The Real Discourses of Orientalism

Robert Irwin

Although it is widely acknowledged that Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978, contained many errors of fact and interpretation, it is often defended and praised for having opened new areas of enquiry and stimulated debate. But I think that that book and those written under its influence have actually closed off areas of enquiry and, though there has certainly been debate, that debate has been conducted within restricted parameters. If a full and accurate history of academic and artistic Orientalism is ever to be written, then its authors will need to sidestep the arbitrary chronological and topographical limits suggested by Said and his followers. It is odd, for example, that Said chose to ignore almost entirely the French presence in North Africa and the close collusion that existed there between colonial administrators, academics and artists. That seriously undermined and deformed the account given by Said of French Orientalism, as he relied excessively on the interpretation of a few romantic literary works.

It is understandable that Said did not feel qualified to discuss Orientalism more broadly and analyse Egyptology, Hebrew studies, Persian studies, Turkish studies, Sanskrit studies and Sinology, as well as the broader range of western cultural responses to the Orient. The paragon who could tackle all this has not yet been born. But even the faintest awareness of how Sanskrit studies or Sinology evolved might have given Said pause.

Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 may or may not have been a watershed in the western study of Arabs and Islam. I shall return to 1798 later, but let me say here that I do not think that it was, though it may have been an event in the history of Egyptology. But if one glances at the history of Sinology, a field dominated for a long time by the French, then 1798 is evidently a date of no particular importance. France was the first to set up a chair of Chinese in 1814 and in the nineteenth century Julien, Rémusat and Hervey de Saint Denys pursued their researches into Chinese matters without reference to France’s imperial ambitions. Paul Pelliot and Henri Maspero continued the tradition in the twentieth century and until the Second World War France was the leader in Sinology. Nevertheless, as Simon Leys has pointed out, a high proportion of the leading Sinologists both today and in the past have been Chinese.

If one considers India and Indian studies, one might guess that the British occupation of most of the subcontinent in the course of the eighteenth century would have led on to the rise of a flourishing body of researchers and publications on Sanskrit and related matters and, indeed some early and important
contributions were made to Indian studies, notably by Sir William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke. But on the whole, scholarship did not follow the flag and British universities were very slow to embrace Sanskrit studies. The Orientalist Sir Charles Lyall worked in the Indian Civil Service, but he did not spend his scholarly free time in working on Sanskrit or other Indian topics, but rather chose to translate Pre-Islamic poetry from the Arabic. It was the French who set up the first chair in Sanskrit studies. A chair of Sanskrit studies was then established in Germany for August Wilhelm von Schlegel in 1808. By contrast, Britain only acquired a Sanskrit professorship in 1853.

I am not qualified to say anything much about Indian studies, but Raymond Schwab’s *La Renaissance orientale* (1950) seems to suggest that Anquetil-Duperron’s publication of the *Zend-Avesta* in 1771 was the real watershed in the history of Oriental studies. Later, Sanskrit studies became peculiarly the province of the Germans, with such works as Friedrich von Schlegel’s *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indien* (1808), August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* and other works and Max Muller’s translation of the *Rig Veda*. Of the literary figures singled out by Schwab as having been strongly influenced by the discovery and progressive translation of Indian literature from the late eighteenth century to the 1890s—Goethe, Lamartine, Novalis, Hugo, Michelet, Baudelaire, Heine, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Emerson, Whitman, Shelley—only the last was British. Though the contribution of British Orientalists was less impressive, nevertheless researches by members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and others did have a role in inspiring the indigenous ‘Bengal renaissance’, in which Indians rediscovered and took pride in their own past. Moreover, as Charles Allen has argued in *The Buddha and the Sahibs* (2002), Orientallist researches made an important contribution to the resurgence of Buddhism in South Asia.

To labour the obvious, Orientalism was not cut from one cloth. In different European counties it developed at different times, with varying intensities and varying emphases. The development of Arabo-centric Orientalism in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had been centred round the academic, critical and, sometimes, polemical study of the Quran, *hadiths* and *tafsir*, as well as the translation of a select band of historians including Abu ʿl-Fida, Bar Hebraeus, Ibn ʿArabshah and, later, al-Tabari. Essentially religious concerns dominated the study of the Arab world until at least the twentieth century. One studied Arabic in order to understand the Hebrew of the Bible better, or in order to gain some insight into the way of life of the ancient Israelites, or in order to compile a universal chronology that would demonstrate the essential correctness of the dates provided by the Old Testament, or in order to prepare oneself for missionary work, or in order to bring the Eastern