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Excerpt

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PART I

Cultural perceptions and  
literary values

## Can we ever understand alien cultures?

Some epistemological concerns relating to the  
perception and understanding of the Other

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In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,  
that snores when you pick it up.

If the ghost cries, they carry it  
to their lips and soothe it to sleep

with sounds. And yet, they wake it up  
deliberately, by tickling with a finger.

Craig Raine, *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*<sup>1</sup>

Poets have a rare gift for expressing with a few simple lines profound facts about life which the prosaic scholar may need many sentences to convey. In the above passage, the poet Raine gives a delightful account of how an alien from Mars may well misinterpret the function and meaning of a modern artefact, the telephone, mistaking it for a living creature. My purpose in this paper is to investigate the problems that the perception of an alien culture can give rise to, and consider the question whether it is possible to retrieve the meanings generated by alien cultures.

A self-conscious awareness of other cultures has had the effect of a sudden explosion in Western academic circles during the post-war years and we may do well to reflect on the spate of academic studies, including mine, on perceptions of alien cultures.<sup>2</sup> A contributory factor is no doubt the presence in the West of people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, who mingle cheek by jowl every day in all walks of life. Of course, hardly any country in either East or West remains unaffected by the vast improvements in communication today. These cultural encounters may and do give rise to potentially threatening situations which leave ample room for mutual suspicions and misunderstandings.

The conflicts may be a combination of two factors that determine individual attitudes: collective representations that shape individual reactions, and the personal psychology of an individual that provides the modifying element in perception of the Other.

The *locus classicus* of how personal misunderstandings can acquire a tragic dimension when there is an additional cultural barrier is Forster's *A Passage to India*. Forster's own credo that every man is an island, *pace* John Donne, is familiar from his novels. The most striking presentation of this theme was, however, the brief friendship and inevitable rift between the Indian Aziz and the Englishman Fielding, set against the background of the great hostile cultural divide of colonial India. On the other hand, there are also remarkable cases where individual prejudice or openness of mind overrides collective representations of other cultures; two contrasting experiences of nineteenth-century Englishmen come to mind. Henry Martyn and William Sleeman were born in Cornwall at about the same time to middle-class families and spent the early years of the nineteenth century in India. The new experience of the East during his extensive travels from Ceylon to Iran hardly taught Martyn anything; he dismissed Hindus as children of darkness. His religious debates convinced him that 'whether it is a dull Rabbi, formal Arabian, or a feeble Indian, he is a drawler in science'.<sup>3</sup> Sleeman, in contrast, even though engaged in suppressing the violent criminal sect of the Thuggees, developed a great sympathy for individual Indians and a profound respect for the culture.<sup>4</sup> It is true that Martyn was an Evangelical, but his Evangelicalism seemed more to be a consequence of his personality than the reason for his prejudice. The question is, if they both belonged to comparable literate backgrounds, presumably sharing the 'monogenist' openness towards other societies which the Enlightenment encouraged, why is it that they differed so violently in their response to Indians?

Here psychologists furnish us with a plausible answer. Milton Rokeach, who further developed the classic study of ethnocentrism, *The Authoritarian Personality*, by Theodor Adorno *et al.*, views the individual's 'belief system' as playing a decisive part in his attitude to the alien. He divides human personality into two kinds, those with 'open' and those with 'closed' minds, irrespective of what they believe in. Thus to describe someone as dogmatic or, in other words, as having a 'closed' belief system, is to refer to the structure of his thought, not the content, to say something about the *way* he thinks. In Martyn's case, Evangelicalism was not the reason for his prejudice. Rather, his closed

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mind drew him to the movement. Interestingly enough, Rokeach discovered a link between the behaviour pattern of a closed mind and a neurotic sense of threat, also strongly suggested by Martyn's career. In short, an individual's cognitive response to alien cultures cannot be separated from his total behaviour, because the cognitive and the affective spheres of behaviour are closely related.<sup>5</sup>

This insight about the individual dimension should be noted by those of us who deal with questions regarding the Other. My own work, *Much Maligned Monsters*, which dealt with Western responses to Hindu religious art, concentrated more on the 'collective' representations of other societies, based on an analysis of texts and pictures and other art forms. The present paper is in the nature of a critique of recent theoretical approaches to the Other, more particularly to the relationship between the self-definition of a given society and its perception of the Other as a historical phenomenon, and finally asks whether understanding of alien culture is at all possible. The paper arose out of the last lines of my book, where I maintained with some boldness that, despite the great advances in scholarship about Hindu art in the West, its appreciation of this alien art has been less than satisfactory.<sup>6</sup> My critics, for example, Mildred Archer, responded by demanding that I lay my cards on the table and tell my readers what I meant by a proper appreciation of Indian art. I admit the demand is legitimate; but it requires answers on two levels. My long-term task would be to publish an alternative reading of ancient Hindu art, based on its social and cultural contexts, which I found lacking in works I criticized. My second concern is more immediate and is particularly relevant here. It is also of a theoretical nature. The conceptual framework that underlay my study of European response to Hindu art, but was not made explicit because I was more concerned to tell the fascinating story there, needs to be spelt out in order to draw some general conclusions about the representations of other cultures, and particularly of their cultural artefacts.

Secondly, when I traced Western 'misunderstandings' of Indian art, how did I formulate the notion of 'understanding' itself? I intend to answer these two related issues through developing the concept of 'cultural perception', which mediates in the universal dialogue between the Self and the Other on a collective level. The phrase 'collective level' needs some clarification here. Even within a culture, the response of an individual (or the Self) to members belonging to other groups can be coloured by the collective representations he or she has of them. For

example, to a middle-class European male, women, the working classes, or even animals can constitute the Other. So his own response may be affected by the collective representations of these groups held by his own group. This tendency to fit the individual into a collective mould is even more powerful when responding to individuals from another culture. It is this interplay of the individual and the collective that forms the pivot of my paper. My strategy will be to pose a series of questions that may shed light on the various epistemic positions adopted by those who deal in such matters. My own position favours pluralism. In this area it is hardly possible, as is often the case with fundamental issues that concern the very modes of our existence, to offer confident prescriptions. By raising these issues we can at least be aware of the differing epistemic strategies that can be applied to the question of the Other, not to mention the complexities that these problems occasion. Lately, one of the most fecund areas has been the deployment of textual theory to the study of the Other, particularly in the case of the influential literature of 'colonial discourse'. Said's *Orientalism* views literature as a means of control of the Orient (a geographically amorphous area) by the West in order to consume and to fantasize about it. Todorov's recent contribution, seeing colonial discourse as a 'linguistic mode' or a closed system of signs, is probably the most exciting of the new insights. The conflict between the Conquistadores and the Aztecs becomes a clash of two systems of signs. So not until the Spaniards were able to appropriate the Indians' system of signs was the conquest of America complete.<sup>7</sup>

The primary purpose of these new writings on colonial discourse is to make sense of European colonial attitudes and politics through a reading of colonial texts. As Said stresses, his work has less to do with the Orient than with 'our world', and this can be said to hold true of colonial discourse in general.<sup>8</sup> Said's illuminating work helps me to make clear my own task in this paper. Whilst acknowledging the importance of the political dimension in our lives, I see 'cultural perception' as a universal phenomenon, though its expression differs according to the culture we are talking about. I shall address myself to the theories of knowledge as well as studies of perception which help us to formulate new and successful strategies for studying what is alien. Western representation of alien Indian art is taken as a sample case of the general working of the human mind when it confronts something strange and new, and the way it seeks to *understand* that unknown quantity. The paper is divided into two parts, which follow and elaborate the framework adopted in my book. Accordingly, the first part follows the

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book in taking up the early Western images of Hindu art (*c.* 1250–*c.* 1700), when the knowledge of Indian culture was fragmented, contingent and largely fabulous. The common mode of representation in this period was the *stereotype*, which will be the keyword for this section, and its cognitive nature will be investigated in depth. I do not consider European misunderstanding in this early period as static or unchanging; on the contrary, it was a dynamic process, moving from almost total incomprehension to a greater degree of understanding, which process was guided by ‘schema and correction’, as expounded in that celebrated work on artistic style, *Art and Illusion*, by E. H. Gombrich. Thus the second part deals with interpretations of Hindu art from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, a period which reflected more complex reactions, implying greater knowledge and familiarity. My inquiry in this latter section will centre upon the paradox that, even with a substantive accession of objective information, misunderstanding still remained. This will compel us to adopt a different strategy from the first section, and this strategy demands a closer look at the notion and epistemic status of *understanding*, the corresponding key word for this section.

*The stereotype and representations of the Other*

My starting-point is the *stereotype*, because stereotypes are almost universally used in early European representations of Hindu gods in art and literature, which lends not only a certain conceptual coherence to the subject of representation in the case of alien cultures but enables us to investigate the nature of stereotypes in a clear manner. The two dictionary meanings of stereotype are: the metal plate used in the printing process, and a fixed mental impression. It is this latter meaning of an image ‘frozen in time’ that underlies the popular sense of a stereotype as a general prejudiced impression held about other groups, a common example being for instance that all orientals look alike. Stereotypes are most powerfully conveyed in pictures, but are by no means confined to them, as is attested by literature from antiquity to the present. And nowhere is there a greater scope for stereotyping than in descriptions of other societies. In *The Image of Africa* Philip Curtin offers us a feast of nineteenth-century European representations of Africans as childish and indolent, cowardly yet ferocious. What becomes clear from his work is that these fixed, generalized impressions were not based on observations of individual Africans.<sup>9</sup> Stereotypes can, however, be found in the most unlikely places. When we read both for pleasure

and instruction Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois*, how many of us have pondered the chapter on 'Laws in Relation to the Nature of the Climate' that makes a connection between climate, national character and political disposition, or predisposition? People in a cold climate, Montesquieu writes, are vigorous and courageous, whilst the tropics deprive the body of vigour, making people cowardly, passive, slavish, and – to Montesquieu the most serious fault – un-progressive. The Buddha's doctrine of renunciation was seen as a prime instance of cultural passivity. Then followed the conclusion that the absence of the freedom of the spirit led in Asia to the rise of untrammelled despotism, a curious remark in view of the fact that Montesquieu lived in Europe in the period of Enlightened Despotism.<sup>10</sup> I mention the passage not to belittle Montesquieu's importance as a political thinker; nor was he the first to employ climatic determinism in political theory. In fact, the earliest recorded source of this sort of stereotyping is Vitruvius. The late-antique architectural writer, after offering some sound advice on the effect of the climate on a building, in Book VI of *De architectura*, launches into the innate differences between the North and the South resulting from climatic conditions, a discussion curiously reminiscent of the present North–South debate. In possibly the most striking passage in antiquity that captures the essential quality of a stereotype, the Roman author adumbrates the effect of the climate on physical features, intelligence and character of races. Heat quickens Southern intelligence, just as it slows down the Northerner and makes him sluggish. Likewise, manliness is sucked out by heat, making Southerners cowardly.<sup>11</sup>

It is commonly held with some justification that stereotypes offer ingredients for prejudice against other social and cultural groups, as was shown in Allport's pioneering study on the subject.<sup>12</sup> It is clear from this important work that a stereotyped view of others is an essential feature of prejudice. And yet it would be rash to claim that all stereotypes stem from prejudice and are hostile. We need go no further than to take the original sense of prejudice as pre-judging, which, as we shall see, lies at the heart of stereotyping. A flattering example of the stereotype can be given in the Western image of Indian spirituality. Montesquieu's contemporary, the great German art critic Winckelmann, had profound admiration for Greek art. To him the perfection of Greek figure sculpture sprang from the physical perfection of the Greek male, who in his turn was the happy product of the salubrious climate of Greece. In this case, Winckelmann's stereotype arose out of his romantic love for Greece, because he had never set foot in that country.<sup>13</sup> An

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experiment conducted by Allport helps us to grasp the nature of a stereotype more clearly. A group of white Americans were first shown on the screen the picture of a New York subway compartment, which contained some white passengers and a black one. The scene also showed a white man holding an open razor. This picture was flashed for a brief moment when the subjects of the experiment were asked to identify the man with the razor but were not allowed more than a few seconds to make up their minds. They all unanimously stated that the black man held the razor when in reality the man with the razor was white.<sup>14</sup> There is a strong suggestion here that in situations like this the mind cannot engage in sequential, step-by-step, logical reasoning but has to reach a swift decision based on fragmentary or (in the psychologist's parlance) degenerate information.

It has recently been suggested that essentially the thought process behind such stereotypes is unlike linear thinking that proceeds step by step as in a syllogism. The process has been termed 'non-logical' thinking by Johnson-Laird in this sense.<sup>15</sup> The stereotypes are thus 'paradigms' or Platonic ideal types which the human mind grasps all at once, as it is fed a whole matrix of diverse but related data. We universally apply such a cognitive tool of instantaneous perception when encountering a new experience, whether this has to do with objects or concepts. Our perception of the visual image outlined above works on the same principle as our representation of alien cultures, namely, by the use of simplified types or genres. This point is forcefully made by Gombrich in his fascinating study of likeness in portraiture, describing the 'experience of likeness [as] a kind of perceptual fusion'.<sup>16</sup> There are many variables in portraiture, such as fleeting movements on the face, which has to be captured by a static image, or again the sitter may change from what he looked like when he was painted. And yet we do recognize the sitter in a successful portrait. This is even more striking in cartoons and caricatures of individuals, where certain constants guide our recognition.<sup>17</sup>

But why is there a need for simplified images like stereotypes in our perception of the outside world? It has, as Hochberg suggests, to do with the function of memory, which stores information in our brain. However, as a recent television advertisement has it: like human beings, computers have memory; unlike human beings, the computer memory shrinks every time it performs a task. Whatever one may think of the metaphor, our memory has to store information in order to execute 'a programme'. Fortunately for us, our memory does not shrink every time



we use it. Nonetheless, we cannot retain more than a few random items in our memory; but for permanent storage, as it were, the information needs to be encoded in an abbreviated and abstract form, according to an ordering principle.<sup>18</sup> In short, classification, which lies at the very heart of perception, guides it. Allport's experiment with the New York subway illustrates this well. If we accept that perception is a cognitive process that does not allow for reflection, how then does the brain make decisions? The subjects of the experiment, we may recall, were forced by brief flashing of the image on the screen to decide without hesitation who held the razor. Their response was prompted by their *expectation*. They expected the black man to hold the razor even though in actuality it was held by a white man. In short, classification aids our expectation.

In order to illustrate how memory serves our mental classification in our perception of the Other, I now return to my book, to the most persistent stereotype of the early period. Ludovico di Varthema, the sixteenth-century Italian traveller to South Indian coasts, has left us a detailed account of a Hindu deity based on his 'observation', a passage that was to influence Europeans for centuries. In his words:

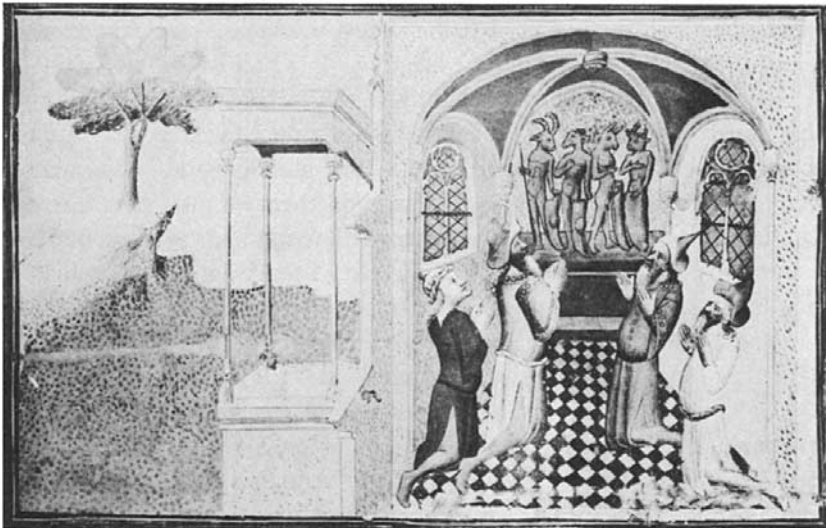
In the midst of this chapel [of the king of Calicut], there is a devil made of metal...[who] has a crown made like that of the papal kingdom, with three crowns...four horns and four teeth...and most terrible eyes...the said Sathanas [Satan] holds a soul in his mouth with the right hand, and with the other seizes a soul by the waist.<sup>19</sup>

Students of medieval art will immediately recognize the source of the description, which is none other than a conflation of different images of the devil as well as of Antichrist in medieval demonology. The German edition of Varthema carried a picture corresponding to this descriptive passage (fig. 1). It was based on European paintings showing devils devouring souls in hell (fig. 2). The fact that Varthema was describing something well known was at once grasped by the German illustrator. If Varthema had seen the Indian image, as he claims, why does he use a medieval stereotype to represent it? This particular example is ideal for us because it underlines the parallels between literary stereotypes and visual ones, and how the visual image helps us to understand the essential character of stereotyped representations. No doubt part of the reason for the use of the devil stereotype lay in furnishing useful information to the reader who had never been out East. In fact, this early representation of an alien culture has striking similarities with more general visual representations through stereotypes. My explanation owes

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1. The monster god of Calicut



2. Horned Indian gods