Introduction

Geoffrey P. Nash

What is the relationship between Orientalism and literature, and how does it aid us in our reading? *Orientalism and Literature* sets out to interrogate a key critical concept in literary studies and has the aim of reviewing the evolution of the concept as it has been explored, imagined and narrated in literature. Building upon existing scholarship, the aim is to give readers a comprehensive grasp of the origins and present contours of Orientalism and to point out future directions in this field. In the early eighteenth century the term designated scholarship on the East, as well as a style in the arts. Interest in the study of Oriental languages led to the establishment of Orientalism as a profession. Although it continued as a discipline for well over two centuries, its scope developed beyond its philological beginnings and its vaguely defined existence as a literary or artistic topic or style. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, the academic credibility of Orientalism as an institutionalized discipline began to be contested, and, after Edward Said’s epoch-making volume *Orientalism: Western Perceptions of the Orient* (1978), the term underwent wholesale re-evaluation. From a literary studies perspective, the value of Said’s work is that it probes foundations of the relationship between the West and its other in the context of the creation of the modern world, as seen through the lens of culture and literature. Said focused on Orientalism in Britain and France, as well as in the United States from the second half of the twentieth century. He was criticized for neglecting the other European traditions of Orientalism – most notably the German, and to a lesser extent the Russian, while in his Introduction to *Orientalism*, Said also extended the list to Dutch, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, and Swiss versions. His primary interest was in the most recent empires; subsequent scholarship has examined the other European traditions, as well as nineteenth-century American Orientalism. This volume, however, is not intended as a survey of Orientalism *tout court*, and of necessity the focus falls primarily on Orientalism in British and Anglophone literary history – although
a French dimension, so vital to Said’s argument especially with respect to imaginative Orientalism, is retained in some chapters.

The volume both surveys and references the more important perspectives on Orientalism and attempts explication of their varied arguments insofar as they pertain and add value to the reader’s understanding of Orientalism as a critical concept within literary studies. In this respect, it should also be useful as a pedagogical tool.

It is constructed around four dimensions, which do not exclusively correlate with separate parts but are found to varying degrees throughout the different chapters.

The first dimension is the relationship between Orientalism and literary studies. In terms of literary representation, Orientalism started out as a style, a taste, a stimulus of imaginative escape and fantasy. Said’s conception of Orientalism transformed the term into a critical concept that continues to inform our reading of literature. In his Introduction to Orientalism, whilst defining Orientalism as a style “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident,’” Said continued to stress the significance of writing as discourse: “Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on. This Orientalism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx.” Indeed it is vital for our purposes that in his investigation of the construction of Orientalist discourse Said neither follows Foucault’s focus on peripheral documents nor figures historians or social scientists; he instead concentrates primarily on literary texts.

The second dimension this volume seeks to address is the methodological relationship between culture and power set out in Orientalism. “For students of literature and criticism, Orientalism offers a marvelous instance of the interrelations between society, history, and textuality” (p. 24). The innovative and controversial core of Said’s work was the manner in which it asserted Orientalism’s complex connections with ideology, politics and power on the one hand and culture on the other. Alongside this went the insistence that, while it might purport to be a “combination of the empirical and the imaginative,” Orientalism as an idea about a geographical entity—the Orient—“derives to a great extent from the impulse not simply to describe [the Orient], but also to dominate and
somehow to defend against it.” Rather than delineating a reality outside of itself, Orientalism constituted a discourse by means of which Western countries like Britain and France constructed their Other and in so doing projected their own identity. This process was “bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society and . . . anything but mere academic wool-gathering” (p. 332). Of vital importance for the student is to gain an understanding of the relationship between power and the creation of culture and how literature interfaces with this; how images of the East that purported to disclose its irrational, static and unchanging, female essence were predicated on the rationality and masculine dynamism of the Occident.

The third dimension is the multidisciplinary context in which Orientalism has been viewed. A professor of comparative and English literature, Said brought an expertise in textual hermeneutics to his treatment of a subject that transcended the limits of literary studies as then construed. **Orientalism** shone new light on well-established areas of academic study, such as the historiography of British rule in India, the debate over the relationship of Ancient Greek civilization to North Africa and Asia, and the study of Buddhism and Hinduism. In the Afterword to the 1995 reprinting, Said saw his book as re-invigorating “study of Africanist and Indological discourses, the analyses of subaltern history, the reconfiguration of postcolonial anthropology, political science, art history, literary criticism” (p. 340). **Orientalism** therefore helped effect an enlargement of literary studies beyond the formalistic and narrowly liberal humanistic axioms that had previously informed it.

A fourth dimension to be considered is the scholarly reception and development of Said’s ideas. Intellectual contestation and critical engagement were an important part of the development of his concept of Orientalism as an expansive category, primary instances being the influence of **Orientalism** upon the creation of postcolonial studies and the affects that outside perspectives – for example feminist studies – have had on readings of **Orientalism** and its application to culture and literature. Numerous studies since its publication have exemplified, expanded or contested specific topic areas contained within Said’s book, alongside focusing on aspects they consider insufficiently developed by Said or in need of refinement, as well as ones that branch out into new regions.

The first, second and third dimensions feature in Part I, Origins, which considers issues concerning the temporality of Orientalism, when it starts and what Said’s claims for its geographical and multidisciplinary scope are before moving on to consider the major genres and trends **Orientalism**
inspired in the literary-critical field: the Oriental tale, eighteenth-century Orientalism, Romantic Orientalism, and Orientalism and empire.

Part II, Development, recaptures specific aspects of Orientalism’s developments: its multidisciplinary contexts and scholarly discussions with regard to postcolonialism, colonial discourse, race, resistance, feminism and travel writing, as well as the critical ideas which form the core of such interventions. Part III, Application, deliberates upon recent and possible future applications of Orientalism, probing its currency and effectiveness in the twenty-first century, the role it has played and continues to play in the operation of power, and how in new forms, Neo-Orientalism and Islamophobia, it feeds into various genres, from migrant writing to journalism.

Part I: Origins

The Beginnings of Orientalism

Said’s claims for the beginnings and the scope of Orientalism, ranging from the Greco-Persian Wars of antiquity to the present day, have of course invited a great deal of criticism. Actually, he proffers two alternative beginnings and spaces: premodern Orientalism, consisting of the classical world and the period from the Medieval to the Renaissance; and modern Orientalism, beginning with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1789. Employing a discourse perspective derived from Foucault, Said envisages an Occident/Orient binary according to which Orientalism “originated not in the eighteenth century or thereabouts, but in the period of Homer’s Iliad, Aeschylus’ The Persians, and Euripides’ The Bacchae”; this “binary division was repeatedly reinforced by Roman geographers, historians and public figures (Herodotus, Alexander, Caesar), Medieval merchants, writers and crusaders . . . and Medieval Christian writers and polemicists (Dante, John of Segovia, Nicholas of Cusa).” In recent decades, postcolonial medievalists, in the process of disrupting and fragmenting “the clean and easy identity narratives that cultures tell themselves, offering divisions that stress difference, conflict and . . . ‘widely scattered contingencies’” and recovering the medieval from its characterization as “wholly other,” have been indebted to Said’s exposure of the colonialist power lurking behind the “seeming naturalness of ‘truth,’” at the same time as they have debated his “thesis that East and West have always been arranged along a binary axis, where the Orient exists only to the extent that it mirrors fantastically its colonizer.” Briefly, Lisa Lampert-Weissig summarizes the main issues
postcolonial medievalists have with Orientalism’s binary treatment of the period as follows: a) cultural interchange existed (specifically in medieval Iberia, Sicily and the Crusader states) “that cannot be reduced to a one-sided attempt by Western European thinkers to understand or control the East, as Said describes in modern Orientalism”; b) Said’s reading of Dante’s insertion into his Inferno of Muslim figures, preeminently the Prophet Muhammad, is “a reductive Orientalist view” that argues Dante could only understand them within a fixed Christian cosmology, whereas his views on Islam were “more complex and ambivalent”; c) the temporality of the Middle Ages in Orientalism is itself schematic and conflates “disparate premodern historical moments, end[ing] up figuring [the period] as a site of historical origin but also as a moment that exists before ‘the movement of history.’”

In her recent study of medieval Orientalism, Idols of the East, Suzanne Conklin Akbari confirms the significance of Said’s work but raises its periodization and how Orientalism might be historicized. Akbari points out that Said “elides the narrative of Roman imperial power” and ignores Europe’s decline over the spectrum of technological and cultural production during the medieval period, sinking into a position of inferiority vis-à-vis an ascendant Islamic world. “For most of that period, the dominant power in the world was not the Christian West but rather the Islamic East, and European awareness of that inferiority played a crucial role in the development of Orientalism.” The overwhelming dominance of Orientalist discourse is therefore far more applicable to the inauguration of the modern global world and its emphasis on imperial power compared with the phase of antiquity and medievalism. Akbari, who is particularly exercised by Said’s employment of the phrase “imaginative geography” stimulated by Foucault’s habit of analyzing actual spaces, territories and sites, proposes that this term could fruitfully be applied to a wide variety of medieval texts, particularly maps, to the end of understanding how the imaginative geographies of Orient or Occident are established.

Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century

Said’s “monolithic and hegemonic version of Orientalism as a discursive formation, transportable and translatable to any time and place,” has, according to Claire Gallien and Olivera Jokic, presented eighteenth-century scholars with similar problems to those raised by postcolonial medievalists. Said’s elision of periods prior to Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt in 1798 have both perplexed and encouraged them “to take up the
question of Orientalism.” For Said, the later eighteenth-century and Romantic periods advanced Europe’s scientific claim to extensive and organized knowledge about the “East.” Suvir Kaul contends that “by the eighteenth century, and in some cases, well before, the ways of seeing that we associate with colonialism and imperialism are convincingly in place.” If that is the case, the argument that Said’s emphasis falls upon one event and misses out some beside is an unbalanced one. Raymond Schwab’s *Oriental Renaissance* (1950), in some respects *Orientalism*’s analogue, comprehends the significance of European intervention in the East. It established the later eighteenth century as a new point of departure, starting with the philological breakthroughs by Anquetil-Duperron in France and Sir William Jones and his contemporaries in British India, the latter coinciding with the spread of Britain’s political and economic power in the East. However, Schwab, who saw Orientalism as integral to the development of European literary and philosophical Romanticism, was optimistic about its crucial importance for, among other things, demonstrating how Western knowledge accessed the languages and literatures of the East and made it possible to build a notion of a world consisting of discrete cultures. Srinivas Avaramudan went so far as to suggest that under different circumstances Schwab’s contrapuntal reading (to Said’s) could easily have become mainstream. Avaramudan’s own expansive articulation of Enlightenment Orientalism places more stress on its “utopian aspirations” than on “materialist and political interest,” its urging towards “mutual understanding across different cultures” above domination of the other. In the seventeenth century, Philosophic universalism’s supplanting of Christianity gave credence to the view that “a transcultural, cosmopolitan, and Enlightenment-inflected Orientalism existed at least as an alternative strain before ‘Saidian’ Orientalism came about.” However, as Ros Ballaster notes: “Enthusiasm for the ancient Orient and its languages can be seen, as it is by Said, as a form of colonial power; European scholars promise to ‘return’ oriental cultures to a civilized classical heritage from which they have been estranged by centuries of barbaric and despotic rule.” In addition, “increased knowledge about oriental cultures and increased awareness about their differences came with increased contact and consumption of oriental goods at the end of the eighteenth century.” Orientalism’s contribution to eighteenth-century literature, according to Claire Gallien and Olivera Jokic, has been to provide “an analytical frame to think about matters related to the construction of tropes, the transformation of Eastern texts as they traveled across countries and continents, the promotion and demotion of genres, the question of canon formation, the
Introduction

birth of the ‘English’ novel, gender, and the impact of other forces than empire, such as the book market, in determining Orientalist fashions.”

In “Styles of Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century” (Chapter 1), Suvir Kaul interrogates how overseas commerce facilitating everyday consumption of material objects from the East, and the creation of a new class of non-aristocratic landed gentry, incited moral diatribes against consumption and luxury. So, “the link between a woman’s vanity, sexuality, and China is a recurrent trope in early eighteenth-century poetry.” At the same time, commerce with Asia enabled a widening view that made for economic and moral, social and spiritual comparisons, particularly with China. While retaining dominance in world trade, China’s image in the West was of a model of stability and governance; however, as this waned in the wake of Europe’s growing power in trading and colonial ventures, this image turned to dismissive contempt. Closer to home, envy of the wealth of the Ottoman empire and the absolute power of the Sultan sharpened by a new emphasis: “Asia was home to slavish subjects, to peoples who had not yet ascended to political rationality or being, and hence the playground of despotic power.” Cosmopolitanism went alongside national chauvinism. Exploring the “possibilities of experience, imagination and literary innovation opened up by the ‘East,’” Kaul moves to Aravamudan’s expansionist reading of The Arabian Nights, and William Jones’ poetry, inspired by translations from Sanskrit and incorporating his admiration for Hindu divinities, and to the Orientalist style of painting developed by British artists in India. For example, Johan Zofany’s portrayals of Indians and British living alongside one another transpose the colonial elite from England into the landowning aristocracy of India. In Mr and Mrs Warren Hastings: “The antagonisms of colonialism are caused to dissolve into the serene platitudes of the conversation piece, and the British presence in, and authority over, Indian land is naturalized.” A similar if reverse process occurs at home, where the Chinese style in gardening is anglicized to become “the English garden.”

In “The Origin and Development of the Oriental Tale” (Chapter 2), James Watt writes of the reception of The Arabian Nights in terms of a broad “generic hybridity” of the Oriental tale with respect to its origins and classification, beginning with Galland’s first attempt at translation, the Indian “Fables of Pilpay,” comprising “a ceaseless movement of narrative” and incorporating the Orient-flavored stories and anecdotes published in Spectator, notably “Vision of Mirza.” Anglicized versions of Eastern tales and moral fables about the times coexisted alongside other forms of fiction; “playful fantastic possibilities of Oriental fiction” vied with emergent
“national realism,” each “informed by an imaginary geography which
assumes London to be the hub of global commerce.” Defoe’s Roxana
acquires Oriental features, suggesting that, despite the taste for reality
catered for in the eighteenth-century novel, that form too was porous to
what Johnson called “the world of wonder.” Watt points out the multi-
faceted character of Oriental tales that “are concerned with the here and
now and invoke the East as a way of thinking about the condition of
Britain itself.” Allegories of the spread of the British empire were estab-
lished within an Eastern narrative; the American War of independence was
placed in an Eastern setting. The trope of Oriental despotism was invoked
in order to urge safeguarding liberty at home and expose the dangers of
corruption produced by wealth from the Indies. By the 1790s, Orientalism
interposed in stories such as Robert Heron’s pseudo-Oriental Arabian
Tales (1792), which depicted the “unchanging condition of women” and
accentuated the “rhetoric of sexual despotism” while distancing themselves
from the romance of the past. Accounting for the ongoing popularity of the
Arabian Nights into the Romantic period, Watt sets a reading of
Orientalism of the Saidian “will-to-empire” type against ones that figure
the world of the Oriental Tale as “a fictional mode for dreaming with the
Orient” – Aravamudan’s phrase – and, in Ros Ballaster’s words, “an
abandonment of the sense of self to an other in a space in which such
activity is virtually free of risk.”

Orientalism, Race and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century

Despite Orientalism’s apparent binaries, an important statement early in
the work acknowledges a split within colonial discourse. Bart Moore-
Gilbert paraphrased this as implying that “on the one hand . . . the West
consciously defines the East as outside itself and radically different or
Other; at the same time, the East is also apparently located intimately
within the West as an integral, if generally unacknowledged, part of its own
constitution and identity.” In other words, if “the European discourse . .
invented the Orient [it] just as surely invented itself.” Suvir Kaul has
pointed out that “postcolonial scholars who study metropolitan national
cultures . . argue that the historical force of colonialist practices is also at
work in the domestic political and economic consolidation of the
nation.” In “Romantic Orientalism and Occidentalism” (Chapter 3),
Saree Makdisi conceptualizes the process by which “Occidentalism defined
British imperial culture not only externally but also from within; it must be
seen to be aligned with an Orientalist logic articulated by Cromer – and
Introduction

rightly identified by Said – that would in the long run be directed exclusively overseas. Occidentalism and Orientalism, in other words, are not opposites: they are two sides of the same coin, ultimately inseparable from one another.” Instead of Western civilization being grounded in terms of Enlightenment and scientific knowledge with the irrational and fanatical East as its antithesis, the “symbiotic relationship between Occidentalism and Orientalism” originating in the Romantic period saw a developing and modernizing West set against an internal opposite. In practice this meant “Orientaliz[ing] others at home – who were seen to be just as incompatible with this emergent new identity as their actual Asiatic counterparts.” From the 1790s these “Orientalist tropes were primarily deployed by anti-aristocratic radicals not to refer to actual Arabs or Indians (about whom they knew almost nothing and cared even less) but rather to refer primarily to either the privileged classes above them in the social hierarchy or those further down the social scale.” In practice the formulation Makdisi proposes “helps explain why all the way through the Romantic period the discourse of Orientalism was used at least as much with reference to the would-be West as it was with reference to the East.”

In “Orientalist Structures and Restructures” (chapter 2 of Orientalism) the layered but complicit constituent parts of imperial governance, Orientalist scholarship and imaginative Orientalism assembled together provide a lens through which Said probes distinctive Victorian discourses belonging to the genres of novel and travel writing, philology and anthropology, through each of which run preconceptions of empire, race and secularized religion.

“The Victorians: Empire and the East” (Chapter 4) begins with Thomas De Quincey’s opium addiction and a meeting with a Malay visitor that demonstrates the Englishman’s “deep familiarity with an Eastern commodity but [inability] to meaningfully engage with someone from the ‘East.’” Sukanya Banerjee uses De Quincy’s ignorance to frame an extended discussion of race and empire in the nineteenth century, which moves through the discovery and application of the Indo-Aryan category (via the Orientalist scholarship of Sir William Jones and Friedrich Max Müller) to an anthropological debate conducted between the Indian Dadabhai Naoroji and John Crawfurd, president of the Ethnological Society. “These anthropological discussions,” Banerjee argues, “should be of interest to scholars of literary and cultural studies not just because they gave shape to Victorian discussions of race but also because Victorian literature often provides articulation of or catalyst for what was being tested or established as anthropological theory.” This statement is partly
exemplified by her reading of Wilkie Collins’ *Moonstone*, where a liberal attitude toward empire is seen evenly to distribute guilt for theft of the stone between British and Indian characters before reassertion of an Orientalist view of fanatical and superstitious colonial subjects in the novel’s final scene. This denouement is aptly set alongside J. S. Mill’s denial of India’s readiness for self-rule and assertion of its need for continuing colonial government.

In “Orientalism and Victorian Fiction” (Chapter 5), Daniel Bivona explores more imperialist fictional narratives with the aim of tracking “the gradual displacement of the focus of Oriental fiction from a fascination with Oriental object to European subject, its gradual movement from a preoccupation with what Disraeli called the ‘Great Asian Mystery’ to foregrounding what I am calling ‘The Great European Mystery.’” Choosing “mainly canonical fiction that has for its setting this constructed Muslim world,” Bivona tests the generic conventions of Orientalist fiction and its attendant tropes of race, sexuality and miscegenation. Beginning with the race/Oriental quest leitmotif in Disraeli’s fiction, focusing on *Tancred* and its impact on George Eliot’s portrayal of the eponymous Zionist hero in *Daniel Deronda*, he proceeds to scalpel racial and sexual ambiguity in Flora Annie Steel’s less well-known *On the Face of the Waters* and more miscegenation plotted into Kipling’s “Without Benefit of Clergy.” Finally, in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, further betrayal of Eastern women by white lovers leads to the conclusion that “while demystifying European claims to racial superiority [*Lord Jim*] also captures the centrality of racial mystique and sexual ambivalence that lay at the heart of the imperial enterprise.”

**Orientalism and the Bible**

Race tropes found in Victorian fiction, which almost invariably underwrote travelogues too (see Part II), might be said to have their origins in Biblical paradigms. Christopher Hutton points out in “Orientalism and Race: Aryans and Semites” (Chapter 6): “European conceptions of peoples and their lineages took as their point of departure the ‘Mosaic triad’ of the sons of Noah, namely Shem, Ham and Japhet.” Popularly, Europeans’ progenitor was Japhet, while Semites were descendants of Shem and Africans of Ham. Hutton notes that, although the Biblical model broke down in the eighteenth century owing to the perception that the genealogical approaches it helped foster were “unsystematic and fanciful,” the nomenclature persisted, albeit with the substitution of