

“Edward Said’s Orientalism and its critique of Edward Lane”

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Although it first appeared in 1978, Professor Edward Said’s Orientalism has lost little of its original impact. In fact, the central thesis of the work has been widely accepted, despite the vigorous challenges towards many of its details(1). The purpose of this paper is therefore to address another detail : the work’s portrayal of Edward Lane. I shall first of all review the overall thesis of Orientalism, then its critique of Lane. This will then be balanced by referring to Lane’s own words.

The area of Western contact with the Middle East has given rise to an extensive literature over the last four decades(2). An excellent outline of the field as a whole has been written by Maxime Rodinson(3). According to Rodinson, the Europeans moved through three main stages in their attitude towards their Eastern brothers. During the Middle Ages, the latter were an enemy but equals. In the Enlightenment, all men were considered equal and basically the same, if at a mainly theoretical level, and “the Muslims were looked upon as men just like other men, with many of them indeed superior to the Europeans”(4). It was in the third stage, coinciding with the industrial revolution and imperialism, that the Orient was viewed as a world set apart, and often viewed with superior disdain.

Serious academic study of the Near East began during the Renaissance out of a wish on the part of Westerners to bring about unity with Eastern Christians. Then “a general trend towards the organisation of scientific research” led to the “Orientalist network” being set up(5). The first chair of Arabic in Europe (since the Middle Ages) was founded in 1539 at the College de France, and at Oxford almost a century later. The discipline of Orientalism was therefore founded on a philological base, and a training in Oriental languages became the main (and often only) qualification for entering it. In the Middle Ages, as Norman Daniel has shown, study of Islam was “always related to the effective exposition and defence of the faith of Christ. There was little academic interest in a subject for its own sake”(6). But with the decline of religious polemics and the advance of

Humanism, a scientific, if still narrow, approach was adopted. The Orientalist industry continued to grow, eventuating in the creation of learned academic bodies like the Paris Société Asiatique (1821); the Royal Asiatic Society (1823); and the American Oriental Society (1842).

Alongside academic Orientalism developed what might be called "imaginative Orientalism"; this was the creation of poets, novelists, and a variety of other authors, including those who, not satisfied with encountering the East from afar (a limitation bemoaned by Goethe in his West-östlicher Divan) travelled there and laid claim to a response more immediate and authentic. While imaginative Orientalism, like its academic counterpart, flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its roots can be found in literary treatments of Eastern subjects in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great, and Racine's Bajazet, are notable examples. But it was Gallard's translation of the Arabian Nights into French that firmly established a taste for the Orient as a world of dream. On European authors, this work's influence in its various translations has been huge.

This has been a very brief outline of the historical field to which Orientalism is addressed. Edward Said did not of course invent the term; neither has he been the first to criticize the Orientalist project, if an overall one can be said to exist. The Arab historian Albert Hourani covers similar ground in a less radically engaged manner in his essay, "Islam and the Philosophers of History", a source that Said acknowledges. But it was the Egyptian sociologist, Anwar Abdel Malek, who in his article "Orientalism in Crisis" (1963) became Orientalism's first trenchant adversary. Rodinson sees this essay as the inaugurator of a state of affairs in which academic cooperation between Eastern and Western scholars had broken down by the late seventies(7). It was against this background that Orientalism was published in 1978.

Said begins his essay by referring to the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-76. A French journalist laments the destruction of part of Beirut which he says "once seemed to belong to... the Orient of Chateaubriand and Nerval". This prompts Said to comment :

He was right about the place, of course, especially so far as a European was concerned. The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting

memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. Now it was disappearing; in a sense it had happened, its time was over(8).

What worried the journalist was not the suffering of the Lebanese people, but the terminal damage being done to a "European representation of the Orient". Thus Said introduces the structure of Orientalism, as a "European representation of the Orient". Various ingredients went into this – the Orient's geographical proximity to the West, its cultural and later colonial relations, all that enabled Europe, in the first instance, to construct an image.

The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience(9).

Orientalism is not merely a literary image however :

The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization, and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles(10).

Language, imagery, ideas are in effect the superstructure reared upon a material base – made possible by Western physical rule over the Orient.

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient(11).

These extracts make Said's post - Structuralist methodology quite apparent. The Orient is juxtaposed alongside a "European representation of the Orient"; this representation is seen as Europe's "contrasting idea" – or binary opposition (12). Then is presented the main structure – "European material civilization and culture" in which the Orient, or the West's representation of it, functions. The Orient is therefore but a part of the structure of Western civilization, but a significant part, for upon it a whole discourse is built up, articulated and sustained by the power of a dominant entity. Orientalism is therefore a subjective structure built by the observer - the West – as a result of its

observation of the thing observed – the Orient. Further, the relationship between the observer and thing observed is clearly to be seen as a power relationship in which the observer has the upper hand.

The structure of Orientalism is an enduring one. It is not merely a false myth which can be exposed and blown away. It is a “created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment”. The political implications of this are not far to seek, although Said argues against an exclusively political domination, “a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by cultural scholarship, or institutions”. Orientalism is rather – and it takes Said a sentence of some twenty lines to make the point – a complex structure of interrelated “interests”, a “modern political-intellectual culture” which “has less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world”(13).

Implicit in Said's thesis of Orientalism is that it is a universal, or a total structure about which a whole series of observations can be made. Any counter-criticism of it would probably center upon its universalist claims, which are themselves a feature of post - Structuralism. In fairness to Said, it should be said that he does not embrace very last article of the Structuralist creed. He disavows, for instance, the view that “the author and his chosen subject matter are only incidentals in an impersonal world”. Instead he writes the following in a passage crucial for the understanding of his analytical method in Orientalism :

Foucault believes that in general the individual text or author counts for very little; empirically, in the case of Orientalism (and perhaps nowhere else) I find this not to be so. Accordingly my analyses employ close textual readings whose goal is to reveal the dialectic between individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which his work is a contribution(14).

It is Said's analysis of the works of individual writers that is of key interest to us, for if it can be demonstrated that they function within the overall framework of Orientalism, we might be justified in saying that Said's Orientalist thesis provides a useful terms of reference for discussing the work of Western writers on the East.

I have chosen Edward Lane for this purpose for two reasons. In Orientalism

he features as a key figure, both for his contribution to academic Orientalism and for his influence on nineteenth century European Literature. In this latter regard, Lane and Thomas Carlyle were reciprocally influential upon each other, and together their writings on the subject of Islam and the Arabs are of seminal importance. Lane's significance lies in his role as introducer of ideas on the Near East which are more informed and more scientifically presented than anything in the literature about the East written in English up to that time. The Napoleonic excursion into Egypt had already opened up the East to academic inquiry in a wholly new way. The pioneering Orientalist, Baron de Sacy stands out as the compiler of this research and the establisher of the discipline of Oriental Studies, including the study of Oriental languages, in France. Lane, however, went a step further by visiting the East, as had the Swiss, John Lewis Burckhardt, but in addition achieving a rapport with the indigenous population that was beyond Burckhardt.

Unlike the French and Burckhardt, Lane was able to submerge himself among the natives, to live as they did, to conform to their habits(15).

This "strategy of disguise" was of course to be adopted by later Western travellers to the East, notably Burton, Blunt and T E Lawrence. Not unnaturally, this kind of enterprise has come to be treated with a certain suspicion, particularly by the very East the strategy has sought to penetrate and report on. It raises a vital issue that is central to Said's Orientalist thesis : the motivation of the occidental "observer" of the East.

All in all, Edward Lane made three visits to the East, each time to Egypt. The length of his stays were respectively, three, two, and seven years. During this time Lane became orientalised to a significant degree, but the questions are, how deeply? And for what reason?

For Said, Lane's expertise in Islamic studies makes him a quintessential example of the professional Orientalist "who considers his residence (in the Orient) a form of scientific investigation". However, what drives the professional Western Orientalist and his freer, more imaginative brother writers on the East, is essentially a common desire to use the East for the display of their prowess. The works of both "rely upon the sheer egoistic powers of the European consciousness at their center"(16). According to Said, Lane was single-mindedly intent on making himself an authority on the Orient. Hence

there is a clear dishonesty about Lane's behaviour in Egypt Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, completed after Lane's first two visits, was a "self-conscious" exercise in creating an impression of "a work of immediate and direct, unadorned and neutral, description, whereas in fact it was the product of considerable editing..." In his preface to the work, Lane "must show initially that he did what others before him either could not or did not do, and then, that he was able to acquire information both authentic and perfectly correct". The dishonesty behind Lane's work is, Said suggests, at the heart of his pretence of being an inconspicuous part of the Egyptian scene while at the same time maintaining a scientific detachment. A key illustration of this point was the way Lane made friends in Egypt solely for the purpose of advancing his work; he joined in the activities of the society around him, including religious ones like prayer at the mosque, but he did so with a more or less supercilious attitude towards the culture he was describing. Thus he passed himself off as a Muslim, with the help of an Egyptian friend, Sheikh Ahmed, only to mock the man in his book for his bizarre behaviour. To sum up then :

As mediator and translator, so to speak, of Muslim behaviour, Lane ironically enters the Muslim pattern only far enough to be able to describe it in a sedate English prose.

The charges Said levels against Lane are therefore very serious ones. He was a "counterfeit believer", who remained all the time a "privileged European". This "bad faith" led Lane to the "betrayal" of his friendship with Ahmed; more, it made Lane a seeker after the sensational and prurient in order to gratify his Western audience :

As rapporteur his propensity is for sadomasochistic colossal tidbits : the self-mutilation of dervishes, the cruelty of judges, the blending of religion with licentiousness among Muslims, the excess of libidinous perversions, and so on.

Much is made of Lane's "refusal to join the society he describes" by contracting a marriage with an Egyptian woman.

If we already knew that Lane was a non-Muslim, we now know too that in order for him to become an Orientalist – instead of an Oriental – he had to deny himself the sensual enjoyments of domestic life... Only in this

negative way could he retain his timeless authority as observer.

The picture is therefore an unsavory one. "As fake Muslim and genuine Westerner" Lane emerges as what modern English slang would term "a user". He uses the East for his own egoistic purposes, attaining in the process a position of authority won out of cheating the society he had lived in and reported on.

For Lane's legacy as a scholar mattered not to the Orient, of course, but to the institutions and agencies of European society(17).

Lane functions, it must be emphasized, as a representative academic Orientalist in the overall context of Orientalism. He fits into Said's Orientalist structure not only as a casestudy of the occidental ego restructuring the East for a Western audience's benefit and for his own as Oriental expert, but as a key figure in the Orientalist project, a link, a transmitter of information and ideas which could be taken up by others. Indeed, Flaubert and Nerval, to name but two major literary authors, "borrowed shamelessly"(18) from Lane in their own Oriental works.

The issue of Lane's status as observer of Egyptian society is also raised by Leila Ahmed in her study of the Orientalist. On Lane's first visit to Cairo she informs us :

(he) began to live as an Oriental. At first he is an observer merely. He would sit at the front of a shop belonging to an Egyptian merchant friend, with nargheeleh.. and coffee, watching the scene and taking notes. Then he began to join in Muslim activities, visiting the shrine of Hosein... then later, regularly attending prayers at the mosques(19).

This of course is to take the term observer at its face value without probing into Lane's real attitude when he would "join in" everyday Egyptian activities. Since Lane's method in Modern Egyptians is apparently to absent himself from the text, it is difficult to answer this question without doing as Said does – undertaking speculative textual analysis and placing special emphasis, as we shall see later, on Lane's remarks in his preface to the work. Leila Ahmed remarks :

The prose of Modern Egyptians is, as a rule, so transparent, so free from all devices that draw attention to author, to his own society and its values,

to the prose itself, or to anything other than the world that it is concerned to make real for the reader, that, consciously, the reader hardly registers the fact that it intervenes between himself and the object he is being invited to contemplate(20).

As it turned out, it was this very objective stance that won Lane greatest praise from his contemporaries :

for the first time in England, and in Europe, Islam and its culture were presented not as a set of beliefs to be intellectually grasped, analysed, rejected, or an assortment of social and political modes to be defined and criticised, but as a lived experience(21).

The key word here is "presentation", suggesting as it does the possibility of an image or meaning being transmitted and received without too evident a distortion by either the encoder or decoder. In the Structuralist lexicon the preferred term would be "representation", with its connotations of subjectivity, distortion, and power complex on the part of the transmitter.

Leila Ahmed's implied explanation for Lane's motive in writing in such a way is that he achieved an identification with his subject, which was quite soon reflected in his manner of life. Lane, in short, actually entered the society he was describing, if not in toto, at least to a degree that had significant consequences for his personal being. Thus she refers to Lane's mode of living in England on his return from his first visit to Egypt in 1828, as "thoroughly orientalisised". He had changed his name to Mansor, and his letters to his friend Hay bemoaned that fact that he could not return to Egypt. As to his habits :

as one of his contemporaries testifies, (they) became so much those "of the Orientalist", that "he could scarcely lay (them) aside even when he brought the accomplishments of an English gentleman into the best society of London". On one such occasion, a dinner of the "best society", Lane had quite disconcerted the author of these words (Charles Knight, Lane's publisher), by turning to him and whispering, "I cannot endure these chairs. I will tuck my legs under me and then I shall be comfortable".

He had also become addicted to the nargeeleh(22).

This, and the story related by Leila Ahmed that Lane, four years after

returning to England, did not like relinquishing his Arabic name, might suggest the behaviour of a poseur, an extension of Lane's desire for acknowledgement as a renowned Orientalist. On one matter, however, his actions show a singularity which, if this was the case, would certainly be stretching dedication to fame to its limits. That is, his marriage to an Egyptian woman in 1840. Nefeeseh, his wife, was of Greek Christian extraction and he had received her from his friend Hay as a freed slave. The strange story of their relationship shows a man in turns indignant at the idea of marrying someone of such lowly status, and eventually contented and devoted to his wife. One construction that could be placed on this is that Lane actually went as far towards adopting an Oriental mode of living as his English upbringing would allow.

The question of Lane's religious attitude provides further evidence of his acquisition of Eastern practice, if not belief. Like Thomas Carlyle, Lane came from an evangelical Christian family, but unlike the lowland Scot, he never gave up his faith. Leila Ahmed quotes Stanley Lane-Poole on the question of his great uncle's religious frame of mind :

to the last [Lane] preserved the simple earnest faith of his childhood. [His]... insight into Semitic modes of thought had certainly modified his views on some of the minor points, but in the essential doctrines of Evangelical Christianity his beliefs never changed. ... He never began his day's work without uttering the... Bismillah.

Later, Leila Ahmed herself writes :

After his first visit to Egypt, during which he had adopted Muslim ways to make inhabitants "familiar and unreserved towards me", he wrote that "wine and swine's flesh" are "loathsome to me". In later life he did not drink wine; and presumably, though he does not again specifically mention this, did not eat pork... his Muslim friends in Cairo, scholars and literary people, hurriedly concealed any wine when he appeared... The skeykh with whom he worked during his last visit to Egypt, and who spent many hours with Lane almost every day for eight years, was fully persuaded that Lane "believed in the Jinn... [and] in the mission of Mohammad, and of Christ"(23).

Further evidence of Lane's sympathetic attitude towards Islam is to be

gleaned from Arabian Society in the Middle Ages. The work goes over much the same ground covered in Modern Egyptians, but in "a more compressed and, sometimes, in very concise form", resulting in "an increased clarity". By drawing on Arab literary sources, historical legends, and above all the Qur'an and Hadith, Lane evoked, in Leila Ahmed's words :

The centrality and dominance of Islam and its vision, and its shaping influence in almost all areas of experience in [Arabian society](24).

To this Lane added the results of his own personal experience of Arab society in Egypt. The underlying respect which Lane held for both Islam and the Prophet is amply born out by the work. The congruence between Lane's Christianity and Islamic precepts – on matters such as abstinence from wine, reprobation of excess in music, and propriety in personal affairs, especially marriage – is probably the cause of this, as it was with Carlyle. Indeed, Carlyle's reaction on reading Lane's work was to remark on the piety and religious nature of the Arabs. As for Lane's putative "European ego" and his predilection for "sodomasochistic colossal tidbits", Arabian Society is as free of the narrator's intrusion as his earlier work. It is not free of outlandish detail, but this comes from Arabic sources, and while nurturing a sense of the exotic – as in the famous description of the inner mansions of the caliph of Baghdad's palace – such detail is wholly within the spirit of the originals.

Such criticisms as Lane levels against Arab society of the time are for the most part for its deviation from the laws of Islam. In discussing the habit of wine drinking Lane observes of its interdiction : "This law is absolute; its violation in the smallest detail is criminal"(25). The practice of communal chanting to the accompaniment of music, or zikr, was "inconsistent with the spirit" of Islam(26) although Lane himself had been moved by a dignified performance of zikr he had witnessed in an Egyptian village. (Recitations of the Qur'an itself "when well executed" were "very agreeable" to him)(27). The so-called walis or saints who it seems were over prevalent in Arab society in Lane's time, he condemned as a "fertile source of imposture", by the standards of Islam again, for they were often allowed to contravene the religious law with impunity(28). Perhaps Lane's European bias is present in his comment that "superstitious fancies" were common "among all classes of the Arabs"(29). Although it might be pointed out that Lane wrote before modern reform movements in the Muslim world. In his

chapter, "Women", however, Lane hit out at Christians who were :

often unjust in their condemnation of Muslim law and tenets, and especially condemn those which agree with the Mosaic codes and the practices of holy men(30).

It is difficult then to credit Edward Said's contention that Lane had no sympathy for the society he described. Said emphasizes a remark made by Lane in his preface to Modern Egyptians in which he writes that he "conformed only to the words of the Koran" when engaged in religious worship with his Arab associates. For Said this phrase proves that Lane was "always aware of his difference from an essentially alien culture"(31). But it may also mean that Lane was unsure of the reception of his pioneering work. George Sale, he would have known, had been accused of favouring Islam in writing his Preliminary Discourse to the translation he made of the Qur'an. Even Carlyle, cavalier as he was towards the public, was not, as his letters and diaries show, at all clear as to how his lecture on the Prophet Mohammad would be received. So while it might be said that Leila Ahmed's portrait of Edward Lane is specially sympathetic, the evidence suggests that Edward Said's is inaccurate, one that makes the Englishman too much of a type, with the implication that he can thereby be fitted into the argument of Orientalism. Clearly, if Said's view of Lane "as fake Muslim and genuine Westerner" is to be upheld, top marks must be awarded to Lane for carrying his duplicity well beyond the printed text into the most private recesses of his everyday life.

In order for Comparative Literature to flourish, an empathy needs must be established. It is here perhaps that Edward Said's Orientalism is an inappropriate model to follow. As an essay on the dangers of cultural hegemonism its message is no doubt a salutary one. Writing in the late 1970s, he speaks of "a growing, more and more dangerous rift separat(ing) Orient and Occident"(32). Such a rift is to be deplored, and it is the duty of scholars of good will on both sides to endeavour to bridge this rift before time runs out. In such an enterprise, the insights of a Thomas Carlyle or an Edward Lane are invaluable, as are those of any author who can aid the West in obtaining a greater understanding of the East, and vice versa. The empathy the Christian Edward Lane felt for Islam, coupled with his adoption of a scientific method which is neither of the East nor the West alone, enabled him in Leila Ahmed's words, "to

disclose a living culture to the members of another... to the extent that a native of that culture can assent to the general accuracy of the presentation"(33). Here we have a Muslim's testimony to the best that is to be found in Orientalism. This at least is worth keeping.

Notes

1. See Edward Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered" in S Farsoun, ed., Arab Society, Continuity and Change, London : 1985.
2. Some notable studies are : N Daniel, Islam and the West, Edinburgh, 1960, and Islam, Europe and Empire, Edinburgh, 1966; R W Southern, Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages, Harvard, 1962; W Montgomery Watt, The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe, Islamic Surveys 9, Edinburgh, 1972; A Hourani, "Islam and the Philosophers of History", in Europe and the Middle East, London, 1980; H A R Gibb, Studies on the Civilization of Islam, London, 1962.
3. "The Western Image and Western Studies of Islam", in J Schacht and CE Bosworth, eds., The Legacy of Islam, 2nd Ed., Oxford, 1974.
4. Ibid, p 40.
5. Ibid, p 35.
6. Islam and the West, p 193.
7. Rodinson, op. cit., p 61.
8. Orientalism, London, 1978, p 1.
9. Ibid, pp 1-2.
10. Ibid, p 2.
11. Ibid, p 3.
12. For an exposition of this term see Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics, London, 1977, p 88.
13. Orientalism, p 12 - 14 pp 23-24. Compare Hawkes, op. cit., "writing writes, not authors". p 159.
15. Orientalism, p 160.
16. Ibid, p 157-158.
17. Ibid, pp 159-164.

18. Ibid, p 181.
19. Leila Ahmed, Edward Lane, A study of his life and works and of British ideas of the Middle East in the nineteenth century, London & New York, 1978, p 26.
20. Ibid, p 112.
21. Ibid, p 117, p 119.
22. Ibid, pp 32-33.
23. Ibid, p 99, p 101, p 181
24. Ibid, p 149.
25. Arabian Society in the Middle Ages, Studies from the Thousand and One Nights, London, 1987, p 155.
26. Ibid, p 72.
27. Ibid, p 78.
28. Ibid, p 60.
29. Ibid, p 46.
30. Ibid, p 241.
31. Orientalism, p 160.
32. Ibid, p 109.
33. Ahmed, op. cit., p 199.

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3. Edward Lane

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Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, London, 1981.

Ahmed, L, Edward Lane, A study of his life and works and of British ideas of the Middle East in the nineteenth century, London and New York, 1978.

4. STRUCTURALISM

Hawkes, T, Structuralism and Semiotics, London, 1977.