

**Book Review: Daniel Martin Varisco's, Orientalism: Said
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Book Review: Daniel Martin Varisco's, *Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*

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Reading Orientalism

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is the seminal work proposing a ubiquitous 'othering' of the Orient by Europe, evident in canonical European literature from Aeschylus onwards, a process Said called 'orientalising'. Said claimed that the Orient was 'almost invented' by the West, as a feminised, exoticised, and eroticised space; an unchanging and unchangeable mirror-image of the rational, morally and culturally superior Occident.¹ 'Orientalising', claimed Said, was largely responsible for two centuries of European imperialism.² Attracting adoration and vitriol equally, Said was an American scholar with a Palestinian heritage, politically active in the cause of his cultural homeland.³ *Orientalism* has, consequently, a significant political edge, polarising opinion as either a brilliant expose of Western prejudice, or a polemical rant which 'invents' the West as equally as Said accuses the West of inventing the East. Regardless, *Orientalism* has remained in print since 1978 and 'its influence can hardly be disputed.'⁴ Credited by many as the founding text of post-colonialism, *Orientalism* remains one of the most cited academic works of modern times.⁵

Varisco's critique of Said brings together an enormous quantity of material published on Said, in a 'critical engagement with this powerful text and the ongoing debate over it'.⁶ The question is, why? As Varisco correctly identifies, *Orientalism* has elicited a veritable avalanche of responses, both supporting and attacking Said's thesis.⁷ In 1986, the scholar Bernard Lewis clashed with Said at the Middle East Studies Association convention, resulting largely in mutual abhorrence of each other's positions, and offering an example of

¹ E. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978), p. 1.

² Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 4-9.

³ Biography of Edward Said', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Said> (Accessed 2/3/16).

⁴ R. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, 2001), p. 384.

⁵ D. Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Seattle, WA., 2007), p. 313, note 41.

For citations, see 'cited references', Web of

Science http://apps.webofknowledge.com/Search.do?product=UA&SID=Y1PdZfOi2uAwmSwCOXc&search_mode=CitedReferenceSearch&prID=dc7c3175-895b-46a0-bdf0-d72377cf9522 (Accessed 4/3/16).

⁶ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. xi.

⁷ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 17-20.

the polarisation which Said's work has often created.⁸ The impasse has barely been broken since, with Said's detractors perhaps best represented, in a wide field, by Ibn Warraq and Martin Kramer in lengthy refutations of Said's thesis.⁹ Said's supporters have long accepted the polemical nature of Said's work, although agreeing with much of his general thrust. An uneasy 'middle way' has been proposed, perhaps best represented by Fred Halliday and Aijaz Ahmad, who sympathise with Said's anger and political position but accept the flaws in a book they consider important and influential.¹⁰

Daniel Varisco calls his 501-page critique, 'two books about one book, the one book being Edward Said's 1978 work, *Orientalism*.'¹¹ Varisco's 'two books' are his critique of Said's thesis, and a further 200 pages of copious footnotes (over 1,700), bibliography and index. The book is prefaced with a note to the reader, an introduction, and then divided into three chapters, further sub-divided into numerous titled sections. Varisco writes clearly, notwithstanding my comments below, effectively exposing Said's polemic. Chapter one discusses the phenomenon of *Orientalism*, its impact on many fields of academic study, and how Said's thesis has been received, interpreted, and applied. Chapter two deconstructs Said's many historical errors, his critical omissions, and his representation of Orientals as unable to represent themselves. Chapter three focuses on the attractions of the orientalisating thesis and attempts to go beyond the polarised debate that has characterised the book since publication.

Varisco's aim is bold: to break the impasse and 'move beyond a referendum on Edward Said...to think outside the binary that binds us to us-versus-them-ism.'¹² He also claims to want to 'strengthen rather than jettison what Said has done', although Varisco's critique is fairly devastating.¹³ The author quotes Mahmoud Manzalaoui's comment that within Said's book, *Orientalism*, 'is a slimmer and genuinely excellent one trying to get out.'¹⁴ I suggest the same is true of Varisco's genuinely comprehensive study of Said's canonical work. I agree that Varisco has written 'two books' here, but in the sense of one book which attempts to go

⁸ The MESA Debate: The Scholars, the Media, and the Middle East', *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, 16 (1987), pp. 85-104.

⁹ I. Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (Amherst, MA., 2007); M. Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Seattle, WA., 2001).

¹⁰ F. Halliday, 'Orientalism and its Critics', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20/2 (1993), pp. 145-63; A. Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London, 1992), Chap. 5.

¹¹ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. xi.

¹² Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. xv-xvi.

¹³ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. xiii.

¹⁴ M. Manzalaoui, 'Review of *Orientalism*', *Modern Language Review*, 75 (1980), pp. 837-839, 837 in Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 13.

beyond what has been already said, and another that is a reference-work on Said. The former disappoints, whereas the latter is of great value to scholars of Said, those interested in representations of the East, and to historians, as an object lesson in how inaccurate history can be constructed very plausibly, as Varisco ably demonstrates Said has done.

The disappointment is that Varisco ultimately fails to move beyond the binaries he correctly identifies. At times, Varisco appears as polarised as those he criticises, attacking Kramer's *Ivory Towers on Sand* as 'an unseemly screed' favoured by 'the neocon clique' responsible for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁵ With such a one-eyed attack on a pillar of the anti-Saidian response, Varisco inadvertently reproduces the binaries he claims to avoid.

One of Varisco's reviewers commented that 'Varisco seems convinced that he has written a very important book', and this is indeed the case.¹⁶ For example, his opening note 'To the Reader', headed with a quote from Maria Rosa Menocal, asks 'and is it not further tribute to his triumph to see more clearly what he was battling?'¹⁷ Turning to the notes, Varisco states that this quote actually refers to Dante, but that it equally applies to Said.¹⁸ Yet positioned at the start of the author's explanation for writing the book, Varisco also implies tribute to his own triumph. Similarly, Varisco states that, although a must-read book for generations of scholars, *Orientalism* 'is also a book with manifest flaws' which require acknowledgment, 'to prevent it becoming the kind of sacred text Said defined as problematically Orientalist. Were this not so, I would not have written this critique.'¹⁹ Of course, for many, *Orientalism* is *already* a sacred text, and Varisco's critique is mostly not original, but predominantly a compilation of criticisms already made, as he readily admits.²⁰ Such self-importance, the impression that Varisco feels he was required to step into the breach to help us resolve that debate, somewhat distracts the reader from what is, as I will shortly discuss, a comprehensive and excellent summary of the same discussion. Varisco's real motive is perhaps revealed in his acknowledgements: to be Said's *bete noir*, the same role that Varisco's friend, Jacques Berlinerblau, played in his own deconstruction of Bernal's '*Black Athena*'.²¹

¹⁵ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁶ A. J. Caschetta, 'Review of *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*', *The Middle East Quarterly* (Winter, 2010), pp. 78-80, 78. <http://www.meforum.org/2607/reading-orientalism-said-and-the-unsaid> (Accessed 1/3/16).

¹⁷ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. xi.

¹⁸ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 307, note 2.

¹⁹ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 39.

²⁰ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. xi.

²¹ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. x.

Similarly, Varisco's note prior to his introduction is unnecessary, given that the introduction is an expanded version of what he has just said. In fact, there is a lot of repetition of themes throughout the book: the polemical nature of Said's work; the polarised nature of the subsequent debate; summaries of protagonists on each side; the need to move beyond. Ironically, by continually stating how we must get past the vitriolic debate between supporters of Said and his detractors, Varisco tends to reproduce and reignite the very argument which he claims to navigate through. The number of examples Varisco gives to support his points throughout is impressive, but the constant repetition of *La problématique* slightly patronises the reader by suggesting they might not have understood previously what are perfectly clear points.

Varisco claims to use 'judicious satirical criticism' to interrogate Said.²² This amounts to the copious use of synthesised words and puns, starting with the title, *Said and the Unsaid*, and continuing with sentences such as 'he grew up in the literal Orient, at least the littoral Mediterranean portion.'²³ By the time we encounter 'a-meta-theoretical' and the 'dainty inferno-ization...of Dante', it becomes irritating, almost trivialising.²⁴ 'Satire' is a dangerous weapon to wield, indeed a two-edged sword, when it is not particularly funny. Other expressions are simply incomprehensible, such as 'antimetaphysical literary archaeology'.²⁵

If all of this suggests a book which is not very good, that is not the case, indeed Varisco's is the first book to bring together such a wealth of material.²⁶ Varisco starts with an interesting analysis of Said's personal choice of cover-picture, Gerome's *Le charmeur des serpents*, which shows a naked boy snake-charming for an assembled audience of elderly eastern men. Varisco points out the polemical use of this picture, the typical portrayal of Orientals as lascivious sexual deviants, demonstrating that Said is rhetoricising before a page has been turned. Varisco contrasts this with his own choice of cover-picture, Dinét's *Le charmeur de vipères*, a snake-charming picture which offers an alternative view of Orientals.²⁷ Of course, Said would say that Varisco's choice is also a stereotype of the mystical and exotic East.

Analysing Said's polemical style, Varisco makes the powerful point that Said uses vague language such as 'almost', 'more or less', 'mainly, or 'nearly' very regularly as rhetorical

²² Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. xi.

²³ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 37.

²⁴ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 255.

²⁵ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 253.

²⁶ D. Cannadine, 'Review', *Common Knowledge*, 15 (2009), p. 510. In University of Washington Press <https://www.washington.edu/uwpress/search/books/VARREC.html> (Accessed 5/3/16).

²⁷ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 24-7.

devices to avoid the need for precision and accuracy, and in doing so, appears to have proved points which, in fact, he has not.²⁸ Varisco's point about Said's use of language is also another example of his repetition, given that he makes the same, albeit very good, point on the previous page, and nearly fifty pages previously when he first describes Said's 'trope of the adverbial caveat.'²⁹

Said's three definitions of 'orientalising' are very effectively taken to task, showing how Said ensnares anyone commenting on the Orient as responsible for a discourse of domination used to justify imperialism.³⁰ Varisco uses a vast array of historiography to demonstrate this point, before bringing the argument together in his own summary to show how Said performs 'a post hoc sleight of hand' by assuming that the extent of rapacious western colonisation means 'orientalism as a specific and absolute discourse must exist', and therefore scholars of the East must be responsible for such discourse.³¹ As Varisco points out, Said avoids mentioning the long list of Orientalist academics who have long declared their antipathy to biased interpretations of the Orient.³² This is an example of one of Varisco's strengths, discussing what Said fails to say in his selective use of evidence;³³ another is his point that the very word 'Western' is related to the Arabic for 'strange', in one of many cases of 'reverse orientalism' which Said ignores.³⁴

Scattered throughout this analysis are examples of Said's lack of historical method. Varisco argues effectively that ancient Greece had no sense of themselves as 'Europeans', and that Persia did not represent an 'Orient', therefore accusations of the former 'othering' the latter cannot represent Western 'orientalising' and are anachronistic.³⁵ Varisco could have gone further and shown the extent to which Greek statuary was influenced by Egyptian art.³⁶ Such examples are a prelude to perhaps the best part of the book, where Varisco highlights Said's manifest historical errors across every period, referencing figures as diverse as Bernard of Clairvaux, to Elizabeth I and Napoleon.³⁷ Discussing the latter's campaign in Egypt, and the 'imagined' Orient that Said's literary analysis claims Napoleon's mind invented, an idea which Said derived from the 'relatively minor historical study' by Jean Thiry, Varisco

²⁸ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 100.

²⁹ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 56.

³⁰ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 41-56

³¹ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 54.

³² Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 41-44.

³³ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 73-78.

³⁴ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 67.

³⁵ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 63-6.

³⁶ Metropolitan Museum of Art <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/32.11.1/> (Accessed 4/3/16).

³⁷ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 83-125.

demonstrates how Said is more interested in a constructed Orient than he is with the real historical interplay between the French, English, and Ottoman presences in Egypt.³⁸ Varisco's grasp of the broad historiography here is seen in the footnotes, where he offers us three alternative studies of Napoleon's expedition from different points in the twentieth century.³⁹

Surprisingly, given his stated aim of 'strengthening' Said's work, Varisco's coverage of orientalising within the travel-literature genre is thin, particularly as post-colonialists have used this genre to show exactly the kind of orientalising Said proposes, as justification for imperialism, and for epistemological and territorial appropriation.⁴⁰ Although included in the bibliography, the index shows no entries for Nigel Leask, Ann Stoler, or Mary Pratt, all of whom have made significant contributions built on Said's work.⁴¹ Varisco's ambivalence towards Said is never really resolved, as demonstrated by his reviewers. Whereas one claims that Varisco 'attempts mightily to buoy up Said's sinking reputation',⁴² another, reproduced by the publisher, claims that 'this book will enrage Said's many admirers and win the applause of his many detractors'.⁴³

Unfortunately, the end is disappointing. 'Beyond the Binary', which should have offered the reader the much-heralded passage through the polarised response to Said, in fact simply repeats the problem. Varisco's conclusion is that 'the best way to battle misleading binary thinking is to get on with sound academic scholarship and spend less time rhetorically damming the binary itself'.⁴⁴ Yet condemning the binary is exactly what Varisco spends three hundred pages doing, and, as he states himself, academic scholarship has already moved on, has already accepted Varisco's self-evident conclusion.⁴⁵ Ultimately, Varisco fails in his ambitious objective of moving the debate 'beyond the binary', and perhaps actually reproduces it. This may explain the luke-warm reception from his reviewers and the relatively few citations the book has generated.⁴⁶ This is a pity because, as a reference-work on Said's *Orientalism*, this is the most complete book in its field.

³⁸ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 123-5.

³⁹ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 359, note 176.

⁴⁰ Varisco, *Unsaid*, pp. 224-30.

⁴¹ For example: M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (London, 1992); A.L. Stoler & F. Cooper., *Tensions of Empire* (Berkeley, CA., 1997), N., Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840: From an Antique Land* (Oxford, 2002).

⁴² Caschetta, 'Review', p. 78.

⁴³ Cannadine, 'Review', p. 510.

⁴⁴ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 303.

⁴⁵ Varisco, *Unsaid*, p. 301.

⁴⁶ Web of Science, 'cited references' <http://apps.webofknowledge.com/Search.do?product=UA&SID=Z15nyCFJaGG5E8AARN>

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