

Introduction: Reframing Exoticism in European Literature

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Sono affascinato da tutto questo che non conosco, [...] da questo cerchio di segni che evocano segreti che voglio capire.

— TIZIANO TERZANI¹

[S]ome notion of literature and indeed all culture as hybrid [...] this strikes me as *the* essential idea for the revolutionary realities today.

— EDWARD SAID²

When editing the previous issue of *Working Papers in the Humanities*, that investigated ‘The Sacred in the Secular in European Literature’, we had to remark on the hegemonic centrality of Christianity in the yet noticeably diverse approaches adopted and themes discussed. We investigated European literature’s confrontation with a superior dimension, and we realized the extent to which that vertical line of conversation was (pre)occupied by a dominant interlocutor: the Christian God. In order to integrate that analysis, the present issue was conceived with another dimension in mind, somewhat complementary to the previous one: the horizontal dialogue that European poets, novelists, playwrights and artists have conducted with Oriental ‘others’. The contributions composing this fourteenth number thus examine European perceptions of the exotic as a means to question these very standpoints’ positions.

The term ‘exotic’ derives from the Latin *exoticus*, and before that from the Greek ἐξωτικός. The Greek adverb ἔξω, meaning ‘outside’, remains in the Latin preposition *ex*, indicating a movement *from* somewhere. Already this brief etymological analysis should draw our attention to an often-underestimated detail: the ‘exotic’ suggests a movement *from* the outside, whereas it has usually inspired approaches that, starting from an alleged centrality, move *to* an object of analysis whose agency has long been considered (or treated) as almost absent.

¹ Tiziano Terzani, *In Asia* (Milan: Tascabili degli Editori Associati, 2016), p. 12. ‘I am enraptured by all these things that I don’t know, [...] by this circle of signs evoking secrets that I am eager to understand’, our translation.

² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 384.

In fact, to talk about a horizontal level of cultural exchange, while symbolic of an encounter that brings together distant dwellers of the Earth's surface, actually brackets an element of verticality that exoticism has long betrayed, and that cannot be overlooked. We are talking about the hierarchy according to which, as in Said's view, 'Orientalism depends for its strategy on [a] flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand'.³

Said's *Orientalism* (1978) unavoidably underpins the analysis in this volume, despite our propensity to refer to the broader and all-encompassing category of 'exoticism', which allows our focus to expand beyond the Near East. Being aware of our own position within the Western academic discourse, and therefore of our plausible internalization of many attitudes of the related cultural hegemony,⁴ we would like to challenge our own viewpoint by recovering some of Said's questions, and by posing some others to his own. For instance, how might recent developments in world literature, comparative, and postcolonial theory enhance Orientalism as it was analysed in the late '70s? To what extent has exoticism — if not exoticisms — changed over time and in different national contexts, according to mutating historical conditions and in light of globalization? In what ways have narrative, philosophy, and ideology engaged with these shifting parameters of exoticism?

Taking Spivak's advice about jettisoning labels in favour of specificities, our issue is going to take into account singular and diverse modes of that heterogeneous phenomenon that is the encounter of Western authors with Eastern cultures.⁵ We hope that this edition of *Working Papers in the Humanities* acts as a hub where many subject positions can meet and engender fruitful dialogues. In this imaginary assembly, German theatre can face Chinese proletariat, French Parnassian poetry can look for a Persian counterpart, and a nomadic dissident French author can lend his words to Palestinian revolution. Identities, if they ever existed univocally, are here convincingly considered in their dialogical forms, in their being always 'co-identities' which necessitate alterity in their own construction. Such 'co-identities' must acknowledge this very need in order to create a harmonic coexistence of diverse agents on the cultural, social, economic and politic field.

Our authors respond to this urge to clarify the mutuality of cultural — and particularly literary — discourses. Indeed, misconceptions, misunderstandings and misinterpretations have long occupied not only creative, but also critical

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 7.

⁴ We refer here, as Said does (*Ibid.*, p. 25), to Gramsci's deft statement about the need to be aware of every analysis' personal dimension: 'The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory' (Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks: Selections*, trans. and ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 324).

⁵ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Questions of Multi-Culturalism', in *The Post-Colonial Critic: interviews, strategies, dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 59–66 (p. 59).

productions whenever a dialogue with the ‘exotic’ has come into play. Trying to be sympathetic with artists, a Veil of Maya of sorts might even be understandable when it comes to the representation of a distant other, with it functioning as a limit that encourages imagination. There is a pertinent verse by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi that refers precisely to the sense of loss that a progressive enlargement of our knowledge of the world inevitably entails: ‘Ahi ahi, ma conosciuto il mondo | Non cresce, anzi si scema’.⁶ It is possible — and perhaps honest — to admit that poetry needs a margin of the unknown, when it comes to otherness, in order to preserve an inspirational naivety. What has to be fully overcome, on the other hand, is a lack of understanding of different identities’ encounters from a critical point of view. It is with this aim in mind that this issue came into being: it is thus our hope to offer an insight into the various new research questions currently being pursued in the long-standing debate on ‘exoticism’.

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[Genet] seeks a liminality that keeps him estranged from a patriotic kinship he staunchly rejects, such that his personal feeling of non-belonging only intensifies the alterity of the Palestinians he tries to evoke without commodification, superiority, or exoticizing invention. — JOANNE BRUETON

Joanne Brueton (University of London in Paris) examines the writings of Jean Genet during his residence in the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan in the 1970s and 1980s. Her focus reveals an author who is aware of the power of Western myths about the ‘Orient’ when writing for that audience. In his portrayal of the Palestinians, Genet seeks to evade clichéd traps whilst also exploiting the existence of such misconceptions. In this article entitled ‘Genet’s Palestinian Folklore’ Brueton is careful not to elide the potential pitfalls of a Western interlocutor acting as spokesperson for a marginalized people. Her analysis places an emphasis on the interventions of Palestinian leaders, as well as Edward Said himself, on Genet’s writing, upending the traditional dichotomy of power in exoticist narratives. Moreover, this article pinpoints the uneasy shifting paradigms of writing on the Middle East amidst an immediate and complex political reality, where Genet eschews the familiar overblown fetishization of the region for a depiction rooted in domestic quotidian detail. Brueton goes on to offer a thoughtful reading of Genet’s use of medieval and classical epic tropes and referents from the Western canon, whereby the fedayeen are both lionized by their association with these mythologies, and the artifice of Genet’s imagined Palestine is revealed.

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⁶ Giacomo Leopardi, ‘Ad Angelo Mai’, in *Canti*, ed. by Mario Fubini (Turin: Loescher, 1968), pp. 50–60 (p. 56). ‘Alas, the world when once known doesn’t expand: | it shrinks’, ‘To Angelo Mai’, in *Canti*, trans. by Jonathan Galassi (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 28–41 (p. 35).

The 'Fronten' of today is comprised not of Occident and Orient, but of foreign and Chinese managerial classes [...] against the 'chaotischen Massen'. — LUCY BYFORD

Lucy Byford (University of Edinburgh), in her essay entitled 'Beyond Asiatic Despotism: The Stagecraft of Erwin Piscator's Adaptation of *Tai Yang erwacht* (1931)', takes as her starting point the analysis of an apparent paradox: the encounter between exotification as a mystifying approach to the 'other' and socialist epic theatre's programmatic objectivity. The case study in question deals with the representation of the awakening of class consciousness in a factory worker during the nationalist Kuomintang party's taking of power: a play set in 1927 Shanghai, directed by epic dramatist Piscator in collaboration with socialist writer Friedrich Wolf and former Dadaist designer John Heartfield. Byford carefully discusses concepts such as 'sinologism' or 'yellowface' to frame Western idiosyncratic relations with China. In particular, she examines fluctuating Marxist interest towards Chinese revolutionary potential, an interest that was at its peak during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. *Tai Yang erwacht's* epic elements — such as a prologue opening on the back-stage, meta-performative and pedagogical moments — contribute to underline, discuss and possibly deconstruct, tropes pertaining to class, gender and ethnicity in the Chinese revolutionary context. The play also stages Chinese language and ideograms, thus facing one of the most critical points of any sinologized discourse: Western misinterpretation or misconception of Chinese modes of expression. Piscator and Wolf, while aiming to address revolutionary China as an instrumental example for action in Germany, do not fail to represent it in its autonomous characteristics. China is othered, yet the act of othering is renegotiated into a dialectical exchange that links the Chinese revolution with the class war in Germany. Piscator's stagecraft thus questions Marxist racial bias and orientalized vision of history, at the same time offering a multifaceted and creative alternative to them.

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Rhaïs's presentation as a Muslim 'évadée de harem' is a response to a colonial blind spot, to the logic of orientalism whereby a woman writer from North Africa could hardly be seen as anything else than an imperial stereotype. — EDWIGE CRUCIFIX

In her contribution to this volume, entitled 'An Orientalist Masquerade: The Self-Exoticizing Gaze in the Works of Elissa Rhaïs', Edwige Crucifix (Brown University) examines the hybrid identity of the Jewish French-Algerian writer Elissa Rhaïs. Via her disguising penname, Rhaïs purported to be the first Algerian-Muslim woman to write her own memoirs, recounting her escape from a harem no less in the best-selling *Saâda la Marocaine* (1919). The subsequent exposure of her deception has discounted Rhaïs's credibility, marring her as an agent of French colonialist exoticization of the Maghreb. However, Crucifix

reassesses this position, highlighting the uneasy assimilation of the Algerian Jewish population into the colonizing French culture. Expanding her analysis beyond *Saâda la Marocaine* to evidence the breadth of Algerian women's realities present in Rhaïs's wider fiction, Crucifix examines the historical reality of the hybridity of Algerian identities in the early twentieth century, and the ways in which women educated within the imperialist system may begin to internalize exoticist narratives of their own lives. Drawing attention to the conscious performativity of this genre of colonial narrative, Crucifix also raises important questions about the expectations of truth in such texts. This interpretation is pertinent to the '(re)-framing' approach of this volume, whereby Rhaïs's disguise speaks more to the inability of the French to countenance a more nuanced Algeria. Rhaïs, on the contrary, is able to exploit her lived experience of both cultures and tell the French what it is they want to hear, in addition to revealing more nuanced truths about Algerian identities.

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Comedias fronterizas take the frontier location as an intercultural space of exchange and interaction, in which people construct identity in interaction with other cultural groups. — REBECCA DE SOUZA

With the article by Rebecca De Souza (University of Oxford) we move into a Spanish context, analysing three *comedias* by Lope de Vega depicting the lives of Medieval Muslim Andalusis. While the debate about the latter's representation in early modern literature has mainly followed a Manichean division between maurophilia and maurophobia, only addressing aristocratic and Counter-Reformation contexts, De Souza investigates Lope's *comedias* as more intersectional case studies. Muslims features there in their contingent and evolving religio-cultural identity, based on their long-term presence in the Iberian Peninsula and on their unavoidable interaction with Christians. De Souza thus proposes the compelling taxonomy of *comedias fronterizas*, referring to Lope's representation of intercultural interaction, frontier setting, and the construction of identities on the basis of exchanges between cultural groups over the entirety of the Middle Ages. Identities' belonging to the surface level of costume and language in Lope's play aims to highlight the artificial and constructed nature of society as a whole. Since religio-cultural identities can be performed aesthetically, their arbitrary nature is unmasked. The designation of Andalusi thus supersedes and undermines the solidity of taxonomies such as *Cristiano* and *Moro*: differences among practices, rituals and languages of Christianity and Islam are de-emphasized, to give relevance to internal conflicts contextually. Lope's *comedias*, by representing the reality of Muslims in Iberia during the Middle Ages and their multifarious relationships with Christians, thus advocate more fluid, adaptable and adoptable religio-cultural identities than the ones that exoticism has usually rested upon.

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Lahor's overt aim was to familiarize Al-Ghazali, but this was in reality a means to an end: that of exoticizing himself. — JULIA CATERINA HARTLEY

Julia Caterina Hartley (University of Warwick) investigates a peculiar example of convergence towards, rather than divergence from, the Orient. In her article, entitled 'Identifying with the Orient: Exoticism and Similarity in Jean Lahor's *Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali*', Hartley presents Parnassian poet Jean Lahor's attempt to assume the poetic voice of the Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali, and to stress similarities between the latter's life and thoughts and his own. Lahor foregrounds his choice to compose poems in the form of Persian quatrains, ultimately vindicating his existential closeness to Al-Ghazali. By doing so, he seems to subvert Said's view of the Orient as a diametrical opposite to the Occident. Nevertheless, as Hartley convincingly argues, Lahor draws on Al-Ghazali's intellectual and spiritual autobiography in a selective, at times even distorting way. The French poet misrepresents the Persian theologian's religious faith, creating a narrative in which he seems to have abandoned Islam in favour of syncretism. Lahor also intervenes on the poetic form, by shifting from the original Persian to French rhyme structures. Lahor's intellectual operation thus falls into a particular mode of Orientalism, where the other is only praised in terms of his similarities, and where differences are erased in view of an ethnocentric approach. Hartley identifies in this mechanism, too deliberate to be naive, a means by which Lahor aims to exoticize himself (his very name included) and to suffuse his French verses with the originality that only an Oriental origin was supposed to possess.

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Brueton notes at the opening of her article the 'necessity' of exoticism to the French collective imagination, quoting Victor Segalen, whose comments mark some of the earliest critical theory engaged within this volume. The enduring truth of his argument is borne out by the predominance of French in the following articles, albeit with the hallmark of great cultural and historical diversity, encompassing eleventh-century Iran (as appropriated by *fin de siècle* France), 1920s Algeria, and 1970s Palestine. Importantly these contexts offer portrayals of exoticist narrative both within and without the formalized structure of political colonialism, reflecting the pervasiveness of French cultural intervention in different periods and circumstances.

In the works of Byford and De Souza the characterization of the 'exotic' in the German and Spanish languages respectively are shown to be likewise influenced by those nations' histories. Byford's article exposes a Germany dealing with the political spectre of Communism, where the 'Otherness' of Chinese culture is both negated by the shared experiences of the working classes in both locations, and engaged as a distancing tool for the German audience. Similarly, De Souza's article challenges the presumed dichotomy of 'self' and 'other' inherent to most exoticist rhetoric by examining the multicultural

history of Spain, calling into question the very validity of figuring the Spanish Muslim population of the middle ages as 'exotic'. It is unsurprising that the articles compiled here concern languages of considerable stature and power in Western Europe, given the uneven power structures which give rise to exoticist thought. It is worth noting, however, the lasting remnants of such structural power within the British academy, which doubtless continue to influence the balance of modern language departments.

Across these diverse threads, we hope that each reader will draw illuminating comparisons and contrasts. The perception of time is one such thread which has been well established in scholarship on exoticism, and merits some examination here. Throughout the articles in this volume the distance, or indeed lack thereof, between 'self' and 'other', between the 'here' and 'there' inherent to exoticism can also be figured in relation to time. Here Segalen is once again insightful, positing that 'L'exotisme n'est pas seulement donné dans l'espace, mais également en fonction du temps'.⁷ In practice, this temporal distance, whether literal or figurative, often plays out in the clichéd dynamic of an exoticized distant culture depicted in terms of simplistic nostalgia, in contrast to the complex and nuanced present of the Western perspective. Robert Young has taken up this idea more recently, arguing that 'implicit to the idea of "the other" is a distinction between the modern (the same) and the residue that is non-modern (the other)'.⁸

This relationship is pertinent to Brueton's analysis, as she navigates the conflict between an immediate, grounded, present, and a mythologized past in Genet's Palestine. However, the distinction is not as polarized as Young suggests, in part due to Genet's self-conscious awareness of his own privileged position, and also due to the political immediacy of the unfolding crisis at hand. This political immediacy is also a factor in Byford's article, where the contemporaneous setting in industrial Shanghai disrupts the traditional exoticist model of a non-modern 'other'.

Contrastingly, Hartley and Crucifix offer a more typical model of this temporal distance. This is true quite literally in the former, as Lahor recalls via his identification with Al-Ghazali a past whose complexities he cannot begin to realize. In the latter, although Rhais's work is set contemporaneously in the early twentieth century, the evocation of the harem recalls the frequently crude use of this motif as shorthand for the supposedly primitive, or non-modern, world of the 'Orient', which as a literary practice is embedded into the French establishment.

This question of time highlights the extent to which the discussion of exoticism centres upon varying degrees of proximity and distance. Without

⁷ Victor Segalen, 'Essai sur l'exotisme', in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), pp. 745–82 (p. 749). 'Exoticism is not only given in space, but also in terms of time'.

⁸ Robert J. C. Young, 'Postcolonial Remains', *New Literary History*, 43. 1, (Baltimore: Winter, 2012), 19–42 (p. 36).

exception, the articles in this volume offer analyses of complex cultural interchanges which cannot be neatly expressed via the polarizing structure of 'self' and 'other'. Instead, the recurrent theme which emerges is one of hybridity, as embraced by Said in the quotation from his influential later work *Culture and Imperialism* which appears at the beginning of this introduction. Some forty years after the publication of *Orientalism*, if 'exoticism' is to continue to offer compelling avenues of analysis, it will be via a nuanced understanding of the myriad identities which exist between 'self' and 'other', as Robert Young argues:

Othering is what the postcolonial should be trying to deconstruct, but the tendency to use the concept remains: the often-posed question of how 'we' (implicitly the majority or dominant group) can know 'the other', who remains implicitly unknowable and unapproachable, [...] is simply the product of having made the discriminatory conceptual distinction in the first place.⁹

Thus, we suggest Young's argument for the 'deconstruction of othering' as a lens through which to consider the following articles. As a venue for the publication of work by early career researchers and postgraduate students, we anticipate that the ideas presented here will go on to provide the basis for further research and debate, and in some small part to contribute to the continuing evolution of our understanding of exoticism.

⁹ Young, 'Postcolonial Remains', p. 37.