Conclusory Remarks: The Innocents Abroad?

Travelers renting Mongolian yurts discovered that the tent-like structures were made of plastic, not animal skin. And some visitors complained that the locals had become too Westernized. 'They’re about as Mongol as I am,' said one vacationer from Miami.

‘Vacations of a Lifetime’
*Newsweek* (7 June 1982)

In 1762, Oliver Goldsmith wrote a brilliant parody of the epistolary genre and Orientalism too which he entitled *Citizen of the World*. He adopted the trope made famous a few decades earlier by Montesquieu, and conceived of an Easterner writing home his observations of Europe. Goldsmith’s Citizen is a studious, cultured, polite and reserved man, in fact, as unlike the traditional stereotype of the ‘Oriental’ as can be imagined. This, he soon discovers, is a shortcoming on his part, for he repeatedly disappoints his European hosts who find him wanting in barbarity. Their demand is for an Oriental Oriental, for a Picturesque addition to their eighteenth-century drawing-rooms. They have very little sympathy for this person so like themselves, so contrary to their preconceptions, whose ‘very visage has nothing of the true exotic barbarity’.¹ Thus the ‘Citizen of the World’ leaves the Salons of Europe cold; he writes home of their grudgeful and fast-waning hospitality: ‘... nor was I invited to repeat my visit, because it was found that I aimed at appearing rather a reasonable creature than an outlandish idiot.’²

The European seemed constantly to transfer from one set of contradictory expectations to another. Either the Orient was not ‘Oriental’ enough, or it was too ‘Oriental’. Either the journey to it was disappointing because it was already traversed by Occidental

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influence, or it was deplorable since it was so removed from all things Occidental so as to seem mere negation and banishment. The same traveller could simultaneously entertain such extremes of emotions. Napoleon wanted Egypt to be even more exotic than he found it, while condemning that very exoticism that left it a country ungraced by civilisation of a Western type, where he found neither 'fourchettes ni contesses'.

The historical animosity between Christian Occident and Muslim Orient gradually changed, as the Ottoman threat grew continually less threatening, into a fascinated distrust instead. And it was precisely with this shift in attitude brought about by political circumstances that the literary fabrication of the Orient became invaluable to the Western imagination. The more fully the Orient fell under the sway of the European powers, the deeper it came to be sublimated in the imagination, in literature, painting, music, and fashion. The Arabian Nights appeared in Europe at a time that coincided with Turkish defeat. ‘Turkish Rondos’ were incorporated into European music when the Ottomans had ceased being a real threat to Europe’s stability. And after Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt, turbans were all the rage in the West. A shift in attitude had become strikingly visible by the nineteenth century; an ignorant awe had become a familiar contempt.

This new attitude became powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition. Stereotypes were forged and meanings instituted that were reciprocally confirming. The ‘ideology’ of Orientalism was inextricably tied to Western hegemony, yet it was not always expressed or articulated in the common forms of manipulation or indoctrination. It was a more subtle system of beliefs which was part of an intentionally selective tradition. It was a powerful system, nonetheless, since it was tied to many practical and directly experienced processes – religion, place, family, institution, and language. The West had to reshape the Orient in order to comprehend it; there was a sustained effort to devise in order to rule.

Orientalist studies were officially inaugurated by Sir William Jones, a servant of the East India Company, in order to deepen Europe’s acquaintance with the peoples over whom it would ultimately come to have control. Europe could now afford to study the East calmly and carefully, and as England was the chief world power, it naturally took the lead in this.