Muslim Mughal



Court. Melaka, the Malaysian city that Tomas Pires described as a cornucopia of riches, the greatest entrepot port in the world, was the seat of a Muslim sultanate. And in the Spice Islands themselves, the Moluccas, would-be traders found themselves playing off the rivalries of the Muslim sultans of Ternate and Tidor. In the face of this new Orient it was the spirit of Europe and European self-perception that changed to make the next era of Orientalism an era that in many respects has not yet ended.

The combined forces of Renaissance, Reconnaissance and Reformation produced a whole new stance towards the non-West. New lands and their peoples threw up perplexing questions about history and human origins, indeed the definition of human nature and natural life and laws. The Reformation, the most potent reformulation of all, required answering anew the entire framework of Western understanding from the purpose and meaning of existence to the nature and origins of the world. The intellectual resources for this project of enquiry, from which emerged the rationalist scientific worldview, were provided by the basic sources of Western thought: the Bible and the classical heritage of ancient Greece and Rome. All the Orients and Indies became the 'reserved laboratory' from which new information was gleaned to resolve the major questions of Western self-consciousness, from which new speculation was manufactured, tested and claimed to be proved. Reserved laboratory is Ernest Gellner's term for the attitude of anthropologists to their subject matter, but it is equally applicable, indeed the most apposite term for the outlook of Orientalists especially from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century when the modern concepts of the West were being formulated. Very quickly, and with meagre justification, Reformed and Counter-Reformed Europeans claimed to have progressed, not only beyond the achievements of the Ancients but also beyond the achievements of the great civilizations of the Orient: Islam, India and China. All of medieval Orientalism, its preoccupations, attitudes and techniques were retained, indeed were fundamental ingredients in effecting the transformation of Western self-perception and knowledge, while they enabled the Orient as a whole to be inexorably transmuted from rich, powerful and superior to markedly poor, viciously incompetent and inferior. The complete revision took centuries, centuries of preoccupation with Western internal problems, centuries during which modernity was constructed using the building

blocks shaped and facilitated by dominance over and involvement with the non-West, the Orient.

The study of the Middle East, the medieval Orient, attained new significance. Arabic language was considered essential to improve knowledge of ancient Hebrew, an aid to translations of the Bible into European vernaculars instead of Vulgate Latin. The way of life and customs of the contemporary Orient were seen as an essential aid to interpreting the life of Biblical times in those lands. Sir John Chardin, the French Protestant who settled in England after many years wandering about the Middle East, declared it was his 'favourite design' to 'prepare notes on very many passages of the Holy Scriptures, whereof the explication depends on knowledge of the custom of the eastern countries'.<sup>13</sup> So Archbishop Laud, a fulcrum of the English Reformation, endowed an Arabic Chair at Oxford and made a major collection of Arabic manuscripts, which eventually passed to the Bodleian Library, as well as being an ardent supporter of Edward Pococke, first Professor of Arabic at Oxford. In Cambridge the first Chair of Arabic was established in 1632, its occupant was William Bedwell. His duties, established by the Head of Houses in Cambridge, were: (1) 'the advancement of good literature by bringing to light much knowledge which is lockt up in that learned tonge'; (2) 'good service of King and State in our commerce'; and (3) 'in God's good time to enlarging the borders of the Church, and propagation of the Christian religion to them who now sitt in darkness'.<sup>14</sup> Bedwell, who is regarded as the father of Arabic studies in Britain, had a good command of Arabic and a reasonable reservoir of sources on Islam and Muslims. But what are authentic documents worth in the face of intense hatred? As Alastair Hamilton, Bedwell's biographer, noted:

The gratuitous venom which Bedwell expends on Islam at every opportunity, even in his dictionary, is striking in its intensity. A manifest exhibition of his attitude can be seen in the title *Mohammedis Imposturae* in the first edition, and *Mahomet Unmasked* in the second, with the recurrent subtitle, 'A Discovery of the manifold forgeries, falsehood and horrible impieties of the blasphemous seducer Mohammad: with a demonstration of the insufficiencies of his law, contained in the cursed Alkoran'.<sup>15</sup>

In the new reformed perspective of Europe religion became even more central to self-definition and understanding. Humphrey

Prideaux, Dean of Norwich, writing in 1697, saw Muslims as part of God's inscrutable purposes: to be a punishment for the sins of Christians.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the great Islamic Empires of Turkey, Persia and Mughal India continued in existence: 'a scourge to us Christians who, having received so holy and so excellent a religion through His mercy to us in Jesus Christ our Lord, will not yet conform ourselves to live worthy of it'.<sup>17</sup> To Prideaux, Muhammad was 'an illiterate barbarian'.<sup>18</sup> The animus and attitudes would have been familiar to Pope Urban. Prideaux's contemporary, Peter Heylyn, considered the Qur'an 'a thing so full of tautologies, incoherencies, and such gross absurdities of so impure and carnal mixture, that he must lay aside the use of his natural reason who is taken in by it'.<sup>19</sup> As befits such a seminal writer as Heylyn his assessment links the consensus of the medieval period with that of the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century students of natural philosophy and echoes on down to today.

The Christian sense of superiority, the Reformed notion of being the 'elect of God', and opprobrium for Islam were constant features. But the sense of social and scientific advance was something new. One of the many threads that enabled this new fabric to be woven was the Ottoman Empire itself. In the medieval period Europe had been acutely aware of the superior learning of Muslim civilization, but no such obligation applied to the Ottomans, who were most often described as Tartars deriving from Scythia, known as the home of vicious barbarians since classical times. So Robert Huntingdon was able to sum up the new consensus in a letter written from Aleppo to John Locke: 'The country is miserably decay'd and hath lost the reputation of its name, and the mighty stock of credit it once had for eastern wisdom and learning: it hath followed the motion of the sun, and is universally gone westward'.<sup>20</sup> It was the constantly reiterated mantra, from Vico to Herder to Hegel. The ascendancy of Europe and the West was in every meaningful sense a battle won at the expense of the East, a continuation of the conceptual interrelations of east and west. The Turks were crude philistines: 'people generally of the grossest apprehension, knowing few other pleasures but such sensualities as are equally common both to man and beasts' according to Henry Maundrell.<sup>21</sup> 'They improve not sciences much, and it is enough for them to read and write', said Andre de Thevenot.<sup>22</sup> Arab astronomy had become Turkish astrology. 'For other sciences as logick,

physick, metaphysick, mathematicks and other of our university learning, they are wholly ignorant' said Sir Paul Rycaut, English Consul in the Levant.<sup>23</sup> Turkish society was also the model on which Oriental despotism was constructed. Sir William Temple thought the Ottoman Empire 'the fiercest in the world'.<sup>24</sup> The Sultan was an absolute ruler sustained by ministers who were slaves rather than an hereditary aristocracy. They owed their appointment to his whim and might lose their lives at his slightest displeasure. The core of the army was the slave regiments. From the highest to the lowest obedience was enforced by cruelty and terror. No one enjoyed security. The end result was poverty and devastation, a population constantly pillaged by the government had no incentive to produce beyond its barest wants. Again that Orient which was closest to Europe and most feared by Europe acquired the character that eventually marked all other Orients.

Assessments of Ottoman rule created the lens through which all Orients could be viewed. So François Bernier, the uncontested expert on the Mughals who served as a physician at the Mughal Court, could link the Ottomans to Persia and Mughal India and conclude that 'Actuated by a blind and wicked ambition to be more absolute than is warranted by the laws of God and of nature, the kings of Asia grasp at everything, until at length they lose everything'.<sup>25</sup> So in India too a fertile country with a favourable balance of trade under Mughal government produced poverty and lands went uncultivated. The other aspect of Ottoman behaviour that found constant reiteration, along with their sensuality and effeminacy, was their harsh treatment of non-Muslims. There is a strong whiff of irony in these judgements on the Orient made in the so-called Age of Reason. The actual state of learning in Europe had advanced very little from the knowledge and ideas it had imbibed from Muslim civilization. Alchemy remained the major preoccupation of even such luminaries as Isaac Newton, who was also fascinated with Biblical chronology. And in complaining of the harsh treatment of Christians by the Ottomans surely Europe was ascribing its own worst failing to its enemy, given the horrors of the Reformation wars and the treatment of its new non-Christian subject peoples in the Americas. The history of Orientalism includes a specific form of disassociationism. The Orient is a discrete category, a utility for the internal speculations of and about the Western self and society, yet extraneous to that self and society,

separable from it. So Sir John Chardin, who took such interest in the contemporary customs of the Orient for the supreme purpose of proper understanding of the Scriptures, argued knowledge of the customs of the people of India was 'in no ways useful itself'. What was useful only for the purposes of the West could be favourably esteemed, without making any dent in the overriding animus and distaste for the peoples of the Orient themselves. The antiquity of the East could be valued and admired for its utility in resolving the central questions of Western existence while the present occupants of the Orient as pagan barbarians were uniformly denigrated. Orientalism was a device for picking and choosing. One cannot select what appear to be favourable comments and attitudes and take them as the footprints of a kind of 'Whig history', the birth pangs of today's political correctness. The favourable is embedded firmly in its total context. Those who thought well of the Orient were always marginal and the seemingly admiring was balanced by the what was taken to be coherently objectionable. So Thevenot could comment 'In Christendom many think the Turks are devils, barbarians and men of no faith and honesty, but such as know and have consorted with them, have a different opinion . . . They are devout and charitable; very zealous for their religion.'<sup>24</sup> Fanatical attachment to false religion was considered the major failure of the Orient, a major ingredient of the stereotype. Individual rarities were just that, individual, or more commonly making example of the enemy to point out their fondest hope for reform of their own society and its attitudes. Take Sir Thomas Baines's conversation with Van Effendi, the Turkish teacher, Sir Thomas expressed the opinion that:

He believed a Musselman, living up to the height of his law, may be undoubtedly saved. He thought himself obliged . . . not to touch a hair of a Musselman's head for his difference of religion, but rather to help, assist, relieve and cherish them in every good office that he was able to do them. At which Van Effendi wept and said he could not believe any Christian came so near true Musselman but that they had all been idolaters.<sup>27</sup>

### The age of unreason

The Ottomans drew a line which separated unfortunate aspects of the Middle East's past from its present and redoubled the sense of

antipathy. They created a platform from which to assess other Orientals that had now become accessible to Europe, a comparative framework in which to look at India and China. The looking was as much preoccupied with the question of time, the reformulation of the history of the world as it was with the present utility of the newly available Orientals for European ends both commercial and strategic. The new Orientals were means to outmanoeuvre the Ottomans and arenas in which European mercantilist rivalries were played out. The Orient of Islam and the Ottomans determined attitudes to what was found in India and China. The Mughals were merely another variant of the Ottomans. The Hindu population of India attracted less attention. Edward Terry considered them 'very silly, and sottish, and an ignorant sort of people who are so inconsistent in their principles, as they scarce know the particulars they hold'.<sup>28</sup> They were undoubtedly an ancient people and therefore the consensus was that Hindus were the Gentiles spoken of in the Old Testament of the Bible, the Hindu pantheon supplying the meaning of idolatry spoken of there, hence the most common name for them, used for centuries, was *Gentoo*.

China was principally known through the accounts of the Jesuits and was marked by their particular concerns. There was no doubting Marco Polo's conclusion that China was a colossus, rich and populous. It was also not Muslim, a matter of some delicacy and a great opportunity if only the right means of conversion could be found. Initial Portuguese reports were coloured by the harrowing experiences of early missions to China, such as those of Galeote Pereira. His account of how his crew was arrested, many of its members executed and the great cruelties and tortures visited on those who were imprisoned and exiled to parts of South China reached the Jesuits in Goa. Included in their annual report, it was subsequently printed and translated across Europe. It established the cold-hearted cruelty of China firmly in the Western imagination. Pereira also reiterated one of Marco Polo's findings that became a standard feature of accounts of China: that sodomy was a vice 'very common in the meaner sort, and nothing strange amongst the best'.<sup>29</sup> The major influence on European information about China was the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who opened the first mission there in 1583. The edited translation of his journals was published in 1616. Ricci's objective was conversion, so he had to attempt to understand Chinese civilization. He presented a portrait of a Confucian Empire



that was well-ordered, organized and essentially benign. In contrast to the capriciousness of Muslim rulers the Chinese Emperor put the welfare of his people first, was open to advice and criticism and his rule attained an astonishing uniformity across the vastness of China through regular hierarchies of mandarins selected for their learning by public examination. China was governed like one large family. Of Confucius himself, Ricci wrote: 'if we critically examine his actions and sayings as they are recorded in history we shall be forced to admit that he was the equal of the pagan philosophers and superior to most of them'.<sup>30</sup> Confucianism was a moral framework, not a religion as such. A major obstacle to conversion was Buddhism, which Ricci discussed as a mass of primitive superstitions fostered by uneducated and often immoral priests; another was the deeply entrenched belief in astrology, which had replaced scientific astronomy; and the greatest impediment of all was ancestor worship. The Jesuitical answer was what became known as Chinese rites, a syncretic form of Catholicism. It was an adaptation of the Malabar Rites formulated in Goa, the seat of the Portuguese in India, that gave a measure of toleration to child marriage, Hindu insignia and names and caste segregation. In China, ancestor worship was redefined as acts of homage to the departed rather than religious invocation designed to obtain favours or benefits. The same was also deemed true of Chinese ritual ceremonies in the name of Confucius. Therefore the Chinese could retain such ceremonies, though they would have to give up their concubines before conversion could take place. Ricci also repeated the view of earlier accounts that homosexuality was common. Reporting on all the crafts and trades of China he observed that they had fallen behind the West in science because they 'have no conception of the rules of logic' consequently 'the science of ethics with them is a series of confused maxims and deductions'.

The Jesuit view of China held sway for a considerable time, though it was never uncontested and always controversial. The Dominican friar, Domingo Navarette, fell foul of the Jesuits in China and returned to Europe to vent his anger in a massive two-volume treatise appropriately called *Tratados e Controversias*. He dubbed the new Manchu rulers of China Tartars, the conventional epithet for barbarians, creating another demarcation between past and present. For him, Chinese ingenuity along with their apprehension of science and learning was now little more than imitation,

including imitation of European goods copied on the coast and sold in the interior as European produce. Despite the contrary evidence, the benign Jesuit image predominated. Its most powerful effect was on Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Born in 1646 and growing up in the Germany of the cataclysmic Thirty Years War his interest in religion and logic was dedicated to seeking the balance of extremes, for which he found great compatibility in Chinese thought. He had been attracted to Chinese ideas by the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, which fitted very well with his binary arithmetic. While convinced of the claims of European science – 'in those matters we are superior' – he could eulogize Chinese 'precepts of civil society': 'indeed it is difficult to describe how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquillity and the establishment of social order so that men shall be disrupted in their relations as little as possible'.<sup>31</sup> Chinese 'practical philosophy' might redeem his own society because the Chinese moral sense expressed in Confucian and other values constituted a kind of 'natural religion'.

The Age of Reason was much concerned with forging the Western perception of scientific advance, the outcome of the battle of the Moderns and the Ancients. A concept of Western progress was the innate assumption of the Enlightenment, and it found its greatest prop in the equally firm assumption of the unchanging nature of the Orient. A new sense of history was developing in the West, a history that required the stasis of the Orient to provide its explanatory power. The battle over religious meaning was far harder to resolve for the West and it resulted in the application of some very old techniques, first pioneered in the explanation and investigation of Islam in the medieval period, to Christianity itself. Radical thinkers of the Enlightenment were indeed the very model for modernity in the West, and they were dedicated workers in the 'reserved laboratory' of the Orient. In defence of deism, natural religion and ridicule of the orthodox Christian history of the world they employed and deployed the Orient. They found in China, and to a lesser extent Hinduism, the lineaments of natural religion, and, what is more, a natural religion that seemed to predate the Bible and thus overturn the most central of all Christian claims, that of being the unique vehicle for God's providence. When Voltaire argued that behind the bizarre religions of India and China stood a concept of one God, the separation of body and soul and the immortality of the soul along

with a set of moral teachings, he established the contemporary definition of religion without any reference to the Bible, or Christianity. Therefore, he created a platform for coherent opposition to the obfuscation of clerics, a vehicle for major change not only in religious thought but the social and political practice of Europe. Where the Qu'ran had been investigated to discredit its claims by showing multiple authorship, internal contradictions, errors and confusions now it was the Bible's turn.

The great matter, what created the 'problem' with orthodox Christian ideas, was the claims for the antiquity of China and India. The wealth of material that became available in the eighteenth century included Indian assertions that put the origins of their civilization back 4866 years. The content of Sanskrit texts was made available to Europe through translation of the Persian translations of these texts. Knowledge of Sanskrit itself grew more haphazardly and slowly and even among the supposed adepts could lead to major errors. Nathaniel Brassey Halhed claimed, for example, that Hinduism had no concept of the Flood, a feature of all religions of the Middle East, ancient and more modern. In fact it is included in the *Puranas*. The Hindu concept of time, divided into four eras or *yugas*, gave the Earth an age of some eight million years, a considerable advance on Archbishop Ussher's dating of creation to 4086BC. Du Halde, most restrained and authoritative of the Jesuits, gave the Chinese 4000 years of settled government and sufficient scientific sophistication to record an eclipse of the sun in 2155BC. This challenged the ruling orthodoxy, confirmed by Isaac Newton, that the Jews were the oldest people on earth. Defenders of orthodoxy found Chinese and Hindu religion easy enough to fit within the dominant explanation. All the people of the earth had a single origin in the Middle East, the Dispersion of peoples had happened after the fall of the Tower of Babel, and any similarities found between myths or religious ideas anywhere could be explained by retention of ideas first learned before the Dispersion. The problem, of course, is that the Dispersion comes after the Flood and the date of the Flood, *circa* 2550BC, and Moses' writing of the *Pentateuch*, *circa* 1600BC, were now claimed to come after the origins of India and China, which were not mentioned in the Bible. Sir William Jones, who founded the Bengal Asiatic Society, settled the matter of chronology by comfortably resolving the dating of India and China to make it conform to the orthodox

sequence. He also discovered great similarities between the structure of Sanskrit and Greek and Latin, and thus generated the concept of Indo-European languages, a shared common origin far in the past reflected not only in language but also mythology. Since he traced the origins of the single language family to somewhere in the Middle East he felt content he had confirmed the general outlines of Genesis.

In the hands of the *philosophes*, and all who shared their intellectual temper, the Orient was a treasury of ideas for rethinking and remodelling European attitudes and understanding. The eighteenth century was the high watermark of using the Orient to reprove Europe, a coded means of satirizing and pointing out its failures. While Daniel Defoe, whose *Robinson Crusoe* was taken by many as fact not fiction, roundly abuses China others found it conducive to accept the more flattering portrayals and use that as a stick to beat their favourite whipping boys and advance their favoured ideas. Oliver Goldsmith made his reputation with *The Citizen of the World*, an epistolary novel told through a series of letters between a Chinese scholar and his son. Addison, Steele, Johnson and Horace Walpole all used Oriental settings for their polemic writings. In England political debate was carried on through satires set in harems and among the eunuchs of the court, and so dense were the references to contemporary British political figures that detailed explanatory keys were also published. The satires made their point because corruption and venality were seen as the natural concomitants of an Oriental court. Montesquieu used the same premise when he produced his *Persian Letters*. Voltaire satirized Leibniz, the model for his ever-optimistic Dr Pangloss, in *Candide*. But Voltaire was just as ardent about China, producing in 1755 his play *Orphelin de la Chine*. It was the reworking of a translation of the Chinese story, *The Orphan of Chao*, but Voltaire thought his resetting much superior to the original. He made the play into a vehicle to demonstrate how the Mongol Genghis Khan is eventually civilized by the order and values of Confucian China: 'I was a conqueror, now I am a king.' After his initial enthusiasm for China, Voltaire discovered Hinduism in the 1760s thanks to a manuscript called the 'Ezour Vedam', now known to be a forgery 'with beautiful appropriateness' produced by his great antagonists the Jesuits. So he swiftly declared the Hindus the oldest people on earth who had taught monotheism to the Chinese and invented the

concept of the separation of soul and body and the immortality of the soul. Whatever utility the Orient possessed for resolving European problems there was an overriding consensus built and set into concrete by the intellectual temper of the Enlightenment, the stasis of the Orient in contrast to the progress of the West. In a sense it is merely the rationalizing of the medieval European sense of perpetual contemporaneity, the lack of a perception of time as change. This allowed early post-Columbian travellers to recycle the anecdotes of the classical heritage as well as medieval writings about far-flung places as if nothing had or could have altered. The convention was placed in the Orient, extended to all Orients and thus separated from the Western self and its unique experience. Changing the terms of existence was the intimate business of Western self-consciousness, received ideas and the specific place assigned to the Orient within the Western self-conception precluded any need to extend the capacity for change to the object called the Orient.

Answering the question of the origin and history of the world made the thinkers of the French and Scottish Enlightenment great system builders. It was a convention of their thought that all ideas and phenomena could be reduced to a single key that made them work. The key to history was in a sense provided by its typology, which came to be seen as a series of stages, and the stages gradually became a developmental ladder. After all, the light in the Enlightenment was that old flame being carried ever westward from the ancient home of learning in the Orient, whichever Orient an individual thinker happened to favour as first. As the light went out in the East it left behind stagnation or, increasingly in later eighteenth-century judgements, degeneration. The seminal work was Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* published in 1748. He saw human history as reducible to three forms of government: monarchies, despotisms and republics; each directed by single principle: honour, fear, virtue. So monarchy on the principle of honour produced hierarchy; despotism, on the principle of fear produced a lone ruler who was a slave to his passions; republics, however, on the principle of small-scale virtues lead to the growth of equality among citizens. As much as this was a typology it was also an argument for the correct political development of Europe. It provided the language and concepts from which nineteenth-century social thought and social science would emerge: the threefold distinction of mores, manners and laws. The typology came with explanatory

ideas such as the effect of climate on temperament, family structure, commerce, religion and history – the environmental thesis of nineteenth-century social science. It all led to one overriding sentiment: in Asia strong and weak nations existed side by side therefore one must be conqueror the other conquered, quite unlike Europe where consistent levels of courage marked all nations. This increased the tendency 'for the liberty of Europe and servitude of Asia; a cause that I think has never before been observed. This is why liberty never increases in Asia, whereas in Europe it increases or decreases according to their circumstances.'<sup>32</sup>

Voltaire echoed the judgement in his *History of Manners and Spirit of Nations*, published in 1756, where he noted that China had stagnated, 'we on the other hand, were tardy in our discoveries, but then we have speedily brought everything to perfection'.<sup>33</sup> Adam Ferguson in his 1767 *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1986) also followed the threefold division of history, his being savagery, barbarism and civilization with Asia being firmly fixed in the despotic mould that had expanded from the Ottomans to be the consensus on all of Asia.<sup>34</sup> The eighteenth century opened with a passion for chinoiserie, in Chinese gardens and decorations, tea drinking and much more. 'If 18th century Englishmen envisaged China as a willow pattern world of quaint figures crossing little bridges, they were envisaging what was essentially a construct of Europe's own imagination.'<sup>35</sup> The willow pattern was a design taken to China for copying on porcelain destined for re-export to Europe. But work in the 'reserved laboratory' made a marked change by the end of the century. 'Ancient China stands as an old ruin on the verge of the world', 'an embalmed mummy; wrapped in silk and painted with hieroglyphs' governed by 'unalterably childish institutions', according to Johann Gottfried von Herder.<sup>36</sup> Marshall and Williams make the essential point:

To assume that interpretations only changed as a result of new knowledge would no doubt be unduly naïve. In fact, in the case of China, almost the reverse seems to be true. As far as Britain is concerned new knowledge was relatively limited during the 18th century but interpretation changed radically . . . It would be an exaggeration but one close to reality to argue that Europe 'made' and remade Asia in the 18th century to fit its own changing preoccupations rather than to suggest that European preconceptions were fundamentally altered by new knowledge of Asia.<sup>37</sup>



India too was to undergo revisionism. While travellers had never thought that well of the Hindu masses, Holwell found from practical experience that modern Hindus were as 'degenerate, crafty, superstitious, litigious, and wicked a people as any race of people in the known world'.<sup>38</sup> Yet he found the teaching of the shastah on the origins of moral evil to be 'rational and sublime' and the few Brahmins who actually lived the code were 'the purest models of genuine piety that now exist or can be found on the face of the earth', a distinction echoed by Abbé Reynal 'amidst a variety of absurd superstition, puerile and extravagant customs, strange ceremonies and prejudices we may also discover the traces of sublime morality, deep philosophy and refined policy'.<sup>39</sup> The early English students of 'philosophic' Hinduism, rigorously separated from 'popular' Hinduism that was not worthy of study, were all Christians of a marked Unitarian or dissenting stripe. They interpreted Hinduism as a kind of undogmatic Protestantism. Charles Wilkins, translator of the *Bhagavad Gita*, thought the Brahmins were Unitarians. As Marshall notes: 'All of them worked with contemporary European controversies very much in mind. As Europeans have always tended to do they created Hinduism in their own image. Later generations of Europeans interested themselves in mysticism were able to portray the Hindus as mystics'.<sup>40</sup>

But a century of intellectual endeavour created a new sense of confidence about the nature of Indian society; so without any acquaintance with its reality policy could properly be made for India in the British Parliament. Thus in 1781 Edmund Burke could take the lead on a parliamentary select committee in urging Parliament to restore peace to Bengal by giving Indians 'laws in accordance with the temper and manners of the people' and with the aid of Sir William Jones, who had not yet set foot in India, he felt able to draft a bill to protect Indians 'in the enjoyment of all those ancient laws and useages, rights and privileges'.<sup>41</sup> In fact, when it came to land reform the ancient laws and usages owed more to English usages in Burke's native Ireland than anything known in India. A continuous loop had been forged, one in which the reality of the Orient was entirely irrelevant because what was important to know was already available on the shelves of European libraries. Thus, men who ruled India down through the nineteenth century:

were men with strongly held prior beliefs expressed freely in the voluminous minutes and dispatches that they were required to send home in which policy is frequently justified by sweeping assertions about Indian society. Such assertions were rooted in the great body of writing about India from scholars and travellers alike which had been accumulated through the 18th century as much as in actual observation of Indian conditions.<sup>42</sup>

What Marshall and Williams call the two greatest stereotypes of Asia, the entire Orient – 'a continent of bizarre religions, fanatically adhered to and it was a continent whose people changed very little'<sup>43</sup> – were essentially judgements founded on the perceptions of Muslim civilization that inexorably expanded to embrace all the civilizations of Asia. The one stereotype explained the other as it was their religions that required Orientals to remain forever the same. The stasis of Asia was nothing more than the opinion of Sir John Mandeville given four centuries earlier:

And in this way this lord leads his life following the ancient custom of his ancestors which custom his successors follow in the same way. And thus they make their belly their god, so that they achieve no worthiness or bravery living only in pleasure and delight of the flesh, like a pig in a sty.<sup>44</sup>

Supposed knowledge had expanded the content of information but not the judgement. When the rationalist temper of the Enlightenment succumbed to the blood-soaked horrors of the French Revolution, Western disillusion with its own self produced the reaction of romanticism, with its renewed emphasis on nostalgia for the rustic antique; a nostalgia that increased as industrialism changed the face of Europe. It provided a new rationale for interest in the unchanging Orient. Contemporaneous with the Romantic Movement was the great upsurge of religious revivalism, the great evangelical awakening. The nineteenth century was *par excellence* a new kind of missionary century. The revision of India and China, their inclusion within the familiar lineaments of the static, decayed and despotic constructed as the Islamic Orient made all Orients a fruitful field for missionary endeavour. The emphasis on decay became the justification for the charitable impulse of the high Victorian era. The militant conversion of the first Columbian era of Western expansion was inspired by seeking to add converts to the battalions opposing Europe's Islamic enemy. Increasing contact and involvement

with the Orient and the changed terms of Western self-perception gave a new twist to the missionary drive: offering the developmental balm of the progressive spirit that was the special possession of the West to the tyrannized peoples of the Orient. Missionary letters, magazines and tracts, produced to raise financial support for good works overseas, were the most common form of communication through which knowledge of the Orient came to the mass of the population in the West during the nineteenth century. Where in the eighteenth century the East India Company had resisted sending missionaries to India, a new breed of Company men, themselves infused with evangelical fervour, produced reports of India that led to a change in policy. The opinion of Charles Grant, a leading example, sums up the whole basis for the policy; he wrote: 'In fact, the people are universally and wholly corrupt, they are as depraved as they are blind, and as wretched as they are depraved.'<sup>45</sup>

### The Orient on the canvas

Muslim civilization bequeathed another lens through which the popular image of the Orient was constructed. In 1704 Antoine Gallard published a translation called *Persian and Turkish Tales or 1001 Nights*, an English translation appeared in 1714. *Alf Laila wa Laila*, or the *Arabian Nights* as it is most commonly known, fed the imaginative sense of Europe. It personified the exotic Orient so well because it chimed in perfectly with all the travellers' tales and scholarly opinions already extant about the Orient, indeed that had been extant from the outset. It generated a fashion for such Oriental tales and many imitations quickly followed. By the early nineteenth century this imaginative Orient had become the conventional setting for pantomime: *Ali Baba*, *Sinbad*, *Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp*, first performed on the stage in 1788, or Charles Dibdin's *Whang Fong* or *The Chinese Clown*. The West appropriated the Orient for its imaginative use for more than pantomime. The scholar's sense of dominance in knowledge about and interpretation of the Orient gave assurance to the appropriation of the travel writer, novelist, playwright and poet. They could begin to write through what they took to be the conventions, settings and language of the Orient. Writers such as Beckford, Southey and Moore read avidly all the scholarly works of Orientalists such as Sir William Jones, who produced numerous translations of Arabic

and Persian poetry. When the Western literary self played at being an Oriental the fictive work confirmed and entrenched as well as it represented and deployed the received consensus on the nature and being of the Orient. It was the *Arabian Nights* projected back along with all the ideas about sensuality, licentiousness, cruelty, fanaticism, treachery, despotism and barbarism. The imaginative re-projection popularized and added force to the learned scholarly body from which it drew its sources and justification, another enclosed continuous feedback loop in which the reality of the Orient, any Orient, was quite irrelevant. Often European writers projected their own repressed sexuality onto their image of the Orient. For example, William Beckford's Oriental tale, *Vathek*, had a sinister, over-indulgent, wealthy young Caliph as its hero who allowed nothing to stand between him and his sexual appetites. But the story of the young Caliph is the story of Beckford himself, complete with Beckford's adulterous relationship with Louisa, wife of his cousin, portrayed by the relationship between Vathek and Nouronihar.

Received ideas about Islam and its Prophet now acquired the Oriental setting of the *Arabian Nights*. All the traditional hostility to Islam, including the description of Prophet Muhammad as an imposter and magician, can be seen, for example, in Thomas Moore's novel, *Lalla Rookh*, published in 1813. Moore made no attempt to differentiate between legend and history, having a Persian fire-worshipper denounce Muhammad as:

A wretch who shrines his lust in heav'n  
And makes a pander of his God.<sup>46</sup>

No one has done more to harden the image of *Arabian Nights* as the reality of the Orient than Richard Burton. Like so many European travellers and adventurers, he sought gratification of his repressed sexuality in the Muslim world and maintained close links with the British government for espionage purposes. He projected every imaginable kind of sexual perversion onto the Orient. Burton presented Eastern women as sexual objects who were capable of infinite varieties of copulation and deserved equally infinite contempt:

A peculiarity highly prized by Egyptians; the use of the constrictor vagina muscles, the sphincter for which Abyssinian women are famous. The 'Kabbazah' (holder), as she is called, can sit astraddle upon a man and can provoke the venereal orgasm, not by wriggling

and moving but by tightening and loosing the male member with the muscles of her privities, milking it as it were.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, what you could not get in the Victorian home, Burton announced to his contemporaries, you can find in the illicit space that is the Orient. Burton had a great reputation, he had participated in the search for the source of the Nile, made a visit to Mecca and Medina and been a distinguished servant of the East India Company. The success of his translation of the *Arabian Nights* taught him what really interested the reading public. So late in his career he earned his richest financial rewards with translations, and more footnotes, of the *Kama Sutra* and *The Perfumed Garden*.

Meanwhile, travel writing continued to reinforce the image of Islam originally conceived by Paul Alvarus, added to by *chansons de geste* and Humphrey Prideaux, sharpened by centuries of Orientalism, and served in the mould of Scheherazade. Thus, for de Chateaubriand, fanaticism, barbarism, cruelty, despotism, servility, violence, and unbelief came together in Muslim nations which 'belong essentially to the sword', and have a history that negates civilization itself. Writes Hichem Djait:

It would be hard to imagine a more Manichaean attitude than Chateaubriand's in the Itinerary from Paris to Jerusalem; he evoked all the passions of the mediaeval period, reaffirming it as he gloried in the splendours of a brutal and exclusive 'we', echoing, continuing, and reappropriating the Middle Ages as the core of a great tradition and a moment of truth in history.<sup>48</sup>

E.W. Lane described *Modern Egypt* as a treasure house of magic and occult, astrology and alchemy, hemp and opium, snake-charmers, jugglers, public dancers, superstitions, supernatural beliefs and bizarre incidents that defied imagination. Beyond fanaticism, sex and the bizarre there was always the old favourite: straight-to-the-point contempt wrapped in a sense of moral and religious bigotry. Doughty had total contempt for Islam and the people he mingled with in *Travels in Arabia Deserta*. After declaring that the 'Moslem religion ever makes numbness and death in some part of the human understanding',<sup>49</sup> he ranted about the Prophet of Islam:

The most venerable image in their minds is the personage of Mohammad . . . [nothing can] amend our opinion of the Arabian man's barbaric ignorance, his sleight and murderous cruelty in the institution of his religious faction; or sweeten our contempt of an hysterical

prophetism and polygamous living – Mohammad who persuaded others, lived confident in himself; and died persuaded by the good success of his own doctrine.<sup>50</sup>

In his introduction to the meanderings of Doughty, T.E. Lawrence wrote that Doughty 'went among these people dispassionately', 'the realism of the book is complete' as 'Doughty tried to tell the full and exact truth of all that he saw'. Lawrence highlighted Doughty's attitude to the Arabs by putting them in more precise terms:

Semites are black and white and not only in vision, with their inner furnishing; black and white not merely in clarity, but in apposition. Their thoughts live easiest among extremes. They inhabit superlatives by choice . . . They are limited narrow-minded people whose inert intellects lie incuriously fallow . . . They show no longing for great industry, no organisation of mind or body anywhere. They invent no system of philosophy or mythologies. . . .<sup>51</sup>

Prejudices, racism and bigotry found in literature and travel writing received empirical support from the colonial administrators. Cromer, for example, repeatedly insisted that 'the Egyptian Oriental is one of the most stupid . . . in the World . . . Stupidity, not cunning is his chief characteristic',<sup>52</sup> that the Egyptian mind 'like that of all oriental races, is naturally inaccurate and incapable of precision of thought and expression',<sup>53</sup> that the Oriental could only show a servile submission to authority, and, most of all, he was quite incapable of ruling himself. He devoted five chapters to delineating such features of the Oriental character in *Modern Egypt*:

Sir Alfred Lyall once said to me: 'Accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind. Every Anglo-Indian should always remember that maxim.' Want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is in fact the main characteristic of the Oriental mind . . . The mind of the Oriental . . . is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description. Although the ancient Arabs acquired in a somewhat higher degree the science of dialectics, their descendants are singularly deficient in the logical faculty. They are often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises of which they may admit the truth.<sup>54</sup>

The *Arabian Nights* as well as the Turkish epics of Byron, Thomas Moore's Indian romance *Lalla Rookh*, Flaubert's *Salammbô*, Theophile Gautier's *La Roman de la Momie* and Victor Hugo's *Les*



*Orientales* and the travel accounts of Chateaubriand, Burton and Alexandre Dumas *pere* – all of these provided a fertile soil for the growth of the Orientalist school of painting. Byron wrote the *Turkish Tales* in 1811, after his return from the East. They are poems of the gratuitous violence, irrational vengeance, and cold-hearted barbarity of Turks – representing the darker side of Romanticism. But the Ottomans that Byron actually met were a different breed. As he told the House of Lords:

If it be difficult to pronounce what they [the Ottomans] are, we can at least say what they are not; they are not treacherous, they are not cowardly, they do not burn heretics, they are not assassins, nor has an enemy advanced to their capital. They are faithful to their sultan till he becomes unfit to govern, and devout to their God without an inquisition. Were they driven from St Safia tomorrow, and the French or Russians enthroned in their stead, it would become a question whether Europe would gain by the exchange. England would certainly be the loser.<sup>55</sup>

But his opinion did not inhibit Byron from supporting the independence movement of the Greeks which made him the great romantic icon.

Byron's literary Orient was one derived from the history of Orientalism, a fictional image, a place of exotic fantasy, the kind of fantasy that Byron created about his own persona. The fantasy nourished a legion of Orientalist painters. The noted French painter, Eugène Delacroix, for example, was inspired by Byron in 1827 to paint *La Mort de Sardanapale*. Based on a popular poem of that name by Byron, the painting depicts an Oriental despot leaning back on his lavish bed watching, rather apathetically, the destruction of his earthly possessions. All around him, his naked concubines are being stabbed and killed by three dark villains while his horse is being dragged away. The chaos and violence of the narrative is coupled with eroticism: the concubines are dying in a state of sexual ecstasy, their death is represented as an exotic spectacle, observed voyeuristically both by Sardanapalus and us. Lane's *Modern Egypt* became a source for many paintings of harem interiors. The harem is one of the most powerful symbols of exoticism and Otherness associated with the Orient. It represents the antithesis of all that the West believes about sexuality. The idea finds its most coherent expression in the work of the classicist Jean

Auguste Dominique Ingres. As early as 1814, he had painted *Great Odalisque*, followed by his famous work *Odalisque and Slave* (1839) and *Turkish Bath* (1862). The *Great Odalisque* looks knowingly at the viewer: she knows she is the object of consumption and the subject of a gaze. She is passive, ready to receive, the mind and the body are simultaneously ready to be occupied. The paraphernalia of the harem is limited to an opium pipe and a hand fan of peacock feathers, while the cool blues and greens enhance the relaxed and luxurious atmosphere of the invitation – so evident in her eyes. The *Odalisque and Slave* takes the idea of total sensual gratification a step further. The woman in this painting has reached a sublime high, thanks to the opium from the water pipe beside her, the music played by the slave, the softness of the silk on which she lies, scent of perfume from the garden in the background, the tranquillity of the trees and the swan on the water, and the exquisite colours that surround her. Like Sardanapalus, she is oblivious to her fate. Come and conquer us! The *Turkish Bath* shows twenty-six nude women, in various stages of ecstasy, in a fantastic Turkish bath. The painting is round, depicting a double voyeurism of looking through a keyhole and picking up the roundness of the women's breasts and bellies. The gaze is unidirectional: the observer is looking at a private space but none of the women look out or look at each other.

This voyeurism is an intrinsic part of the painting, for the onlooker has been presented with a means of gazing into a forbidden East. He enters a world of sexual abandon; he sees without being seen. The women in the painting all appear to be cloned from one model, as if depictions of one woman in an endless variety of poses. They are intertwined in love-postures, hinting at lesbian relationships. No bathing activity is actually visible; the bath here seems to be an occasion for undressing and dallying. The painting is an obvious collage of the hackneyed themes of Eastern sensuality; the women fondling each other, the perfumes, the incense, the music – all convey the endless potential of erotic gratification of such a lieu. The eroticism becomes, unintentionally no doubt, a parody of itself. For the compilation of bodies in a mass disturbs without arousing. It is a surplus which satiates.<sup>56</sup>

The female inhabitants of the harems and baths have a counterpart. Contrasting with the passive, inviting females, are the unrestrained and savagely barbaric males. The painting that perhaps

most symbolizes the violent Muslim male is Henri Regnault's *A Summary Execution Under the Moorish Kings of Granada* (1870). When Regnault visited Granada in 1869, he was overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the Al-Hambra. But his main interest was to 'depict the real Moors in the way they used to be, rich and great, both terrifying and voluptuous, the ones that are to be found only in past history'.<sup>57</sup> Regnault depicted this history in terms of a grotesquely violent execution inside the Al-Hambra; the title giving the painting all the historical validity it needs. A man has just been executed. His severed head lies on a step near the bottom of a staircase. The executioner stands imposingly above, looking down indifferently at the severed head as he wipes the blood from his sword with his garment. The executioner's strong black body, bulging with tough muscles, contrasts sharply with the soft lines of his apricot tunic. The severed head has similar features and stature to those of the executioner – suggesting fratricide. The red of the blood, dripping from the body and pooled around the severed head, is diffused into shades of oranges and peaches as we look up to the executioner and the Arabesque background on which this scene of barbarity is being acted. There is no one in the picture to witness this act which is obviously committed in secret, without remorse or emotion, with technical efficiency and total ruthlessness – as befits the Orient. When the painting was exhibited in Musée du Luxembourg visitors were so overwhelmed by its reality they were seized by faintness; and, no doubt, their worst suspicions of the Orient were totally confirmed.

Symbolically, the violent and barbaric Muslim male and the sensual, passive female, come together to represent the perfect Orient of Western perception: they fuse together to produce a concrete image of sexuality and despotism and thus inferiority. The opposing principles generate expectations of the Orient that never failed to be fulfilled giving internal momentum to images so rooted in distorted desires and imagination. *The Slave Market, Constantinople* (1838), by the Scottish Orientalist Sir William Allen, combines the idea of an Orient made up of two opposing principles. Underneath the domes and minarets of the Blue Mosque, a family is being sold in slavery. The members of the family are being cruelly separated. The man has been sold to a Circassian warrior on horseback and is being dragged off into darkness and a life of violence and barbarity. The woman goes in the opposite direction to the

harem. A number of people watch this transaction unconcerned at the drama that is taking place. In the foreground, two Ottomans sit deep in conversation unmoved by the cruelty before them.

### Circles within circles

Orientalists' paintings show the Arabs as a race apart. Nineteenth-century scholars incorporated this notion of racism and the innate sense of progress of the Enlightenment in their philosophy. Spencer and Comte 'scientized' this notion of racism to produce developmental stages of social life; Darwin 'biologized' their ideas and unwittingly laid the foundation of Social Darwinism which became a whole new stance on humanity and history. The concept of race, which was also viewed in a developmental sequence from lowest to highest, came to play a more overt part in judgements on social history. What those judgements consisted of was very old and familiar. Hegel (1770–1831) set the tone. The central idea in Hegelian thought is development. In history it appears as an evolutionary process moving history through periods and civilizations towards a progressive self-realization of reason. In the Hegelian scheme, history developed through four stages: the Oriental world, the Greek world, the Roman world and, finally, the goal of the evolutionary march of humanity, the German world in which Hegel himself lived. Hegel considered the German world to be the epitome of civilization because it gave full reign to reason by making freedom a cornerstone of the state. In his scheme, Islam was of the Oriental world and its sole purpose was to be a stepping stone to humanity's ultimate realization, the creation of the German world. For him Islam signified 'the worship of one, the absolute object of attraction and devotion'.<sup>58</sup> But Islam's devotion to One was much too abstract, too excessive; indeed, it excluded an interest in the human world. This is why Muslim mood swung like a pendulum from fanatic zeal to desperation, from one extreme to another. Because of these extremes, Islamic civilization was self-destructive and on the verge of writing itself out of history. Islam now had nothing to offer except fanaticism, sexual enjoyment and despotism. Europe's destiny lay in swallowing the antithesis of Islam into a new thesis of its own. Hegel was simply spelling out Western anxieties and fears about Islam: in the dreamland of European destiny, Islam looms as a nightmare.

Where Hegel led, other philosophers followed. In his monumental work, *Weltgeschichte* (1881–88), L. von Ranke declared Islam to be an antithesis of Christian Europe. Jacob Burckhardt concurred. Ernest Renan declared that Muslims were the first victims of Islam. They must break the hold that Islam has over them, just like Europe had broken the chains of religious tyranny. But Renan was not sure that Muslims, whatever their history, had the capability of measuring up to the norms established by the European civilization. The reasons for this lie behind race – the moving spirit behind history. Islam and Christianity were not only two different religions, they were products of two different races: the genius of Christianity was the genius of the Aryan race, and the fanaticism and decadence of Islam rested squarely on the Semitic race. The Oriental mind, Renan declared in a lecture on 'Islam and science', borrowing the idea from Voltaire, is incapable of rational thought and philosophy and was responsible for blocking the development of science and learning in the Muslim world. The little science and philosophy that Muslims had produced was the result of a rebellion against Islam. The view that Muslims had produced no original science, but were only a conveyor belt for transferring Greek learning to Europe, became the orthodoxy until the middle of the twentieth century. Marx accepted Hegel's idea that history is a process, a man-made process, which could be controlled and modified. For him, history is the arena of human struggle and liberation as well as of promise and salvation. History acquires meaning in the future when salvation comes, not through divine grace, but through collective human action. Thus, Marxism, a Judaeo-Christian heresy, replaced religious eschatology with historical materialism. But the liberation and salvation of the Orient required first its destruction. Drawing from Adam Smith and Mill, Marx and Engels made a typological distinction between Western and Oriental history. Their argument was based on the climate and agricultural practices of the Orient. The mode of production in the Orient, they argued, rested on agriculture that in arid zones had to be carried out with huge irrigation schemes which had to be state-financed and controlled. It is not surprising, then, that governments in the Orient tended to be too powerful and despotic. Islam provided a typical example. Thus, the liberation of the Orient required destruction of its mode of production; and England was right to colonize India, where it had a double mission: 'one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of the Asiatic society

and the laying of the material foundation of Western society in Asia'.<sup>59</sup> As it turned out, both processes were totally destructive; and for Marx the Orient was nothing more than so much human fodder standing between him and the realization of his messianic vision.

A voice of sanity was supplied by the Königsberg historian Hans Prutz. In his history of the Crusades, *Kulturgeschichte der Kreuzzüge* (1883), Prutz argued that not only had the West acquired the use of its rational faculties from Islam but also it was through contacts with the Muslim world that Europe learned to liberate itself from the suffocating embrace of the Church. As before, a furore followed and Prutz's voice was drowned in all the noise. A year later Gustav le Bon, in *La Civilization des Arabes* (1884), showed that the European universities had been living off the intellectual efforts of Muslims for over five hundred years. But both Le Bon and Prutz were overshadowed by Oswald Spengler. In his classic study, *The Decline of the West*, Spengler classified human culture into three basic types: the classical, the Magian and the Faustian.<sup>60</sup> Here Islam fits in the middle as the best expression of the Magian type sharing its 'Magian life-feeling' with such other 'religious' cultures of the Orient as Judaism, early Christianity, ancient Chaldean society and Zoroastrianism. Magian cultures, Spengler argued, are intensely dualistic, split between soul and spirit and were fervently messianic. The individuals of the Magian cultures experience the world as a cavern and project this experience in their sacred architecture and buildings, such as Christian and pagan basilicas, Hellenic and Jewish temples, structures of Baal worship, Mazdian fire temples and mosques. The best expression of this sacred architecture, derived from the cavernous experience of the world, is the dome; and the first mosque was the Pantheon, as built by the Roman emperor Hadrian! So the only thing that the Muslims could claim to be authentically Islamic dissolved into the dim and distant past of ancient history! Spengler is totally wrong on almost every count. His data has been shown to be spurious and he has been demolished by a host of scholars. The Muslim scholar, Muhammad Iqbal, known as 'the philosopher of the East', declared that 'his ignorance of Muslim thought on the question of time, as well as the way in which the "I", as a free autonomous center of experience, has found a place in the religious experience of Islam, is simply appalling'.<sup>61</sup> Despite that, just as most philosophers of history are, one way or another, children of Hegel, the influence of Spengler



simply refuses to go away. But it is not just philosophers of history, such as Toynbee, Mumford, Sorokin and Suzuki, who are Spenglerian through and through, but even politicians such as Nixon and policy-makers such as Kissinger have found Spengler rewarding for understanding contemporary realities. However, it is Arnold Toynbee who imbibed Spengler more than most. In *A Study of History*, Toynbee identified twenty-one civilizations as constituting the totality of human cultures.<sup>62</sup> Borrowing freely from Ibn Khaldun, Toynbee argued that each civilization passes through three phases. The genesis always appears in religion which is soon institutionalized into a 'universal church' and leads to the creation of a 'universal state'. The state collapses when its centre of culture is attacked by outside barbarians. In the case of Islam, the universal church is the *ummah*, the global Muslim community, and the universal state is the Abbasid caliphate. The role of the barbarians here is played by Turkish and Mongol hordes of Central Asia, the Berbers of North Africa and the Arab nomads of Arabia. Toynbee also argued that the Muslim civilization consists of two distinctively separate societies: 'the Arabic' and 'the Iranic'. As to the 'fundamental question' of the 'parent society' of which the Abbasid caliphate is the 'final stage', Toynbee identified it as the ancient society of Syria. Seen in this light, Islam is reduced to a mere response to Hellenism; and Toynbee is able to locate the origins of Islam in the dim and distant horizons of the 'Syriac' society – almost fifteen centuries earlier!

To whisk through so many centuries of the history of the West is to truncate its complexity. But in our identification of repeated patterns of recurrences, it is not the Orient and Western acquaintance with the Orient that has been truncated. More detail of repetition of the same interpretation, the conformity of opinion and animus, could have been brought forward for each and every age and each and every Orient. But the detail would add little to the concluding point: underlying the complexity of the history of the West there is a continuity of stance to a necessary construct that is called the Orient. The overriding opinions were set when information was most limited and as information expanded its meaning and effect for the internal purposes of the West changed, but continuity was the essential feature of the Orient. There was change in the way the Orient was deployed, change in what information gleaned from the 'reserved laboratory' was taken to imply about human nature,

history and the proper means of conducting the business of living. But these were preoccupations of the Western self for the Western self, and only after that, by extension of the relations of dominance, a matter of any consequence (and the consequences were huge) to the peoples of the Orient. All the aspects of the stereotype appeared early, different aspects of this coherent picture were more prominent in particular fields of Western thought and endeavour at different periods; there was disassociation, one part of the stereotype of concern in literary and artistic genres, while other aspects dominate in other fields. There was no need for logic, or integration because the object, the Orient, was not considered; it was constructed for present utility in the operation and advancement of Western thought. There simply has never been a definite object that is the Orient; the Orient is merely a pattern book from which strands can be taken to fashion whatever suits the temper of the times in the West. What we have gathered from history is a glimpse of this pattern which constitutes a theory and its practice that can apply itself to any aspect of literature, art and ideas. This coherent, but constantly reworked, theory and practice has for the West the ring of normality and reason for all that it is fable, myth and purposeful recreation of the realities that exist to the East of the West. This is the theory and mode of operation that has been and is Orientalism.

# Theory and Criticism

It is a large claim to suggest a definite beginning located in history. A discussion of what happened in the past is also an attempt at representing the past. The validity of the representation, the substantiation of the continuing relevance of a point of origin can only be found in the underlying coherence of practice today, as much as through all the yesterdays that have been represented. A number of highly significant elements came together to make Orientalism possible. But Orientalism is unthinkable until these disparate elements find a focus. The representation of the past coheres around the Western response to the origin of Islam and the expansion of Muslim civilization. From this point of origin the West acquired and developed a stance, a body of ideas and a means of operation to interpret, represent, construct, interact with and deploy the idea of the Orient. In formulating a response, the West learned more and developed more of its own self-image than it did of the specific Orient it constructed, the Orient of Islam. The West lived with the Orient of Islam, and its own Orientalist ideas, for 800 years before it had significant encounters with any other Orients. From the Battle of Tours where Charles Martel turned back Muslim advance into Europe in the eighth century to the preaching of the Crusades in 1096 is the early, and as I have shown, defining phase in which Orientalism begins. The major fluorescence of Orientalism occurred in the sustained period of 400 years that separate the preaching of First Crusade and Vasco da Gama's landfall at Calicut in India. Orientalist ideas were already old, deeply ingrained at the time when new Orients entered into the experience of the West. It is possible to see how the interrelationship and interaction of the West with a variety

of Orients was moulded by the reflexes and ideas developed in the preceding 800 years.

Contemporaneous concerns in relations with the Orient of Islam impelled and shaped response to new Orients. The representation of the past has shown change, diversity and reformulation in Orientalist ideas. It has also shown that the Western construct of the Orient of Islam has been a force in effecting as much as it has been affected by these shifts of emphasis. To make sense of where Orientalism stands today and how argument about the concept of Orientalism operates, it is therefore expedient to concentrate, as we have done in representing the past, on the Orient of Islam. Presenting a history of Orientalism through the discussion of a finite set of texts in a linear development could be seen as representing Orientalism as a monolithic system. Such a representation would be essentialist, it would see Orientalism as a fixed, unchanging discourse. A simplistic, essentialist interpretation would not take into account the fact that Orientalism has adapted itself to various historic situations; it would tar all Orientalists with the same brush, accusing them all of demonizing Islam and Other cultures whatever their individual positions; it would ignore any sites of resistance both in the West and the non-West; and it would ultimately project Orientalism as an all-encompassing totality. It would be more fruitful to see Orientalism as a whole series of discourses, changing, adapting to historic, scholarly and literary trends, but interconnected by a coherent set of common features. The coherence and the common features appear most clearly in the central relations between the West and the Orient of Islam. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the West is still squirming on the coherent features of Orientalist ideas, and demonstrating that centuries of scholarship have not improved knowledge to a point that removes or overcomes the impasse to mutual understanding. From film to fiction, foreign policy to polemics, Islam is seen and evoked as 'a problem', an immovable obstacle between Western civilization as its destiny: globalization. This impasse is the idea of Orientalism as a theory and practice as it has become known, as it has operated and continues to operate in the West.

## Resisting Orientalism

An essentialist representation of Orientalism is, of course, open to demonization in reverse. If we see Orientalism as a meta-narrative,

the Orientalists themselves can then be represented as a group of wolves determined to tear apart the religion, culture and civilization of Islam. And Orientalism could easily be portrayed as an arch conspiracy against Islam and, by extension, all non-Western cultures. One of the earliest polemics against Orientalism did just that. In *Islam and Orientalism* the popular Pakistani writer, Maryam Jameelah, reviews the works of six Orientalists, and concludes that 'Orientalism is not a dispassionate, objective study of Islam and its culture by the erudite faithful in the best tradition of scholarship'. Rather, it is 'an organised conspiracy' based on social Darwinism designed 'to incite our youth to revolt against their faith and scorn the entire legacy of Islamic history and culture as obsolete'.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, she presents Islam as the binary opposite of her own perception of Orientalism: as unchanging, fixed in history and obscurantist. An innately hostile Orientalism is pitted against a puritan Islam inimical to the West in totality.

Fortunately, most Muslim and Arab critique of Orientalism was on a much higher plane. In his classic study, *English-Speaking Orientalists*, A. L. Tibawi offered a masterly dissection of the techniques and methodology of Orientalism. As a historian, Tibawi choose to expose Orientalism on the basis of historic accuracy and objectivity. He deliberately tackled 'living', rather than 'dead Orientalist', to emphasize the continuity of the tradition. Many Orientalist studies on Islam, he wrote:

are distinguished by erudition, but if one penetrates beneath the apparatus of the learned foot-notes and the array of sources one is bound to detect an alarming degree of speculation, guesswork, and passing of judgement, for which little or no concrete evidence is produced. It is, of course, one thing to be skilful in deciphering documents in Arabic (or Persian or Turkish) and quite another to be able to integrate the material culled therefrom into an historical contribution in the accepted professional sense. History in general is one of the most vulnerable of disciplines to the invasion of people from outside; it is often assumed that anyone who wields a pen can write history. In Islamic sources, the linguistic, literary, and historical materials are so intertwined that scholars are prone to attempt too much and find themselves writing history, almost unconsciously, with scant qualification for the task.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the position of the writer, Tibawi argued, there is an obligation to state Muslim beliefs and views in their 'entirety so fully

and clearly as to leave no room for complaint of misrepresentation'.<sup>3</sup> Once that is done, the authors have the right to take issue with these views and argue their own positions. What the Orientalists actually do, Tibawi asserted, is to state their own views as though they were facts and then draw inferences from them. For example, the Orientalists assert that the Qur'an is Muhammad's own composition. From this assertion far-reaching historical, theological, literary and linguistic judgements are drawn which by 'sheer repetition are elevated to the dignity of facts'. To prove the assertion that Muhammad wrote the Qur'an, the Orientalists must prove that a man who could not read or write sat down in the first half of the seventh century 'in his study to consult and "quote" previous authors for the composition of the work known as the Qur'an'. But without offering this proof, the Orientalists proceed to locate the 'origins' of Islam in the Judaeo-Christian heritage. Thus, in *The Life of Muhammad*, A. Guillaume asserts that Muhammed makes allusions to the Gospel; and Montgomery Watt in *Islam and the Integration of Society* suggests that early Muslim works are peppered with 'quotations from the Bible'. How is this possible, asserts Tibawi, 'when there was no Arabic Bible to "quote" from'?<sup>4</sup>

The earlier polemics against Islam were abusive and deliberately misrepresented Islam in order to subvert it. But the new scholarship, asserts Tibawi, aims to be more objective. The new technique is to rely on simplistic comparative methodology to expose the 'defects' of Islam. So whenever Christianity is compared with Islam, the exercise is 'almost always to the disadvantage of the latter'. Moreover, Orientalists arrogate the power of interpretation to themselves and have taken on the mantle of being the guardians of Muslim tradition. They define the tradition and they guard it. They advocate 'reform' but that reform is subject to their approval. On the one hand, Orientalists allege that Islam is too rigid and must admit change. However, when far-reaching changes are made to the application of Islamic law, for example, these same advocates of reform assert that the changes are undermining authentic Islamic tradition. Extreme change, often propagated by Westernized Muslims, is hailed. But 'genuinely native reformers, with substantial followings, are frequently branded as mere "reactionaries"'. Nor were those who chose a middle way, more or less like their predecessors in the golden age, accorded unqualified approval, because, we are told, 'they did not go far enough'. What change is necessary, and how it



is implemented, is surely a matter for the Muslim community, Tibawi asserts. Change within Islam is based on two guiding principles: it should be in accordance with the interests of the community (*maslahah*) and the principles of justice (*adl*). And it is the community, and not the Orientalists, who must decide what is in its own interests. Orientalist scholarship is also brought into the service of Western foreign policy and imperialism. If the Arab states act against the interest of the West, the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet are used to show that their actions are against the spirit of Islam. The works of classical Muslim scholars are distorted to demonstrate that Arabs and Muslims cannot adjust to the modern world. For example, even though such terms as 'Arab patriotism' and 'Arab nation' were totally alien to ibn Khaldun, Orientalist interpretations of his work are used to justify the 'alleged inferiority of the Arabs'. Indeed, all variety of political creeds, from socialism to reactionary politics are being read into ibn Khaldun. In discussing the problems of the Middle East, and particularly Palestine, only 'social, religious, agricultural, industrial, biological' problems are analysed, the political dimension of the problem is often omitted.

Tibawi's concise and razor sharp analysis lead to three basic conclusions:

- 1 Modern Orientalism, despite its academic advances, continues to rely substantially on the medieval images of Islam; 'it has only discarded old-fashioned clothes in favour of more modern attire. Illustrations of the persistence of the old ideas abound, not only concerning the Qur'an and Muhammad but also quite logically concerning Islamic theology, law, and history'.<sup>5</sup>
- 2 Orientalist scholarship lacks clear thinking, objective standards, and basic courtesy, tolerance, and moderation towards Muslim points of view. In most cases, the religious and political affiliation of the Orientalists gets the better of their scholarly judgements.
- 3 There is no concrete or conclusive proof in the voluminous output of Orientalist scholars on the origins of Islam that Islam borrowed from the Bible or the Jewish scriptures. In this regard, Orientalist assertions are unproved 'vague generalizations'; and Orientalist scholarship is little more than a learned process of producing 'speculative discourses on the obvious'.

Tibawi's condemnation of Orientalism is not wholesale. He readily acknowledges the work of those Orientalist scholars who

have genuinely pushed the boundaries of historic knowledge. In his classical paper, 'Orientalism in crisis', Anouar Abdel-Malek, too begins with identifying the positive elements in Orientalist studies of Islam and Arabs. 'The study of ancient civilisations; the gathering of Arab manuscripts into European libraries; the compilation of catalogues of manuscripts; the publication of a number of important works'; and 'the editing of studies, often deficient and erroneous from the linguistic point of view, yet rigorous in their method' have all increased our understanding of the past.<sup>6</sup> But these aspects do not represent the 'dominant vision of traditional Orientalism' which, Abdel-Malek argues, is deeply embedded in assumption, postulates, and philosophical and historical concepts that undermine the alleged objectivity of Orientalist scholarship. The main objective of the Orientalists, according to Abdel-Malek, was to examine and open up the 'ground they were to occupy, and to penetrate the consciousness of the peoples, the better to ensure their subjection by the European powers'. This phenomenon, however, was not unique to Orientalism. It was:

a constituent element of all social science in the European countries in the period of imperialist penetration and colonisation: Italian Orientalism under Mussolini; the psycho-political penetration exemplified by Lawrence and his school, and before that the relations between missionary circles, the military and the Orientalists (notably at the time of the Third Provincial Congress of Orientalists in Lyon, 1878).<sup>7</sup>

Abdel-Malek distinguished between 'traditional Orientalism' – consisting of 'an amalgam of academics, businessmen, military men and colonial functionaries, missionaries, publicists and adventurers' – and 'neo-Orientalism'.<sup>8</sup> Both groups treat the Orient and Orientals as an 'object' of study inscribed by Otherness. This object was considered passive, non-participant and 'endowed with an "historical" subjectivity that is above all non-active, non-autonomous, with no sovereignty over itself'.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, thematically the nations, people and cultures of the Orient were seen in essentialist terms, which translated into 'a characteristic ethnist typology'. This typology, which was often converted into racism, was 'based on a real specificity but detached from history, and thus conceived as intangible and essential'.<sup>10</sup> Thus, European man, from Greek antiquity onwards, becomes the measure of all men everywhere.

Like Tibawi before him, Abdel-Malek sought to expose the methodology of Orientalism. He identified four main components:

- 1 Orientalism focused on studying the past of the Oriental nations and cultures. By positing that the most brilliant periods of the Oriental countries were located firmly in history, they made decline of the Orient a natural and inevitable phenomenon.
- 2 The past of the Orient was studied in its cultural (linguistic and religious) aspects and divorced from any social evolution; thus Arabic, for example, was studied as though it was a dead language. 'It is', notes Abdel-Malek, 'as if one set out to write a commentary on the French language (the language of Martin du Gard, Sartre, Aragon) on the basis of a reading of the *Chansons de geste*, the English of Shaw or Russell by reference to Anglo-Saxon, or the Italian of Croce, Gramsci or Moravia through a reading of ecclesiastical Latin'.<sup>11</sup>
- 3 Such a reading of history made living or resurgent history appear only as 'a continuation of a great but limited past'. As such, the history of the Orient ceases to be a life-enhancing force and is reduced to mere exoticism.
- 4 The achievement of the Orient, their contributions to science and learning, were deliberately ignored or suppressed. On the whole, they were deemed to be of little or no value and denigrated. This ploy was used to attribute the 'backwardness' of the Orient to its unproductive history and the alleged unproductive nature of Oriental history was then projected as 'a specific constituent characteristic of the Oriental reality'. Colonialism was thus absolved from all guilt.

This methodology, Abdel-Malek argued further, was used in combination with a number of 'instruments' of research. The primary sources of research were all collected, confiscated and otherwise taken from the Orient and accumulated in the great European metropolises. The indigenous scholars were thus forced to study their own national and cultural history using only indirect sources. The secondary sources on which the Orientalists rely so heavily – consisting of reports of colonial administrators, religious missions, as well as the accounts and reports of the managing boards of societies, travelogues and literary fabrications – 'are profoundly tainted with ethicism and racism in all its variants', the least extreme being paternalistic and drenched in exoticism.<sup>12</sup> Such sources,

asserts Abdel-Malek, cannot and do not provide us with solid and objective research.

In contrast to Abdel-Malek, Syed Hussein Alatas offered a sociological analysis of Orientalism. His focus was the notion of the 'lazy native' which was the most common description of the people of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Colonial administrators, who also tended to be scholars, and travellers to Southeast Asia were unanimous in seeing the 'leading characteristics' of the people of the region as 'a disinclination to work'. Alatas's painstaking scholarship analysed how, from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, the native was represented as indolent and offered a sociological explanation for the emergence and persistence of the myth. One writer who contributed more than any other in framing an Orientalist representation of the Malays was Frank Swettenham. Swettenham, who was also the British Resident in Malaya, considered the Malays, as Muslims, to be fatalist and superstitious. He suggested that they respected 'constituted authority', were 'good imitative learners' and could even be persuaded to accept 'innovation'; and rejected the common notion that the Malay was treacherous: 'I question whether he deserves the reproach more than other men'. But his sociological and historical work had convinced him that the Malays were just not interested in physical or mental work. 'Whatever the cause', Swettenham wrote, 'the Malay of the Peninsula was, and is unquestionably opposed to steady continuous work'. Moreover, the Malays had no initiative whatsoever; they simply did what they were told by their rulers: 'They never thought whether anything was right or wrong, advantageous to them personally or otherwise; it was simply, "What is the Raja's order?"'<sup>13</sup> If the Malays did not work, asks Alatas, how did they survive?

Most of the Malays, as well as the Javanese and the Filipinos, worked hard, every day and regularly. They toiled on the farms, planting, cropping, fishing, building houses and doing a thousand other chores of rural life. So how did the image of the lazy native emerge? Alatas suggests that this work was invisible to the colonist. A major factor in the Malays' reputation as indolent was their sheer independence. As the Malays were predominantly rural, their contact with the European colonists was somewhat limited:

The Europeans there had very little experience of Malays serving them. The Malays were not their pillars of comfort. In the bars, in the

rest houses, in the hotels, in the shops, Malays did not serve the Europeans. The most which they did was driving and gardening. Malays were also not involved in construction labour, in road building, in clerical estate work, in short in the modern private capitalist sector of the economy.

Colonial capitalism, as thorough going system, was not confined to strictly economic areas. It embraced the entire system of administration, the school, and all other connected activities. Thus if the government built a railway, those labourers building the railway, and those running it, entered the network of colonial capitalism. The Malays entered this network indirectly in the civil service. They served a state administration manipulated by colonial capitalism. Since this did not bring the Malays into direct and regular contact with the European colonial community, their services were not appreciated. The Malays did not function in the total life pattern of colonial capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

The Chinese, on the other hand, worked to provide the Europeans with almost all their comforts. They worked as butlers, barmen, built railways, and ran small businesses that provided the Europeans with their 'profusion of luxuries'. It was thus necessary to generate a different set of myths about the Chinese: 'they smoke opium, they lie without restraint, and whenever opportunity offers are dishonest, cunning, and treacherous'.<sup>15</sup> But despite all this, the Chinese were seen as industrious simply because they supplied the lowest form of labour. The Indian had a similar status for the same reasons. Both Chinese and the Indians, because of their immigrant status, were compelled to work as slave labour, trapped in the worst type of mining and estate labour that Alatas describes in considerable detail. The Malays were considered lazy, not because they were really indolent, but because they could resist, and stubbornly resisted, becoming an integral part of colonial capitalism. 'Here was the sociological and ideological origin of the image of the indolent Malays.'<sup>16</sup>

*The Myth of the Lazy Native* was a groundbreaking work that had a profound influence on the scholarship of Orientalism. It offered the first sociological analysis of Orientalism. Hichem Djait's *Europe and Islam*, published in French a year after Alatas's study, presented the first philosophical interpretation. Djait suggested, rather paradoxically, that 'the uniqueness' of Europe's history made it 'incommensurable with (or opposite to) all other societies'. A comparative study of religions or civilizations could hardly be

justified under this condition as Islam had become a problem for Europe by definition. And it constituted a bigger problem than all other non-Western civilizations. While China, for example, represents absolute Otherness, Islam has a number of things in common with Europe; indeed, it was 'one of the root causes' of Europe's 'rise to eminence'. The central problem that Europe has with Islam is that Islam played a predominant part in the ascent of Europe, it provided it with a basis for intellectual, scientific and technological development, 'suffered from and paid for its expansion and, finally, survived to defy the modernity it brought forth'.

Djait's work is much more than simply an insightful survey of Orientalist thought and scholarship – focusing particularly on French Orientalism. He saw Orientalism as a handmaiden to modernity and used Orientalism to offer a powerful critique of modernity. He was also concerned with both, breaking the spell that Orientalism exercises on the Muslim mind and liberating the West from the narrow confines of the Orientalist lore. The emergence of modernity has both left the problem of Orientalism behind and posed it anew. Orientalism does not ask Muslims to Westernize their souls; rather it now insists that they rationalize and modernize their lives. But modernity has also fragmented Western civilizations. Djait writes:

Western culture was bound up with moral values as much as with a certain fundamental aspiration. Both of these, however, have managed to change their content while protecting their overall purpose. The civilization of the West was its way of envisaging life as a whole, its attempt to conquer nature, its endeavour to build, in the cities and the countryside, a particular human existence, and to provide an orientation for human activity. Up until the Industrial Revolution there was a culture and a civilization, and nothing more. Later, and until recently, these two structures succeeded in dominating the nascent power of technology, civilization by harnessing it, culture by simply ignoring it. But the invasion of technological modernity has broken the rhythms of the one and drained the substance of the other. The malaise of the West arises from the fact that it can save neither its culture nor its civilization, because of modernist logic. If the West desired to move boldly and bring about this sort of separation, it would not be able to, precisely because of the long and deep influence that industrialization has had on civilization, as well as because, more significantly, technological thinking itself derives, even though indirectly, from a fundamental cultural choice in favour of rationality. The



renewed stress on regionalism, the impassioned questions raised about the anguish of modern times, the proliferation of sects, the culture of marginality, the rediscovery of communitarian values – all these reactions testify confusedly to the same malaise over the rising tide of inhumanity. And this response comes just when everywhere else one sees at once the longing for that modernity and the extreme difficulty of getting it.<sup>17</sup>

In Djait's analysis, modernity becomes an extension of Orientalism. Modernity's attempts to bring non-Western cultures into the ambit of its own notion of humanity is both a continuation of the project of Orientalism and a reflection of the crisis in Western consciousness. Like Orientalism, modernity enables Homo Occidentalis to continue to act out his Promethean vision: through modernity 'he forces his rhythm and his choices on others, under pain of subjection or historical death'. Modernity ignores real history, its struggles, its violence and its demands. It has incited the non-Western world to fight the West with its own weapons and drown itself in a raving for development. It is foolish to assume, Djait wrote two decades before Samuel Huntington recycled the thesis, that we are heading towards a confrontation of civilizations. Rather, the threat to all cultures and civilization comes from an instrumental modernity. 'And if there is any sort of solidarity that can provide a basis for a truly universal aspiration, it is surely the solidarity of cultures, including that of the West, against the enemy that denies them all: uncontrolled modernity. Within this framework Islam can send home its sublime message.'<sup>18</sup>

The Muslim response to Orientalism, and resistance to Europe, can now take a more positive turn. Muslim intellectuals need to understand Western civilization from within, 'to question it about its essential nature, to explore its contours with both sympathetic commitment and critical detachment'. This becomes particularly pertinent at a time when Western civilization, Djait wrote with brilliant insight, is simultaneously becoming insular and rethinking its origins as is so evident from its politics. This 'auto-reflection', argues Djait, 'is symptomatic of doubt and disarray. It could be the prelude to a desperate kind of self-glorification. In any case, Europe can no longer ignore the world outside or the modesty of its origins'. But Islam too cannot ignore the 'inner drive' of the West or perceive itself in 'monolithic and mythical terms'. Islam needs to be more confident about itself for it is quite evident that

neither the Western civilization nor Marxism are capable of draining its cultural foundations. Thus, historical and critical thought within Islam can get a new grip on the whole situation. 'The Islamic intelligentsia can look at normative Islam from a certain remove, demythologizing its past without the nervous rigidity of self-accusation.' The role of Muslim intellectuals is thus not to put Europe's record or rationality on trial but to 'expose the whole range of European experience, in depth, to other norms, other values, and perhaps other categories. This is the way to hammer out a universal that will not be utopian nor destructive but the outcome of creative synthesis'.<sup>19</sup>

Muslim resistance to Orientalism must maintain a sense of rationality and a sense of history. The Muslims must accept, however false it may be in absolute terms, that they are 'backward'. But what does this 'backwardness' actually mean? 'It means that one fine day the West broke away from the pack of its fellows, running ahead, exhausting both itself and them. But in this unsporting race, with its peculiar rules, the one who jumps out ahead stifles his adversary, and those who fall behind are crushed.' The backwardness of Muslims 'is the dark side of the breathless race run by the West, which has chosen the pace, the terrain, and the goal'. However, because this 'backwardness' really exists, it makes modernity all the more tempting and catching up with the West that much more necessary. But since this gap is impossible to bridge, it is even more important for Islam to preserve its other values: an identity, a culture, a civilization. In other words: Islam 'should safeguard, cultivate, and refine its share, which is great, in the human enterprise'.<sup>20</sup>

### Edward Said and his critics

Before the publication of *Orientalism*, Edward Said's much cited and contested study, critiques of Orientalism were confined to disciplinary boundaries such as Islamic studies, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, history and philosophy of history. Said, a Palestinian/American scholar, intellectual and activist, borrowed and built upon the earlier studies of Tibawi, Alatas, Abdel-Malek, Djait and others such as Abdullah Laroui, Talal Asad, K.M. Panikkar and Ramila Thapar; but he did not acknowledge any of them. Indeed, *Orientalism* seems to have emerged ready-made and

fully-fledged, as though from nowhere, and proceeded to shape and dominate the debate.

What are the differences between *Orientalism* and previous works? Aijaz Ahmad identifies Said's treatment of French Orientalists, such as Chateaubriand, Nerval and Flaubert, and his use of the Foucauldian discursive theory as unique features of *Orientalism*.<sup>21</sup> Yet, in comparison to Djait's insightful analysis of French Orientalists, Said's treatment is easily forgettable. Moreover, long before both Foucault and Said became fashionable, Marshall Hodgson had argued, in a dazzling series of essays published between 1940 and 1960, that Orientalism, as a discipline and discourse of power, perpetuated the dominance of the West over the non-West.<sup>22</sup> The Orientalist outlook, Hodgson had suggested, was rooted in the Western notion of world history; and both Orientalism and Western civilization are based on the assumption that civilizations have essences and that these essences are to be found in the Great Books they have produced. Hodgson argued that the Great Books approach reduces history to a farce, obliterates change and presents the past in dramatic forms: as tragedy, in the case of Muslim civilization, or triumph, in the case of Western society. Thus we get the history of the West as a story of freedom and rationality and the history of the East ('pick an East, any East'), as a story of despotism and cultural stagnation. The idea of civilization as a discrete regional entity, Hodgson argued further, was quite meaningless. Muslim civilization, for example, is not limited to the Middle East or Asia. Its global nature makes it difficult for it to be studied as a discrete, regional entity. Islam broke many regional and civilizational barriers producing numerous new social and cultural hybrid forms which while undeniably Islamic were also unquestionably Arab, Indian, Chinese, Turkish and African. Only when Islam is studied as a global phenomenon does its history make sense. In the three-volume *Venture of Islam*, his best-known work, Hodgson showed what world history looks like when studied from an Islamic perspective.<sup>23</sup> Suddenly, Muslim civilization does not appear as a truncated version of the West but as a maker of global history on its own terms. Hodgson did not use the language of Foucauldian discursive theory but he presents Orientalism as a grand narrative that was used not just to misrepresent Islam but to make the history of Islam a small tributary in the grand universal history of Western, secular civilization.

So, is *Orientalism* saying anything new? Said is certainly not raising any new questions; neither is he providing a critique more profound or more thorough than his predecessors. As James Clifford noted, 'in the French context, the kinds of critical questions posed by Said have been familiar since the Algerian war and may be found strongly expressed well before 1950'.<sup>24</sup> In Britain, through a steady stream of books and papers, Norman Daniel and R.W. Southern had produced a consolidated picture of the origins, development and persistence of the Western images of Islam. On purely scholarly terms, Said's contribution is not very significant when compared to Hodgson, Daniel and Southern on the one hand, and Tibawi, Alatas and Djait on the other. Nevertheless, Said's book did start a new debate focused specifically on something called 'the Orient'. So what is this new debate based upon?

The new debate is based on three innovative features of *Orientalism*. First, to the standard scholarly and historical analysis, Said added a new dimension: literary criticism. To Arabists like Ockley and Gibb, colonial administrators like Cromer and Curzon, travellers like Burton and Doughty, historians like Muir, and Frenchmen such as Volney and Chateaubriand, Said added a new category: the values that enabled empire and imperial exploitation, he argued, also shaped not just the fiction of writers like Kipling, Forster and Conrad but the novels of even those figures we rarely associate with imperialism, such as Austen, Dickens, Hardy and Henry James. Indeed, Said contends, there would have been no European novel without imperialism. Second, Said was able to bring the different strands of critiques under a single interdisciplinary framework which transformed disciplinary critiques of Orientalism into multidisciplinary cultural analysis. Third, by using the language of Foucauldian discursive theory and literary criticism, Said was able to place the repackaged critiques of Orientalism into a new strategic location. It was this location, and Said's representation of Orientalism as the 'grandest of all narratives', an all-encompassing discourse that both represented and contained the Orient, that are the key to the success of *Orientalism*. Of course, Said's own location in the metropolitan academy of the West, and the fashionable genre of literary criticism, were also important. In contrast, Tibawi was working in the relatively obscure field of Islamic studies; Alatas was located in Singapore and worked in sociology from the unfashionable Third World perspective; Djait wrote

in Arabic and lived in Tunis (although his work was translated, first into French and later into English); Hodgson was strictly a historian of world history; and Daniel and Southern were working essentially in European history. Paradoxically, the success of *Orientalism* is based on the very dynamic that sustained Orientalism as an arch discourse in the first place!

In presenting Orientalism as a meta-discourse, Said was able to incorporate all previous definitions of Orientalism into his analysis. So, Said defined Orientalism as:

- 1 The classical tradition of studying a region by means of its languages and writings; thus anyone who teaches, researches or writes about the Orient is an Orientalist. It is in this form that Orientalism lives on through its doctrines and theses, with expert Orientalist as its main authority.
- 2 'A way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience.'<sup>25</sup>
- 3 An overarching style of thought, with a history going back to antiquity, based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the 'Orient' and 'the Occident'.
- 4 A 'western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.'
- 5 'A library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held. What bound the archive together was a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective. These ideas explained the behaviour of the Orientals; they supplied the Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed the Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics.'<sup>27</sup>
- 6 A 'system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western Empire.'<sup>28</sup>
- 7 The western 'corporate institution' responsible for dealing with the Orient: describing it, containing it, controlling it, teaching and learning about it, making statements about it, authorizing views of it and ruling over it by these and other means.

Using these all-embracing but contradictory definitions, Said constructs Orientalism as a relatively unified discourse spanning the entire course of history from antiquity to contemporary times. The

book presents a genealogy of Orientalism in which the basic features of the discourse repeat themselves in different epochs of human history. Said's most significant argument is that Orientalist 'texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition',<sup>29</sup> which then shapes all further learning about the Orient. Moreover, this knowledge tradition is so integrated with structures of economic and political power that it became handmaiden to colonialism; indeed, it articulated the forces of colonial aspirations and justified colonialism in advance. *Orientalism* tries to demonstrate both how Europe invented the fiction of the Orient and the Orientals and how this representation was used as an instrument for control and subjugation in colonialism. Such a sweeping and all-embracing definition of Orientalism obviously contains many seeds of contention. And *Orientalism* has received praise and derision in equal measure.

Perhaps one should begin by stating the obvious. *Orientalism* is not an anti-Western polemic nor is it pro-Islamic. Neither is Said representing Orientalism as a conspiracy nor portraying the West as evil. All of these have been suggested by otherwise quite respectable writers. The defence of the practice of Orientalism as well as of the West and imperialism that have come as a retort to the book are also rather transparent. For example, the argument of Bernard Lewis, a senior statesman of Zionist historiography, that Orientalism is disinterested scholarship and thus above criticism is just too weak and ludicrous to deserve serious attention. In the essays collected in *Islam and the West*, many of which provide excellent models of Said's critique, Lewis suggests that Orientalism is a neutral, rather innocent, classical discipline, much too specialized to be amenable to criticism from the outside.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Orientalism has nothing to do with politics and power; there is no connection between Orientalism and imperialism, between the rise of Orientalist scholarship and the European acquisition of empires in Asia and Africa, and between Orientalism and the image of Islam as the darker side of Europe. Lewis also seemed to be troubled by the interdisciplinary nature of Orientalism; quite natural for a scholar with his own disciplinary territory to defend and preserve. He thus questions Said's professional competence: while someone like Tibawi may be qualified to take on Lewis, what qualifications did Said have to stray on the intellectual patch called



Islamic studies? This flat-earth view of Orientalism is also shared by Ernest Gellner. Gellner, who accused Said of 'facile inverse colonialism', was a great believer both in the 'scientific' nature of 'social sciences' and in the Enlightenment project. It is thus hardly surprising that he was troubled by the notion of Orientalism, which he dismissed as an invented 'bogey'; Orientalists like Bernard Lewis, for Gellner, offered a 'dispassionate analysis' of Islam and other cultures. Gellner's objectivity was clearly deeply subjective for he was always eager to project the good in imperialism. He wrote in a review of Said's *Culture and Imperialism*:

Mobility, egalitarianism and free choice of identity have better prospects in the modern world than they had in the past. Should there not, on the part of one who seems to value this free, individualist choice of identity, be at least some expression of gratitude towards the process which has made such a free choice so much easier – even if it also for a time engendered an initial disparity of power between early and later beneficiaries of modernity?<sup>31</sup>

Both Lewis and Gellner represent a body of critical stance on Said that Richard Fox has described as 'an unreflective opposition, who refuse to budge from the idea of a value-free scholarship, which is as mythical as any epic tale from India'.<sup>32</sup>

There are, however, some very deep theoretical problems both with *Orientalism* itself and Said's own position on the discourse. His notion of the 'Orient' is both too limited and too general. It is limited to the Middle East and suggests that it is unique both in the way it is represented by the West and the kind of imperialist or oppressive writing produced about it. As I have tried to show, Orientalism was by no means limited to Islam and Muslims; it was applied, with and without changes and modifications, equally forcefully to all other Orients: Chinese, Indian, Southeast Asian and others. But Said's Orient is also so broad that it transcends time and history, disciplines and genres and, as such, it is limited both in its analytical capability as well as explanatory power.

A common criticism of Said is that he has presented Orientalism as an unchanging, monolithic, predominantly male-orientated discourse. In contrast, Orientalism itself expressed a whole range of voices, Islamophobics as well as lovers of Islam, hegemonic movements as well as counter-hegemonic endeavours, differentiated by gender, ideology and sexual preference. Said's reduction of this

diversity and heterogeneity actually amounts to Occidentalism – a stereotyping in reverse. In *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, John MacKenzie takes it upon himself to unravel the true variety and changing character of Orientalism. After a detailed examination of Orientalist art, theatre, music design and architecture, MacKenzie concludes:

the artistic record of imperial culture has in fact been one of constant change, instability, heterogeneity and sheer porousness. It is impossible to recognise either the 'essentialised, basically unchanging Self' or the freezing of 'the Other in a kind of basic objecthood'. The western arts in fact sought contamination at every turn, restlessly seeking renewal and reinvigoration through contacts with other traditions. And both Self and Other were locked into processes of mutual modification, sometimes slow but inexorable, sometimes running as fast as a recently unfrozen river ... the 'oriental obsession' was a continuing and constantly changing phenomenon, repeatedly adapted to the needs of the age and the yearning for innovation. Time and again, composers discovered their most distinctive voice thorough the handling of exotica. These were not passing fads, nor were they mere embellishments which ultimately left western forms unchanged ... the capacity for assimilation often obscured the graft, but the resulting artistic organism was unquestionably new and different from that which had avoided all such contacts with the Other.<sup>33</sup>

But is there a contradiction, let alone an irreconcilable disparity, in arguing that Orientalism was as diverse, heterogeneous and porous as described by MacKenzie but was also enveloped in a worldview that saw the Orient from an essentialist standpoint which suggested some kind of enduring Oriental reality? In Islam, for example, there is a single worldview based on the idea of *tawheed*, the notion of one, omnipotent, God, that has generated a whole array of different outlooks, traditions, customs and lifestyles. Surely, diversity and complexity do not exclude collective arrogance or a common Western location far and above the Orient? Just because, as MacKenzie states, 'Orientalism was endlessly protean, as often consumed by admiration and reverence as by denigration and depreciation'<sup>34</sup> does not mean that it cannot, at the same time, be obsessed with the Other in a manner that the Other found denigrating, even in its admiring form. A paedophile admires and reveres a child before he denigrates and depreciates it! MacKenzie's argument sets up an artificial duality based on either/or logic;

the complexity of Orientalism suggests that it could/can be both: a rich and diverse enterprise conducted within an arch narrative.

If, as Said maintains, Orientalism consists of nothing but representation which has little to do with the 'real Orient', how was it possible for this imaginary construction and its knowledge to be put in the service of real imperialism, colonial conquest, occupation and administration? Notes Young:

This means that at a certain moment Orientalism as representation did have to encounter the 'actual' conditions of what was there, and that it showed itself effective at a material level as a form of power and control. How then can Said argue that the 'Orient' is just a representation, if he also wants to claim that 'Orientalism' provided the necessary knowledge for actual colonial conquest?<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, is all representation misrepresentation? If representation can have an essence of truth, as Said sometimes implies, then, as Dennis Porter asks, 'how can it be justified on the basis of a radical discourse theory which presupposes the impossibility of stepping outside of a given discursive formation by an act of will or consciousness?' This 'fundamental contradiction' remains unresolved in *Orientalism*, Porter believes, 'due to the incomparability of the thought of Said's two acknowledged *maitres*, Foucault and Gramsci, of discourse theory and hegemonic theory'.<sup>36</sup> Hegemony involves some notion of historical process 'in concrete historical conjunctures, as an evolving sphere of superstructural conflict in which power relations are continually reasserted, challenged, modified' – a notion that is 'absent from Said's book'.<sup>37</sup> Said is thus:

led to claim a continuity of representation between the Greece of Alexander the Great and the United States of President Jimmy Carter, a claim that seems to make nonsense of history at the same time as it invokes it with reference to imperial power/knowledge. Accordingly, one important reason why Said apparently cannot suggest the form alternatives to Orientalism might take in the present is that his use of discourse theory prevents him from seeing any evidence of such alternatives in the past. In fact because he does not reflect on the significance of hegemony as process, he ignores in both Western scholarly and creative writing all manifestations of counter-hegemonic thought . . . The consequence (of this) is serious. The failure to take account of such efforts and contributions not only opens Said to the charge of promoting Occidentalism, it also contributes to the perpetuation of that Orientalist thought he set out to demystify in the first place.<sup>38</sup>

Orientalism's failure, Said argues, has 'been a human as much as an intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience'.<sup>39</sup> But the idea of 'human' that Said invokes is itself part and parcel of the very same tradition that fabricated Orientalism. Notes Young:

It was produced from the very same culture that constructed not just anti-humanist Orientalism, but also, as Said himself points out, the racist ideology of the superiority of the 'White Man' whose rhetoric of Arnoldian 'high cultural humanism' was defined against the intellectual and cultural depravity of the colonies.<sup>40</sup>

Young suggests that Said is unwilling to address the complexity of his position; Aijaz Ahmad notes that Said embraces the ideal of humanist values 'precisely at the time when humanism-as-history has been rejected so unequivocally'.<sup>41</sup> Said's paradoxical relationship with Western humanistic tradition leads to some strange anomalies. In particular, notes Ahmad, it suggests that:

- (a) there is a unified European/Western identity which is at the origin of history and has shaped this history through its thought and its texts;
- (b) this seamless and unified history of European identity and thought runs from Ancient Greece up to the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, through a specific set of beliefs and values which remain essentially the same, only becoming more dense; and
- (c) that this history is immanent in – and therefore available for reconstruction through – the canon of its great books. Said subscribes to the structure of this idealist metaphysic even though he obviously questions the greatness of some of those 'great' books. In other words, he duplicates all those procedures even as he debunks the very tradition from which he has borrowed them.<sup>42</sup>

An objection commonly raised against *Orientalism* is that it offers no alternative to the discourse it critiques. Indeed, Said sees no reason why there should be an alternative: 'the general, essentialist paradigms which constitute knowledge of "the Orient" also constitute "the Orient" as an object in the first place – to provide an alternative to Orientalism would be to accept the existence of the very thing in dispute'.<sup>43</sup> Said insists that the object (the Orient)

cannot challenge the subject (the Orientalists) by developing alternative models. But, as Michael Richardson notes, 'since the object has no real existence, being only a conceptualisation of the subject's mind, it can never be a question of the former acting upon the latter'. The only way out of this impasse is for the subject to represent the object more faithfully. But how can this be achieved? By the representations concurring with Said's own understanding? 'By what right can Said stand as a representative of the Orient? He is consequently forced in to a position that relies on precisely the same discourse he is criticising'.<sup>44</sup> Thus, while Said gives lip service to such alternative discourses as feminism and subaltern studies, he actually has no use of these discourses.

An alternative to Orientalism is not possible for Said, I would argue, because for him there is no option beyond secular humanism and its high culture. For Said, there is only one culture: European high culture which somehow contains all the seeds of resistance and liberation. Said exhibits as much hatred for things non-Western as the Orientalists showed towards things oriental. In his books on Palestine, which even his strongest critics have praised, a distinct dislike for Islam and Islamic culture is more than evident; and Said is never too far from the classic trope of Orientalism in his depiction of Muslims. In *The Politics of Dispossession*, for example, the believing Muslims are dismissed as 'traditional' – the very word has notions of inferiority – simple, emotional, conformists. The '58 million Egyptians', Said tells us, all fall 'back into simple patterns of Islamic conformity' and seek 'emotional comfort' from their religion.<sup>45</sup> That religion could have real meaning for people, that it can be just as rational as humanism, are totally alien notions for Said. Hence he retreats into the classical European depiction of the Oriental as a child-like entity driven purely by emotional needs. In Said's vision there is no place for alternatives and in his world there is no place for Islam or Muslims to exist by their own definition. While all Islam, for Said, is a figment of someone's imagination, 'acts of will and interpretation',<sup>46</sup> secular humanism emerges in his thought as something real and concrete that he employs with all the force of neo-colonialism.

This is why any notion of resistance is so conspicuously absent from *Orientalism*. The native recipient of this discourse is passive and mute – a point Said reiterates in 'Orientalism Reconsidered'.<sup>47</sup>

Neither does the West offer an internal resistance to the discourse of Orientalism. Thus, far from offering resistance to Eurocentrism, I would argue that Said's construction of Orientalism takes the project of secular and Eurocentric discourse towards a new trajectory. His secular critique is as much a 'style of thought' and as ontologically and epistemologically rooted as the distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident' that Said describes as the major characteristic of Orientalism. Indeed, in direct parallel to 'the Orient' and 'the Occident', Said posits a new binary duality, 'secular world' and religious world – echoing Salman Rushdie's construction of 'the light of secularism' versus 'the darkness of religion'. 'The secular world – our world', he writes, provides us with a sense of history, human worth and a 'healthy scepticism' about 'various official idols venerated by culture'.<sup>48</sup> Religion, on the other hand, is based on superstitions, has no basis for thought nor can it explain anything 'except by consensus and appeals to authority'. Now, this is not just a specifically Enlightenment notion of religion, it is also an Orientalist construction of Islam – the idea of authority through consensus being a particularly Islamic one. Through this 'appeal to authority', Said suggests, human beings have suffered more violence, more conflicts and more oppression than anything else. Religious wars and conflicts are the main reasons for untold tragedies in history and in our time. This uncritical stand on religion is not only totally incorrect but also less than competent. In purely statistical terms, secular ideologies in the form of fascism, Marxism, Stalinism, Maoism, Pot Pholism, nationalism, instrumental rationality, modernity, development and other notions have produced a level of violence that is not just greater but several orders of magnitude above anything that religious conflict has and can manage. Said presents 'Islamic fundamentalism' as an ahistorical phenomenon and then generalizes Islam within its framework. His romantic association with Western high culture blinds him not just from seeing that Orientalism, like colonialism, fractured and dehumanized Western civilization itself – a point so eloquently argued by Djait – but also that humanism is intrinsic to the worldview of Islam. Indeed, as George Makdisi has shown so brilliantly, it has deep roots in Islam.<sup>49</sup> Humanism came to Europe from Islam in the twelfth century along with the vast corpus of Muslim scholarship. Not only does Said refuse to acknowledge this history, he never allows Islam – its worldview, its history, its enlightened scholars –



to speak for themselves but insists on presenting a grotesque parody of Islam of his own construction.

This brings us back to the question of 'intellectual competence' which Said values more than 'truth or freedom' for it is the 'new prize' acquired by postmodern intellectuals.<sup>50</sup> But Said's own treatment of Islam betrays a serious ignorance of Islamic history and spirituality, Islamic political theory and history of Islamic science and learning, not to mention the vast contemporary Muslim scholarship of resistance and alternatives. But there is more than simply incompetence at work here. The logical conclusion of the discourse of Orientalism as constructed by Said is that all professional scholarship, to use the words of Bruce Robbins, is 'inherently elite and undemocratic' and 'based on a denial of self-representation to the oppressed, making possible a monopoly of uncontested and degrading representations of them by authoritative, self-accredited professionals' in the service of dominant groups. Scholarly careers are made not just by representing those who cannot represent themselves but by 'keeping the unrepresented from representing themselves, substituting their own elite intellectual work for the voices of the oppressed even as they claim to represent those voices'.<sup>51</sup>

We have placed the most influential contemporary theory and definition of Orientalism within the Orientalist tradition itself. Does any theory or practice that can be called Orientalism still exist? Said's definition is just one among many definitions; and his attempts at formulating a theory of Orientalism will always be open to criticism. It presents its own selection and structure to the common features of an ongoing theory and practice that is continually being remade. It is the process of remaking which links the Middle Ages to the diversity of Orientalism that is at work and among us today as contemporary praxis.

# Notes

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