

HERODOTUS, THE FIRST ORIENTALIST?

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Today's globalization induces a discourse of cosmopolitanism and mixing of cultures that might give the impression of a serene and respectful cohabitation of societies. But behind the surface, power dynamics are still at play, and western ideology prevails. More than three decades ago, Palestinian-American literary theoretician Edward Saïd concluded his masterpiece of historical scholarship, *Orientalism* (1978), with a vibrant political message: Orientalism is not dead; it is still operating in the minds and habits of populations across the world. How can we exhaust it? One way would be to explore its potentially earliest roots, in order to deconstruct its deepest assumptions. Herodotus, the 5th century BCE Greek scholar, could be the ideal candidate, as the first historian of western tradition, and as a citizen of the imperialist look-alike powerful Greece of the Classical Period. This paper evaluates whether Herodotus could be seen as the first Orientalist. Acknowledging convincing evidences gathered from his accounts, and from later commentaries, the paper suggests a more moderate hypothesis.

Keywords: Orientalism, colonialism, discourse, hegemony

History and lie. Fifth century BCE scholar Herodotus is equally known as the 'Father of History' and the 'Father of Lies.' His chronological and causal accounts of the Persian Wars may have marked the beginning of history as a discipline, but it was observed by many, from his contemporaries to his most post modern commentators, that Herodotus also included in his records some factually questionable episodes. With Herodotus starts the paradox of history: a discipline that aims at documenting

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the origin and evolution of humanity in an objective manner, while the one who so documents remains actively involved as a member of humanity. The historian, necessarily subjective, attempts and pretends to write an ideally objective history.

If one contemporary thinker is aware of this fact, it is Edward Saïd (1935-2003). The Palestinian-American literary theoretician arrived at the forefront of the intellectual world in the late 1970s, with a missile addressed towards the numbly apolitical movements of post-modernism and post-structuralism. In *Orientalism* (1978), Saïd inspects four centuries of relations between European colonial powers and their corresponding lands in the Middle East and Asia, to discover an overwhelming pattern: the colonial project was not only military and political, but also one with primary concerns over knowledge. Following Foucault, Saïd establishes that within the colonial program, knowledge of the colonized directly produces power over the colonized. More: knowledge of the Orient *creates* the Orient. Thus, definitely, history is not, and cannot be objective, and it is, in fact, worse: the authority deciding of the historical discourse ends up with actual, physical, and political power over the world.

The critique is sore and irritating. The target is transparent: imperialist Europe, its historical roots and its modern day after-effects. The objective is clear: understanding the past to affect the present. Saïd's voice is clearly political. But how far should this past go? When did the process start? If we follow the main trends of western intellectual traditions, we find Herodotus as the first historian. More than a recording writer, he himself, in person, visited a number of countries. His profile was strangely similar to that of his French, British, and American colleagues of the 18th to 21st centuries. Was Herodotus the first Orientalist?

To answer this question, I will set the foundations of the problem through several steps. I will start by having a closer look at Saïd's *Orientalism* and its main arguments. I will also discuss his intellectual influences in the making of this project, before reviewing the main forms of criticisms received by Saïd, pointing to potential weaker points in his thesis. Turning to the Greek side, I shall first establish the historical and cultural context of the time with regards to international contacts, through the intriguing notion of the *barbarian*. While Herodotus is renowned for his *Histories*, counting mainly the Persian Wars, I will look at a less famous text, *An Account of Egypt*, where his position as a potentially Orientalist traveler is more complex and interesting. Egypt is also a destination of importance for Saïd; *Orientalism* focuses at length on the British and French occupations of the land of the Nile. Finally, I will attempt to reply to the primary question, by invoking differing academic views on the topic, which I will complete with our textual findings.

Orientalism

The Theory

Ten years after the demise of Edward Saïd, the maverick thinker remains one of the most cited and debated upon intellectuals of the past half century. The thought of Saïd, and in particular his 1978 masterpiece, *Orientalism*, is generally perceived as initiator of what would become one of the most active fields of academic research and, occasionally, activism: post-colonialism. Virtually all possible views and positions about *Orientalism* and Saïd have been uttered, and even his enemies have acquired fame through decades-long intellectual struggle with him. In this context, what would be the worth of a brief summary of what Saïd meant by ‘Orientalism’? The space available for this exercise, in the present essay, renders utopian the hope of bringing something new to the debate. However, since our ultimate goal is to *apply* Saïd’s framework of analysis, and to do such, moreover, to a temporally removed authority, it is primordial to define with clarity the main aspects of Saïd’s thought. This is the purpose of this section, which, coupled with a short note on Saïd’s influences and a sketch of the main criticisms addressed to the thinker, should suffice to provide the general picture of Orientalism.

What does Edward Saïd mean by Orientalism? In *Orientalism*, Saïd collected and critically addressed numerous records and archives dated from the 17th century till now, to support his central hypothesis: that European colonialism was not only a political movement, based on physical force, but also an intellectual one, where knowledge became a source of power. The scope of invisibility of this power (until Saïd’s study) was only equal to its insidious force, affecting the colonies of North Africa, the Middle East, and India arguably more profoundly than the official and extremely conspicuous foreground political and military presence. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2001) paraphrase the fundamental assumption of Saïd in *Orientalism*: “The essence of Saïd’s argument is that to know something is to have power over it, and conversely, to have power is to be able to know the world in your own terms” (p. 81). In *Orientalism* (2003), Saïd explores how the colonial project – and in particular the period spanning from 1814 to 1915, when Europe’s control of the world passed from 35 to 85 per cent (p. 41) – was also the product of an intellectual and cultural enterprise, that of *knowing the Orient*. Famously, Saïd argues that the Orient, on its whole, was an invention of Europe: the scientific powers of Europe conveniently labeled and reduced the entirety of their cultural and historical discoveries from a number of varied colonies into a

single term, a single concept: *the Orient*. Thus was defined the ultimate alterity, the real “Other.” To the industrial, rational, and humanist Occident was opposed the Orient, underdeveloped, led by passions, and politically endorsing a belief in the survival of the fittest. Saïd insists that Orientalism is parallel to the political enterprise of colonialism, and it takes place at four different planes of action:

[Orientalism] is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with *power political* (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), *power intellectual* (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), *power cultural* (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), *power moral* (as with ideas about what “we” do and what “they” cannot do or understand as “we” do) [emphasis added]. (p. 12)

In other words, for Saïd, Orientalism is fundamentally a discourse, that is, a corpus of positions and statements about a particular subject, of which the ultimate nature is precisely that of being described, discussed upon, and ultimately, mastered.

Orientalism is divided into three sections. In “The Scope of Orientalism,” Saïd details the theoretical project of Orientalism and its methodological tools towards a representation of the Orient. Analyzing the speech of ex-Prime Minister Arthur James Balfour to the British House of Commons on June 13, 1910, Saïd notices that the Orientalist discourse has three audiences (p. 34). First is the direct audience of a particular national community, whether British, French, Belgian or Portuguese, fully supporting the colonial power. Second is the ‘civilized world,’ the group of developed nations who share in common their participation in the larger colonial movement – a movement that, incidentally, also diverts their attention to the outside, therefore preventing enhanced internal tensions within Europe. And the third audience is the “Orientals.” Even though Balfour, along with the other Orientalists, does not address his speech to them directly, the very intellectual and scientific project of conquering not only the present but also the traces of the Orient’s past – textually or archeologically – allows the colonizers to believe they “know what [the colonized] feel” (p. 34). Through this attempt to *know the Orient*, the Orient became what one judges, what one studies and depicts, what one disciplines, and what one illustrates (p. 40). There was indeed a desire to organize and order any possible piece of knowledge emanating from the Orient’s majestic past, almost literally into the shelves of the Western libraries: “there

is also the triumphant technique for taking the immense fecundity of the Orient and making it systematically, even alphabetically, knowable by Western laymen” (p. 65). Saïd uses the metaphor of the *theater* to describe the attitude of Europe towards the Orient, as Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2001) summarize:

Where the idea of Orientalism as a learned field suggests an enclosed space, the idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined.... They are also characters who conform to certain typical characteristics. (p. 58)

In the second section, “Orientalist Structures and Restructures,” Saïd studies how European traditions of philological and historical study, as well as fictional novelists, once in contact with the Orient, contributed to the imaginary construction of an Orient, before becoming, in turn, a primordial tool for political control. Among such writers is Gustave Flaubert, whose journey stories have influenced generations of western travelers. Like him, many artistic authorities visited the Oriental countries, hoping to adjust the clichés uttered on the matter in the European salons, but furthering the strangely tuned combination of romantic idealizations and racist belittlements. Writing from Cairo in early 1950 to his friend Dr. Jules Cloquet, Flaubert (1996) explains that:

In Europe we picture the Arab as very serious. Here he is very merry, very artistic in gesticulation and ornamentation. Circumcisions and marriages seem to be nothing but pretexts for rejoicing and music-making.... The ‘most extreme excesses of our Press’ would give but a feeble idea of the buffooneries that are allowed in the public squares. (p. 80)

Such literary enactment of the Orient contributed to what Saïd (2003) saw as the four characteristics of Orientalism in the 19th century: expansion, historical confrontation, sympathy and classification (p. 120).

Saïd’s study is completed with a third section, “Orientalism Now,” where he addresses the question of surviving, if not enhanced, forms of Orientalism in modern times. Through this closing section, Saïd expresses his initial views on the final phase of Orientalism, exemplified in particular through American imperialism. He would complete his own reflection primarily through two following volumes, *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Covering Islam* (1981). Along with them, Saïd would further defend his arguments in nearly twenty other books, tens of articles and interviews, in the course of the two following decades. In the process, Saïd, initially a textual historian

of the cultural aspects of colonialism, became a political activist, defending particularly the cause of his native land, Palestine. We must cut short this brief and necessarily arbitrarily selective discussion of *Orientalism* to look at Saïd's intellectual influences in the making of this project.

Influences

Edward Saïd's reflections on the powers of the colonizing West on the rest of the world did not come out in a vacuum. It had forefathers, both in terms of the object of analysis, and in the methods he chose to follow. Saïd himself recognized the heritage of 20th century "theoreticians, militants, and insurgent analysts of imperialism like Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, C.L.R. James, Aime Césaire, Walter Rodney" and by "the great nationalist artists of decolonization and revolutionary nationalism, like Tagore, Senghor, Neruda, Vellejo, Césaire, Faiz, Darwish... and Yeats" (Eagleton, Jameson, & Saïd, 1990, pp. 72-73). In other words, *Orientalism* is first an attempt to theorize the growing voice of protest from the very colonies. The case of the Martinique-born psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) is particularly central, since, according to Ashcroft and Kadhim (2002), "systematic theorizing of colonization and its attendant features such as race, language, resistance and representation" (p. x) were first found in Fanon's activist voice. One of the legacies of Fanon on Saïd is his distinction between "independence" and "liberation," that is, the evolution of a national consciousness into a new sense of social and political action (Dirlik, 2001, p. 16). Through this distinction, Saïd could discuss the effects of the cultural traces of Orientalism even after the (political) liberation of the colonies.

The analysis of Orientalism by Saïd would also be impossible without certain conceptual tools. First to appear is the notion of *hegemony*, famously coined by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Hegemony does not mean only the uncontested power of a state over others, but the idea of 'dominance with consent' (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia 2001, pp. 41-42). It is a very subtle form of power over a group, since it attempts and succeeds in acquiring the agreement of the controlled population in being controlled.

Domination is thus exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion, but by a more subtle and inclusive power over the economy, and over state apparatuses such as education and the media, by which the ruling class interest is presented as the common interest and thus comes to be taken for granted. (p. 42)

Even though Gramsci discussed this notion in his own context, that of 20th century European nations on the edge of facing the Communist project, hegemony is particularly relevant as a tool of analysis for Orientalism. The Orientalist powers do not aim only at controlling the populations by the force, but also at diminishing their reliance on physical strength by convincing them of the legitimacy and ultimate good of their ruling.

However, of the influences on Saïd, one is primordial and unavoidable: Michel Foucault (1925-1984). The French post-structuralist philosopher is at the heart of Saïd's conceptual method, in particular through the notion of *discourse*. The Foucauldian discourse is more than a speech, a single utterance of language: it is a body of statements made on an external object, and one, precisely, which affects its external object. But the discourse does not come after, and in superimposition, upon the external object: its effect is so deep that it constructs a particular view or definition of the external object, which may, in certain cases, become an official or *hegemonic* view. In such cases the discourse *makes* its object. This discourse may support certain practices, for instance medical acts and beliefs on insanity, as argued by Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* (1961). Discourse can, at times, fully engender practices, as can be seen in Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966) and *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). As we have already observed, discourse as a colonial tool is very helpful and recurrent in Saïd's analysis: the Orientalist discourse *makes* the Orient. One may even argue that Foucault's stamp on Saïd transcends consciously chosen concepts: the very method of research adopted by Saïd – undertaking a meticulous and detailed study of archival documents from various languages and continents, in order to paint a very large picture, geographically and temporally, of a very ambitious question – is exactly what Foucault exemplified in his studies on madness and the history of knowledge.

However, Saïd adopted, early on, a very critical attitude towards Foucault. While acknowledging his intellectual insights, Saïd accused Foucault of being “more fascinated with the way power operates than committed to trying to change power relations in society” (1983, p. 221). In “Edward Said and Michel Foucault: Affinities and Dissonances” (2005), Karlis Racevskis offers a detailed history of the evolution of Saïd's attitude vis-à-vis Foucault. His famous stance against “‘literature’ as a cultural agency [that] has become more and more blind to its actual complicities with power” (Said, 1983, p. 175), as expressed in the 1983 *The World, The Text and the Critic*, would be balanced, decades later, by Saïd's rediscovery of Foucault's subtlety. Saïd could criticize the apparent political passivity of Foucault, but he had missed, in his

passionate denunciation, that for Foucault the role of the intellectual was not “to tell others what to do but to make knowledge available to them on the basis of which they could then decide on the best course of action” (Racevskis, 2005, p. 93). The question of the accuracy of Saïd’s understanding of Foucault was one major, but perhaps not the most eventful, of the waves of criticisms that his work would receive, as we will see in the next section.

Resistances

The sudden prominence of Saïd after *Orientalism* is only equal in intensity with the number of voices that have criticized his work. Some are precise and question certain specific points, or methodological assumptions of the work. Others are vaster, if not utterly rejecting the whole of Saïd’s intellectual undertaking. This is the case of Bernard Lewis, the advocate of the Area Studies discipline and specialist of Islam. He accused Saïd’s undertaking to be “both an ahistorical and an inconsistent narrative” (Porter, 1983, cited in Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001, p. 70). Their opposition was hardly surprising, as Saïd precisely took Lewis as the example of a modern Orientalist. He found his work on Islam to be particularly ideological and following exactly the same ambition and arrogance as the first Orientalists (see Saïd’s 1995 afterword to *Orientalism* for a response to Lewis’ attacks). Their confrontation is barely insightful, however, since anyone sensible to at least parts of Saïd’s project would recognize the Orientalist figure in Lewis (if nothing else, in his critique of *Orientalism*). Luckily, other scholars have provided different critiques of *Orientalism*, often from a background of general agreement with Saïd.

One recurring problem highlighted by critics of *Orientalism* is its (maybe unintentional) tendency to establish monolithic entities: a single Occident, necessarily entirely Orientalist, and a single Orient/Asia, even though Saïd discusses only a few countries of Asia. This partiality is also found regarding Saïd’s statements – or lack thereof – on the role of women in Orientalism (Miller, 1990). Reina Lewis, in *Gendering Orientalism* (1995), notices that Orientalism lists only one female writer in all of the four centuries of Orientalism studied by the author.

Arif Dirlik (2001) narrows his larger critique of post-colonialism to Saïd’s work in particular. Dirlik’s main contention may be condensed in the observation that numbers of post-colonial authorities are Third-World born individuals who have migrated to the west, often to reach positions in highly elite centers of knowledge, such as the Ivy League. Their original economical background, generally of higher

class, contributes to their disregard, within their post-colonial discourse, of questions like gender and class, in favor of less economically determined domains like race and identity (p. 8). His second criticism, which is an extension of the first, is that while Orientalism evolved hand-in-hand with the economical, master project of colonialism, post-colonialism does not criticize the current economical supremacy of a globalized capitalism. Worse, Dirlik argues,

Post-colonial concerns resonate with questions concerning the status of the nation-state, classes, identities, etc. in a world where globalization real or imagined has also captured the imagination of many; and it is hardly coincidental that the two have gained in intellectual popularity in tandem.... What is intended as a critique turns into a legitimation of a new ideology of globalization when it is mobilized in service of the latter. (p. 8)

In this view, the post-colonial discourse grew in parallel, if not as an offspring, of the progressive reign of capitalism. And within this discourse, Saïd's concern, like that of other post-colonial scholars, appears as particularly elitist and *petit bourgeois*, while allegedly addressing questions concerning millions of individuals, who are mostly affected by economical matters. Dirlik continues: "The very paradoxes in his politics inexorably displace political concerns toward the realm of culture, and utopianized cultural places, such as the university, where politics may be interpellated into cultural politics" (p. 25).

One word may be said, finally, on Saïd's personal relation with the field of post-colonialism. While presented as the chief-head of this movement, Saïd soon took distance from it. He was particularly wary of the excessive textual preoccupation and prolixity of this field, closely connected – yet clearly distinguishable, according to him – to post-modernism. The risk, as expressed earlier regarding Foucault, was to turn the scholar into a passive voice: "luring intellectuals away from any sort of meaningful political engagement" (Williams, 2002, p. 35). Nonetheless, as Williams points out, this cannot suffice to explain the almost absolute absence of post-colonialism and post-colonial scholars in the œuvre of Saïd. From this is also revealed another central aspect of Saïd's scholarship (and personality): his refusal to be labeled. This corresponds perfectly with the project of *Orientalism*, an undertaking for which Saïd has readily accepted the position of *amateur*. The very concept of amateurism, which he discussed since *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), is an understanding of the critic as intently refusing reducing categories, and opening his interest and realm of analysis across disciplines

and beyond conventional objects. It is a move against professional expertise in the intellectual world. Therefore, unsurprisingly, as Ashcroft & Ahluwalia (2001) notice,

to historians, he is unhistorical; to social scientists, he conflates theories; to scholars, he is unscholarly; to literary theorists, he is unreflective and indiscriminate; to Foucauldians, he misuses Foucault; to professional Marxists, he is anti-revolutionary; to professional conservatives, he is a terrorist. (p. 68)

As we now know, this does not seem like a problematic contradiction for Edward Saïd.

The First Orientalist?

Ancient Greece and Barbarism

The modern word barbarian integrates both ideas of something foreign, and something of a lower value. Where is it coming from? The Greek βάρβαρος (barbaros) was conceived as antonym to πολίτης (polites), the “citizen” or inhabitant of the city. In Ancient Greece – a complex geopolitical order made of city-states – not belonging to the city meant being outside of the main form of community. The leap operated from barbaros as a purely factual term, providing a geographical, if not demographic information on the concerned individuals, to barbaros as a pejorative and disdainful category, corresponds to the association observed by Saïd, of the stranger as a lower individual with less respectable values. If we wish to look at the roots of the Western understanding of foreignness, it is on the Greeks that our focus must be pointed, and in Attic Greece, foreigners were barbarians.

Not unlike other racial appellations,² the concept of the barbarian was initially used to refer to language features (it is still used today as a technical term of linguistic). In his *Iliad*, Homer qualifies the Carians, supporters of Troy, to be *barbarophonos*, “of incomprehensible speech” or “uncouth of speech” (2.867: Homer, 1978, pp. 114-115). Jonathan Hall (2002) argues that the *barbarians* were not necessarily the foreigners, i.e., non-Greeks, but, as in the case of the Carians, those who spoke a flawed Greek (p. 111). This was a determining feature: notions of language and reason were conflated in the growingly central concept of *Logos*, progressively defined as both the core intellectual energy and its (reflexive) ultimate object of enquiry: one could think only *through* the *Logos*, but, the main question remained always to understand what this

² It is also the case of the category of the Aryans.

universal *Logos* could be. Not speaking well meant not having a clear and refined sense of reason. Hall adds that the distinction between Greek nationals and foreigners was not as strong during the Archaic period (800-510 BCE), when a feeling of ‘Greek nationalism’ was not yet formed, as it would become in the Classical period (510-323 BCE) (p. 111). This corresponds exactly to the era of Herodotus.

The understanding of the barbarian in Classical Greece was two-fold, emphasizing two features of the barbarian. These do not constitute two distinct definitions of the barbarian, but rather two aspects of one and the same category. Moreover, interestingly, each of these two features is best explained by a major authority. For Herodotus, the main barbarians, the Persians, were not simply uncivilized, but civilized *and corrupted*; their historical value was that of being able to provide a contrast with the virtuous deeds of the Greeks (Pocock, 2005, pp. 11-12). In this conception, the barbarian society was defined as opposite to the proud cultural sophistication of the Greek polis. But for Aristotle, foreigners were primarily barbarians in virtue of their being governed by “god-king living in palaces” (p. 12). In other words, barbarians were those beings who surrendered, as slaves, to the tyrannical power of self-established rulers. The barbarians had not reached the ‘Greek stage,’ where humans partook actively in the organization of their political order. They simply did not share, according to Aristotle and others, the political project of free and “democratic” Greece. Aristotle’s judgment was certainly influenced by the switch of provenance of slaves after the 6th century BCE. Statesman Solon (c. 638-558 BCE) had abolished chattel slavery (self-slavery as a form of repayment of debts), provoking a boost of importation of slaves from war prisoners and foreign populations. Aristotle probably assumed that barbarians had to be slaves because most, if not all of the barbarians present in Greece, for several centuries before his own life, were slaves. It is not surprising, therefore, that Aristotle estimated that “barbarians are slaves by nature” (1.2–7; 3.14: Aristotle, 1998, pp. 2-12 & 91-93). Constituting the association of pejorative values and habits on the one hand, with the inability to govern themselves and their “natural” quality as slaves on the other, the barbarians soon became recipients of the worst derogatory attributes. Leo G. Perdue (2011) lists the moral attack addressed by most Greek authors on the barbarians: they are “like children, unable to speak or reason properly, cowardly, effeminate, luxurious, cruel, unable to control their appetites and desires, politically unable to govern themselves” (p. 112).

In his *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience* (1994), Pericles Georges attempts to sketch “Herodotus’ Typology of Barbarism” (pp. 167-206), and he recalls that

Herodotus' *Histories* are in fact limited to a very restricted geographical space. This zone is bordered in the north by Scythia (modern central Eurasia), "where winter is so cold you make mud with fire instead of water and the whole climate is topsy-turvy, because the summer is wet but the winter is dry" (p. 204). It is the land that the Persian ruler Darius the Great (550-486 BCE) could not penetrate, even at the peak of his conquests. South of this zone is Egypt, where, as we will see, "climate, river, and customs are altogether different from everyone else's" (p. 204). It is interesting to notice that Herodotus did not simply assemble all non-Greeks in one box, in the category of the *barbarian*, similar to our modern *foreigner* – and, perhaps, to Saïd's *Oriental*s. There was, for Herodotus, a group of communities compounded of the Dorians, Ionians, Lydians and Persians, occasionally antagonists, but nonetheless similar on a number of respects (this is also why Persians were not simply "uncivilized" but of a civility "corrupted" from that of the Greeks). The real contrast is operated with the communities and the cultures external to this geographical zone: the Scythians and the Egyptians. Georges comments: "In Herodotus the two nations [Greeks and Persians] are mutually related, "permeable" to one another, whereas Scythia and Egypt are impermeable to both peoples" (p. 204). This may explain why most, if not all of Herodotus' *Histories* are focused on the Persian Wars. But another text prevails, one confirming that Herodotus also went "off the beaten track," and in particular, in Egypt. Therefore, if we want to discover what a stranger to Herodotus is really, we may need to turn to another text: *An Account of Egypt*.

An Account of Egypt

Where is the Orientalist hiding?

Herodotus may be, since Cicero, the "Father of History." It has been long since modern academics have referred to his name mostly to highlight the lack of rigor, not to say, the credulousness of the man. His writing and approach to historical recording was a rather large improvement from the *logographers* or tellers of tales, and this was certainly noticed even during his lifetime. Herodotus did not go as far as adopting an attitude of virulent attack towards the tradition of the poets, from Homer onwards, an attitude we find, for instance, with Plato. Herodotus took his critical distance from the poets, if nothing, by making clear that he was aware that their stories were certainly more mythical than factual in nature. But it is while not contesting this older approach to story telling – he was himself a renowned story-teller – that Herodotus enacted a change towards historical work, by emphasizing on a serious field-work of collection,

combined with an intention to provide a comprehensive and comprehensible narration trying to establish relations of cause and effect between facts. Nonetheless, in *An Account of Egypt* as in his other travels, Herodotus seems almost naïve, being shown places by the local intelligentsia and scrupulously recording any possible view on any historical event. How could such a “simple man” correspond to the highly political and interested figure that is found, for instance, in Saïd’s study of the Orientalist?

If Herodotus was truly interested in facts, it is, ultimately, what comes out of his *Account of Egypt*: the text is, more than anything else, factual. Herodotus, as he goes along the Nile, shares his most minute measurements, from single architectural pieces to estimations of the country at large, but also of the Nile itself, mentioning also various hypotheses, more or less fantasist, on the origin and evolution of the river. He does not hide his critical spirit, for instance, when he gauges various propositions on the topic:

The second way [the second hypothesis] shows more ignorance than that which has been mentioned, and it is more marvelous to tell; for it says that the river produces these effects because it flows from the Ocean, and that the Ocean flows round the whole earth. The third of the ways is much the most specious, but nevertheless it is the most mistaken of all. . . . And indeed most of the facts are such as to convince a man (one at least who is capable of reasoning about such matters), that it is not at all likely that it flows from snow. (Herodotus, 2006, pp. 7-8)

There may be, there, a slight feeling of a judgment of cultural supremacy on the locals, but it is not obvious, and it is not deepened or theorized further by Herodotus. His descriptions transition from geography to human culture, and his ethnographic observations reveal that Egyptians follow “manners and customs in a way opposite to other men in almost all matters” (p. 11) – this comment concerns the roles assigned to genders, practices of clothing, haircuts of priests, etc. Coming to religious practices, his one-sidedness is the least visible: while he indeed attempts to equate Egyptian and Greek gods, he insists a number of times on the priority of the Egyptian deities over those of Greece: “the naming of almost all the gods has come to Hellas from Egypt” (p. 15). He later adds:

it is true also that the Egyptians were the first of men who made solemn assemblies and processions and approaches to the temples, and from them the Hellenes have learnt them, and my evidence for this is that the

Egyptian celebrations of these have been held from a very ancient time, whereas the Hellenic were introduced but lately. (p. 16)

The Egyptians are also prior to the Greeks in regards to practices in the temple (p. 17), while it is from the Egyptians that Solon borrowed the political reform of the declaration of goods (p. 43).³ Herodotus then goes on to describe the animals of Egypt, and human habits with them.⁴ He presents various domains of human habits and practices: value of memory, health, diet, entertainment, proxemics and politeness, superstition, medicine, burials, boat technology.

The second half of Herodotus' *Account of Egypt* is an attempt to retell the history of the country, and the historian is particularly transparent as to his sources: "I am about to tell the history of Egypt according to that which I have heard, to which will be added also something of that which I have myself seen" (p. 24). He covers thousands of years and hundreds of dynasties, at times focusing on the tales around one particular ruler, but always following what local priests and educated men told him. He sometimes confronts one version to another, or expresses his doubts regarding one particular view. Finally, Herodotus provides a contrasting history of Egypt's prestigious past, this time from foreign sources (pp. 36-44). Thus, in *An Account of Egypt*, Herodotus wanders through a country, records diligently any possible detail or hearsay, speaks occasionally his mind but insists, many times, that on a number of practices and beliefs, the Egyptians precede the Greeks. We could assume, in theory, that Herodotus, a product of the imperialist Classical Greece, would be more aggressive in his discourse about the Egyptians, that he *should* be a sort of proto-Orientalist. For instance, we would expect him to argue that all the noble Greek values and practices came from Greece. But, unambiguously, what his accounts reveal goes in an opposite direction. So, where is the Orientalist hiding?

On the Neutrality of the Historian.

One needs to scratch the outer skin of Herodotus' historical account of Egypt to start noticing the more ideological, if not political, perspectives of his discourse. We could first notice how Herodotus, quite regularly, describes at length ethnographic observations or stories containing sexually explicit, if not disturbing, material. While talking of animal sacrifice, he adds that "Moreover in my lifetime there happened in that district this marvel, that is to say a he-goat had intercourse with a woman

³ In another passage, he also acknowledges the Greek debt towards another culture, Babylon, for discovering geometry (p. 26).

⁴ Herodotus notes, for instance, that if one fails to follow a particular, precise technique to catch a crocodile, consisting in splattering the animal's eye with mud, then "he has much trouble" (p.19).

publicly, and this was so done that all men might have evidence of it” (p. 14). He later, briefly mentions practices of necrophilia by corpse embalmers (p. 21). The insistence on (deviant) sexual practices is a feature of the modern Orientalist too, in particular Gustave Flaubert: “On the road from Cairo to Shubra some time ago a young fellow had himself publicly buggered by a large monkey—as in the story above, to create a good opinion of himself and make people laugh” (Flaubert, 1996, p. 44). The two stories are almost interchangeable: Herodotus and Flaubert display the same curiosity and amusement (if not delight) at seeing a sexual act, and moreover one that is of perverse bestiality, and such, in a public space. Between the lines, it is clear that the two travelers find such acts to be absolutely dishonorable, even more in the public sphere, and that they denigrate a society that establishes it as an acceptable practice. As Martin (1990) notes, “a chief index of the Other or of barbarity in Herodotus is sexual excess, the extreme case being sexual or “bestial” intercourse in the open or public sphere, since the beasts, like tyrants, are without *nomos*” (p. 518).

Another intriguing feature of Herodotus’ *Account of Egypt* is his repeated refusal to mention certain things. Discussing on the resemblance of Gods with animals, he comments that “the cause however why they represent him in this form I prefer not to say” (Herodotus 2006, p. 14), and later, on another fact, “this story I know, but it is not a seemly one for me to tell” (p. 14). Discussing a religious ceremony, he explains: “for whom they beat themselves it is not permitted to me by religion to say” (p. 17). Herodotus, for his defense, explains that it is for religious reasons that he censures himself:

But if I should say for what reasons the sacred animals have been thus dedicated, I should fall into discourse of matters pertaining to the gods, of which I most desire not to speak; and what I have actually said touching slightly upon them, I said because I was constrained by necessity (p. 17).

Is it the only reason? When it came to mentioning sexually explicit facts, there did not seem to be any customs or manners he should not disrupt. And what exactly “constrained” him? Whose manners would he be talking about? Clearly, it would be that of his readership, the Greeks. Such self-censorship reveals, if need be, that Herodotus is not the impartial and neutral observer that he gladly wished to portray himself as. He had a cultural background, and his travel accounts were prepared for a certain purpose.

George H. Chase, in a series of lectures from the beginning of the century (1909-1914), has noted that the purpose of the wide-ranged travels of Herodotus were

not clear. There are various hypotheses on the matter. One is that Herodotus was a merchant, having his *Histories* as a side narrative, almost a past time besides his main business activities. This hypothesis is discredited in virtue of the general absence of any particular portrayal, favorable or unfavorable, regarding the class of merchants, in all of Herodotus' accounts. Others have argued that Herodotus was simply a professional reciter, going to foreign lands only to practice his talent. But, as Chase highlights, the most probable hypothesis is that of a political purpose behind Herodotus' undertaking. Pericles and other contemporary rulers would have undoubtedly had a great interest in the travel accounts of Herodotus, which all took place in countries of geopolitical importance for Greece in that era. The most troubling fact is the sum of ten talents Herodotus received from the Athenian Assembly. Chase equates this amount, in the standards of the early 20th century to more than \$ 10,000, in other words, a fantastic sum. Undoubtedly, such an amount of money could come from the Greek political authority only as "a reward for political services," as is noted by the author (Chase, 1909-1914). Seen in this light, Herodotus had an ideological and political environment hardly different from that of the European colonialists of the 19th century. Herodotus could well be the first Orientalist.

Herodotus: The First Orientalist?

Finding the first Orientalist is a matter of importance. It is aiming at discovering the roots of what became later a major part of world history, one that has determined world dynamics in the recent centuries and, according to Saïd, still today as an after-effect of colonialism and in the surviving forms of Orientalism. Finding the origin of Orientalism may also permit to unveil the most specific features of this attitude, in order to further the attempt of disintegrating it totally in today's society. Herodotus, for the very simple fact that he was the first historian (of western) civilization, and therefore the first to provide broadly factual accounts of both visits to foreign countries, and commentaries on foreign cultures, would logically receive the infamous title of the first Orientalist.

What is Saïd's view on the question? Even though *Orientalism* does not directly address antiquity, the scope of the study is so vast that Ancient Greeks are naturally mentioned at several occasions. As early as in the introduction of the book, Saïd asserts that the Orientalist "belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer" (2003, p. 11). The reference to Homer is further explored as Saïd explains: "Every writer on the Orient

(and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient” (p. 20). Mentioning Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides, Saïd contends that the West/East distinction was already clear in Ancient Greece:

Consider first the demarcation between Orient and West. It already seems bold by the time of the *Iliad*. Two of the most profoundly influential qualities associated with the East appear in Aeschylus’s *The Persians*, the earliest Athenian play extant, and in *The Bacchae* of Euripides, the very last one extant. (p. 56)

In other words, according to Saïd, awareness of the East was already there in Archaic Greece (800-510 BCE), when Homer wrote or perhaps even before. Naturally, the lack of records makes any confirmation of this hypothesis impossible. References to Herodotus arrive only later, when Saïd explains that:

From at least the second century B.C. on, it was lost on no traveler or eastward-looking and ambitious Western potentate that Herodotus—historian, traveler, inexhaustibly curious chronicler—and Alexander—king warrior, scientific conqueror—had been in the Orient before. The Orient was therefore subdivided into realms previously known, visited, conquered, by Herodotus and Alexander as well as their epigones. (p. 58)

In a later portion of the text, Saïd mentions Herodotus one more time: the (Muslim) owners of Egypt, it is argued, “so impressed Herodotus” (p. 175). In other words, Saïd mentions two important Greek characters: Homer and Herodotus. But he is visibly not interested in the question of who the first Orientalist would be. He even does not go as far as calling them Orientalists. His words on Herodotus are even rather kind: he was an “inexhaustibly curious chronicler” (p. 58) and one who was “impressed” (p. 175) by the Egyptians he met. At best, these Greek authorities were already subject (before contributing) to the ideological framework of a mythical dynamic between East and West, on which the whole of Western culture followed, culminating in the *actual* Orientalism. Yang (2007) completes the brevity of Saïd by adding that in this process, Homer’s main achievement was that of setting the origins of the West-East relation to the soon-to-be mythical confrontation of the Trojan War. But the very one-sidedness of accounts after this event made of Troy the primordial silent other: “The Trojans had left no literary records about themselves or their adversaries. The ‘East’ had become the silent subject that was to be represented, written about and constructed” (Yang, 2007, p. 119). There was clearly an ideological setting and

mythological representation of this Asiatic Other, but does this suffice to make it a form of Orientalism?

It was certainly on the mind of Saïd that his analysis was historically very precisely set, as we already discussed. Saïd perhaps believed that calling a group of Greek authorities Orientalists, would confuse his readers and weaken his argument. In a sense, Herodotus, and even Homer before him, were *not* Orientalists, because their relation to the East was still very ‘primitive,’ based on a few individual travels, with few or no proper political relation between great states outside of the ‘civilized zone’ that Herodotus established. Similarly, Herodotus’ visit in Egypt, among others, was not one taking place in a colonized land, or even in a land that was about to be colonized, as is the case with the modern Orientalists. Herodotus hardly matches this definition of the Orientalist.

There is also another way to refute the hypothesis that Herodotus was an Orientalist, and one that actually deals with the material left by, and on him. In the last pages of *An Account of Egypt*, Herodotus uses the term “barbarian,” but not in the context we would have expected of him:

Now Necos ceased in the midst of his digging, because the utterance of an Oracle impeded him, which was to the effect that he was working for the Barbarian: and the Egyptians call all men Barbarians, who do not agree with them in speech (Herodotus, 2006, p. 40).

In other words, Herodotus defines the barbarians not exclusively by negation, simply as the non-Greeks, but as the generic term for any population’s Other. Egyptians have their barbarians in as much Greeks have their own. By contrast, there is no way one could interpret Saïd’s *Orientalism* to argue that just as Egyptians, Syrians, and Indians were the barbarians of the Europeans, Europeans were the barbarians of the Egyptians, Syrians and Indians. The term is not bilateral. Moreover, if Herodotus considers that the concept may apply to various cultures, this confirms that he was aware of a sense of equivalence in the way one society understands, and deals with its foreigners. This would go against the assumption that Herodotus followed the allegedly general sense of cultural supremacy believed by the Greeks at that time.

We may also be reminded, at this point, of the aforementioned discourse of praise of Herodotus on the priority of Egyptian culture on a number of Greek traits. This, too, seems to eulogize foreigners rather than denigrate them. Yang (2007) contends that “the construction of “otherness” does not necessarily mean downright

derogation”, and that Herodotus was still creating the other as a radically different “human existence” (p. 122). In the same vein, Yang mentions Cartledge (1993) for whom “polar opposition is what shapes Herodotus’ Egyptian logos throughout and yields the *locus classicus* of ‘reversed world’ othering” (p. 58). These views should not be denied, and in this sense, indeed Herodotus contributed to some extent to the larger pre-Orientalist world view, in which the Greco-Roman world would then dwell. But his works display signs of subtlety and slightly more complex and respectful feelings towards foreigners, which forbid us from labeling him right away as an Orientalist.

More than his recorded statements, it is the biography of Herodotus that is important with regard to our question. As recalled by Chase (1909-1914), Herodotus was almost destined to be a traveler; he who was exiled two times, surviving many years without citizenship and finding shelter to end his life as a recluse in the small colony of Thurii in South Italy. Interestingly, exile is also a particularly redundant theme in Saïd’s personal writings. As pointed by Dirlik (2001), exile is a central part of Saïd’s identity, and according to Dirlik’s larger study of post-colonialism, exile is in fact an almost compulsory element in the construction of the post-colonial academic figure. It is, according to Dirlik, a proper “exilic self-consciousness” that Saïd enacted, before mentioning an interview of Saïd where he confessed “a perpetual sense of placelessness” (p. 23). The same words would hardly be out of context for Herodotus. Of course, it is not my intention here to argue that as a total reverse of situations, Herodotus was not the first Orientalist but actually the first critique of Orientalism; Herodotus as a sort of “proto-Saïd.” Nothing would be further away from the truth, simply because there was no established Orientalism around and before Herodotus, and also because his travel accounts do not even focus primarily on the way his people, the Greeks, had understood and conceptualized foreign populations. But this shared biographical trait may explain why Herodotus was somehow sympathetic with the foreign population he was encountering, to the point of being nicknamed the “Barbarophile” (Arora, 1999). We may also speculate that the instances of self-censorship mentioned earlier could be a disguised critique of the political correctness that was expected of him back in Athens. He could simply have skipped a number of these passages, but he decided to keep them, perhaps to discharge him, in a sense, of the responsibility of the occasional ideological tone of his pieces: if he was, at times, denigrating the foreign culture, it was because he was muzzled.

After having reconstructed his typology of Herodotus’ barbarians, Pericles Georges (1994) wonders whether Athenians were for Herodotus, also barbarians. Georges

responds: “Yes and no.... They exhibit the characteristics of Asiatic barbarism—luxury, atrocity, tributary empire—as well as Hellenism—sophia and victory over barbarism” (p. 206). In this light, Herodotus was not a spokesman for Greek imperial ideology, but a nation-less autodidact whose initial curiosity culminated in his first-person discovery of many faraway lands, where his sense of cultural supremacy – if it existed originally – certainly got drastically revised. When Herodotus returned to Athens, he probably prolonged the mindset of his long journeys before realizing that these new foreigners around him were, in fact, his familiar Greeks. More than the Orientalist package, it is the recorded experience of foreignness that Herodotus represented, and perhaps premiered. Herodotus was not the first Orientalist, he was the first foreigner.

Conclusion: Being a Foreigner

Questioning the responsibility of Herodotus in the Orientalist project is asking the question of alternatives. Saïd himself seems to praise the curiosity and adventurous mind of Herodotus. His very presence in the debate is also liable to Herodotus’ enterprise of not only travelling to foreign places, but also of maintaining records of them. Naturally, therefore, the question of Orientalism is not just a question of one’s attitude towards foreigners, but a question that is related to matters of textuality: there is no Orientalism without Orientalist texts, and more fundamentally, there is no Orientalist text without historical texts. It would be in no one’s mind, Saïd’s or anybody else’s, to contest the very project, arising at some point in Ancient Greece, of starting to gather facts, that is, of starting (recorded) history. But writing history implies having individuals to write history, people who would inevitably write from a standpoint with a certain background. And in essence, people who would address the question of the other/Other from the viewpoint of the same. What other alternatives was there for Herodotus?

In this context, Catherine Gimelli Martin’s “Orientalism and the Ethnographer: Saïd, Herodotus, and the Discourse of Alterity” (1990) is particularly insightful. Among other valuable arguments, Martin contends that François Hartog’s understanding of the role and power of the ethnographer (1988) may correspond more effectively to Herodotus than Saïd’s Orientalist category would. Hartog acknowledges that ideology may be one effect (and one reason) of the ethnographer’s discourse, but he highlights that this discourse is also one that permits a form of dialogue, a correspondence between the familiar and the alien: “The inversion is a fiction which ‘shows how it is’

and makes it possible to understand: it is one of the figures of rhetoric which helps to elaborate a representation of the world” (p. 14). The discourse of the ethnographer-historian is not, as Saïd argues, simply a mirror for Greeks to define themselves in opposition to their Other, but a dialogical process of translation of cultures, values, and worldviews (Martin, 1990, p. 521). Translation, as a process, is both destructive and creative: “To translate is at once irremediably destructive as well as affirmative ... it enables a self/other dialogue by putting the unknown idea in the form of the known concept” (p. 523). The translation distorts the Other in the same time as it makes one’s very awareness of the Other possible. Saïd perceived a situation where a Same is *knowing*, from above the Other, while Hartog observes two Others exchanging their own versions of each other. This corresponds to our aforementioned argument on Herodotus’ profound awareness that he – he as a Greek, and he as Herodotus the individual – was also fundamentally the Other of the Other. Martin naturally comes to mention Derrida, for whom, following Levinas, language is necessarily violence, while being simultaneously an *economy*, that is a *lesser violence* necessary to permit the relation to the Other (p. 525). According to Martin, the fundamental mistake of Saïd is to avoid a strict historical setting of Orientalism, therefore, making Western knowledge *eternally* Orientalizing the Orient, thus missing the undeniable dynamics of civilizations throughout history: “Lacking these distinctions, Saïd’s discourse of the Other must resolve itself into intractable dichotomies which suppress rather than elucidate their own historical and ideological bases” (p. 525). She concludes on an interesting note, arguing, after Fabian (1983) that “interpretative ‘facts’ must be represented as acts, partial recognitions which are never either fully translatable or fully incomprehensible” (p. 527). In other words, Herodotus’ *Histories* are not simply the establishment of the textual and ideological supremacy of the West, but also, or rather, the *act* of initiation of a connection between cultures, one which is, of course, inevitably imbalanced on one side or the other, initially and at any historical point. It is, I believe, not for the expected Orientalist tone of some of his writings, but for his introduction of the problematic of the foreigner, *and of being a foreigner*, that Herodotus should be discussed.

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