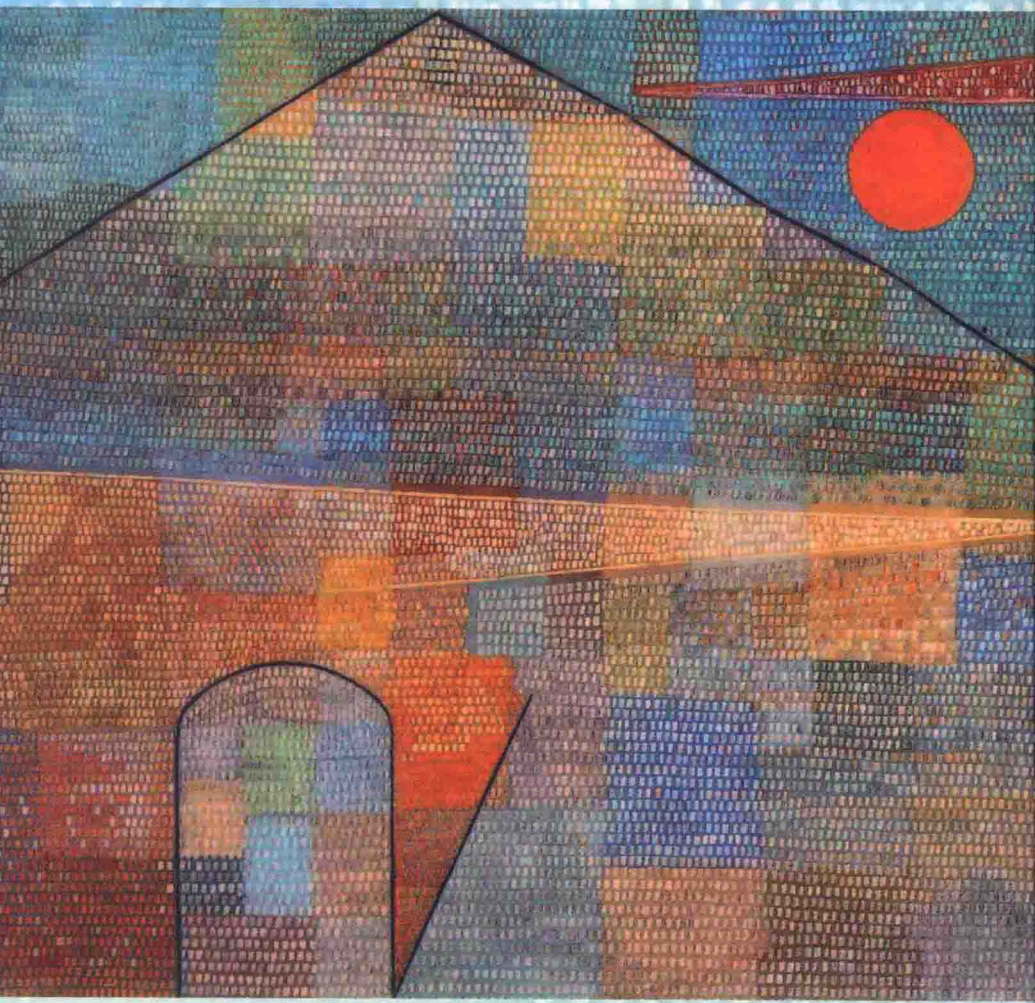
Debating *Orientalism*



Edited by Ziad Elmarsafy,
Anna Bernard
and David Attwell

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Edited by

Ziad Elmarsafy
Reader, Department of English and Related Literature, University of York, UK

Anna Bernard
Lecturer, Department of English and Comparative Literature, King's College London, UK

and

David Attwell
Professor of Modern Literature, Department of English and Related Literature, University of York, UK

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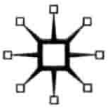

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Debating *Orientalism*

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Finally, we hereby gratefully acknowledge permission granted by the Palmach Photo Gallery to reproduce the photographs in Yonatan Mendel's piece here.

Note on Transliteration: We have generally followed the *IJMES* system for transliterating Arabic. Some of the better-known names are transliterated according to the more widespread form (hence Sadik Jalal al-ʿAzm rather than Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm).

Contributors

Moneera Al-Ghadeer received her PhD in comparative literature from the University of California, Berkeley, and is now Head of the Department of English Literature and Linguistics at Qatar University. Her publications include *Desert Voices: Bedouin Women's Poetry from Saudi Arabia* (2009). She is currently finishing two books, *Zoopoetics and the Politics of the Nonhuman in Arabic Literature* and *The Anxiety of the Foreign*.

David Attwell is Professor of Modern Literature at the University of York. A world-renowned expert on Coetzee, his publications include *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993) and *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (2006). With Derek Attridge, he is co-editor of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2012).

Anna Bernard is Lecturer in English and Comparative Literature at King's College London. Her publications include essays on Israel/Palestine and 'third-world literature,' the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in metropolitan popular culture and transnational genres of partition literature. She is completing a book on contemporary Palestinian and Israeli world writing.

Ziad Elmarsafy is a reader in the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York. He is the author of *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam* (2009) and *Sufism in the Contemporary Arabic Novel* (2012).

Peter Gran is Professor of History at Temple University, where he specializes in Contemporary Arabic Studies and Comparative Third-World History. His publications include *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt 1760–1840* (1979), *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History* (1996) and *The Rise of the Rich* (2008).

Joanna de Groot is a senior lecturer in the Department of History at the University of York. Her publications include *Religion, Culture and Politics in Iran: From the Qajars to Khomeini* (2007) and, with Mary Maynard, *Doing Things Differently? Women's Studies in the 1990s* (1993).

Nicholas Harrison is Professor of French Studies and Postcolonial Literature at King's College London. His publications include *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (2003), and, as editor, *The Idea of the Literary* (*Paragraph*, July 2005) and *Gillo Pontecorvo's Battle of Algiers, 40 Years On* (*Interventions*, November 2007).

Robert Irwin is a publisher and writer of both fiction and non-fiction. His works of non-fiction include *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (1994), *Islamic Art* (1997), *Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (1999), *The Alhambra* (2004), *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (2006), *Camel* (2010) and *Memoirs of a Dervish* (2011). A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the Royal Asiatic Society and the Society of Antiquaries, he is also a consulting editor at the *Times Literary Supplement* and a senior research associate of the History Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University.

Donna Landry is Professor of English and Director of the Centre for Studies in the Long Eighteenth Century at the University of Kent. Her publications include *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture* (2008) and *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking, and Ecology in English Literature, 1671–1831* (2001).

Yonatan Mendel is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Politics and Government at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. His PhD dissertation (2012) deals with the securitization of Arabic studies in Israel, and his current research deals with Zionist publications in Arabic in the pre-state period. Mendel used to work as a journalist, and currently contributes to the *London Review of Books*.

Mishka Sinha is currently a Fellow-Elect at the Program Zukunftsphilologie, Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin. She obtained an MPhil from Oxford and her PhD from Cambridge. Her doctoral work analysed the history of Sanskrit in Britain and America, from 1832 to 1939. Her research interests include transcolonial interactions in

interwar London, histories of spiritualism and the self in the Victorian and Modern periods, and the intellectual history of empire.

Robert Spencer is Lecturer in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures at the University of Manchester. His research interests include postcolonial and especially African fiction and poetry, postcolonial theory and the work of Edward Said. He is the author of *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature* (2011). It seeks to show how, as a crucial aspect of their appeal and utility, postcolonial literary texts can inculcate the aptitudes of cosmopolitan citizenship.

Andrea Teti is Lecturer in International Relations and Middle East Politics at the University of Aberdeen, and a senior fellow at the Brussels-based European Centre for International Affairs. His research focuses primarily on political theory and Mediterranean politics. He has published on both Egypt and Italy, as well as on a range of theoretical issues, including democratization theory, constructivism, post-structuralism, European democracy promotion and leftist opposition groups in Egypt.

Nicholas Tromans is a senior lecturer at Kingston University, London. He is the author of *David Wilkie: The People's Painter* (2007), *Richard Dadd: The Artist and the Asylum* (2011) and *Hope: The Life and Times of a Victorian Icon* (2011). He was the curator and catalogue editor of the Tate Britain exhibition *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, which toured to Istanbul and Sharjah in 2008–09.

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Orientalism: Legacies of a Performance

Ziad Elmarsafy and Anna Bernard

Books, as Catullus reminds us, have fates of their own. Our concern is with the fate of one book, Edward Said's *Orientalism*. To many, this seminal work is an enduring touchstone, a founding text of the field of postcolonial studies and a book that continues to influence debates in literary and cultural studies, Middle Eastern studies, anthropology, art history, history and politics. To others, however, *Orientalism* has serious failings, not least in blaming the wrong people – namely, Orientalists – for the crimes of European imperialism. Thirty-five years after its first edition, popular and academic reactions to *Orientalism* continue to run the gamut from enthusiasm to apoplexy. Yet few assessments of this work ask the 'so what?' question, addressing the book's contemporary relevance without lionizing or demonizing its author. This is our aim in *Debating Orientalism*. Bridging the gap between intellectual history and political engagement, the contributors to this volume interrogate *Orientalism*'s legacy with a view to moving the debate about this text beyond the Manichean limitations within which it has all too often been imprisoned. Too much ink has been spilled on what *Orientalism* got right or wrong – especially in its historical and political registers – and too little on taking stock of its impact and building on that to appraise its significance to current debates in multiple fields. This book seeks to consider *Orientalism*'s implications with a little less feeling, though no less commitment to understanding the value and political effects of engaged scholarship.

Orientalism's influence came above all from its decisive linking of politics with the humanities, a position that was to have revelatory effects for humanities scholars. If it is still an obligatory point of reference today, that is partly because the political and intellectual climate to which it responded is little changed,[1] but it is also because

Orientalism made it all but impossible to write about colonialism and culture, intellectuals and institutions or the representation of non-European 'difference' without at least acknowledging its claims.[2] This volume takes *Orientalism* as a springboard, seeking to recreate the rush of excitement it sparked when it was first published. We are interested in what *Orientalism* has come to mean as it has travelled across disciplines and historical periods, and in the kinds of thinking it has enabled and, in some cases, suppressed, especially in relation to contemporary understandings of the Arab and Islamic world. Has the book become 'a spectacular and depressing instance of traveling theory,' as Timothy Brennan has argued, used to authorize an identity politics that equates cultural location with epistemological and political position?[3] Or have its peregrinations given us something to celebrate, in the decisive changes in academic work that have made cultural production and practice inseparable from its political circumstances?

Orientalism caused polemics even before its publication, as witness Said's bitter private exchange with Syrian philosopher Sadik Jalal al-ʿAzm that spilled over into a very public three-way argument between Said, al-ʿAzm and the Syrian poet Adūnīs.[4] In the intervening decades, the book has been attacked, defended, rebutted and restituted with no apparent end. These debates have been marked by recurring points of dissent, to the extent that it has become difficult to say anything new about this text. Depending on what one reads, *Orientalism* is a Foucauldian book, or it is a challenge to Foucault; it made possible a textualist and dehistoricizing postcolonial studies, or it set out very different points of theoretical and political allegiance; it essentialized the West in much the same way that it accused Orientalists of doing, or it emphasized the agency of individual thinkers and writers and the fundamental imbalance of power between Western and Eastern sites of knowledge production in the modern period.[5] Each of these assessments is passionately argued and just as passionately refuted, as much in recent years as in the 1980s and 1990s. Ali Behdad, writing in 2010, praises *Orientalism* for 'rigorously interrogating the ideological underpinnings of familiar scientific and artistic representations of otherness in modern European thought.'[6] Daniel Martin Varisco, three years earlier, dismisses the text on almost exactly the same grounds: 'Said's amateurish and ahistorical essentializing of an Orientalism-as-textualized discourse from Aeschylus to Bernard Lewis has polemical force, but only at the expense of methodological precision and rhetorical consistency.'[7] But even its critics return to it again and again: *Orientalism* is a text, as Varisco concedes, that 'engages even the reader it enrages.'[8]

While *Orientalism* was explicitly framed, in the final chapter 'Orientalism Now,' as a response to American foreign policy, in the last decade the global 'war on terror' has brought a new degree of urgency and controversy to its claims. The book has been taken up as a means of challenging the murderous indifference of American military intervention (see Landry and Al-Ghadeer, this volume), at the same time that it has been excoriated for its apparent condoning of anti-American violence (see Spencer's discussion of Ibn Warraq, Kramer and Irwin, this volume). These more recent assessments indicate one of the key reasons that *Orientalism* continues to attract attention, since the idea of a 'clash of civilizations' between the Arab-Islamic world and the metropolitan West remains alarmingly current. *Orientalism* is accused of fuelling a 'politics of resentment,' in al-ʿAzm's phrase,[9] forever pitting West against East. Yet for other contemporary readers, like Stephen Morton, the book makes it possible for us to name the discourse of terror as an instance of present-day colonial discourse, one that is used to obscure the geopolitical contexts of particular forms of non-state violence.[10]

It is not just *Orientalism*'s subject matter that gives it its continuing prominence, however, but also its methodology and style. Aijaz Ahmad, in his infamous attack on Said in *In Theory*, suggests caustically (with perhaps a hint of begrudging admiration) that although the book's references were drawn from comparative literature and philology, the book was as bewildering to literary critics as it was to Middle East scholars. The former were asked to read their customary objects of study as documents of 'the Orientalist archive, which they had thought was none of their business'; the latter scholar found himself 'with no possibility of defending himself on what he had defined as his home ground.'[11] Even Ahmad admits that this authoritative interdisciplinarity was 'electrifying, because the book did serve to open up, despite its blunders, spaces of oppositional work in both' fields.[12] But what Ahmad calls the book's 'narrative amplitude'[13] describes something more profound than bringing the tools of close reading to bear on ideas normally associated with political history or area studies. The book's sheer breadth of reference gave its readers a sense of glimpsing a kind of historical totality, in keeping with a method Said would later describe in his autobiography as 'making connections between disparate books and ideas with considerable ease... [I would] look out over a sea of details, spotting patterns, phrases, word clusters, which I imagined as stretching out interconnectedly without limit.'[14] Said's 'intellectual generalism'[15] was of course greatly inspired by Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (see Spencer,

this volume), which may help to account for *Orientalism*'s stature, especially in postcolonial studies, as the *Mimesis* of its time. Not all of Said's readers were persuaded by this display of erudition (see Irwin, this volume), but many humanities scholars found in *Orientalism* a suggestive model for trying to grasp the full 'imaginative geography' of colonial and neocolonial forms of rule across and within a wide array of contexts and periods.[16] It is not just that Said 'violat[ed] disciplinary borders and transgress[ed] authoritative historical frontiers,' as an influential assessment has it[17]; it is that he found an eclectic (if arguably inconsistent)[18] means of knitting these disciplines and histories together.

This is not to offer an unequivocal endorsement of this method and its legacy, for the embrace of *Orientalism* has proved, in some ways, more problematic than its rejection. 'Orientalism' quickly became 'a codeword for virtually any kind of Othering process,'[19] through which the specificity of Said's readings of individual texts became the grounds for indiscriminate assertions about the primacy of discourse in any form of cultural encounter. Nicholas Dirks recalls Said's dismay at realizing that many anthropologists had taken the text as an invitation to privilege representation over all other subjects of enquiry, 'repeating the political delusions of philosophical and literary theories and preoccupations that stressed meaning and interpretation over the clamorous demands of politics and history.'[20] Said's interlocutors are divided on the question of whether this mode of reception stems from a fundamental misreading of the book – 'an *Orientalism* that Said did not write'[21] – or from the contradictions in its positioning and methodology, which allowed its readers to selectively emphasize the moments in which Said claims that no 'true' representation is possible, or that there is no 'real' Orient, over the moments in which he defended the responsible and self-critical production of knowledge.[22] Part of the aim of this collection is to enable a return to the notions of textual and historical specificity that *Orientalism* demonstrated with characteristic verve. Many of our contributors point the way toward what Graham Huggan calls a 'relocalized' (and rehistoricized) Orientalism, even as they express reservations about some of its more sweeping appropriations.[23]

Among Orientalism's many articulations, its status as performance deserves special mention. We use the term 'performance' as Said himself did, taking his cue from a complex genealogy involving the legendary pianist Glenn Gould, R. P. Blackmur (who taught Said at Princeton) and Richard Poirier (the man Said called 'America's finest literary critic'[24] and the dedicatee of *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*). 'Performance' is a loaded term for Said: where others might detect dissimulation, Said saw

an approach to authenticity. Said admired Blackmur's 'back-and-forth restlessness' that transformed criticism 'from the mere explication, to the *performance*, of literature.'[25] He repeatedly used the phrase 'bringing literature to performance' to describe a core element of his critical and intellectual project, namely taking a text through a philological close reading that unfolds its discourses and animates its silences to bring out its situated worldliness.[26] In his foreword to the 1992 edition of Poirier's *The Performing Self*, Said saw in the 'performing ethic' a laudable rejection of fixed identity and completeness as bases for critical authority. Instead, via Poirier, Said urges us to let go of the idea that 'words and objects are in stable contact with each other,' of literature as a 'magistrate's court or a closely guarded fiefdom,' and of professional expressions of piety, awe and particularity as acceptable substitutes for 'real identity, real particularity, which in fact have to be forged and re-forged constantly.'[27] Poirier himself emphasizes the point that literature is not, and cannot be, 'a world elsewhere,' adding that 'no book can, for very long, separate itself from this world; it can only try to do so, through magnificent exertions of style lasting only for the length of the exertion.'[28] Although Said was at the farthest possible remove from wanting to separate himself, or his books, from the world, the phrase 'magnificent exertion of style' might usefully describe his performance – as critical mode and as intervention – in *Orientalism*.

For Said, moreover, performance is an activity that entails responsibility 'for those voices dominated, displaced or silenced by the textuality of texts.'[29] That responsibility became, as is well known, the story of Said's life: giving voice to those that he considered silenced by the 'systems of forces institutionalized by the reigning culture,' in the Middle East and elsewhere. So important is performance for Said that it is the first quality he lists in describing the critic's activity during the course of his 1976 interview with *Diacritics*: 'We need to acknowledge that criticism is a very complex act: it involves performance, cognition, intuition, style, ritual, and charlatanry of course.'[30] As he strives to perform, the critic/reader must 'decreate' and reorder the material at hand to liberate the voices of the silenced.[31] Of course, the terms 'decreation' and 'reordering' might also very usefully describe the things that Said does with the traditional understanding of Orientalism, now undone and re-arranged to look much less objective and neutral than before, more domineering over and oppressive of those it claims to represent. Along with decreation and reordering, we might add 'invention' as the final term in the critical triad informed by the performing ethic. In a late piece on Glenn Gould whose title could have served as a good description of