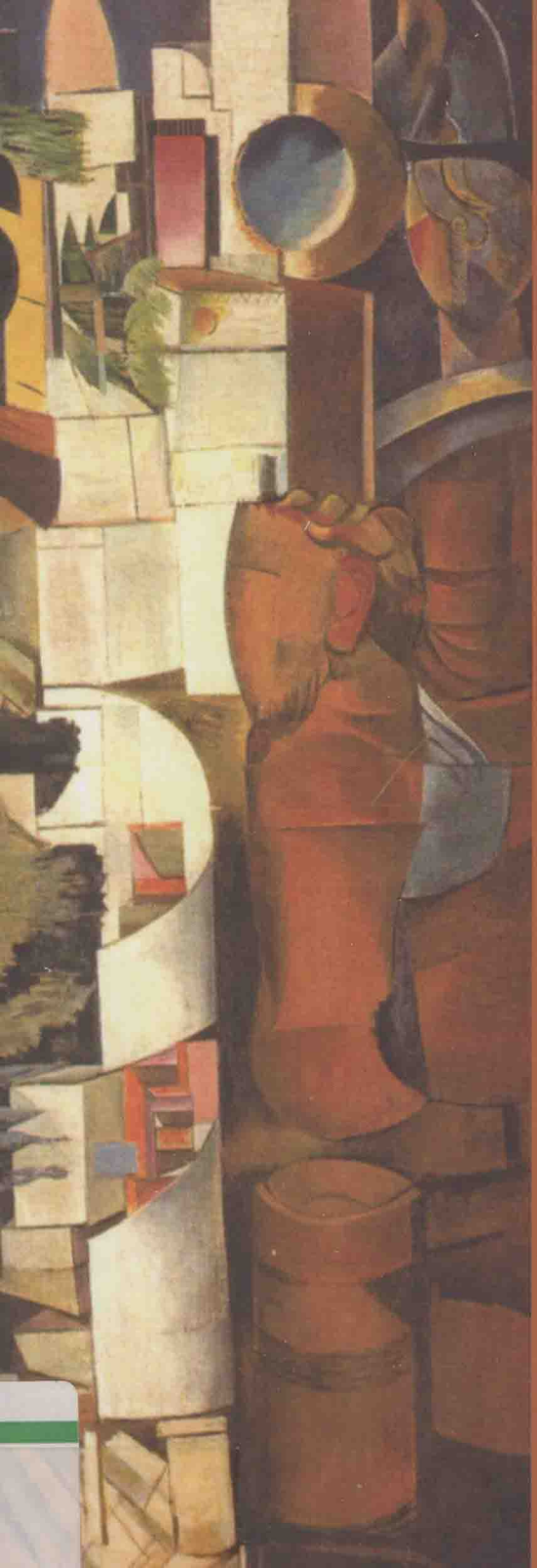

MODERNISM'S MIDDLE EAST

Journeys to Barbary

Joanna Grant

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List of Abbreviations

Albright, Daniel

Beckett	*Beckett and Aesthetics*
Impersonality	*Personality and Impersonality*
Serpent	*Untwisting the Serpent*

Aldington, Richard

A	*Artifex*
DH	*Death of a Hero*
L	*Lawrence: A Biographical Enquiry*

Bowles, Paul

SS	*The Sheltering Sky*
TG	*Things Gone and Things Still Here*
WS	*Without Stopping*

Durrell, Lawrence

The Alexandria Quartet, 4 vols.

J	*Justine*
B	*Balthazar*
M	*Mountolive*
C	*Clea*

The Avignon Quintet, 5 vols.

Mr	*Monsieur*
Li	*Livia*
Co	*Constance*
S	*Sebastian*
Q	*Quinx*
BB	*The Black Book*
CP	*The Collected Poems of Lawrence Durrell*

Forster, E.M.

Passage	*A Passage to India*

Klein, Melanie

Personification	"Personification in the Play of Children"

Kristeva, Julia

POH	*Powers of Horror*

Lewis, Wyndham

B	*BLAST*
BB	*Blasting and Bombardiering*
CD	*The Caliph's Design*
F	*Filibusters in Barbary*
MM	*Mrs. Dukes' Million*
P	*Paleface*
RA	*Rude Assignment*
SB	*Snooty Baronet*

Sackville-West, Vita

Days	*Twelve Days*
Teheran	*Passenger to Teheran*

Sackville-West, Vita and Virginia Woolf

VSW/VW	*The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*

Woolf, Virginia

BA	*Between the Acts*
D	*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*
E	*The Essays of Virginia Woolf*
L	*The Letters of Virginia Woolf*
MB	*Moments of Being*
O	*Orlando*
PA	*A Passionate Apprentice*
TL	*To the Lighthouse*
VO	*The Voyage Out*
W	*The Waves*
Y	*The Years*

Contents

Introduction

Modernism's Middle East: Journeys to Barbary

> The agon, then. It begins. Today there is a gale blowing up from the Levant.
>
> —Lawrence Durrell, *The Black Book*

> Douglas Fairbanks Sr.
> flies over minarets,
> you can almost see the wire ...
> we have entered the modern
>
> —Michael Davidson,
> "Bad Modernism: Souvenir"

In his magisterial, gorgeous study of the body, sexual renunciation, and the teachings and history of the early Christian Church, Peter Brown draws aside the veil of centuries and customs separating us from the visions of the "Desert Fathers," hermits who lived on isolated pillars in the midst of desert wastes and mortified their flesh to the joy of their souls as they sought communion with God. Brown tells us in *The Body and Society* that the distinction between the human, ordered world of the city and the wild, brutal void of the desert was seared into the consciousness of the West from antiquity:

> The myth of the desert was one of the most abiding creations of late antiquity. It was, above all, a myth of liberating precision. It delimited the towering presence of "the world," from which the Christian must be set free, by emphasizing a clear ecological frontier. It identified the process of disengagement from the world with a move from one ecological zone to another, from the settled land of Egypt to the desert.

> It was a brutally clear boundary, already heavy with immemorial associations.
>
> (Brown 216)

Brown's great achievement is his vertiginous thrusting of his readers into the harsh light and heat of this place that parches our skins and assaults our senses. The importance of this partly imaginary, partly actual geography to the West remains difficult to overstate. From antiquity, this conception of the desert remains available to the West as both origin and Other.

The arid zones of the Near East and North Africa, despite their seeming emptiness, remain the source of strange fertility and vitality, as David Jasper demonstrates in *The Sacred Desert*. His text, half cultural study, half desert meditation, participates in the tradition that it chronicles. Jasper summons the figure of St. Antony, who, like many of his spiritual descendants, finds the desert to be a space of "purity and cleanness":

> And so for nearly twenty years he [Antony] continued training himself in solitude, never going forth, and but seldom seen by any. After this ... Antony, as from a shrine, came forth initiated in the mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God. ... And, when they saw him, they wondered at the sight.
>
> (Jasper 11; *The Life of St. Antony* 200)

Here we encounter a paradox. The Desert Fathers, and the prophets and mystics who went before them, inaugurate a genealogy of eccentrics, explorers, madmen, philosophers, archaeologists, poets, painters, and novelists sharing the conviction, albeit often an uneasy one, that the path to true becoming, development, rebirth and regeneration for a Western civilization seen as moribund, degenerate, or even inimical must be the communion with what is often construed as its opposite, the desert wastes of the Middle East.

This study takes as its theme the efforts of a representative body of British and American modernist prose writers to grapple with their places in history in the context of their collective sense of an ending, desired or otherwise.[1] I argue that many Anglo-American modernist authors looked to the deserts of the cradle of civilization with a mixture of fear and fascination in this period of crisis, world wars, and the perceived and actual threat of complete annihilation. In an age that still sought and lionized mythical figures despite an undertow of doubt and skepticism as to their possibility or utility, the exploits of apotheosized

figures such as Lawrence of Arabia seemed to offer the promise of cultural (predicated on physical and emotional) regeneration. Lawrence's well-documented obsessions with purity, with cleanness, with the power of the will to overcome weakness, illegitimate or shaming origins, and doubt in ecstatic acts of becoming-inhuman harmonizes with cultural and artistic trends in modernist aesthetics. This ecstasy coexists uneasily with its alternative, its antiself: the horror that comes with the (self-sought?) annihilation of the reason, of consciousness itself. These characteristically Western constructs, for all of their perceived iniquities and shortcomings, could not be relinquished without regrets and conflicts. This study traces a broad arc through its chosen works and authors. The vector emerging most strongly from close consideration of the representative texts under review is one of increasing dismay and disquiet. As we proceed through these chapters, the energies unleashed by would-be acts of reparative identification on the parts of my authors' characters begin to rebound upon them, to fail or to succeed all too well. Despite these fears, however, Western yearnings for a kind of separate peace with the Near East never entirely dissipate. Thus we see that these orientalist fantasies become embroiled in a larger pattern of polemic, utopian striving, and anguished disappointment characteristic of the decades of the various modernisms.

Critics have long recognized a strand of modernist poetics and aesthetic pronouncements that valorized impersonality, detachment, classicism, and the ruthless stripping away of anything resembling sentiment. More recently, many fine studies have explored modern culture's (and modernists') obsession with the primitive, with the desire to regenerate the body, Western cultural and artistic forms, and nations themselves by means of the excavation (sometimes intellectual and sometimes archaeological) of ancient civilizations and subsequent acts of identification with images or artifacts of those cultures. While much work has been done on modernism's love affair with African art, for example, less attention has been paid to modernism's reworking of the long tradition of orientalist writings and images constitutive of Western culture's view of the Near East.

Such a relative neglect of modernism's Near Eastern desert spaces is all the more surprising if we consider the extent to which these spaces make appearances in some of the seminal works of postcolonial theory. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is often characterized as the founding text of postcolonial criticism. Oddly enough, although Said's text concerns itself explicitly with "the Anglo-French-American experience of the Arabs and Islam," a focus remaining at the heart of his work until

his recent death, modernist studies as informed by postcolonial theory have paid little attention to modernist artists' evocations of this particular dimension of what Anne McClintock refers to as desirable, fetishized "anachronistic space" (Said 17; McClintock 36). Although McClintock makes reference to Western obsessions with the veiled woman of the Arab seraglio, the Middle East remains marginal to her study, in which she traces the processes by which, "long before the era of high Victorian imperialism, Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination—a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (22). Despite the contributions to the field of fine studies of cultural encounters between the West and Islam by authors such as Kathryn Tidrick and Billie Melman, for the most part, postcolonial criticism has concerned itself primarily with the loci of India, Africa (as in Conrad's Congo), the Americas, and Asia.

I do not mean to disparage the efforts of such famous postcolonial critics as Gayatri Spivak[2] and Homi Bhabha; on the contrary, I believe that my study will help to enlarge our knowledge of this aspect of the modernist imagination, one that has suffered from a neglect fostered in part by critics' tendency to view modernist authors' and artists' obsessions with the Arab Other as a rehash of the "tried and tested [and tired] stock of familiar Orientalisms" (Almond 435). If we confine ourselves to impatient dismissals of modernists' uses of the Arab Other, we miss the opportunity of attempting to forge a more complete and sophisticated understanding of the literature and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

We also miss the chance of tracing the means of cultural transmission of these replications of the Arab and what they can tell us concerning the flows and forces of the cultural field at this time, and how a single figure can circulate and recirculate at all levels of culture, from the self-consciously highbrow (Yeats's Haroun al-Rashid) to the explicitly kitschy yet by no means less influential (Valentino's Sheik). Of course, as figures such as Adorno and Horkheimer state to their chagrin, high and mass culture seem incapable of living in chaste isolation from each other; one of the most fascinating characteristics of this modernist obsession with the Arab and the Middle East is the ease with which regenerationist fantasies can deteriorate into what McClintock terms "commodity kitsch" (McClintock 33). We may argue that the debates surrounding the use and abuse of the figure of the glamorous Arab may serve critics as a microcosm of the larger conflict within the modernisms as to the proper relationship between the highbrow and the lowbrow, the "bad" and the

"good."[3] In this case, tireless cultural commentator and theorist Wyndham Lewis emerges as an exemplary figure, one capable of circulating simultaneous fantasies of the European *Bagdad* [*sic*] that could be created if his chosen hero, the "Caliph," could exert his mastery over the mass (see Chapter 3, also cover image).

One of the self-appointed tasks of postcolonial theory has been the exposure of Western culture's insistence on viewing the alien Other as subhuman or inhuman, as evolutionary throwbacks or as a different species altogether (see Haller, Jr.). No one could deny the importance of this work. Postcolonial theory also enables the reader to see through the flimsy veils of fashionable primitivism so readily donned by disaffected Westerners seeking escape from bourgeois conventions and the "eternal knocking on preferment's door" by means of ersatz communion with the exotic, the Noble Savage (Arnold, "The Scholar Gypsy," line 35). This kind of primitivism, this yearning for a return to the origin, may be easily dismissed as a racist fantasy, one depending on the same ideological underpinnings as the complementary view of the Other as savage, as degenerate.

Yet I think it remains of great importance that we should revisit this modernist fascination with the figure of the Arab Other, the inhabitant of the glamorous desert, and seek to understand its importance. This figure received extensive treatment in the literary and other artistic productions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and found itself in close proximity to some of the most crucial aesthetic tenets and ethical imperatives of the various modernisms. Fantasies of identification with this figure and the forces it represents underwrite its wide-ranging appeal. This humanoid's flowing robes and exotic headdresses obscure and abstract the shape of the body in the view of many modernists, seeming to make it something both more and less than human. This version of the toughened, arid, granitic Arab, as distinguished (although often not that clearly) from his mirror image, the effete, luxury-loving, corrupt, decadent Levantine, would seem to fulfill as literary subject and role model the criteria set forth by modernist literary theorists such as classicist T. E. Hulme (see Tidrick, esp. Chapter 1). Hulme shared with his friend and fellow artist and writer Wyndham Lewis a love of the shell, the segment, the exoskeleton as prototypes of subjectivity-free humanity.

Hulme and Lewis are not alone in their desire to escape subjectivity, to annihilate consciousness, to "amputat[e] the soul," as Paul Sheehan has it (24). Sheehan concerns himself with the tendency of many modernist thinkers and artists to conceive of human beings as "*fallen*

creatures, plunged into the torments of consciousness" (86, emphasis in the original; the explicit reference is to the works of Joseph Conrad). For Sheehan, one of the primary modernist narratives is the obsessive re-enactment of the traumatic primal scene of the subject's contamination by subjectivity, of the subject's subsequent fall into rationality, into social and literary convention.

One of the many groundbreaking aspects of Sheehan's well-received study is his reading of Continental philosophy; namely, his identification of its appropriations by poststructuralist theorists and the continuities linking this body of texts to the theories and tropes of modernist literature. Sheehan opens his own text with the observation that

> The decades since the end of the Second World War have been notable for precipitating ... a thoroughgoing reappraisal of what it means to be human ... postwar theoretical discourse has transformed the human from a discrete, intuitively understood idea (or ideal) into a site of contention, where notions of hybridity, contradiction and dispersion circulate freely and abundantly ... this concern with the human ... has its roots in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. Specifically, it emerges from the cultural upheavals that have been historicized as the "crises of modernism." ... [T]his earlier engagement was crucial, not incidental, in establishing the conditions of possibility for the post-war antihumanism dominating continental theory and philosophy in its various present-day guises.
>
> (ix, x)

Modernism both revels in and runs from the possibilities for becoming inherent in this constructed view of the human—both of the body and of that more essential, elusive thing, consciousness itself. For good or for ill, thinkers and writers across the spectrum of modernism and modernity associated the figure of the Arab Other and his desert homeland with a style of thinking and being devoid of the increasingly cumbersome accretions of Western civilization. Self-consciously highbrow, experimental works that seemingly disdained all contact with more popular novelistic and cinematic productions shared with these popular entertainments a vision of the desert wastes as oddly glamorous spaces, ones in which the Western subject could reinvent itself in a zone of authenticity. All too often, however, these works, both high and low, find themselves flirting with the dangerous notion that such authenticity will prove to be nothing more than a mirage or fever dream.

Thus we see that the attractively, wickedly sharp tools of antihumanist discourse can cut the unwary subject who takes them up. The genealogy of antihumanism Sheehan traces in his study provides me with many of the tools I use in my own study of modernism's flirtation with these philosophies, enabling the construction of my own methodology, a combination of historical, textual, poststructural, and psychoanalytic theories. These theoretical approaches facilitate my interpretation of representative modernist texts' explorations of the discourses of civilization, degeneration, and regeneration through identification that were such an important part of the cultural field of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The present volume focuses on Anglo-American modernist prose writers and their imaginative uses of the Near East. The first chapter describes some of the primary means by which this region became known to some of my representative authors through their travels and to some through their samplings of the long tradition of orientalist writing and iconography that took on a new life in this period due to the pressure of historical events and the widely reported exploits of glamorous figures such as Lawrence of Arabia. I argue that my authors view the desert spaces of the Middle East and the feudal, granitic, alien forms of its inhabitants with a mixture of fear and fascination. My chapters concern themselves with the origins and the fates of a lingering, seductive fantasy of regenerative, reparative identification with locations and individuals figured as both searingly empty and lushly populated with energies and extremities conceived of as vastly rewarding to the individual, the artist, able to wield them.

In my early chapters, I describe the nexus of ideas and fantasies swirling around fears of the presumed cultural, physical, and spiritual decline of Western civilization and how these fears have been analyzed in terms of modernist studies. I follow Graham Dawson's emphasis in his study *Soldier Heroes* on the importance of Melanie Klein's theories of identification, introjection, and disavowal as expressed in children's play as a theoretical model enabling us to understand the workings of similar forces in terms of the broader cultural field. I use these paradigms as a means of contextualizing and analyzing orientalist fantasies of redemption by means of identification with an Arab Other.

In my chapter on the literary and romantic partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, I argue that these women-identified women use orientalism as a means of half revealing, half concealing their "deviant" desires. In Sackville-West's travel narratives and Woolf's *Orlando*, we see these authors drawing upon this corpus of

orientalist fantasies in order to create a kind of queer fantasy space. Despite the pleasures offered by means of these sex-changing, race-changing performances, problems of ethics and of lingering loyalties to Western civilization—to literature, to art—force their way into this possible utopia.

It seems significant in terms of my analysis that those of my authors who most gratefully and wholeheartedly embrace identification with the Arab Other are women taking advantage of orientalism's uneasy proximity to supposed deviance. My study charts the increasing difficulty of maintaining this reparative fantasy. For this reason, I devote a chapter to the contested, slippery figure of Lawrence of Arabia, drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field and of the importance of symbolic capital in the restricted subfield of production that was high modernism. I follow the unfolding biography wars between Lowell Thomas, the so-called Lawrence Bureau, and Robert Graves on the one hand and Richard Aldington and his supporters on the other. I am less interested in who is "right" in this instance than in why it seemed so important for these authors to fight this battle at all. The outcome of this conflict, as it affects the reparative fantasy at the heart of my study, lies in the balance. These issues and this unease provide us with the proper lens through which to read many of Wyndham Lewis's more unjustly neglected orientalist writings; he emerges as a conflicted, ambivalent third term in this debate.

In my final chapter, I track the deconstruction and odd, stubborn survival of this glamorous fantasy. I situate my readings of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* and of Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* in the context of Tyrus Miller's theorization of late modernism as a deliberate assault on the categories of identity and psychology so dear to Western civilization. However, instead of neatly repackaging these constructs in orientalist garb, these late modernist fictions flirt with the idea of identification with force characterized as Near Eastern settings and individuals as remorseless onslaughts ripping the Western tripper to shreds. I use the theories of abjection elaborated in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* to help illuminate these authors' struggles with a similar topos and corpus of works. While Durrell manages to recuperate a Romantic vision of the Near East as miracle ground through his mystical marriage of the Alexandrian painter Clea to the Western writer Darley, Bowles offers us no such panaceas. Instead, he delights in the perverse, sadistic undoings of the young Americans Port and Kit Moresby. Paradoxically enough, however, the cult success of this novel and its glamorous, expatriate author helps to perpetrate the very fantasy of

regained wholeness and authenticity this novel so perversely deconstructs.

Finally, then, I view this exploration of modernism's Near East as part of an unfolding investigation of the topos of the remaking of the self, of this endeavor's pleasures and its perils. Such a topos was of the utmost importance to modernism, with its broad emphasis on making it new, of making oneself anew, whatever the cost.