

East and West Dialogue or Monologues?*

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Abstract / Resumen / Résumé / Sommario

The confrontation of Modern Western culture with that of the Middle East sometimes appears to boil down to the conflicting theses of Edward Said and Samuel Huntington. The examination of a few texts in a longer chronological perspective reveals on the contrary that the opposition served above all to the West in its efforts at self-definition, and that Easterners also made their contribution to the enterprise. Through a historical review of different cultural representations about Christianity and Islam from the origins to the present day, ranging from medieval times, the text question misunderstandings and cultural prejudices that have been forged through the stories of travellers, diplomatic and religious of both cultures. Among the texts of modernity that most significantly symptomatize the debates on the «East», stand out the reflection of eminent thinkers of the Illustration such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Volney, and the diversity of their positions and arguments.

La confrontación entre la cultura occidental moderna y la de Oriente Medio parece resumirse, a veces, en las teorías aparentemente antagónicas de Edward Said y Samuel Huntington. La revisión de algunos textos desde una perspectiva histórica más amplia revela, sin embargo, que dicha oposición ha servido principalmente a Occidente en su intento de definirse a sí mismo, y que los orientales también contribuyeron a tal tarea. A través de un repaso histórico de distintas representaciones culturales acerca de la Cristiandad y del Islam desde los orígenes hasta la actualidad, pasando por la época medieval, el texto interroga los malentendidos y los prejuicios culturales que se han ido forjando a través de los relatos de los viajeros, diplomáticos y religiosos de ambas culturas. Entre los escritos de la modernidad que sintomatizan de modo más significativo el debate sobre el «Oriente», destacan las reflexiones de pensadores de la Ilustración como Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau y Volney, y la diversidad de sus posturas.

La confrontation de la culture occidentale moderne et de celle du Moyen-Orient semble parfois se résumer aux thèses conflictuelles d'Edward Said et de Samuel Huntington. Un examen de quelques textes dans une perspective chronologique de longue durée révèle toutefois que l'opposition a surtout servi à l'Occident dans ses tentatives de se définir lui-même, et que les Orientaux n'ont pas manqué de collaborer à l'entreprise. A travers une lecture historique des différentes représentations culturelles du

christianisme et de l'islam depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours, en passant par l'époque médiévale, le texte interroge les malentendus et les préjugés culturels qui ont été forgés à travers les récits des voyageurs, diplomates et religieux des deux cultures. Parmi les textes de la modernité qui reflètent d'une façon plus significative le débat sur l'Orient, figurent les réflexions des penseurs des Lumières comme Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau et Volney et la diversité de leurs positions et arguments.

Il rapporto conflittuale tra la cultura occidentale e il Medio Oriente potrebbe essere riassunto dalle teorie di Edward Said e Samuel Huntington, in apparente antagonismo. Tuttavia, la lettura di un insieme di testi da una prospettiva storica più ampia rivela che tale antagonismo è servito alla cultura occidentale fondamentale per definire se stessa, e che l'Oriente ha contribuito a tale operazione. Mediante un *excursus* storico che prende in considerazione testi sulla Cristianità e sull'Islam, dalle origini fino all'attualità, passando per il Medioevo, il saggio interroga i malintesi e i pregiudizi culturali forgiatisi mediante racconti di viaggiatori, diplomatici e religiosi delle due culture. Tra i testi della modernità che sintomatizzano in modo significativo il dibattito su «l'Oriente», speciale interesse rivestono le riflessioni di pensatori eminenti dell'Illuminismo come Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau y Volney, e la diversità delle rispettive posizioni.

Keywords / Palabras clave / Mots-clé / Parole chiave

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Choque o diálogo de civilizaciones, Cristiandad, Islam, Edward Said, Samuel Huntington

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The debates on the dialogue of civilizations – or lack of it – have concentrated over the past thirty years around the two antithetical, and yet mirror-like, books by Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) and Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations*, 1993-6). The first denounces the colonialist attitude latent in all Western writings on the East, specifically the Middle East; the second advocates a new world order under the aegis of the US along neo-conservative lines and found its disastrous application in the 2003 Iraq war. Although placed at the two extremes of the political spectrum, both look strangely alike in their relativistic essentialism. They are reminiscent of the Good and Evil Spirit of Zoroastrian cosmology who, it is said, were conceived as twin brothers. Although Said speaks of the Orient and Huntington of civilizations in the plural, both are in fact mostly, almost exclusively in the case of Said, concerned with the Islamic Middle East. The *de facto* identification of Islam and Middle East, by the way, is not the least problematic feature of his book. In what follows I will not attempt a critique of their theses, a task which has been carried out in great detail by numerous authors, and would be impossible to realize within the time compass of a short article, but rather try to place them in an historical and philosophic perspective.

I would like to begin by letting poets speak, one from the West, one from the East. The first witness is Aeschylus, the founder, for us, of the tragedy. In his *Persians*, created in 472 BC, he relates the military disaster suffered by Xerxes at Salamis in 480. Said quotes from this play a fragment of the choral song in which the Persian courtiers lament the fate of the men who lost their lives in a distant land, and comments thus: «What matters here is that Asia speaks through and by virtue of the European imagination, which is depicted as victorious over Asia, that hostile “other” world beyond the seas. To Asia are given the feelings of emptiness, loss, and disaster that seem thereafter to reward Oriental challenges to the West; and also, the lament that in some glorious past Asia fared better, was itself victorious over Europe.» These remarks are particularly bizarre, not only in that there is no intimation of a glorious past in

the lines quoted by Said, but above all in that he entirely overlooks the glaring Orientalist cliché which is the basis of the whole tragedy, namely that the Greeks won because they love freedom, whereas the Orientals love subjection. This is best illustrated by another passage of the same play. The scene is set in Persia where Darius’ mother is anxiously awaiting the news of the ongoing campaign. She narrates the ominous dream she had the previous night:

There seemed to come into my sight two finely dressed women, one arrayed in Persian, the other in Doric robes, outstandingly superior in stature to the women of real life, of flawless beauty, and sisters of the same stock: one, by the fall of the lot, was a native and inhabitant of the land of Greece, the other of the Orient (Barbarian). I seemed to see these two raising some kind of strife between themselves; my son, perceiving this, tried to restrain and calm them, yoked them under his chariot, and passed the yoke-strap under their necks. One of them, thus arrayed, towered up proudly, and kept her jaw submissively in harness; but the other began to struggle, tore the harness from the chariot with her hands, dragged it violently along without bridle or bit, and smashed the yoke in half. My son fell out. (trad. Sommerstein)

It doesn’t take a Sigmund Freud to interpret the dream. Darius loses the war because his people, represented here by a beautiful girl wearing Oriental clothes, willingly accept and even rejoice in slavery, whereas the Greeks love freedom. In his *Politics*, about a hundred years later, Aristotle will give philosophical shape to this idea with his doctrine of the slave by nature, a nature which he ascribes indiscriminately to all Asiatic people. But the more interesting point here, which has not been remarked so far, is that the two girls are sisters. It vividly reflects the ambivalent attitude of the Greeks towards their neighbours, at the same time similar and irreducibly different.

Less than a half-century later, Herodotus will give in his «Enquiry» (*Históriē*) a detailed account of the causes and history of the conflict between Greeks and Barbarians «in order that so the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time, and that great and marvellous deeds done by Greeks and

foreigners (*Barbaroi!*) and especially the reason why they warred against each other.» There is no trace here of contempt for the enemies of the Greeks, in fact Greeks and Barbarians are put on the same footing, even if the implicit lesson of his work is the same as that of Aeschylus, namely that the Greeks got the better of the Persians thanks to their love of freedom; but their victory has nothing to do with cultural or intellectual superiority: throughout Antiquity, both Greeks and Romans will ascribe to the Orient a native wisdom, incarnated in figures like the Iranian Zoroaster.

The point made by Said, that the Orient is *represented*, and thus in a way dominated, by the West, is however worth considering. The question may be asked why the Iranians did not give their own version of the events and their own view of their enemies. One obvious answer would be that they had no interest to dwell on their defeats and commemorate them as the Greeks triumphantly did. This is however a bit short as there is no lack of evidence, both in the ancient and in the modern world, for powers who knew how to manipulate the facts to their own advantage and higher glory. And it is possible to find precisely that in the Iranian tradition. This is where my second poetic witness will step in. The *Shahnameh* or Book of Kings is that huge epic poem composed by Ferdowsi between 1000 and 1030 which relates the whole history not only of Iran, but of the world, from the Creation to the Arab conquest of the mid-7th century, from the legendary heroes of the remotest past to the last Sasanian king. In the first, mythical part of the poem, the Iranian kings feature as universal kings disposing of the world at their will, and the wars with their Western (Rum, Byzantines) and Eastern (Turkic and Chinese) neighbours as family squabble. Within this framework, the conflict with the Greeks is set forth in a way which seems to conflate the Persian wars of the 5th century BC with the Alexander conquest of the 4th. At the end of a war between Philip of Macedon and Darius, peace is concluded and a dynastic marriage arranged between the latter and Philip's daughter. The Iranian king however is disappointed by his wife and sends her back to her father

in Greece where she gives birth to a son, Alexander. He then marries a true Persian girl who will be the mother of another Darius, the future antagonist of Alexander. The two enemies are thus half-brothers, answering to Aeschylus' sisters, and Alexander's conquest becomes in a way a conquest of Iran by itself. In the narrative of his reign, the Greek king is depicted with a blend of positive and negative traits which seem to reflect his dual nature.

Other texts from the early Islamic period take a similar stance by reporting that all sciences were discovered in Mesopotamia and consigned in books which were subsequently stolen or destroyed by Alexander, until their contents were recovered by the exertions of Iranian kings of the Sasanian dynasty. It is of course impossible to generalize on the basis of a few scattered testimonies, but it would look as if the Orient had a propensity to assimilate and regard as its own all that suits its purposes or seems to hold valuable lessons, while the West tends to cast the Orient in the role of the enemy.

The medieval period, particularly in its earlier stages, was dominated by the mutual hostility of the two competing religions, Christianity and Islam, with the difference that the mood was conquering on the Islamic side, fearful and defensive among the Christians. The attitudes of the latter, however, can vary a great deal according to times and places. For the Western Europeans, Islam is simply a diabolical ploy of the Antichrist and all sorts of absurd legends, bearing no relation to the reality, were spread concerning its faith and beliefs. The Oriental Christians, being in direct contact with their Muslim neighbours and masters, were in a better position to judge with equity. It is the case of John of Damascus, Saint John for the Church, whose numerous writings evince a fairly accurate knowledge of Islam. His polemics against the rival faith concentrate in particular on the Islamic doctrine of predestination which was taking shape at the time, and which he contrasts with the Christian freedom of will. This theological debate is important in that it provides support to the idea that the Orientals are constitutionally

prepared to accept political servitude. The theologically determined view of the East and Easterners is however less dominant than might be expected. In a recent and remarkable study, *Before Orientalism*, Kim Phillips has surveyed a wide spectrum of travel narratives from the medieval period with particular attention to *realia* such as food, sex and customs. Although he is concerned to a large extent with countries beyond the Muslim Middle East, like India, China and South-East Asia, his findings have a more universal relevance. In his conclusion he writes as follows:

Before Orientalism has argued for a distinctive set of attitudes toward Asian peoples and cultures among European travel writers of the later medieval era, especially with regard to secular matters, which to a significant extent run contrary to Pagden's assertions (regarding America: «Europeans had always looked upon their own cultures as privileged, and upon all other cultures as to some degree inferior. There is nothing remarkable about this.») From the mid-thirteenth to early sixteenth century, writers who had travelled to the more distant reaches of the East – and other authors who attempted to distil in prose the experiences of travellers who reported their experiences – offered a diverse range of responses to Oriental realms. These ranged from the pragmatic through the stigmatizing to the wondering and in some instances awestruck, depending not only on the location and motivations of the travellers but also on the agendas of those producing the written texts and interests of the readers who consumed them. The argument has been for a view of the Orient that drew on older European conventions of the wondrous Indies and fears of barbarism beyond the known horizon, yet added richness and complexity through the reports of the travellers who ventured deep into the Eastern hemisphere. Their observations offered a far more diverse range of perspectives than can be covered by concepts of a European Self standing in contrast to an Oriental Other, or of a superior European civilization justified in criticism or domination of less advanced cultures.

The «Europe» produced through these various constructions of Orient, via a kind of cultural refraction, was a complex place. It possessed an openness and willingness to learn that we have sometimes missed. It was disposed to take pleasure in descriptions of distant places. It rarely assumed its own superiority, except in matters of religion, or looked to justify conquest or possession. This Europe, indeed, never entirely disappeared. Even after the turn to imperialism and colonialism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many Europeans retained a multiplicity of responses to different cultures.

That far-distant countries are lands of wonders, monsters and terrors is a permanent trait of the collective imagination, and many elements found in the medieval travelogues can be traced to ancient authors and literary fiction like the Alexander Romance whose fame and influence was equally great in West and East. In this respect, there is no deep difference between the narratives studied by Phillips and some Arabic texts, for instance the famous Travels of Ibn Battuta in the 14th century, just after Marco Polo.

An important, if atypical, figure in the medieval cultural and political landscape is the German emperor Frederick II von Hohenstaufen. His own personal inheritance consisted of Sicily and Southern Italy, where he spent most of his life and where Arabic culture was still predominant at the time. He mastered the language and cultivated the friendship of Arab princes. What makes his place unique is that he put his Muslim sympathies in the service of policies dominated by his hostility to and struggle against the papacy. Excommunicated and compelled to organise a Crusade to recapture Jerusalem, he struck a financial deal with the Sultan to the utmost scandal of Christendom. His political sympathies are inseparable from his interest for the philosophical and scientific productions of the Arabs. It was under his patronage that some important works by Averroes were first translated into Latin. The *Sicilian Questions* of Ibn Sab'in, who seems to have played the role of a kind of court-philosopher, are dedicated to Frederick. His modernity is equally evidenced in the fact that he rejected Aristotle's authority on some questions of natural science.

The late Renaissance and the classical age will bring about a sea-change in the West's perception of its Eastern Muslim neighbours. The balance of power undergoes a complete reversal, first of all on the economic level, with the conquest of the Americas and the discovery of the new sea routes around the world which will at a stroke provide fabulous enrichment to the Europeans monarchies and ruin Islam by transforming it into a commercial back-water circumvented by the new maritime economic fluxes. This will quickly translate in

the military field into the almost uninterrupted series of defeats sustained by the Ottoman Empire, the most powerful Muslim state at the time, from the naval battle of Lepante in 1571 to the loss of the Black sea to Russia in the 18th century. These events will provoke a new awareness in the East as to the necessity to emulate Europe in the military, scientific and technological fields. It is at the same time that Oriental representations begin to penetrate European consciousness and culture on a massive scale. The last decades of the 16th century see the premises of the phenomenon with the beginnings of what may be termed a scientific interest for Islam and specifically the Oriental languages, Arabic, Persian and Turkish, and the creation of the first chairs dedicated to these disciplines. The ostensible religious motive which had justified this kind of curiosity, knowing one's enemy in order better to fight – or convert – him, was soon forgotten in favour of commercial concerns. The first experts in such matters were merchants and diplomats, the two professions being generally combined in the same person, mostly French such as Du Ryer, Tavernier or Chardin, all in the 17th century. The first named of those, though less known, is particularly remarkable in that he left us the first grammars and dictionaries of these languages, as well as a translation of the Coran. But Tavernier, and above all Chardin, are better known thanks to the relations they wrote of their travels which enjoyed a lasting popularity. It is striking that these testimonies are largely devoid of the Orientalist stereotypes for which Europeans writers are commonly blamed. The most influential of these diplomats-merchants-scholars is of course Antoine Galland. He was sent by Louis XIV to Constantinople and acquired a good mastery of Arabic and Turkish. It is as an aside to his main activities, as it were, that he translated some tales which he had found in old manuscripts, *Les Mille et Une Nuit*, generally known in English under the inadequate title of *Arabian Nights*. The success of the first volume, published in 1704, was so phenomenal that the author was compelled by the pressure of his readers, and of his publishers, to put together in haste several sequels. No one could have foreseen this

outcome. These tales, as well as many similar collections discovered since, had always been despised in Arabic and Islamic culture owing to the popular character of the adventures they narrate, and above all because of their stylistic vulgarity. Indeed, Galland paraphrased rather than translated them in order to bring them into line somehow with the literary conventions of the finishing «Grand Siècle». It is thus through the French translation that the Arabs recovered the consciousness of their lost masterpiece. It is quite fascinating to observe the contrasted reactions to it of the Western and Oriental publics: whereas the Europeans somehow assumed that these tales must be licentious because of the traditional clichés of the harem and Mahomet's Paradise, full of lovely girls, they aroused negative response among religious and conservative milieus in the East on the absurd grounds of indecency. Their much vaunted eroticism is in reality quite overdone, to the extent that later translators such as Mardrus at the end of the 19th century were induced to add liberally to it in order to bring them into line with their reputation. In France, the publication's first and most brilliant reflection was Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, a satire of contemporary French society through the eyes of a travelling Persian. The reversal of the Orientalist perspective is here explicit. The traditional theme of the sensuality of Islam, against which Christian theologians had conducted a relentless polemic over many centuries, becomes in the 18th century a new weapon in the fight of intellectuals against the dominance of the Church.

In this respect, Voltaire predictably occupies a predominant position. In 1741, he produces his tragedy *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète* in which the messenger of Islam is depicted as a cynical and manipulative impostor using the religious faith and the naivety of the masses in order to achieve personal and egoistical aims. Religion is turned into and denounced as a mere instrument of power. The literary ploy is so transparent that the Church, despite the ostensible attack against Islam, managed to have the play banned after a few performances. Even more significant is his attitude as evinced in his *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*, in

fact a universal history, perhaps the first instance of what could be dubbed cultural history, a fascinating and quite original enterprise in its attempt to encompass all non-European civilizations and to place them on a par with the Western Christian world. Chapter 6, devoted to «Arabia and Mahomet» sets out in a remarkably factual manner the career and personality of the Muslim prophet as they appear in the native sources, omitting as a matter of course all reference to revelation and supernatural factors. Even such a traditional object of polemics as Mahomet's unrestrained appetite for women, his lubricity as it had for centuries been branded by Christian theologians, is vindicated as an effect of his strong nature and as having had no adverse effect on his courage, energy or health. Polygamy is further justified in the next chapter, dealing with the Coran and Muslim law, as necessary to ensure the demographic stability of the state. The praises he lavishes on Islam and the Muslims, it must be emphasized, are in part motivated by the desire to disparage the Jews by comparison. The traditional imputation of fatalism is justified on the grounds that it was shared by all the classical Antiquity. Voltaire's strategy is thus decidedly anti-Orientalist and consists in stressing the convergence, not to say identity, between the exotic and the European. His idiosyncratic position appears particularly clearly in his attitude towards the most prevalent of Orientalist schemes, despotism. In chapter 60, on Gengis Khan the Mongol conqueror, he denies that his government was despotic. According to him, the chiefs of the ancient northern peoples and their companions were born free and equal, and it is incredible that one of them should have been capable to establish any sort of absolute power over the others and to treat them like horses. Despotism is only established at the end of a long historical process. More surprising still is the favourable judgement passed on the contemporary Ottoman Turks.

«I deem it necessary to fight here a prejudice, namely that the Turkish government is the absurd government called despotic; that the people are all slaves of the Sultan, that they don't possess anything as their own, that their lives and properties belong to their master.

Such an administration would destroy itself... All our historians have utterly deceived us when they regarded the Ottoman Empire as an administration the essence of which is despotism.» In this chapter, which would deserve to be quoted in full, Voltaire describes in a suitably nuanced way the workings of Ottoman rule. He does not deny that it can be brutal and arbitrary, particularly towards conquered non-Turkish nations like the Greeks. What is remarkable here is the clear-sightedness, not entirely devoid of intentional provocation, with which he counters one of the most lasting and cherished Orientalist tropes, still unreservedly endorsed by Montesquieu who propounded a physical-climatic explanation of it. Still more sweepingly he asserts: «If you inquire as a philosopher about what concerns this globe, you will begin by looking into the Orient, cradle of all the arts, and which has given everything to the Occident.»

Voltaire's approach is at once factual and ideological. No other History before him and very few after contain such a wealth of concrete data. To return to the specific case of Mahomet, it is interesting to contrast Rousseau's position as expressed in the last chapter of the *Social Contract*: «Mahomet had very sound views, he tied up (*lia*) his political system, and as long as the form of his government was maintained under the Caliphs his successors, his government was exactly one, and to that extent good. But the Arabs became prosperous, learned, polite, weak and cowardly, and were vanquished by Barbarians. Thereafter, the division between the two powers set in again.» Rousseau here uses the Islamic paradigm of the union of religion and political government in a deliberately anti-Voltairean way to further his own view of the Civic religion. He bends the facts to his own purpose and to support his pet notion of the corrupting influence of the arts. His position thus anticipates what we might call the post-modern attitude (on which more later), in opposition to the modern, liberal stance of Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists. Whereas the latter flatly deny the validity of the traditional scheme («Oriental despotism»), Rousseau endorses it but operates a pre-

Nietzschean inversion of values by turning the minus sign into a plus.

Another Frenchman, less famous than Voltaire and Rousseau, but no less significant in our present perspective, is Constantin-François Chassebeuf, comte de Volney, born in 1757. This last title is a pseudonym or *nom de plume*, formed on Voltaire and Ferney as an homage to the writer for whom he felt the deepest admiration. This notwithstanding, in his relationship to the Orient and to Muslim culture, he is far removed from his idol as we shall see. Having inherited sufficient means from his family, he formed several plans for travelling to distant lands, the first to attract him being the newly created United States, a project to be realized a few years later by his countryman Chateaubriand, who will later follow him in the East. He finally opted for Egypt and Syria, an original choice. Travellers to the East had so far given preference to the politically significant states, the Ottoman Empire above all, and to a lesser extent Persia as it was then called. He explained: «Syria, and above all Egypt, from the dual point of view of what they had been in the past and of what they are today, seemed to me appropriate fields for the political and moral investigations I had in mind.» The results of his observations were consigned in his *Travels to Syria and Egypt* published in 1787. It is however a distinct possibility that he had a hidden political agenda and he may have benefited from official support on the part of the still monarchical government, despite his own sympathies for the new ideals of the Enlightenment, if we bear in mind that his first choice had been America and that the government of Louis XVI. had actively supported the rebels there in order to create difficulties for the traditional English enemy of France. The same strategy may well have been at work in the Middle East with regard to the other major English colony, India. The idea at any rate will not be lost on the successor of the Bourbon monarchy, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Volney's travels and ideas will certainly be one of the inspirations behind the conquest of Egypt by the French in 1798. He was close to Bonaparte before falling out with him.

Volney was not only a writer, philosopher and adventurer; he was also a learned man who thoroughly mastered Arabic before setting out for the East. This interest accompanied him throughout his life. He put forward various plans for the reform and improvement of the teaching of languages, in particular Arabic, including a doomed proposal for writing it with Latin letters. He was also innovative in insisting on the importance of learning the spoken and vulgar language, which in Arabic culture is by no means a foregone attitude.

Volney is eminently of man of the Enlightenment, virulently hostile to tyranny, as despotism was renamed after the Revolution, and to religions. All the ills of the East can be ascribed to the tyranny of the Turkish government. His social and economic analysis of the situation of these regions is however far from simplistic, but on the contrary remarkably prescient. The Ottoman ruling class collects the taxes from the working peasantry and buys goods from Europe, thus enriching its enemies and contributing to the under-development (although obviously he doesn't use the term) of their own country. The inexistence of a middle-class or bourgeoisie is the main reason of the economic, and consequently political, stagnation of the East is the proto-marxist explanation of its backwardness and of the disparity between it and Western Europe which bears witness to Volney's far-sightedness.

A few years later, in 1791, Volney published a kind of afterthought on his trip under the title of *Les Ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires*. The basic ideas are the same as in the *Voyage*, but the tone is different. The French Revolution has made its mark. Volney, given his positions, is predictably one of its supporters and politically involved. The Ruins is dramatically set in the site of the antique city of Palmyra which Volney had visited in Syria. As he stands in front of its imposing ruins, wondering how such mighty empires could disappear and be utterly destroyed, a spirit appears to him in a kind of vision and provides the answer in a lengthy discourse: the reason is tyranny (to make it short and simple). In transparency it is possible to decipher

the role which France and the revolutionary ideas are destined to play in the liberation of the East.

Volney can be taken as the paradigm of «modern» Orientalism with his paradoxical blend of genuine sympathy, thorough study and deep understanding for his object, with the colonialist or proto-colonialist attitude denounced by Said. He constitutes one of the most exact, and ultimately rare, instances of the type defined by Said as universally valid, and one can only wonder that he paid him such scanty attention (no more than a few scattered and fleeting mentions).

If Voltaire, Rousseau and Volney are taken to exemplify different modes of a «modernist» approach of Islam, is it possible to locate a post-modern reading? The attempt has been made in one of the most ingenious and stimulating recent publications on the question of Orientalism in general, Ian Almond's *The New Orientalists* (2007). It consists of eight case-studies on mostly late twentieth-century authors, novelists and essayists, including at least one «Oriental», the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk and his «Black Book». The earliest author considered is however Nietzsche who features there as a kind of odd man out. His position deserves to be recorded here. Just as Rousseau praised Mahomet for binding together State and Religion, Nietzsche exalted Islam as a war-like, anti-egalitarian and anti-feminine culture, a point incidentally which clearly disproves Said's contention that the Orientalist discourse treats the East as a woman destined to be conquered and dominated by the male West. His attitude comes out most clearly in a late – late in the relatively brief career of its author – section 60 of the *Antichrist*:

Christianity robbed us of the harvest of the culture of the Ancient world; it later went on robbing us of the harvest of the culture of Islam. The wonderful Moorish cultural world of Spain, more closely related to us at bottom, speaking more directly to our senses and taste than Greece and Rome, was trampled down. «War to the knife with Rome! Peace and friendship with Islam!»: this is what that great free spirit, the genius among German emperors, Friedrich the Second, felt, this is what he did.

Islam becomes thus for Nietzsche a kind of contemporary Ancient world. It is no wonder that he seriously considered at one point settling down in a Muslim country. Of course his interpretation of Islam is completely opportunistic, «self-serving» in Almond's words. In other texts, he uses Japan or other Asian cultures to the same purpose. The point is to be geographically and culturally non-European, and above all non-German, and chronologically pre-modern, or even anti-modern and anti-progress.

It is impossible to summarize here the very rich contents of Almond's investigations. I will be content to point out some of the paradoxes implied in his conclusions. Of course, Almond is well-aware that nothing is more difficult than giving a more or less accurate definition of the term «post-modern», this «over-used buzzword» to use his own terms. In the perspective I have followed here: traditional (anti-despotic) Orientalism, modern attitude negating the traditional prejudice (Voltaire), or flaunting it (Rousseau, Nietzsche), colonial (Saidian) Orientalism, a post-modern position could be expected to deny purely and simply any pertinence in the dichotomy East-West. In more philosophical terms, if Said is right to say that «Orientalism» in his definition is «a form of radical realism», it would be in post-modern terms a form of radical nominalism. To our utmost surprise, this is not the conclusion to which Almond's reflections lead up. Rather, post-modern thinkers seem to have nothing more urgent to do than falling into the traps of the most conservative and traditional Orientalism. I will quote two examples to illustrate the point, but it would be easy to multiply them on the sole basis of Almond's book. The first concerns Michel Foucault who created a kind of stupefaction, as a libertarian thinker, in praising the religio-conservative Iranian revolution of 1979. «In reading Foucault's remarks on Iran, the point that appears to be most significant is that, to a surprising extent, Foucault had already decided what he was going to experience there.» Even more damning is his remark on Derrida: «The philosophical world, it would seem, is destined to

revolve round Europe; Derrida's generous qualification that such philosophers of the future may even be non-European, providing they continue to think in a "European" way, does not provide much comfort.» In view of such examples, one can only wonder at the «concluding thoughts» of the author according to which his book is concerned with «a single gesture: the use of the unfamiliar in the critique of the familiar», and «the representation of Islam in post-modern texts tells us more about post-modernity than it does about Islam.» But isn't this exactly what Said has been trying to demonstrate that it could be said about almost any Orientalist text for the past twenty-five hundred years? Post-modernism in that case would distinguish itself from modernism not by any change of perspective, but merely by an added awareness of its historical contingency. «Orientalizing the Oriental» is the formula in which Said encapsulates the gist of his approach. The formula could with advantage be turned on its head: the hidden and unconscious purpose of Orientalism was to Europeanize the European, to define him by opposition to the non-him, as the Greeks had defined themselves in opposition to the Barbarians. And the Orientals played the same game. In a book published in the same year, 1978, as *Orientalism, L'Europe et l'Islam*, and which was unfortunately eclipsed by the latter, the Franco-Tunisian scholar Hichem Djait suggested that Orientals very often play the role of Orientals when confronted by Europeans, and react in the way which they suppose their interlocutor is expecting of them. In this order, the most perceptive considerations are to be found in the essay of an Iranian writer, Al-e Ahmad. Born into a family of Muslim clerics, he turned Marxist, was active in the communist Tudeh party, before returning at the end of his life to more traditionalist positions, even if his attitude to religion remains elusive. The essay I am referring to has been variously translated as «Occidentosis», or «Westoxification» (*gharbzadegi*), a word he didn't coin himself, but made famous. Published in 1962, 16 years before *Orientalism* and totally ignored by Said, it contains in a more concise form all the main theses of the later book, including the

denunciation of academic «Orientalism» considered as a tool of colonialism, although Al-e Ahmad, as a good Marxist, places machinism at the root of the problem. But the significant fact is that it is all qualified not as Orientalism, but as Occidentalism. Al-e Ahmad has described with great penetration the perverse process whereby industrialized countries buy oil and sell finished products, thus ensuring the indefinite economic dependence of oil-producing countries (a process, by the way, already well understood by Volney as we have seen. Unlike Said, Al-e Ahmad doesn't see Orientalism as a moral and intellectual preparation to colonialism, but rather as a kind of fetishistic counter-prestition on the part of Western powers and a way of ingratiating themselves with Easterners. In contrast to Said, too, and this is possibly the most important point, Al-e Ahmad lays squarely the blame for this situation on the Iranians themselves no less than on the Westerners. The problem lies in the definition of what is «European», or Western, no less than in that of the «Oriental». The Europeans too have put their label on that by which they wanted to be defined and annexed what did not necessarily belong to them (rationality). It is the pertinence of the East-West opposition which ought to be questioned, not that of the concept of Orientalism. Orientalism, as we have seen, exists also in the Orient, and moreover is often an Occidentalism. There may be a profoundly tragic lesson in what is currently happening in the so-called «Islamic State», ISIS, or Daesh. By showing off cruelty, beheading and burning alive their prisoners, including Muslims, the fanaticized jihadists are perhaps unknowingly trying the only way out from Western categories, the ultimate opposition to a system of values regarded as Western because it is universal. To no avail, needless to say: the most casual look at the Internet postings on ISIS will immediately reveal the omnipresence of the qualification of «Barbarians», and of the label «new barbarism» applied to them. They have thus neatly found their way back to the most traditional pigeon-hole of Orientalism, the very name by which the Greeks had identified their neighbours

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