Introduction

> Neither you nor I nor anyone, no ancient and no modern can know Oriental woman for the reason that it is impossible to visit her.
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> GUSTAVE FLAUBERT Letter to C. A. Sainte-Beuve, 1862
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> Literature, it seems to me, is the discourse most preoccupied with the unknown, but not in the sense in which such a statement is usually understood. The "unknown" is not what lies beyond the limits of knowledge.
>
> BARBARA JOHNSON *The Critical Difference*

By 1862, when Gustave Flaubert wrote the letter to Sainte-Beuve that is cited above, the expression "Oriental woman" held a particular meaning for French readers. Like the word "Orient" itself, it did not simply designate a concrete social or geographic reality—women from North Africa or the Middle East—but rather triggered a series of associations involving harems and veils, polygamy, eunuchs and political despotism, and perhaps above all, desire intensified by the obstacles placed in its way. These connotations began to coalesce in the travel literature of the late 1600s, and by the early nineteenth century, the expression "la femme orientale" had become idiomatic, a figure of speech denoting a determinate set of characteristics, a mystery, an enigma, a promise. Judged from a more politicized perspective, it was an all-encompassing cultural label that emphasized only certain features of Oriental life while erasing numerous differences between women of different Eastern nations, cultures, and religions.

Although the expression "Oriental woman" no longer trips off the tongue, more contemporary labels such as "Third World woman" or "Middle Eastern

woman," widely used in contemporary sociology and political theory, have not only absorbed many of its cultural connotations but also retained its problematic generality.[1] Given this genealogy, and the continuing polarization of relations between East and West, Islam and Christianity, I have felt it worthwhile to look back to the literary and visual culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to perform a genealogy of this figure in which issues of race and gender, politics and sexuality, are intertwined. What this genealogy uncovers is not simply the central role that the idea of the "Oriental woman" has played in defining France's relation to the Maghreb, Egypt, and the Levant, but also the important place that ideas about gender relations in the Orient have occupied in the history of domestic cultural politics.

It is, I have found, possible to draw a clear analogy between these two vectors because Western representations have not only "feminized" the Orient but also "Orientalized" the feminine; that is to say, the foreignness ascribed to Oriental woman can be read as a displaced representation of all of the forms of "otherness" ascribed to women in Western culture—criminality, perversion, homosexuality, and neurosis, to cite but a few.[2] In this regard, Orientalist representation constitutes an exemplary illustration of the fact that race and gender are, in Anne McClintock's terms, "articulated categories"—modalities of difference that are constructed in relation to each other and that therefore need to be examined together as overlapping dimensions of an integrated cultural perspective.[3]

The necessity of this kind of perspective is political and wholly current. With remarkable uniformity, cultures have attempted to control the experience of difference by subsuming it under a monolithic category of "the Other." However diverse the field of cultural difference may be—and certainly differences in race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation have been experienced in a wide variety of ways by members of the dominant cultural group and by members of the oppressed group or cultural minority—historical investigation testifies to the existence of a seemingly universal drive to reduce all differences to the congealed sameness of "the Other." One of the principal means by which this reduction or containment of difference takes place is precisely the articulation of categories of difference, the process by which different modes of difference are made to interpenetrate and define each other.

Thus, in the case of Oriental woman, race and gender operate as categories of difference whose apparent parallelism neatly confirms the existence of an alterity or foreignness that lies beyond the bounds of identity. The product of this kind of erasure of the specificity of " the Other" has predominantly been identity politics and particularism: the current wave of anti-Western sentiment traversing the Islamic world, for example, is clearly in some measure a reaction to the reductive " othering" of Moslems that has taken place in Europe and North America over the last two centuries. In retracing this process of social abstraction, I want to propose that rather than simply heralding the cries of " death to America" currently resonating in the Sudan or Iraq as confirmation of the intrinsic religious fanaticism of Islamic culture—as our foreign policy institutions and the mainstream media generally invite us to do—it behooves us to consider the roots of these attitudes of resentment and condemnation that lie in the dominant Western representations of Islam.

Representations of Oriental women are extraordinarily abundant in the art and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, they constitute a key dimension of what Edward Said has described as the " citational" repertory of Orientalism: the practice of intertextual borrowing and repetition from which Western representations of the Orient derive their authority (Said, *Orientalism*, 20). They occur in genres as varied as travel narratives, ethnography and the novel, lyric poetry and opera-ballet, painting, postcards, and film, and across epistemologies and aesthetic movements as diverse as empiricism, romanticism and symbolism, the neoclassical realism of Jean-Dominique Ingres and Jean-Léon Gérôme, and the formalisms of Stéphane Mallarmé and Henri Matisse. Although in the wake of the publication of Said's seminal study *Orientalism*, a number of critics have turned their attention to the politics of the Orientalist tradition,[4] none has examined the figure of the Oriental woman as a central category of Orientalist representation or asked why over the last three centuries Oriental sexuality has occupied such an important place in the European imaginary.[5]

This book attempts to fill this void by situating representations of the Oriental woman within the history of European colonialism; by examining the centrality of the figure of Oriental woman to the consolidation of aesthetic movements, notably artistic and literary modernism; and by exploring

the array of functions it has fulfilled in the field of domestic cultural politics. It has for some time been acknowledged that "the Orient" has functioned in European thought as, in Lisa Lowe's terms, a "critical terrain," a dense representational field on which political ideologies, aesthetic ideals, and critical models have been distilled and bodied forth. The time is now ripe to take a closer look at this appropriation of the Orient and to explore the specific, historically changing agendas—both domestic and global—that Orientalist representation has fulfilled.

It seems to me that although the studies of Orientalist literature published in the wake of *Orientalism* invariably promise to deliver a historical interpretation of this cultural production, they just as consistently fail to follow through, privileging the theorization of the literary construction of alterity over the analysis of the historical evolution of French colonial policy and the changing interplay between this policy and the literary sphere. This book, by contrast, explores ways in which the changing realities of French colonialism are paralleled by shifts in the mode of literary representation. It also attempts to do something further, going beyond the mere elucidation of the relationship between Orientalist literature and colonial ideology by asking about the range of functions that representations of Oriental others have fulfilled within the domestic social and political economy. In my view, this shift in emphasis constitutes an important first step toward dismantling the opposition between metropole and colony, center and margin, that has underpinned most thinking on colonialism, whether by historians or by literary scholars.

The chapters that follow cover the period roughly from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. It is my view that insofar as European representations of the Orient are concerned, this time frame manifests a strong internal coherence. This is to say, unlike other recent theorists, I do not approach French Orientalism before the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a properly "colonial" discourse. This is not because I think that literary representations of the Orient have no relation to or affinity with colonial history—they clearly do—but because I want to argue that to conflate the two is to overlook and even to mask a subtle process of displacement by which, for over two centuries, French literature managed to distance itself from the central concerns of colonialism. If we

focus closely on historical context, rather than applying to the Orientalist corpus a set of transhistorical theoretical postulates, we observe that the cultural sphere has consistently aestheticized colonial experience, devoting its energy and attention to relatively peripheral matters, while saying almost nothing about the nuts and bolts process of colonial expansion. The ubiquitous figure of the Oriental woman exemplifies this tendency because it embodies a core of idealized longing for an " other," even when in strictly material terms this " other" was already conquered and possessed.

The pattern of aestheticization and displacement that I will describe also had its own history. During the eighteenth century, the " sublimation" of the colonial to which I am alluding involved the displacement of French *interests* in the New World onto a veritable *fascination* with things Oriental; in the nineteenth century, after incursions into the Egypt and Algeria in 1798 and 1830, when Orientalist representation and colonial politics became more closely intertwined, it involved the consecration of an idea of the " timeless" Orient that obscured changes occurring in the region as a result of the European presence. All of this began to change when, as a preliminary to the " Scramble for Africa," the acute phase of colonial expansion that began around 1870, a coherent national policy of colonial expansion was elaborated for the first time in France. In this period of overt expansionism, the colonies enjoyed unprecedented prominence in the national consciousness, a heightened level of awareness that in the literary sphere generated representations of the Orient that departed from the patterns of displacement and aestheticization characteristic of the earlier period.

Perhaps in reaction to this political shift, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Orientalist representation also began to change in a different, indeed almost diametrically opposed, fashion. Beginning around midcentury, a number of avant-garde artists, including most prominently Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé, Gustave Moreau, Oscar Wilde, and Henri Matisse, created images of Oriental women that abandoned the ethnographic concerns of earlier representations. Anecdote has it, for example, that when Matisse was told that his images of odalisques did not really resemble women, he replied that they were not women, but paintings. His response (a paraphrase of Mallarmé's famous statement that a dancer is not a woman who dances because she is not a woman, but a

metaphor resuming the elementary aspects of form, and because she doesn't dance, but rather writes with her body; " Ballets," 304) illustrates the fact that for many avant-garde artists, including Mallarmé and Matisse, the Oriental woman was such a common figure of artistic representation that it no longer referred to anything beyond art itself and could therefore be marshaled to represent representation: Matisse himself used the odalisque as a framework for the valorization of color and form.

The final chapter of this book traces the beginnings of this shift to a modernist aesthetic in Orientalism in the work of Théophile Gautier. I do not, however, follow its evolution through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, largely because this corpus of representations seems to me to exhibit a distinct formal paradigm—one that does not manifest the constant shifting between aestheticism and ethnography, or between Oriental woman as a literary figure and as an empirical referent, that characterizes literature of the earlier period.

FOREIGN BODIES

In the letter cited in the epigraph, Flaubert responds to some rather pedantic historical corrections that his friend, the writer and literary critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, had proposed to his novel *Salammbô* (1863) with the sweeping assertion that Oriental woman can never truly be known because, hidden beneath a veil or enclosed within the walls of a harem, she cannot be visited. He emphatically declares that " neither you nor I, no ancient and no modern can know Oriental woman": Oriental woman is, by definition, inaccessible and unknowable (Flaubert, *Correspondence*, 3:277). Yet despite this categorical assertion, we know from Flaubert's travel notes, published posthumously in 1910, that during his voyage to the Orient in 1849–1851, the writer frequented several Egyptian *almées* (dancers who sometimes doubled as prostitutes), including the now famous Kuchiouk Hânem.[6] This discrepancy between rhetoric and reality suggests that in the mind of Flaubert and his reader the expression " la femme orientale" did not simply denote a woman from Egypt or the Maghreb whose sexual services might, on occa-

sion, be bought and enjoyed, but that it also functioned as a metaphor for an unknown and unknowable other.

But if we are tempted to ascribe to this sense of transcendent otherness the ideological neutrality of a philosophical ideal, a letter that Flaubert wrote in March 1853 to his lover, the writer Louise Colet, clearly demonstrates that political forces were also at work in this construction of absolute alterity (*Correspondance*, 2:279–89). Colet had just read Flaubert's travel notes and reacted strongly to his account of his visits to Kuchiouk Hânem, expressing jealousy but also bemoaning the degrading depiction he gives of her rival. In response, Flaubert attempts to assuage her jealousy by claiming that the courtesan felt nothing, either emotionally or (because of her circumcision) physically; indeed, he goes so far as to state that " Oriental woman is a machine, nothing more": the interests of Oriental women are restricted to going to the baths, smoking, and drinking coffee. Seemingly inspired by this idea, he goes on to observe that what makes this woman poetic is the fact that she is " thoroughly natural" (" elle rentre absolument dans la nature"): she is like the Oriental dancer whose eyes express tranquillity and emptiness because they are unmoved by passion.

What these remarks show is that if the Oriental woman has functioned in European art and literature as a figure for radical alterity, it is in large part because women of the Orient are deemed to exist in a mechanical state of self-absorption, experiencing no desire for anything beyond themselves. Implied in the ascription of absolute alterity is thus the secondary assumption that male, European identity constitutes the unique locus of desire, subjectivity, and knowledge. Yet as we will see, in the fragile economy of Orientalist writing, *knowledge of "the other,"* which participates in the erasure of the other's subjectivity and in the corresponding assertion of European superiority, is in many instances counterbalanced by a discovery of *the other in knowledge*.[7]

In delineating what he describes as the " heterological" tradition in European thought, Michel de Certeau observes that the ethnographic production of " the other" has historically been a means of constructing a discourse authorized by " the other"; that is to say, there is typically a circularity between the social construction of categories of alterity and the claim that

discourse is authorized by something beyond itself, an inaccessible exterior or *hors texte* (*Heterologies*, 68). De Certeau is certainly right to assert that ethnographic discourse is saturated with implied assertions of textual authority that in many instances involve claims to have witnessed or experienced something extraordinary, something beyond the life experience of the reader. However, it is also possible to discern in early European ethnography a contrasting dynamic, a process by which the representation of others generates a sense of otherness *within* knowledge that undermines rather than authorizes formulations of sameness and difference.

As Barbara Johnson states in the epigraph to this Introduction, literature has always been preoccupied with the " unknown"—for instance, with the Orient as an unknown and enticing ideal. Yet as a self-conscious mode of representation its primary object has been the unknown that is " in" rather than " beyond" knowledge. For Johnson, as for a whole school of deconstructive readers, this " unknown" corresponds to the fact that knowledge is constructed in language, and language can never be thoroughly grasped or controlled by the subject who speaks or writes: as subjects of language, we cannot simply step outside of the semantic order and enjoy a commanding view of the infinite and ungraspable play of difference that makes meaning possible.

The idea that language, the very medium in which knowledge is constituted, might itself constitute an " unknown" is an important one for this study, for when I began to examine the feminine figures of Orientalist texts, I found that they are often interwoven with self-reflexive representations of language, and more specifically, with representations of language as something " foreign," an alien and resistant code. It would seem in fact that the Western meditation on the absolute alterity of Oriental woman—" other" in terms of both gender and race—has had the unintended effect of exposing alterity closer to home. This book is in part about the status of Oriental women as " veiledfigures" of linguistic alterity,[8] or to put this another way, about the recurrent linkage between the figure of the Oriental woman and the textual " cognizance" that language is not simply the transparent medium of ideology, experience, and identity.

To designate this potentially disruptive core of alterity within the economy of knowledge and its categorization of identity and difference, the pres-

ence of " the other" *within* as well as *between* genders and cultures, I use the metaphor of the " foreign body," a term primarily deployed in biomedical discourse to denote the presence of a foreign entity, usually a virus or bacterium, within the confines of the body. But my use of this term is in fact more than merely metaphorical, for in this study I examine the perceived alterity of quite literal foreign bodies—the mysterious solar tattoos that adorn the body of the Javanese slave of Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (*Voyage to the Orient*; 1851), the " imperceptibly African" lips of Gautier's Egyptian heroines, the loquacious genitals of Denis Diderot's female protagonists—and because I show that perceptions of foreignness, and anxiety about its destabilizing impact on the self, are frequently conveyed through medical metaphors of contagion and disease with which the trope of the foreign body is aligned.[9]

Yet at this juncture I need to introduce an important caveat by emphasizing that the fact that representations of Oriental women frequently disclose the existence of radical uncertainty within the order of knowledge, and therefore within hierarchical categories of social and racial identity, does not give immediate grounds for embracing their political message. The relationship between the political agenda of a text and its epistemological instability is rather a complex one that requires slow and nuanced consideration. To begin to broach this issue, I think it will be helpful to compare my reading of the way that ethnography takes " cognizance" of its own linguistic frailty with a similar, although in several important respects divergent, perspective—the position that Roland Barthes outlines in *L'Empire des signes* (*The Empire of Signs*; 1970).

In his often-cited meditation on Japanese culture, Barthes observes that Orientalist representation has consistently erased the foreignness of the Orient by translating it into the conceptual framework of European culture. In his own writing, he struggles against the current of this history, reversing the flow of knowledge such that the unmediated foreignness of Japan floods European culture and provokes an interrogation of European cultural norms. For Barthes, the ultimate promise of this contact with unmediated otherness is to expose these cultural limits in such a way that the Western sense of what is real is undone, the subject's " topology" is displaced, and " everything occidental in us totters" (*Empire*, 6).

Like Barthes, I believe that the most far-reaching questioning of cultural identity demands recognition of the contingency of the language in which societies and selves are constructed. However, my perspective differs from his in two important ways. Although I agree that the Orientalist tradition must be viewed as the history of a missed opportunity, a failure to ponder the nature and effects of difference, I would nonetheless argue that there have been moments in this history when the signifying system of European culture has been shaken by its contact with alterity. In the critical moment of the Enlightenment, for example, awareness of other cultural norms clearly stimulated the contestation of political institutions and social practices. It is, however, equally apparent that in the case of the Enlightenment, this self-reflexive sense of alterity was rapidly reabsorbed into the postulates of Western universalism. I will therefore argue—again, contra Barthes—that even the most profound disturbances of our signifying system are inevitably reabsorbed into the structures of meaning and understanding—that we can never simply transcend these structures and enter a utopian space of pure difference.

What I will identify in the European representation of the Orient is therefore a constant *fluctuation* between the fleeting and destabilizing manifestation of the unknown within knowledge and the inexorable reconfiguration of categories of knowledge and power. In this regard, my analysis differs not only from Barthes's, but also from most previous studies of Orientalist literature. By this I mean that the debate over the political stakes of Orientalist representation has progressed through the kind of pendulum swings between politicized criticism and close textual reading that have characterized other debates over the cultural politics of literature. I would like to call a halt to this back-and-forth debate, at least insofar as Orientalism is concerned, by arguing that it is important to acknowledge *both* the geopolitical power encoded in Orientalist representation *and* the ways in which specific texts and individual writers offer resistance to this power.

The play of forces that characterizes Orientalism operates on two distinct, although interrelated, levels: the broad linguistic–epistemological plane that I have begun to outline, and a more circumscribed historical frame that I now want to delineate. Ethnographic thought, of which Orientalism can be considered a subcategory, came into existence in the early eighteenth century—which is to say, in a historical context of unequal power relations

between Europe and the rest of the world. It bears the traces of this history in the sense that it offers spontaneous confirmation of the Western observer's superior ability to travel and to gather information; to the extent that it represents other cultures as "more primitive" or "less advanced"; and finally, for the reason that the accrual of ethnographic knowledge has often served as a preliminary to conquest and occupation.

Yet despite ethnography's obvious complicity with the accretion of European power, it is nonetheless important to recognize that the geographical discoveries that furnished the basis for the primitivization of other cultures also profoundly shook existing conceptions of the globe, provoking an interrogation of Europe's systems of authority, notably in the domain of religion.[10] When we evaluate ethnography as a mode of inquiry, it is necessary to acknowledge both of these dimensions: the critical force of the representation of alterity in relation to the established order, or ancien régime, and its central contribution to the consolidation of Western dominance. What is at stake in this analysis is not simply the construction of an accurate and fair-minded historical model, but rather the chance to reflect upon the paradoxes of our modernity, to trace the origins of the contradictory relationship between our experience of political liberalism and the ongoing history of racial and sexual prejudice and injustice. We are wont to wring our hands in despair while asking how it can be that racial prejudice and sexual discrimination coexist with the tolerance and political openness of liberal democracy. The roots of this contradiction are, however, elucidated when we look back to the Enlightenment and consider the role that encounters with "others" played both in the genesis of modern liberalism and in the consolidation of exclusionary national, cultural, and racial identities.

Over the past two decades, much has been written on the subject of the cultural and political implications of Orientalist representation, and it is clearly necessary to situate any further reflection on this subject within the parameters of this debate. In the following section, I present the key terms of this discussion and situate my own approach in relation to it. Broadly stated, I propose a new reading of the relationship between Orientalist discourse and colonial history, and I extend to a broader cultural context the arguments for a double movement of reading that I have already made in relation to the figuration of the Oriental woman.