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Disraeli as an “Orientalist”: The Polemical Errors of Edward Said

EDWARD SAID, THE WELL-KNOWN PALESTINIAN ACTIVIST, literary critic, and theorist of Orientalism, reached two milestones in the year 2003: his best known and most influential work, *Orientalism* of 1978, was reissued in a twenty-fifth anniversary edition, and he died.¹ Said died having lived the dream of every ambitious graduate student: he had the satisfaction of becoming the founding father of a subfield of his own, that of “post-colonial studies.” Said’s *Orientalism* reached an audience far beyond what might have been expected of a learned tome on nineteenth-century intellectual history. It turned Said from an obscure scholar of Joseph Conrad into a best-selling author, an academic star, and the canonical founder of one of the most fashionable and widely influential academic specialties. But—as will be shown—Said’s interpretation of his emblematic Orientalist, Benjamin Disraeli, is based upon a tendentious and decontextualized misreading of Disraeli’s novel *Tancred*, and in the course of turning Disraeli into the archetype of an Orientalist, Said made a number of startlingly obvious factual errors.

In *Orientalism*, Said redefined the term “Orientalist,” which no longer names an erudite master of difficult languages, but thanks

to Said, has come to designate an ideologue and propagandist of empire, so that it is now almost impossible to use the term in its former sense. *Orientalism* argues that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperialists, scholars, and artists constructed an entire category of knowledge designed to justify imperialism in the “Orient” in general, and in the Islamic world in particular. Disraeli, the imperialist Prime Minister of Great Britain (1868 and 1874–1880) and sometime traveler and romantic novelist, must have appeared to Said an exemplary Orientalist. In 1847, Disraeli published a novel by the name of *Tancred, or the New Crusade*.² Disraeli’s main character, a young aristocrat named Tancred, visits the holy land and spouts a great deal of romantic nonsense about the timeless wisdom of the Orient. Said took a phrase from the novel—“the East is a career”—as an epigraph for his *Orientalism*, and in that volume he refers repeatedly to Disraeli:³ Disraeli is made to serve as the prototypical Orientalist. Said contends that the novel of the rising politician laid the ideological foundations for the imperialism—the “political management of actual forces on actual territories,” in Said’s phrase⁴—practiced a generation later by the elder statesman. Disraeli, for Said, is an exemplar of the direct connection that he wishes to establish between literature and politics.

There are two basic problems with Said’s account. The first is factual: Disraeli’s book, like his foreign policy as Prime Minister thirty years later, was not primarily concerned with Islam, the Orient, or the Holy Land, and insofar as Disraeli did touch on such themes—in *Tancred*, and in addressing, as Prime Minister, the so-called “Eastern question” (Balkan crises) of the 1870s—he was throughout his career notably sympathetic to Islam. The second and perhaps more telling problem is that all of Said’s numerous and often egregiously repetitive references to Disraeli are superficial, and none describe either the context of the young writer’s novel or the content of the elderly politician’s policies. With few exceptions, Disraeli’s name makes its frequent appearances in long lists of a dozen or

more famous nineteenth-century names, lists that serve to convey a rhetorical impression of the monolithic and authoritative character of the nineteenth-century practice of Orientalism, and indeed of the comprehensive authority of Said's *Orientalism*, but which say little specific about the names that are so carefully dropped.⁵ Where Disraeli's novel is addressed directly, it rates two cursory descriptions, each of less than half a page, and Said's brief summaries of the novel's plot say nothing of its context, and consequently miss completely the book's primary aims, as I shall show.⁶ In his eagerness to use Disraeli as the archetype of the Orientalist, Said, who was bright enough to know a context when he saw one, had to forget not merely the political environment in which Disraeli wrote but many of the facts of his career. In the end, Said's account of Disraeli is little more than a collection of extraneous and context-free quotations that happen to suit his polemical purposes. One is left to wonder how many other errors a specialist could find elsewhere among the names of "Orientalists" so purposively dropped in Said's ambitious, field-defining tome.

The Orientalists, according to Said, constructed not merely a body of knowledge but the whole category of the "Orient." In Said's words, "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric," a statement that reads strangely in a book ostensibly opposed to sweeping, essentialist generalizations.⁷ That all-embracing condemnation is made in the course of a discussion of nineteenth-century Orientalism, and it is quickly followed by the mollifying observation that "human societies . . . have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with 'other' cultures."⁸ But of course Said and his epigones focus on the first statement, whose sentiment is echoed throughout his volume; the second functions as something of a prophylactic, there as a silencing answer to anyone reactionary enough to question the first assertion, to suggest that the West or some Westerners might not all have been so uniform in character, or indeed to argue

that only within the context of Western egalitarianism could the “construction” of an “other” come to seem problematic.

Orientalism appeared in a congenial political and intellectual climate. Said was among the first wave of theorists to apply to social and literary analysis the by now rather drearily predictable language of discursive construction. By the 1970s, numerous *Marxisant* critics were explaining that capitalism’s unexpected survival, notwithstanding the fall of colonial empires and the upheavals of the 1960s, was possible because it controlled even the production of knowledge. It was a variety of thought that went back to Antonio Gramsci’s theory of ideological hegemony: in a curious inversion of the original Marxist premise that objective material realities govern history, any number of left-wing academics were by the 1970s eager to hear about the importance of discourse, and of course such themes merged easily with the kind of derivative structuralist rhetoric now familiar to anyone who has read an undergraduate essay. Said was therefore able to explain to a receptive audience that Western notions of the inferiority of other—or according to taste and ideology, “other”—societies were a key tool, motivator, and constituent of imperialism. Such discourses—or mythologies, epistemes, or ideologies, again according to taste—were complicit in the West’s long and in many circles regretted period of global preeminence. Not merely any notion of Western superiority but any notion that there was a West at all, became for many a racist construct designed to justify colonial or neocolonial oppression, and Said provided the supporting authority and the requisite footnote for such ideas.

The ever-present and greatly overused verb “to construct” was at the core of Said’s project. To speak of something—be it the moon, salvation, or Islamic society—is of course to construct an image of that something, and if one is determined to be confused, or to make confusion appear profound, it is easy to slip from speaking of the creation of a representation to the “construction” of a reality. For Said, to speak of the Orient was to “construct” it, as though the Orient and ideas about it had not existed prior to the discourses

constructed by his Victorian villains. Said was an English professor, and this manner of speaking is perhaps understandable in members of that profession: when Jane Austen wrote of Mr. Darcy, she can intelligibly be said to have constructed that character. But when contemporaries wrote of Mohammed Ali of Egypt, they were not “constructing” that powerful Oriental despot, unless one wants to descend into a solipsistic variety of ontological confusion in which reality is entirely dependent upon the mindset of the observer.

For Said, the idea of “Oriental despotism” was a particularly invidious ideological construct, though in fact it has a venerable history. Oriental despotism was until recently an intellectually respectable notion, and not only on the right. As late as 1974, the respected Marxist historian Perry Anderson, in his immensely learned *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, advanced an analysis of Oriental despotism, as contrasted with European feudalism, to explain the failure of non-Western societies to modernize indigenously.⁹ But, thanks in large part to the influence of *Orientalism*, all of that is now under a kind of anathema, an ideological prohibition. “Crusade” is another term that has recently fallen under a similar prohibition, though it has long been a perfectly serviceable word for a moral cause: Eisenhower’s *Crusade in Europe* did not refer to the Christianization of that continent.¹⁰ Disraeli used the term in the title of *Tancred, or the New Crusade* to refer to a spiritual quest on the part of his young hero, a quest for a more authentic religion than was available in rationalist, industrial Europe, though Said is keen to link nineteenth-century writers to the military Crusades of the Middle Ages.¹¹

Tancred, Disraeli’s hero, goes to the Holy Land in search of the wisdom of the three Asian religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Disraeli writes with a heavy-handed didacticism that leaves no doubt as to which character speaks for the author. Through Tancred, he emphasizes the “Asian” character of all three monotheisms. “[Asia’s] slumber is more vital than the waking life of the rest of the globe . . . it is the unhappiness of Europe over which I mourn,”

says Disraeli through Tancred.¹² The “Oriental values” of the revealed religions stand in contrast to the “desperate shipwreck gaiety” of Europe: “Enlightened Europe is not happy. Its existence is a fever, which it calls progress. Progress to what?,” demands Tancred/Disraeli, echoing a familiar Tory and romantic skepticism of industrial modernity. Europe must look to those more human and less instrumental “Oriental values,” which Disraeli is at a loss precisely to describe, for its salvation. Whatever this is, denigration of the East, of Oriental peoples, or of Islam, it is not.

Tancred was the final novel in Disraeli’s “Young England” trilogy. (Was there a nation that did not produce a romantic “Young” nationalist movement? Disraeli even conjures up a “Young Syria.”) The first two books in his trilogy, *Coningsby, or the New Generation*, and *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, are much better novels.¹³ *Coningsby* tells the story of a young nobleman who, defying threats of disinheritance from his aristocratic grandee of a grandfather, marries his true love and ends up in Parliament. *Coningsby* was a *roman-a-clef*, with each character reputed to be a caricature of a living personality or personality type, and many of its characters survived in *Coningsby*’s sequels *Sybil* and *Tancred*. Some of the caricatures were devastating, and Disraeli’s novels did his political career little good. Tadpole and Taper are a pair of characters whose names have passed into the English language as synonyms for cynical, handicapping political wire-pullers; today they would appear on *Crossfire* or *Have I Got News for You*. Other recognizable characters include Rigby, a cynical politician said to have been modeled on Disraeli’s rival John Wilson Croker, and Lord Henry Sidney, an idealistic aristocrat, who gets many of the best lines and was reputed to be a stand-in for Disraeli’s friend Lord John Manners. Finally, there is Sidonia, a benevolent Jewish banker, modeled on the Rothschilds, rich beyond dreams of avarice, but exercising a liberal and beneficent influence on all around him, including the young hero Coningsby. After *Coningsby*, the second of the “Young England” novels was *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, the two titular nations being “THE RICH AND THE

POOR,” in Disraeli’s unsubtle capitals.¹⁴ It was a novel addressed to the social conscience of the age. Like many young Tories in the “Young England” movement, Disraeli held that liberalism and its economic theories were heartless and inhuman, and looked back to a time when the greater man looked after the lesser—indeed when obligation was thought to have constituted greatness.

In all of his didactic “Young England” novels, Disraeli missed no opportunity to sermonize on the condition of England and against the morals of its ruling class, and the novels’ defects of plot and characterization are more than compensated for by Disraeli’s often biting wit. Disraeli was at his best as a caricaturist of British high society, which he knew intimately: “a majority is the best reparation,” announces one of his heroes, describing a Parliamentary debate, for the later benefit of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.¹⁵ The Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel is caricatured mercilessly as “*Le grand Colbert . . . prix fixe avec quelques rebais*.”¹⁶ It is less a reference to the great French mercantilist than to Peel’s progressive abolition of the Corn Laws (tariffs on grain imports) in the name of the liberal doctrine of Free Trade, using complicated schemes of so-called “sliding scales” (tariffs dependent on market price), along with rebates and a graduated income tax. To Disraeli, Peel represented the spirit of Liberalism and its mechanistic, bean-counting, philistine, instrumental rationality, blind to higher concerns, inimicably described in *Tancred* as “that strange union of lax principles and contracted sympathies which now form the special and degrading features of British politics.”¹⁷ In acceding to those false principles, Parliament and Peel had abdicated their responsibilities to “the leagues that really govern England,” a reference to Richard Cobden’s Anti-Corn Law League.¹⁸

As students of British political history know, Peel’s fiscal policy was the bitter partisan issue of the 1840s, and it became the issue over which Disraeli in 1846—the year before *Tancred*’s publication—split the Tory Party, driving Peel from power and putting the Whigs, or Liberals as they became, in office for the

better part of a generation. Peel, defeated by Disraeli and his Tory aristocratic and protectionist followers, left the Tory Party, and with him went the future great Liberal hero and antagonist of Disraeli, W.E. Gladstone, along with many other eminent men, most of whom eventually went with Gladstone into the Liberal Party. It was a defining and also a vituperative moment in Victorian politics: friendships were broken and enduring enmities established. Disraeli felt for Peel and his Gladstonian followers the contempt reserved for the apostate. *Tancred*, a novel written in the midst of these ructions, is not about the Orient, or even about religion; it is primarily about English politics and culture. In *Tancred*, the “other,” to use the overworked language of identity studies, is not the Orient, it is Liberalism, “that strange union of lax principles and contracted sympathies.” To read *Tancred* without reference to English politics in the 1840s—as Said does—is like reading *Primary Colors*, Joe Klein’s 1996 novel of Washington sex scandals, without knowing anything about the Clinton Administration.¹⁹

Once Disraeli’s young hero reaches the Holy Land, Tancred begins his search for the sterner principles and wider sympathies of authentic religion in the land of the prophets. This is by far the worst, and the most literally inconclusive, part of what is probably the worst of Disraeli’s novels. Tancred meets representatives of all three monotheisms, each of which is lauded to the skies. The English, “sprung from a horde of Baltic pirates,” have only been redeemed by “the Syro-Arabian creeds [which] formed our minds,” the hero tells his companion, as Disraeli, so good with flippancy, attempts to plumb spiritual profundities that he cannot begin to describe.²⁰ Disraeli’s view of religion is ecumenical, not to say multicultural, to a fault. The Muslims are descendants of Moses and of the prophets, says Tancred, reproving a European who calls them “heretics”;²¹ the Asian Christians dwell piously in the land of Christ; the Jews are the founders of Christianity, and a mosque and a church coexist in amity at the top of Mount Sinai.²² All three religions, according

to Disraeli, have Arabian roots—"it is Arabia alone that can regenerate the world"²³—and all three teach the same basic truths. No modern multiculturalist could quarrel with Disraeli's uncritical, not to say Panglossian, view of the "other."

Whatever else he was trying to do, Disraeli was not portraying an inferior East. Romantic Orientalism set up a fully and authentically human Orient against a mechanistic and dehumanized post-Enlightenment Europe. Romantic Orientalism no more calumniated the Orient than natural romanticism calumniated nature. The object of condemnation in both cases was rationalistic Europe and its scientific, calculating, un-spiritual, individualistic, and above all liberal civilization. Disraeli's *Tancred* was a book about England, against certain Englishmen, and against the very English doctrines of liberal individualism and free markets; the Orient became a figure for everything that was timeless, august, holy, authentically human, communitarian, and admirable. It is a use of the Orient that sits poorly with Said's notion of a Western-created Orient that was debased, decadent, inadequate, and in need of subjection or salvation by the West. *Tancred* says quite directly that Europe must learn Asia's ways, rather than the reverse: "God has never spoken to a European?" asks a character; "Never," replies Disraeli through his mouthpiece, *Tancred*.²⁴ Only timelessness has survived in Said's facile, present-centered, context-free interpretation of the novelist Disraeli's view of the Orient.

Insofar as *Tancred* was taken seriously in contemporary England, it was read correctly as a continuation of the *roman-a-clef* caricatures of *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, and as an attack on British liberalism, and critics duly praised or criticized it according to their politics.²⁵ It was not written or read as an attack on Islam, let alone a call for the conquest of an Oriental empire. Disraeli was not a religious man, and his attempts to describe religious feeling fail utterly. But his talent for mockery rarely deserts him, and his writing comes alive when he writes of contemporary English politics, which is to say of what he knew best and cared about most. In the course of the

novel, Tancred becomes not an imperial manipulator but a pawn in what Said quite correctly calls the “ludicrously complex” web of conspiracies spun by the novelist, though Said is mistaken to say that Disraeli based that complex web on knowledge of the Levant rather than his own imagination.²⁶

The only thing Disraeli loved more than a Levantine conspiracy was the chance to take pot-shots at English politicians in London: with heavy sarcasm, he writes of “Downing Street; happy spot, where they draw up constitutions for Syria and treaties for China with the same self-complacency and the same success”—hardly the words of an uncritical imperialist.²⁷ The sarcasm was at the expense of Lord Palmerston, the Whig Foreign Secretary associated with the Anglo-Chinese Opium War of 1839–1842 and the British intervention of 1840 against Mohammed Ali of Egypt’s march on the Porte. A rich merchant in the marketplace at Jerusalem is made to say that “Palmerston will never rest till he gets Jerusalem”; “the English must have markets,” is the knowing response of Metternich’s Consul.²⁸ It would have been an anti-imperialist theory of economic imperialism long before Lenin, but for the fact that Disraeli, as so often, was being flippant.

After many twists and turns and much extravagant rhetoric about the superiority of the “Asian religions,” Tancred ends by visiting the fictional kingdom of the Ansarey, high in a mountain fastness, where he is surrounded by the usual Levantine conspiracies, of which he is until the end oblivious. The novel concludes, if that is the word, with the arrival of his aristocratic parents at Jerusalem. At this point the reader has a feeling that Disraeli, having run out of witticisms, does not know quite where he is going or how he should end. The Ansarey, a noble survival of the ages, are made to worship of all things the Greek gods.²⁹ One can see the attraction this had to a philhellenic Victorian readership, but as a narrative conclusion it is all a bit less than satisfactory.

Aside from holding Whigs and Peelites—the predecessors of the Gladstonian Liberal Party—up to scorn, Disraeli had another

polemical aim, an aim about which he was completely serious, and in which his success was at best ambiguous: he wished to defend the position of the Jews in England.³⁰ Disraeli was an Anglican, his father having converted from Judaism largely for opportunistic reasons. But he was always proud of his Jewish ancestry, which, given his name, he could hardly hide. On occasion his political opponents directed anti-Semitic slurs at him, but in an England where the political world, and especially the Tory political world, was small, personal contacts meant much and Disraeli's charm, his reputation as a wit in company, and the aristocratic patrons he acquired sufficiently insulated him from prejudice that he was able to rise to office. Nevertheless, he was an enthusiastic defender of the Jewish "race" (that omnipresent Victorian term) even when it was not politically opportune.³¹ In *Tancred* he explained his eccentric theory that while the Jews were a people just as gifted as the English, they believed only one half of their religion, the other half of which Disraeli held to be Anglican Christianity. He went on carefully to explain to his readers the connections between Judaism and Christianity, writing of the English that "there never was a race who sang so often the odes of David," an assertion which was perhaps true given the religiosity of the Victorians and the omnipresence of the Psalms in the Anglican liturgy.³²

As always, Disraeli was at his best as a satirist, at one point making fun of street-corner louts who believed that the Jews "used to crucify little boys."³³ In Victorian England, Disraeli had chosen his polemical tactic—the association of disreputable paupers with anti-Semitism—skillfully. But Disraeli's defense of the Jews could also backfire. His character Sidonia, a stand-in for the Rothschilds, is at the center of everything; he knows everyone; he solves large problems with a word in the ear of Metternich.³⁴ Sidonia is a thoroughly wise and benevolent character—Disraeli persistently romanticized wealth and power—but the stereotype of the Jewish financial wizard pulling strings in high places could obviously have disastrous consequences.

Said, however, is concerned with Disraeli's view of Islam, not Judaism. The Suez Canal is for Said the perfect symbol of the Orientalist view of Islam:

In the Suez Canal idea we see the logical conclusion of Orientalist thought and, more interesting, of Orientalist effort . . . Islam was militant hostility to European Christianity. To overcome such redoubtable constants the Orient needed first to be known, then invaded and possessed, then recreated by scholars, soldiers and judges . . .³⁵

It is indeed true that Disraeli as Prime Minister, by now in contact with real Rothschilds, did in 1876 buy shares in the Suez Canal for the British government, a purchase arranged through Baron Rothschild in the kind of confidential anteroom conversation that must have thrilled the old conspiratorial novelist ("what is your security?"—"the British Government"—"you shall have it," was the famous Downing Street exchange with Nathan Rothschild³⁶). But these manoeuvres were interpreted at the time, and interpreted correctly, as an anti-French, not an anti-Egyptian or anti-Islamic, policy.³⁷

The problem with using Disraeli as an archetypal Orientalist is that, far from seeing "Islam as militant hostility to European Christianity," he had a positive view of Islam, and for all his imperialism in other areas of the world, wished above all to preserve the independent power of the primary Islamic empire, Ottoman Turkey, against, among others, the French and the Russians. Though in Said's view Disraeli is doubly damned as both a literary Orientalist and a political imperialist, as Prime Minister he followed a policy that consistently favored Islamic Turkey over Christian Russia, and he did so against significant domestic opposition. In the 1870s, atrocities committed by the Turks in Bulgaria became what a later age would have called the human rights question of the day. Liberals, led by Gladstone, held what they called—without irony—"indignation meetings" about the fate of the Eastern Christians,

and it was the Liberals rather than Disraeli's Tories who produced copious amounts of anti-Islamic invective. Gladstone, whose talent for moral outrage matched that of Disraeli for flippancy, wrote of the Turks:

It is not a question of Mahometanism simply, but of Mahometanism compounded with the peculiar character of a race . . . They were, upon the whole, from the black day when they first entered Europe, the one great anti-human specimen of humanity. Where ever they went, a broad line of blood marked the track behind them; and, as far as their dominion reached, civilisation disappeared from view. They represented everywhere government by force, as opposed to government by law.³⁸

Disraeli by contrast defended Islamic Turkey on the grounds that it was a power just like any other, as civilized as Christian Russia, and essentially neither more nor less entitled to security and influence in the world than any other European power. It was moreover a power whose survival was in the British interest.³⁹ "Your Eastern question is a great imbroglio that only exists in the cabinets of diplomatists," quipped the younger Disraeli in the 1840s, and the "Eastern question" remained a staple of European politics through the Crimean War and the crises of the 1870s and 1890s, and it played a large role in the origins of the First World War.⁴⁰ But it was Disraeli and his followers who, far from wanting to invade or possess the Islamic empire, defended it against Russian invasion on the grounds of a *Realpolitik* more or less indifferent to religion and culture, while the anti-imperialist Liberals attacked Turkey using language loaded with what we are now taught to identify as Orientalist prejudice: Said has his story on this major historical issue backwards.

Said writes that, following the 1882 occupation of Egypt, the British had:

An imperial domain which by the 1880s had become an unbroken patch of British-held territory, from the Mediterranean to

India. To write about Egypt, Syria, or Turkey, as much as travelling in them, was a matter of touring the realm of political will, political management, political definition. The territorial imperative was extremely compelling, even for so unrestrained a writer as Disraeli, whose *Tancred* is not merely an oriental lark but an exercise in the astute political management of actual forces on actual territories.⁴¹

There are a number of major problems with this climactic passage and its attempt to make the much-desired link between a novel and an empire. Said's description of the "imperial domain" is flatly wrong: between British-held Egypt and India in the 1880s was the Ottoman Empire, covering most of what is now called the Middle East, and the Persian Empire, not under British influence or domination until the turn of the century. Said's "unbroken patch of British-held territory" was broken by two of the most important Islamic empires in history, a strange error from an author otherwise keen to emphasize the subjective agency of Eastern peoples. This obvious factual error remains uncorrected in the latest reprint of *Orientalism*.

Said proceeds from his exaggeration of British imperial power to a slippage from writing to traveling to political management. The familiar discursive technique that slides from one verb to another, from seeing to knowing or writing to possessing or controlling, often with a genuflection to Foucault's epigrammatic assertions on knowledge and power, is perhaps congenial to those who feel that they possess the former without the latter. It leads here to an interpretative solecism that is not supported by the text. *Tancred's* titular character, Disraeli's mouthpiece, is not at all interested in "political will" or "political management": in his naiveté he is a pawn and an observer of the conspiracies of others, conspiracies in which he is entrapped, often unknowingly, and he is no kind of political manager. The only Englishman with an Oriental project of "political management of actual forces on actual territories" in *Tancred* is Palmerston,

and he, being a Liberal, is held up to mockery. The epitome of the supposed “actual territories” visited by Tancred was the entirely fictional kingdom of the Ansarey, complete with their Hellenic gods. The novel is no more a program for the conquest of the Levant than it is for the annexation of Attica.

The British occupied Egypt in 1882. We have it on the authority of the senior British official in Egypt in the 1870s, the future proconsul Lord Cromer, that Disraeli as Prime Minister mentioned to him no plans for such an occupation.⁴² But Said is guilty of a far more obvious oversight, evident to anyone with a passing familiarity with the “political management” of the Victorian empire: Egypt—an “actual territory” obviously distinct from the Palestine and Levant ostensibly the objects of Tancred’s designs—was occupied under Gladstone, not Disraeli, who by 1880 was out of power, and who died in 1881. Said’s fuzzy phrase “by the early 1880s,” thus obscures the fact that Disraeli was in no position to exercise any “political will” at the time of the occupation of Egypt—this is either a factual error or a shoddy trick of words, either unworthy of an undergraduate.

Said nowhere in *Orientalism* mentions Gladstone, under whom the empire expanded quite as rapidly as it had under Disraeli. Gladstone had great distaste for Disraeli as a man, as well as for his imperial policies, and considered those policies and Disraeli’s at times bombastic rhetoric to be insipid and corrupting, attributing to them a “loss of moral equilibrium.”⁴³ Disraeli and Gladstone were two very different men who had been on opposite sides of British politics since the Peelite split over the Corn Laws in 1846; wherever Gladstone got his imperial program, it was not from Disraeli, never mind from what he considered to be Disraeli’s frivolous, phrase-making novels.

Serious historians who study “actual forces on actual territories” argue that the occupation of Egypt was a last-minute expedient unrelated to any long-term scheme for Oriental domination.⁴⁴ As D.C.M. Platt remarks, a century-long tradition of left-wing

historiography has seen the Egyptian occupation as determined by economic factors involving Egypt's spendthrift rulers and their massive foreign debts, and having little to do with political schemes, let alone Oriental fantasies: self-regarding progressives used to pride themselves on their emphasis upon material or economic factors.⁴⁵ Similar conclusions have been drawn by numerous modern historians, from Marxists like John Marlowe to the far-from-leftist Niall Ferguson.⁴⁶ One of the few scholars to attempt to find a long-term plan behind the occupation of Egypt can only date that plan back a short period of months prior to the event, and even Gladstone's fiercest critics know enough not to accuse him of getting his plans from his opponent's novels.⁴⁷

It says a great deal about the fawning and uncritical attitude of Said's followers that his admirers have not, even a quarter of a century later, proposed some revisions to save him the embarrassment of these obvious historical howlers. John M. Mackenzie, a perceptive, acerbic critic of Said, writes that "historians who feel more comfortable with analysis firmly grounded in an empirical base have tended to avoid [the] highly theoretical disputes" occasioned by *Orientalism*. The other side of this coin is that many who enjoy politically charged theoretical debates are plainly ignorant of, or uninterested in, empirical facts, especially where those facts concern traditional high political history. This is unfortunate, as many academics, journalists, and writers who do not specialize in Victorian politics, and even many who do specialize in Victorian culture, are ready uncritically to accept Said's errors, not to mention the larger structure of assertions about the dynamics of European imperialism that he builds upon them. Even serious historians such as Bernard Porter, who question that larger structure and introduce masses of evidence about the relatively limited place of imperial topics in the metropolitan worldview, have been inclined to treat Said with an exaggerated amount of respect, and have avoided criticizing his more obvious errors.⁴⁸

Those errors have certainly not harmed the reputation of *Orientalism*: it is treated reverentially in the most august academic journals, and any visit to a library catalogue will show that it has spawned a veritable academic cottage industry.⁴⁹ Even the *American Historical Review*, the house organ of the American historical profession, devoted an issue to the questions raised by Said, and allows that his volume is:

A book that is now so much a part of so many interdisciplinary landscapes that its arguments—while open to many different sorts of criticisms and calls for modification—are difficult (and perhaps costly) for any historian to ignore.⁵⁰

More empirically serious writers about British imperialism and its causes are generally known to specialists only—how many of Said’s acolytes have heard of P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, for instance, two of the most discriminating synthesists of British imperial history?⁵¹—while Said is accepted as a serious and authoritative source by a much wider audience. That audience includes self-consciously progressive journalists, academics, and writers, and the authority of Said is widely accepted, at any rate on the left, within large parts of the academic world and the journalistic intelligentsia, as his often fawning obituaries attest.⁵² It has been said that a historian is a scholar who reads the footnotes first: a historian reading this article will have noticed that it is based entirely on published and indeed widely available sources. The question then arises why Said’s easily debunked errors are not more widely contested—why do they command such wide assent?

Of course many of Said’s readers are students of literature or culture, often working under the rubrics of “cultural studies” or “post-colonial studies” or other vaguely postmodernistic disciplines of recent construction. Such people are not really interested in the specifics of names, dates, and places, let alone authorial intent, and too much emphasis upon such things may be dismissed as

theoretically naïve and possibly politically reactionary. Facts, and especially political facts, are for some at best mere pedantry, at worst imperial nostalgia. Much of Said's audience is sufficiently distant in mindset and politics from both Gladstone and Disraeli that the two appear more or less equivalent: they are heard as voices within an imperialist and Orientalist discourse, arguing about issues that have ceased to be live issues to the postcolonial mind, and distinctions within that rebarbative Orientalist discourse are seen as distinctions without a substantive difference, distinctions that served only to keep the discourse going—a curious elision in those given to sermonizing against overgeneralization. Historians of imperial politics, by contrast, pass Said by either in silence, or, in obeisance to current sensibilities and to academic politics, with polite words about his erudition and platitudes about the importance of avoiding stereotypes. This is unfortunate, because it leaves the field to those who know little of history as the story of real people making specific decisions, or indeed writing specific novels. One problem raised by Said, albeit unintentionally, is the question of the appropriate reaction on the part of historians to accepted and influential historical errors on the part of widely admired theorists: other than persistent, reasoned correction of such mistakes—a response admittedly without the emotional satisfactions of a good polemic, and unlikely to match either the sales or the influence of a work like *Orientalism*—this article has no easy answer. But historians should at a minimum correct the errors, and ask the question.

It is of course open to defenders of Said to argue that Disraeli, like other “Orientalists”—a collective noun made to include anyone who wrote about anything east of the Bosphorus or south of Gibraltar—painted a caricatured picture of the Orient, thus depicting it as fundamentally (the term “essentially” will likely come into play at this point) different and therefore “other.” The character of the picture created, be it positive or negative, is less important, we might be told, than the fact that a kind of “Orientalist” knowledge opposing “us” to “them”—scare quotes too often abound—was constructed.

The problem with such a defense, aside from the fact that it ignores what Said specifically wrote about the extent of the British Empire and the intentions of Disraeli, is that it implies that any view, positive or negative, of another society is “Orientalist”: the only possible implication is that we should have no view at all, which is to say that its consequences are obscurantist. Said never really grapples with the problem of how we may construct non-Orientalist, and so presumably permitted, kinds of knowledge; nor does he confront the possibility that a negative view of another society may in fact be accurate or useful. The effect of Said’s polemic has largely been to set up restrictions on what may be said in polite, tenure-granting company, a curious but not entirely inadvertent consequence of a volume that so proudly announces its anti-obscurantist suspicion of power.

I have made a point in this essay of quoting from the twenty-fifth anniversary 2003 reprint of *Orientalism*, though pagination and wording have remained unchanged across the volume’s various reprints. It says a great deal about the uncritical and even at times fawning reception of Said’s volume, and indeed its congruence with current ideological fashions, that no need has been felt to correct even direct errors of fact in this latest edition, though Said has found time and space—expense cannot be an issue in such a widely sold work—to add a postscript of 1994 and a foreword of 2003, each declaiming against the iniquities, real and imagined, of U.S. policy under successive administrations. The trajectory of Edward Said’s reputation, notwithstanding his factual errors and polemical misreadings, tells us much about the ideological predilections of the American academy—but little about Disraeli or the imperialism of his day.

In *Orientalism*, Said distorted his enormous knowledge of Western and Oriental literature and history, pillaging the past for names, dates, and ideas that could be deployed in the service of his indictment of Western imperialism, all the while ignoring inconvenient details and when necessary central realities. Many in the modern

academy are so convinced of Western perfidy that Said's arguments, tending as they do to present Western imperialism as a monolithic injustice, are accepted with little further critical attention. But though Said gets many points wrong, and although Disraeli, the man he chose as his exemplary and epigraphic Orientalist, was no enemy of Islam and had no schemes for a Middle Eastern empire, let alone schemes propounded in an early novel, Said's chief narrative—the “construction” by the malevolent West of an Orient to be known and conquered—is sufficiently congenial to today's intellectual and ideological environment that *Orientalism* is considered in “post-colonial” and indeed in many other quarters to be canonical and even foundational, and it is taken seriously among some historians and many modern language specialists who ought to know better. It is a curious fate for a book that set out to destroy stereotypes in the name of the particularities of real, contextualized, detailed experience that it should become the standard and little-questioned textbook of its own imperious and misleading orthodoxies.

On Said's recent death, *Orientalism* was hailed in prominent quarters as his “masterpiece.”⁵³ Perhaps a certain generous overstatement is among the decencies of the obituary. But its errors are so plain and its textual interpretation so strained that a century from now *Orientalism* will be read mainly for its value as a primary source on the moral, academic, and intellectual dysfunctions of the late twentieth century; on its ostensible historical focus, the nineteenth century, it is highly unreliable. That more people have not noticed that fact says a great deal about those current moral and intellectual dysfunctions.

NOTES

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003), orig. pub. 1978, postscript 1994.
2. The Earl of Beaconsfield [Benjamin Disraeli], *Tancred, or the New Crusade* (London: Longmans, Green, 1894), orig. pub. 1847.
3. Said, *Orientalism*, 5, 19, 44, 99, 102, 157, 169, 192.
4. Said, *Orientalism*, 169.
5. See esp. Said, *Orientalism*, 99, 169.

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6. Said, *Orientalism*, 169, 192.
7. Said, *Orientalism*, 204.
8. Said, *Orientalism*, 204.
9. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974), 397–441, appendix.
10. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (London: Heinemann, 1948).
11. Said, *Orientalism*, 172.
12. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 309.
13. Earl of Beaconsfield [Benjamin Disraeli], *Coningsby, or the New Generation* (London: Longmans, Green, 1881), orig. pub. 1844; and Earl of Beaconsfield [Benjamin Disraeli], *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), orig. pub. 1845.
14. [Disraeli], *Sybil*, 77.
15. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 167.
16. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 145.
17. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 134.
18. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 136.
19. Anonymous [Joe Klein], *Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics* (New York: Random House, 1996).
20. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 426.
21. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 271.
22. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 288–89.
23. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 465.
24. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 261.
25. Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966), 205–14.
26. Said, *Orientalism*, 192.
27. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 347–48.
28. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 478.
29. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 424ff.
30. Blake, *Disraeli*, 202–03.
31. W.T. Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli* (New York: MacMillan, 1929), vol.1, 875–95; Blake, *Disraeli*, 258–61.
32. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 265–66.
33. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 389–91.
34. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 212.
35. Said, *Orientalism*, 91–92.
36. Monypenny and Buckle, *Life of Benjamin Disraeli*, vol. 2, 787.
37. Niall Ferguson, *The World's Banker: The History of the House of Rothschild* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), 821–24. A prominent contemporary view was that of [Walter Bagehot], “The Suez Canal and the English Government,” *Economist*, 12 February 1876, 185–87.
38. The Right Hon. W.E. Gladstone, “Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East” (London: John Murray, 1876), 12–13.
39. The canonical history of the “Eastern question” or Balkan crises of the 1870s remains that of R.W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question* (London: Frank Cass, 1962 [1935]); see also Blake, *Disraeli*, 598–628.
40. [Disraeli], *Tancred*, 393.
41. Said, *Orientalism*, 169.
42. Earl of Cromer, *Disraeli* (London: MacMillan, 1912), 27–29.
43. Quoted in H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1898* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 303.
44. See for instance, William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments, 1871–1890* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 251–78; Alexander Scholch, “The ‘Men on the Spot’ and the English Occupation of Egypt in 1882,” *Historical Journal*, 19, 3 (1976): 773–85; Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher, and Alice Denny, *Africa*

- and the Victorians* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 122–59; and Matthew, *Gladstone*, 382–94.
45. D.C.M. Platt, *Finance, Trade and Politics in British Foreign Policy, 1815–1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 154–59.
 46. John Marlowe, *Spoiling the Egyptians* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974), 7 and passim; E.R.J. Owen, *Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969); and Ferguson, *The World's Banker*, 819–41.
 47. Robert T. Harrison, *Gladstone's Imperialism in Egypt* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1995), 11–24, 67–68.
 48. Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), viii–ix, 139–41.
 49. For instance, Gyan Prakash, “Orientalism Now,” *History and Theory*, 34 (3), October 1995, 199–212.
 50. “Orientalism,” *American Historical Review*, 105 (4), October 2000, 1204.
 51. P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2000* (Oxford: University Press, 1996).
 52. A typical specimen is Tom Paulin, “Writing to the Moment,” *Guardian*, 25 September 2004.
 53. Michael Wood, “On Edward Said,” *London Review of Books*, 25 (20), 23 October 2003.