Introduction
From solipsism to Orientalism

In 1810, recently recovered from an intense fever and self-exiled in the Greek countryside, a young Byron was very, very lonely:

> As for England, it is long since I have heard from it, every one at all connected with my concerns is asleep, and you are my only correspondent, agents excepted.—I have really no friends in the world, though all my school companions have gone forth into the world, and walk about in monstrous disguises, in the garb of Guardsmen, lawyers, parsons, fine gentlemen, and other such masquerade dresses.—So I have shaken hands and cut with all these busy people, none of whom write to me, indeed I asked it not, and here I am a poor traveller and heathenish philosopher, who hath perambulated the greatest part of the Levant, and seen a great quantity of very improveable land and sea, and after all am no better than when I set out, Lord help me.[1]

If Wordsworth had once wandered lonely as a cloud, Byron simply wandered, lonely. Unlike Wordsworth's famous "inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude" (21–2), a mode of perception and reflection enlivened by "vacant" or "pensive moods" (20),[2] Byron's own eye can scarcely look at what he is or what he has become. The two versions of himself, though separated by fifteen months and thousands of miles of nameless "adventures," are scarcely different. Byron cannot, in short, escape himself. Thus while Wordsworth's memories of the receptive "host, of golden daffodils" (4) help bring him out of his wandering solipsism and work to enable an identification between the poet and external reality, Byron's memories don "monstrous disguises" and march somnambulantly into the world. Each of their solitudes is populous, and yet Wordsworth's "host" seems far more receptive to his presence, and he of it, than Byron's "busy people."

In a deep sense the manifold differences between Byron and Wordsworth, and perhaps between the First and Second Generation Romantics, are crystallized in their respective treatments of solitude and identity. For Wordsworth, the border between similitude and dissimilitude

is typically porous and mutable. Wordsworth's simile *as a cloud* works to mediate the solitary poet and the world – indeed, this figurative *as* eventually links the poet to nature, humanity, and his past and future selves.[3] But Byron remains stubbornly skeptical of the process of identification and growth – that which is the same, remains the same, and that which is different, remains different. The best, or worst, a person can do is "don" a "disguise" – "*what*," asks Byron in *Don Juan*, "after *all*, are *all* things – but a *show*?" (VII.2).[4] Even within Byron's optimistically imperialist survey of "the great quantity of very improveable land and sea" we are left with a bitter pun. Not only are these lands subject to improvement in a way that Byron himself is not, but these lands, and indeed the Levant and the Orient generally, lack a certain reality. The lands, caught in a narrative of progress, are *un*-provable, that is, potentially illusory. Byron cannot, once again, escape the unchanging solitude of himself. The imagination, Wordsworth's engine of identification and unity, becomes for Byron an Orientalizing dream machine.

And yet, in typical Byronic fashion, the tone of his plaint abruptly changes key. Having reached an apotheosis of isolation, Byron quickly declares to Hodgeson that writing cannot heal internal wounds or patch up friendships with former selves, but can serve to distract one from loneliness: "the end of all scribblement is to amuse."[5] The remainder of the letter relates a memory of Byron's friend desperately, comically trying to save the unfinished manuscript of an "unactable" farce from a burning Drury Lane theater. Thus we see two very different reactions to solitude: Wordsworth leaps into a mimetic play of memory, figuration, and forgetting; Byron, like Childe Harold, seeks a "change of scene" (I.54) in the Orient and, finding neither company nor *Bildung*, turns to farce.[6] This ironic attitude is carried through to the other side of Byron's career when a weathered, sardonic narrator describes a young Juan as

> Silent and pensive, idle, restless, slow,
> His home deserted for the lonely wood,
> Tormented with a wound he could not know,
> His, like all deep grief, plunged in solitude:
> I'm fond myself of solitude or so,
> But then, I beg it may be understood,
> By solitude I mean a Sultan's, not
> A hermit's, with a harem for a grot.
>
> (Canto I stanza 87)

For Byron the problem of solitude is never resolved or dialectically incorporated, as in Wordsworth, but must simply be endured and,

subsequently, made fun of. In linking the hermit's (Wordsworth's) solitude to the "Sultan's," Byron also thereby ties the two solitudes to a third: the Orientalist's.[7] The "harem for a grot" that *Juan*'s jocular narrator prefers is, in other words, pure fantasy. This book claims that Orientalism for Byron, and for the Young Romantics more generally, is therefore a symptom of solitude and, more precisely, of solipsism: it is a projection of the Orientalist's fears and desires that shares a fundamental logic with Wordsworth's poetic project.

But why then do the Young Romantics – Byron, Keats, Shelley – stage so much of their poetry in Oriental or Orientalized settings? An easy answer is that everybody was doing it. In the wake of Southey's epics *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) and *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), the era saw a flood of interest in the Orient. Said's *Orientalism* (1979), indeed, assumes "modern Orientalism to have begun" in the "late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries."[8] And Regency England's Orientalist culture is certainly half the reason so much of the Young Romantics' art is about the East.

In this book, however, I argue that any historical answer must be firmly grounded in the Young Romantics' philosophical, political, and poetic commitments. The Orient – self-critically understood by the Young Romantics as a historically determined fantasmatic projection of the West's own fears and desires – provides a setting in which to explore and critique the epistemological, existential, and above all political limits of their own solipsistic imaginations. It is simultaneously an escape from and return to the self, a vicious circle. While in a certain sense this is Orientalism by definition and at its most potent, this book argues that the Young Romantics' treatment of the Orient becomes – because it is nearly always self-conscious and ironic – itself a critique of the Orientalism practiced by the eighteenth century and the First Generation Romantics. Where the First Generation Romantics often saw a potential solution in the self (as in Coleridge's "I am that I am" or Wordsworth's "bliss of solitude"), the younger Romantics see only an endless desert of questions – an imagined waste populated by their own fears and ideals. And nowhere is that fantasmatic projection more apparent to the Young Romantics than in Europe's construction of the Orient. As Said says, the Orientalist sees "the Orient not as it is, but the Orient as it has been Orientalized."[9] That "Orientalized" Orient is a construction to which the Young Romantics often apply a rigorous and sustained Romantic irony. Poems like Shelley's *Alastor* (1816) and *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), Byron's "Eastern" Tales (1812–16), or even Keats's *Lamia* (1821) anticipate Said's critique, and postcolonial studies more generally, *avant la lettre*.

The problem with the Young Romantics' astute critique of Orientalism, however, is precisely its astuteness – it leads the reader into an icy maze of irony, doubt, and figuration, and then asks her to find her way back to the rough ground of lived experience and political praxis. More often than not, whether in Regency England or today, the reader finds it far easier to subsume all Oriental allusion under the vague rubric of exoticism. This book therefore aims to trace a careful genealogy of these allusions and genres to demonstrate that they are often – though not always – strategically employed to undercut the West's imperial stance towards the East.[10] These poets thereby wrestle with one of the most pressing and overlooked problems of an age dominated by colonial expansion, the fear of revolution, and the information explosion of the human sciences: how to found a politics that not only incorporates regional difference within a nation, but that also remains attentive to even the most radical difference imaginable. In contemporary parlance one might refer to the Subaltern or the Orientalized Other, but in the Romantic age no such shorthand existed. What they did have, however, were evolving, migrant genres such as the Oriental tale or Southey's Oriental Epic-Romances, which generated and codified new modes of imagining the Empire's relationship to the East. For the Young Romantics, therefore, literature becomes a privileged space in which to explore, repurpose or critique that political imaginary, even if such explorations – say, Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* (1818) or the peasant rebellion in Byron's *Lara* (1814) – ironically mark themselves as clear failures of imagination.[11]

Their project is grown from tangled roots that reach deep into the history of philosophy, literature, and politics, and thus this introduction traces the twined genealogies of solipsism and Orientalism through the eighteenth century and early Romanticism. Following the chapter summaries here, this introduction contains three subsections. The first is methodological, and includes a critical engagement with recent approaches to reading Romanticism's vexed relationship to colonialism, empire, and "the East." The second is a case study which reads Wordsworth's "Dream of the Arab" episode as complicating both solipsism and Orientalism, drawing particular attention to the episode's figure of the dreaming friend. I conclude the introduction with a final case study, on Romantic "generations," particularly in the work of Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Shelley. This book also contains two "interchapters." The first close reads Montesquieu's "Oriental" Despot. The despotic state, firmly determined by an unchanging "Asiatic" climate, is defined solely in terms of the solipsistic whims of the Oriental Despot: "referring everything to himself exclusively, [he] reduces the state

to its capital, the capital to its court, and the court to his person alone."[12] Indeed, I later argue that *Lara* (1814) and *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) suggest that such despotism defines not the Orient as such, but the European Orientalist. A second interchapter, "Rousseau's Foreigners," argues for the centrality of the *étranger* and "foreign will" in Rousseau's political thought, an indispensable model for thinking through the Young Romantics' emancipatory political projects.

My first chapter makes the long overdue case that Robert Southey's Orientalist epics are the key influences on the Young Romantics' poetic engagements with the East. Beginning from the unconventional premise that Southey is every bit as philosophically astute as his fellow First Generation Romantics, the chapter argues that he applies a very "High Romantic" sensibility to the more overtly empirical studies of the Orient from which he gathered his "facts." His acumen – particularly his complex, if problematic, reading of fatalism, what he calls "the vice of the East" – reveals for the first time in the Romantic age that writing about "the East" was at once an empirically, epistemologically, aesthetically, and ethically fraught process. One could never know the extent to which one's Orientalist sources were reliable, or exactly what sorts of information constituted "knowledge" of a foreign culture in the first place. Even more difficult was the task of finding the proper form in which to best convey the "pure truth, pure language, and pure manners," as Southey put it, of a foreign culture. It has become common to read the copious footnotes of *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) as Southey's clumsy attempt to qualify these questions and situate himself with respect to a particular reading of Islam. My chapter, by contrast, proposes that those footnotes, and hence Southey's entire Orientalist project, cannot be understood outside of a careful reading of *Thalaba*'s convoluted verse, which critics counterintuitively overlook. Specifically, I argue that Southey's epic self-consciously borrows and distances itself from three versions of "Islamic" or "Eastern" writing: the arabesque, the Koran, and the oft-intoned "Book of Fate." This textual dialectic of imitation and distantiation constitutes Southey's conflicted brand of Orientalism, one which the Young Romantics subsequently inherit and critique.

"Byron's Lament: *Lara* and the specter of Orientalism," my second chapter, reads Byron's oblique, unpopular, "final" Eastern Tale as an acute critique of Orientalism, both textual and political. The poem concerns the Byronic Lara, who returns to his Spanish home from years of unnamed Oriental travels. My reading focuses on Lara's hidden "wound," a recurring trauma that no "glance could well reveal, or accent breathe," and

argues that that psychic wound is complexly tied to the "wondrous wilds, and deserts vast, / In those far lands where he had wander'd lone." That is, Lara's past trauma is deeply connected to the Orient, via both past fact and productive fantasy. After his death Lara's trauma becomes "some phantom's wound," an open psychic sore that Kaled, Lara's gender-bending Eastern page, can never properly heal. Such a phantom wound – which torments the Western Lara and Eastern Kaled, and causes the poem's doomed and bloody peasant rebellion – constitutes Orientalism itself. This fantasmatic projection of the East is what I call the Spectral Orient. With that concept *Lara* initiates a subtle critique of the Orientalism practiced in not only Southey and in eighteenth-century works such as Beckford's *Vathek*, but also in Byron's own earlier Eastern Tales, of which *Lara* is a rewriting.

Though largely unappreciated in Byron's time, *Lara* was, suggestively, Shelley's early favorite of Byron's poems, particularly as he composed *Alastor* in 1815–16. Chapter 3 ("The spirit of Oriental solitude") contends that *Alastor*'s questing Poet and its unreliable Narrator are particular kinds of Orientalists, and that the poem's counterplot unworks their authority. That Orientalism is born of a kind of solitude that closes itself off from authentically ethical or "human" interaction with others – in the Poet's case, from the "Arab maiden" who brings him food. That is, his (Orientalizing) solitude forecloses him from one of Shelley's most vexed concepts, love. The chapter's second half extends and complicates this argument through an analysis of Shelley's late lyric *Epipsychidion*, making the case that the poem employs a Lucretian materialism to unmoor both Platonic idealism and High Romantic notions of unity. As in *Alastor*, the drive to such fusion, even if propelled by love, bears the mark of despotism.

Building upon my reading of the ethics of imperialism in those poems, Chapter 4 ("'The great sandy desert of Politics': *The Revolt of Islam*") turns to its properly political dimensions. I ask, specifically, the longstanding question: why does *The Revolt* take place in "Constantinople and modern Greece" if it depicts "such a revolution as might be supposed to take place in an European nation"? My answer is that in setting its events in the Near East *The Revolt* brings us into the dark heart of the European political imaginary, one based in the notion of Oriental despotism. To this flattening ideology Shelley opposes the revivifying poetic imagination, whose figure is the whirlwind in the desert. *The Revolt*'s central crisis, however, is that despotism and custom (drives towards a solitude of perpetual sameness) are depicted as only minimally different from revolution and poetic renaming (which strive to awaken one from deadening solitude and the

deadlock of history). The poem asks, in other words, how the poet's solitude differs from the Despot's. For example, the protagonist Laon's name, originally a slogan of revolutionary hope, becomes a reactionary war cry; and his sister changes her name from Cythna to Laone, both a generative poetic renaming of revolution and a haunting anagram for *alone*. Laon and Cythna stand, I argue, as instances of the Rousseauian *étranger*, using their solitude and foreignness to re-found and re-awaken the polis. I then show how the desert – both an Oriental trope and the poem's key figure for exploring recombinant poetics – points to how Orientalism is itself a kind of despotism: repetition of the same in the guise of the new. *The Revolt*'s own failure to imagine a lasting revolution is thus linked to Orientalism's failure to imagine something other than itself.

The first four chapters examine solitude and Orientalism from several overlapping angles: culture and religion (Southey), psychology (Byron), ethics and materialism (*Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*), and politics (*The Revolt*). My final chapter ("Unperplexing bliss: the Orient in Keats's *Poetics*") brings the project's investigation into the realm of consumerism. In it I read the late romance *Lamia* as a rethinking of Keats's earlier treatments of the East (most notably *Endymion*'s Indian Maiden scenes), and two stories from Henry Weber's (fabricated) *Tales of the East* (1812). The locus of my investigation is Lamia herself and the curious – and critically neglected – "Persian mutes," guardians of Lamia's private fantasy and "seen about the markets" of Corinth. *Lamia* thinks deeply about how individuals, markets, critical communities, and schools create, manage, and distribute fantasies; indeed, the ways in which fantasy mediates the public and the private, or "Eastern" and "Western," becomes a central theme. But above all *Lamia* is about entanglement and blending, and in it Orientalism itself becomes a kind of discursive entanglement. Like fantasy or capital (which it resembles), Orientalism entangles everything: styles, objects, feelings, places, colors, ideas, texts, readers, and even authors. Upon publication of his *Poems* (1817), Keats found himself grouped together not merely with "the Cockney School," but with "the Orient," despite his volume making little or no reference to it. Keats's view of Orientalism as a discursive entanglement provides a natural bridge between the fiercely solipsistic versions described in the Romantic era and the far more diffuse and consumerist Orientalism of the Victorians.

It is a topic broached by the First Generation, both in the abstract and also in specific relation to East. In this introduction's third section I use Wordsworth's Dream of the Arab episode to illustrate how Orientalism, and its unmasking, is predicated on manipulating pre-existing texts,

genres, and discursive fields. Critique, whether successful or not, needs a ground on which to find its footing. The terrain of Wordsworth's Dream of the Arab episode comes largely from the title of its chapter, "Books." The Orient is no longer simply a physical site, but an ideological and ideational one – a dream prompted by reading told, retold, and then written into verse. It becomes the ground on which other contests are waged, discourses are mediated, positions are defended, tropes are figured and unwound. Like Schlegel's description of the transcendental self, the Orient in the Romantic era at times seemed "infinitely elastic." Site, figure, medium, discourse – it was all these things, sometimes at once. And yet it was also a real place – or rather, a constellation of places. And the self was also undeniably a historically anchored individual self – or a "republic or commonwealth" of selves, as Hume would have it.[13] These slippages – between real and ideal, constellation and projection, parts and whole, constative and performative, self and Orient – shape the Young Romantics' engagements with the East, and are the topic of this book.

Romantic Orientalism: irony, critique, problematization

The current state of Romantic Orientalism resists easy summary, not only for its growing breadth and diversity, but because it blends with and crosses so many other currents in Romanticism. Indeed, an argument underlying this book is that fields, discourses, and reading practices aren't so separable. I think Keats's *Lamia* has it frustratingly correct: Orientalism is entangled with everything. The Orient, for the Young Romantics, is simultaneously a product or projection of the era's trends, a way of intervening in those trends, and a constellation of places and peoples in its (and their) own right. But the Orient's uncomfortable multeity is itself also a problem for the Young Romantics, just as it has become one for Romantic studies. Thus before tackling Wordsworth's Dream of the Arab and Romantic theories of "generations," this introductory chapter engages some prominent works and useful currents in Romantic Orientalism. Particularly important is how those studies set the context for my central claim that the Young Romantics "critique" Orientalism by unearthing its secret affiliation with solipsism. As the recent vogue for "critiques of critique" suggests,[14] critique itself demands examination, both for its own tangled history and because my use of it points to a clear, if not singular, difference between the methodologies and conclusions of this book and those of previous studies in the field.

Many years ago Isaiah Berlin called Romanticism, at heart, a type of homesickness, "the daydreams of exiles and colonists."[15] Although Berlin uses the definition as merely one among many, I find his formulation a useful description of the field at large. Here British Romanticism is constructed as a reaction to or appropriation of the foreign as much as it is a result of dynamics within England.[16] Politically, British Romanticism's great anxieties were the French Revolution, and, alternatively, the Napoleonic wars, which were, to borrow Edmund Burke's worried phrasing, a "strange chaos of levity and ferocity" that England wanted to keep off its shores. The opening to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) signals his concern not merely for "the peace of [his] own country," but also for "a great crisis, not of the affairs of France alone, but of all Europe, perhaps of more than Europe."[17] Burke's tenor of creeping globalism is characteristic of the age, and helps explain why so many Romantics were itinerant or exilic. With this foreign influence on their aesthetics, thought and politics, it is not surprising that they also had a keen interest in specifically non-Western cultures, such as translations from philosophical and poetic works in Sanskrit, Farsi, and Arabic, or scientific studies conducted across Africa, Asia, and the Americas.[18] To be sure, these foreign factors played a role in creating a "Romantic imagination" that forged the way for a new vision of British nationalism and imperialism. That these three categories – the Romantic imagination, the foreign or exotic, and the emergent nation state – are inextricably interrelated has become a staple in nearly every key study of the era's relationship to Orientalism. Tim Fulford and Peter Kitson, for example, point to Romanticism's consistent linking of the desire to imagine and the desire to rule to "the exotic."[19] And Nigel Leask takes as central the notion that in the Regency there was no "civic ideology of a pre-constituted nation state," but rather that British "national culture was as much a product of imperial expansion, as imperialism was the 'expression' or exportation of that culture."[20]

This mutual reinforcement of ideology and imperialism was not merely cultural, but also economic and material. Building on John Barrell's work,[21] Saree Makdisi argues that the unprecedented growth of Britain's interior transportation and mail systems mirrored England's imperial reach, a fact fundamentally altering British culture and ideology.[22] That burgeoning economic network, in turn, continually fed the metropolis – Wordsworth's vision of London, locus of the "too busy world" (*1850 Prelude* VII.150) and center of the era's new global market system: the "Babel din; the endless stream of men, and moving things" (*1805 Prelude* VII.157–8). Nature becomes, not unproblematically, a scene divorced from that din. The

"endless stream of men, and moving things" is transformed into the "host, of golden daffodils" the poet can experience and then contemplate from the quiet of his couch. But in seeking, a "mode of space–time outside or beyond the modern,"[23] I argue that Wordsworth sets up a central crisis or problematic that cuts across, and even produces, the Young Romantics' understanding of politics, history, subjectivity and Orientalism: in de Man's phrase, an "excess of interiority."[24] David Simpson has woven this abstracted operation back into the "spectral personifications of Britain's expanding military-industrial complex."[25] This braiding of theory and history seems a trend in accounts of Romantic empire, perhaps sparked by a historicism whose object is simultaneously Romantic-era conceptions of history (and their blind spots), as well as our own.[26]

Useful here is Rebecca Comay's account of Hegel's thinking through the "knot" of the French Revolution. Both his and our challenge becomes "how to conceptualize lateness without assuming a stable reference point of a uniform and continuous time frame from which to take the measure of the delay."[27] The "untimeliness of historical experience" the Revolution thrusts upon the Romantics becomes exacerbated, I argue, when extended to an increasingly global context fabricated by news, commerce, historicism, and empire.[28] Consider, for example, *Hellas*'s complex layering of historical accounts and "newspaper erudition," Aeschylus' *Persians* and Herodotus' *Histories*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the "Return" of Freedom (84), biblical and Virgilian prophecy, Islamic, Christian, Greek, and Jewish traditions. This accrual of historical genres and examples, and Shelley's extended struggle to find the right form to depict the Greek and Ottoman War, gestures at just how out of joint the times must have felt. Revolutionary change, like depictions of an incongruously unstable and unchanging East, was both impelled and ensnared by that anachronism.[29]

As *Hellas* suggests, genre became a way of mediating such temporal and geographic rifts. Srinivas Aravamudan's *Enlightenment Orientalism* begins with the premise that a "transcultural, cosmopolitan, and Enlightenment-inflected Orientalism existed at least as an alternative strain before 'Saidian' Orientalism came about." This Orientalism is different because in "the Enlightenment the self was under critique as much as any 'other.'"[30] For Aravamudan, while the early novel was busy contesting "romance" in good McKeon-esque fashion, the Oriental tale was free to engage a wider field of genres and viewpoints that extended beyond the domestic sphere. If, as critics from Watt to Armstrong maintain, the novel was increasingly associated with the rise of the (albeit protean) individual then it would make sense that the Romantics – arch-problematizers of the self – would