

An Invitation in the Form of a Polemic

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Reading the year's books in a given field amounts to reading the field. If this proposition is true, then 2012 surely marks the Year of Empire within eighteenth-century studies. Of the roughly sixty books we considered for this year's Kenshur Prize—the “we” being Scott Juengel, Dror Wahrman, and myself—nearly half explored the idea of empire in one form or another. (I counted.) Of the seven books we shortlisted for the prize, six of them concentrated on Europe and its colonies within a global perspective, dazzled by new and strange fancies and tickled by a thousand and one untold pleasures. If there emerged a repeated theme—a leitmotif among this chorus of voices—it is that the pressure distributed itself equally from the West to the East, that as the West colonized the East, so the East colonized the West.

One book, we felt, made this point with exceptional clarity and force. Srinivas Aravamudan's *Enlightenment Orientalism* opens with a blistering polemic, targeted at the familiar “rise of the novel” story but oriented, more broadly, at eighteenth-century studies itself. We have known for quite some time that the Whiggish view of the novel promoted by Ian Watt and his successors is myopic, built as it is on the brittle foundation of a scholarly tradition emphasizing the “great writers.” What Aravamudan demonstrates is that it is simultaneously solipsistic, subordinating “lesser” forms of fiction like the oriental tale in order to promote an armada of self-congratulatory “rise of” narratives—whether they be realism, bourgeois individualism, nationalism, Enlightenment scientism, or any of the other “-isms” we preserve and teach primarily because they are so teachable. “Novel” and “oriental tale” therefore stand, within this matrix, as code-words for any number of related binaries, like “reality” vs. “fantasy,” “responsibility” vs. “escapism,” or “reasoning” vs. “imagining,” as expressed in a chart (p. 20) destined to find its way onto innumerable graduate-course syllabi (including for my own courses).

Such binaries tantalize with their explanatory power, but they fundamentally misunderstand the tastes of the eighteenth-century reader, which were omnivorous and ultimately indiscriminating. As Aravamudan writes in a key passage:

This kind of generic differentiation is nothing more than the proverbial shell game, given that the novel and the oriental tale were trolling for the same readers, who consumed products in both genres with equal satisfaction. Readers could switch back and forth over an array of generic instantiations involving prose fiction: adventure tales, travel narratives, pseudobiographies, real and pretended histories, journalistic exposés, scandal chronicles, conduct manuals, moral tales, and political utopias. (20)

Like all good polemics, though, *Enlightenment Orientalism* is simultaneously an invitation. What I will take from the book is not necessarily its attack on teleology and binary thinking (anyone can do that), or even its demonstration of the cultural capital of the oriental tale within the eighteenth century (we already have fine accounts of that). Rather, what the book offers, like any good work of literary criticism, is the opportunity to see texts anew: to see the ending of Defoe's *Roxana* as a version of the Turkish spy narrative made popular by Giovanni Marana, or

the gypsy scene in *Tom Jones* as transcultural allegory in the mode of Manley's fictions, or Voltaire's *Micromégas* as transmogrified beast fable, or Lemuel Gulliver as a latter-day avatar of Sindbad. I came to these readings as a skeptic and confess that I remain not wholly persuaded by all of them. But I am grateful for the invitation to reimagine works I thought I had "solved," and to revisit assumptions I thought long settled.

One of the most powerful moments in *Enlightenment Orientalism* comes in its coda, on Benjamin and Joyce, during a reading of Molly Bloom's internal monologue on Sindbad. I quote:

Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailor and Whinbad the Whaler and Ninbad the Nailor and Finbad the Failer and Binbad the Bailer and Pinbad the Pailor and Minbad the Mailer and Hinbad the Hailer and Rinbad the Railer and Dinbad the Kailer and Vinbad the Quailer and Linbad the Yailer and Xinbad the Phthailer.

When?

Going to a dark bed there was a round square round Sindbad the Sailor roc's auk's egg in the night of the bed of all the auks of the rocs of Darkinbad the Brightdayler.

Where?

It is easy to see Molly Bloom as a modern (and therefore better) version of Clarissa Harlowe, or Lizzie Bennet, or Dorothea Brooke, because the teleological drift of realism teaches us that the epistolarity of Samuel Richardson gives way to the free indirect discourse of Austen, which in turn gives way to interior monologues of Joyce. But by Aravamudan's account, Molly Bloom is simultaneously a modern-day Scheherezade, whose silent effusion celebrates, rather than obscures, its allegiance to that form of oral storytelling thought long dead by Benjamin. The drift of the novel is therefore not so much relentlessly forward but, rather, back and forth, side to side, and up and down—so that the very notions of forwardness and backwardness can no longer be maintained.

As a scholar of the novel, I greet this conclusion with both dismay and relief. I say dismay because accepting this thesis is a grim prospect for those of us brought up not only on Watt and Auerbach, but also on Lukács and Bakhtin, whose efforts to cast the novel as synonymous with modernity seem less and less urgent. I say relief because this perhaps opens a different fate for the storyteller, left for dead in the final sentences of Benjamin's essay, beaten into extinction by the bully figure of the novel. As Benjamin describes the fate of the storyteller: "he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story."¹ I'd like to think that turning away from Benjamin's Romantic historicism, with its nostalgic portrait of a world long deceased, means revising our idea of the novel—and seeing it as healer, rather than as bully.

¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 108-09.