

*Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*

By DANIEL MARTIN VARISCO (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007), xvi, 501 pp. Price PB £16.99. EAN 978-0295987521.

When Edward Said's *Orientalism* first appeared in 1978 on both sides of the Atlantic, many Orientalists, who have never rejoiced in critique of their enterprise, dismissed the book as a fit of anger indulged by an angry Palestinian Arab who did not like the way his history, culture and society were represented in Orientalist discourse. For all that, the book is still reprinted, translated (into more than 36 languages), read and widely discussed all over the world by the followers of many disciplines. *Orientalism* is (p. 4) 'one of the most oft-quoted texts across the various disciplines engaged in studying the Middle East or Islam'. 'Reviews, journal articles, book chapters, books, conference papers, debate forums, guest lectures, newspaper columns, interviews on radio and television, documentaries, websites: for more than two decades Edward Said was visible as America's intellectual everyman. Entire symposia have been devoted to *Orientalism's* claims, including an emotional public duel between Edward Said and historian Bernard Lewis [...] at the annual convention of the Middle East Association (MESA) in 1988'.

In fact, *Orientalism* is still an extremely rich source of inspiration for any scholar, writer, intellectual or artist interested in human relations, particularly the relation between 'the self' and 'the other'. As Professor Varisco admits in his introduction, 'There have been calls and sporadic attempts to "do a Said" in African-American studies, American studies, Andeanism, Japanese studies, Italy's southern question, pre-Alexandrian Greek texts, and analysis of missionary narrative. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld coins "Mediterraneanism" in conscious imitation of Said's "Orientalism". *Orientalism* even inspired an "ismic" deconstruction of Anglosaxonism and Celticism' (p. 17). Varisco's book is only partial evidence of this widely recognized phenomenon of Said. As a matter of fact, 'The potential (and one would add the actual) readership alone separates *Orientalism* from any other critical text written in any language in the later part of the last century' (p. 11). It is natural or even (thirty years after its first publication) high time that a study of the unique attraction of the book and the sustained interest of its diverse readers should be carried out. Professor Varisco indeed presents his readers with two books about Said's *Orientalism*, which he has read thoroughly and which (in his assessment, 'a milestone in critical theory' (p. xi)) changed the destiny of several disciplines, including Oriental, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. The first of the two books about it is an account that 'provides a critique of Said's thesis'. While many of the details in that thesis have been presented before by a wide range of scholars, Varisco has added his own focus on Said's persuasive rhetoric in order to produce what he claims to be 'judicious satirical criticism' of Said's book so that 'we move beyond the polemical rhetoric of the binary blame game' (p. xi). In preparing this critique Varisco has looked at commentary on Said's *Orientalism* from 'guilded' practitioners of anthropology, American studies, Arabic studies, archaeology, art

history, biblical studies, economics, cultural studies, English literature, film studies, gender studies, geography, intellectual history, literary criticism, medieval history, philosophy, political science, religious studies, psychology, sociology, and their sub-disciplines. The various orientations of these critics, pro and con, find representation in activists, anarchists, feminists, evangelicals, Foucauldians and anti-Foucauldians, ghost writers, Islamists, journalists, Marxists, positivists, post-colonialists and postcolonialists, postmodernists and subalterns (pp. 11–12). The second book consists of the endnotes (pp. 307–422) and bibliography (pp. 423–88), where Varisco lists all the references he consulted.

Stressing the polemical nature of *Orientalism* in his 'To the Reader', and referring in some detail to a few of Said's critics such as Martin Kramer, Kanan Makiya, Bernard Lewis and Ziauddin Sardar, Professor Varisco points out that it is high time that the issues raised in *Orientalism* moved beyond a referendum on Edward Said, and that his aim in writing the book is to move the debate beyond polemical stalemate. 'We need to think outside the binary that binds us-versus-them-ism' (p. xvi).

Highlighting the importance of the book in his 'Introduction', Professor Varisco begins by presenting (pp. 24–7) the first published reading of the cover of the 1979 paperback edition of *Orientalism*, namely Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1880s *Le charmeur des serpents* (The Snake Charmer). He then moves on (Chapter 1, 'Orienting Orientalism', pp. 29–92) to 'introduce the Phenomenon of *Orientalism*, leading to an emphasis on the ways in which Orientalism has been defined and redefined as an object of study, followed by an etymological excavation of the "imagined" and a close look at the growth of institutional Orientalism in Europe'. Chapter 2 ('The said and the unsaid in Said's Magnum Opus Oriental', pp. 93–233) 'surveys the critical reaction to Said's Orientalism thesis, covering the faults in his historical hindsight', focusing attention, not just on what he said, 'but on the absent self-critique of Orientalist authors and the self-representation of Orientals capable of representing themselves'. The essence of Said's essentializing thesis is engaged in Chapter 3 ('The seductive charms of and against *Orientalism*' (pp. 235–305). In concluding the first of the two books, Varisco tries to move beyond the polemic of *Orientalism* and the split-vision of the world that dominates most of the works of Orientalists, by pointing out, quite rightly, that only sound scholarship is the solution: 'the best way to battle misleading binary thinking is to get on with sound academic scholarship and spend less time rhetorically damming the binary itself or reconstructing incomplete genealogies of intellectual history [...]. The goal of serious scholarship should be to improve understanding of self and other' (pp. 304–5). And that goal needs to be sought through a real and genuine partnership between the Orientalists and Orientals.

While one is impressed by Varisco's thorough examination of the text and context of Said's *Orientalism*, as well as by the arrangement of his work, particularly his 'second book', one cannot help but express a measure of disappointment with some of his judgments. His views on the reception of Said's book in the Arab world and the Orient in general are one example. He is

certainly wrong when he claims that 'Said's exposé of [W]estern Orientalism has received limited attention in the real Orient' (p. 17). In point of fact, *Orientalism* has twice been translated into Arabic (by Kamal Abu Deeb and Muhammad 'Anani), and then engendered several series of books on Western Orientalism generally, and a score of books and hundreds of articles on Said and his *Orientalism*. It has also been translated into several Oriental languages, including Japanese, Chinese and Turkish. There are several editions of the book as well as partial translations pirated in Iran and Pakistan. It is most regrettable that, though Professor Varisco knows Arabic and has spent a good while in Yemen, he hardly covers the reception of *Orientalism* in the Arab world—one could easily write a book on the subject, there being more than enough material to do so.

Varisco also neglects to discuss the direct and indirect impact of *Orientalism* on the works of his continental contemporaries such as Tzvetan Todorov's *La Conquête de l'Amérique* (1982, English transl. 1984) and his *Nous et les autres: La Réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (1989, transl. as *On Human Diversity*, 1994), Paul Ricoeur's *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990, transl. by Kathleen Blamey as *Oneself as Another*, 1992), Julia Kristeva's *Étranges à nous-mêmes* (1991, transl. as *Strangers to Ourselves*, also 1991), Jack Derrida's *L'Oreille de l'autre* (1982, transl. as *The Ear of the Other*, 1985) and others.

Varisco's ambivalent attitude towards *Orientalism* is, nonetheless, coupled with great admiration for Said's intellectual integrity. Those who mourn the passing of Said 'the relentless advocate of human rights for all the victims of past imperialism and present neo-colonial co-option' will find in *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* an excellent and thorough history of the debate that has been generated by Said's book. If *Orientalism* is, to use Thierry Hentsch's words, 'the corridor through which all examination and discussion of Orientalism must pass', Varisco's book is certainly the right place for readers of Said's *Orientalism* to begin their journey of reflection.

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