CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I

With the “decoding” of languages such as Sanskrit, Oriental wisdom became a complement to the vision of the Renaissance. No less a commentator than Victor Hugo notes in his *Journal* that Oriental literature had become, for superior souls, what Greek literature had been for the savant of the sixteenth century. Moreover, the Orient authorized the European observer to pose, from a position of prestige, the question of difference. Not only was it different from the unique model of Western culture, it was also the locus of a multitude of European aspirations. Friedrich Schlegel, in the *Athenaeum*, could suggest: “Im Orient müssen wir das höchste Romantische suchen.”

Both scholar-dilettantes and popular authors initially possessed a conception of the Orient generated from vulgarized texts. The body of scholarship fused images of grace or conceptions of love, both divine and mortal, with associations derived from medieval romances, travel literature, missionary accounts, universal mythology, and European Romanticism. The earliest knowledge that Europe possessed of India, its customs, philosophy, and religious affinities was transmitted by ancient Greek historians. Unfortunately, Alexander the Great, his associates and successors, like most Greeks of antiquity, took virtually no interest in “barbarian” languages.

Medieval travellers to Indian, Hindu or Muslim courts, for all their Christian bias, were the first Europeans to comment seriously on the languages and literature. These voyagers' intel-
lectual baggage was light, because their major preoccupations were of a more practical nature—the danger and necessities of life left them little time for disinterested observation and the acquisition of knowledge.

The Orient was emplotted by Europeans throughout the centuries in various forms. The medieval religious tradition portrayed it as a balmy garden. To the Crusaders, the Muslim Orient was a treacherous enemy. In Marco Polo’s account, the Orient was a marvelous land of wonders and enchantments, a land which would remain obscure to the Renaissance literati whose attention was fixed on Greece as the seat of ancient culture.

This “Orient,” however little explored and understood, provoked comparisons. Europe, compared with the perceived elegance and refinement of “antediluvian” Eastern civilizations, was at a definite disadvantage. The Orient thus provided a shield to protect satirical authors from strict censorship. Fiction with an Oriental allure presented, in the most piquant and prudent manner, conceptions which the author strove to render in an acceptable form. This satirical mode was followed at the end of the seventeenth century by the adventure novel, histoire galante, in which the Orient was a pretext for local color, a cover for subversion and a reservoir of forbidden pleasures.

As geographical space was investigated, so too the traces of early man were sought. The Orient, now thought to contain the secrets of the origin of the world and of religions, became a scientific domain. Montesquieu and many others studied its institutions. But toward what end? Paul Hazard described the eighteenth century as wishing to escape from itself and from the burden of a thousand years of culture. Indeed, the search for the exotic implied an escape from banal and prosaic reality. This trend continued into the nineteenth century when a disdain for the “civilized” world and the revalorization of nature as it was found in exotic landscapes provided new decors, noble in their simplicity and uncorrupted by modern artificiality (Rousseau, Gessner, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Ossian). This Geistesbewegung, if it may be so termed, coincided with the first appearance of Sanskrit texts on the European literary scene.
II

It has recently become fashionable to discuss the literature growing out of the European encounter with the Orient almost exclusively in terms of political domination. Modern academic sleuths, assuming a self-conscious posture as cultural radicals, are advised “cherchez l’impérialiste.” Present-day scholars, themselves weighed down by their ideological baggage, impose a systematized coherence on the past which presupposes the political experience of the twentieth century. Edward Said’s book, Orientalism, attempting as it does to view Western literary approaches to the East in terms of political discourse, is a case in point. The critical debate which he initiated centers on the following formula: The Orientalist’s scholarly frenzy was nothing but a deliberate attempt at cultural hegemony. However, Said’s fundamental premise, that Western writers, believing in the efficacy of their “imperial selves,”3 approached the Orient first as nationals and secondly as individuals,4 is highly questionable. Uninitiated readers may not recognize in such sweeping generalities a style which has come to characterize discussion of the scholarship and literature growing out of the European encounter with the Orient.

Said’s work, viewed as groundbreaking, is, in fact, the most recent avatar of this trend, which stands in sharp contrast to earlier scholarship in East-West cultural studies. The study of exoticism has long interested national literature scholars (Carré, Martino, Jourda, Bies, Dufrenoy, El Nouty,).5 In such works, the exotic functions, to cite Mario Praz, as “a sensual and artistic externalization” of the artist who “invests remote periods and distinct countries with the vibrations of his own senses and materializes them in his imagination.”6 As an alternative to exoticism, recent scholarship views East-West artistic representations as primarily a function of imperialist political ideology. Orientalism exhibits “a proclivity to divide, subdivide, and redivide its subject matter without ever changing its mind about the Orient as being the same, unchanging, uniform, and radically peculiar object.”7 As a “mode of apprehension and perception”,8 it operates as a “self-validating closed discourse which is highly resistant to internal and external criticism.”9
One of the problems with such criticism lies in its concept of the exotic's objectification of the “Other.” Unfortunately, the exotic, like art, does not present universal categories, but cultural categories that a given culture bestows upon objects that interest it and promise to nourish it. Western exoticism departs from the Greco-Roman and Judaic-Christian tradition in search of a new reality. By appropriating the accoutrements of fantasy, the exotic masks a quest involving the vital center of poetic feeling, and exhibits an artist’s compulsion to make a reality for himself. In this respect, exoticism functions as a myth.

However, in this process, the exotic effects a taxonomic shift; rather than celebrating the products of a foreign culture, it transforms that culture and its members into objects of art. This shift has prompted the critic of Orientalism, in his attempt to raise pertinent questions concerning race, sex, and hegemony, to view the exotic as an ideological artifact which the Orientalist collects and exhibits. As myth, the exotic mediates issues of race, eroticism, and power, although not in a clearly quantifiable fashion. Reduced to an artifact, the exotic becomes indistinguishable from racism. The problem with this critical equation of Orientalism is that the exotic’s transformation of an aestheticized object into a fetish is not the same process that leads to genocide.

This metaphorization of the exotic as racist and hegemonic informs the current criticism of Orientalism. Terrible simplificateurs judge exotic representations either as weapons of subversion and deliberate attempts at cultural hegemony (Said, Bernal), sexual displacement (Kabbani), or direct precursors of the worst abuses of the twentieth century. Even the highly readable masterpiece of this scholarly genre, Raymond Schwab’s La Renaissance orientale, draws a direct line from the early philologists to modern racists and anti-Semites. In Le Mythe aryen, Léon Poliakov identifies Germany’s Indomania with anti-Semitism. In a journalistic rewriting of world history, Amaury de Riencourt’s The Soul of India asserts that the initial Sanskrit studies eventually bore the bitter fruit of Nazi crimes against humanity. Even in an introduction to a reedition of Friedrich Schlegel’s Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier, a linguist has discovered the seeds of racism in early Indology.
One can be suspicious of the hidden agenda of this theoretical stance. The criticism of Orientalism is singularly uninterested in the language, character (genre) and reception, of the texts (when, if at all, texts enter into the discussion) that they deconstruct. The politics of Orientalism arbitrarily links a text with certain cultural practices; it “colonizes” a text from the past by means of present-age discourse. Although such criticism is often fascinating, it relies on the political tenor of the audience and on facile political analyses whose referents are unsubstantiated generalizations. I question the virile compulsion to view the West’s reception of the East solely in terms of possession, power, and control. Based, as it is, on a pessimistic reading of Foucault, the critics of Orientalism offer as an alternative to Orientalist discourse merely a different discourse incorporating another expression of power. Theoretically, it may be worthwhile to read a literary text in the light of historical events and see artistic endeavors as primarily implicated in power relations. However, in practice, the criticism of Orientalism is often unreflective, fragmentary, and anecdotal. The gravest criticism which can be leveled against this method is that it imposes an authorial intention upon the text, disregarding the testimony of a work’s language, reception, and character as narrative, poetry, translation, scholarship, or artistic performance. By consigning to a secondary position the work of individual artists, a text becomes a commentary on a political situation rather than an expression of the motivations and desires that inspire the individual artist or scholar.

However, I do not wish to assert that the literature arising out of the West’s encounter with the East was apolitical. Rather, it was quintessentially political in the sense that it articulated the Western writers’ political relation to their own society: their vision of themselves as individuals within that society and their sense of entitlement. The luxury of “finding oneself” in any culture other than one’s own presupposes certain prerogatives. There is a freedom of play involved in such aesthetic or spiritual journeys. The unreflective vanity of the metaphorical traveller allows him, figuratively, to journey away from home and still take with him the unacknowledged assumptions, not only of class and race, but ultimately of a secure social iden-
tity.10 These Western voyagers' metaphorical journeys East are necessarily weighed down by the baggage of their cultural and aesthetic tradition and prejudice. That humans are inextricably bound up in the entanglements of history is merely a banal assertion, if we do not examine how their prejudices initially open up a text, offering to readers points of identification and appeal.

The Western European travellers' lack of a valid wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein does not obscure the significant fact that these metaphorical journeys often masked battles with their own culture. By their reduction of the foreign culture to a "cause," these Western devotees express their overriding sense of self-worth. The great paradox of such figurative journeys is this: Those to whom the fruits of Western culture are most available are those who most readily reject this same culture, seeking rejuvenation in their encounter with the East. They are ever unconscious of the fact that the very aspects of their culture which they seem to despise, its unchallenged cultural and intellectual superiority, empowers them.11 In fact, it animates their endeavors.

Western culture's sophistication ensures a position of prestige and affords them the liberty to seek and pursue their need for compensatory spiritual and aesthetic discovery. Thus, educated and cultivated individuals, by means of a quasi-religious encounter with the Orient, separated themselves from the crowd. Their hubris consisted in their belief that they had tasted all that their own culture had to offer and saw themselves worthy of some superordinate fulfillment. The phantom India becomes, for the metaphorical traveller, an exotic brothel. It promises to fulfill desire and legitimize role-playing.

This evocative analogy does not suggest that the nineteenth-century European writer's quest Eastward in search of an aesthetic model was either vague or undefined. If fluctuated between contrasting modalities: Indian culture could be an ideal locus for Westerners pursuing inspiration and it rationalized a pessimistic apprehension of existence. Although European artists were primarily animated by the possibilities for positive inspiration, others flirted with the darker, and perhaps more seductive prospect, which was never absent from
their picture of India. The phantom India satisfied specific consequent demands of each modality.

A cogent example of this tension between humanism and pessimism which characterized the European reception of India can be seen in a curious literary vignette. A particularly beautiful poem, written in the seventh century A.D. by the poet Bhartrihari, was among the first Sanskrit poems published in a European language. First translated into Portuguese and then into Dutch, it appeared in Abraham Rogerius' *Open Deure tot het verborgen Heydendom* of 1651 and in the book's German translation of 1663. The German translation of Rogerius' work greatly impressed J. G. Herder, who refashioned the proverbs into didactic poems.

The poem reappeared in German literature in 1806. Before taking her own life, the Romantic poetess Karoline von Günderrode left it as her epitaph. Leaving behind an Indian apologia for suicide was a strange and unimaginative final statement. It was also indicative of the darker impulses at work in Germany's Indian Schwärmerei. The appropriation of this poem, first by Herder to herald the hoped for riches of Sanskrit literature, and then by Günderrode as an emblem of despair, is a macabre and fascinating example of the fruits born from the literary meeting of East and West. How could one poem offer to one writer an ideal of spiritual strength and to another a rationale for death? The answer resides less in Indian thought than in tendencies inherent in the individual artist's will.

III

The India which nineteenth-century European writers discovered was principally a phantom arising out of a confrontation with the self. If one did not lack imagination, "finding oneself" via India, indulgent as it may seem, addressed a multitude of aspirations and fantasies.

Individual artists entrenched in their own historical tradition, might have been tantalized by the clichés of the "exotic," but the literary creations arising out of their metaphorical journeys suggest just how much a product of their imagination this East really was. What did these writers seek? Wilhelm von Humboldt, while editing Goethe's correspondence (February 5,
1830), came across an error which he attributed to a scribe. He noted: "In einer Stelle, stehen Brahma und Roman. Was soll das sein?" Indeed, what did India mean to these artists? For Goethe, did Brahma enter into the fiction of the roman? We will never know.

One thing is, however, certain: Through the early rudimentary translations from the Sanskrit, India was emplotted by the West. By this I mean that incomplete projections from a variety of sources were given a voice defined through narrative, and received the authority of signification. India brought to the imagination new forms and a propitious framework for the presentation of new ideas that corresponded to dominant aspirations of the time. If artists took part in a pilgrimage to India in search of their particular goal, they went not as fanatics, but under the banner of science. They could profit from the contributions of science without adopting the inadequate scholarly apparatus that characterized early European Sanskrit scholarship.\textsuperscript{14}

IV

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a limited body of Sanskrit texts was already known in Europe. In 1785, Charles Wilkins published his translation of the Bhagavad-Gîtā, to be followed in 1787 by his translation of the Hitopadeśa. In addition to the publication of the Śākuntala in 1789, Sir William Jones’ translation of the Mānava Dharma Śāstra appeared in 1797. Meanwhile the French Bibliothèque Nationale (ci-devant Royale) had accumulated a store of Indian manuscripts that no one could read. In 1801–1802, Anquetil-Duperron published a Latin translation of Dara-Shikoh’s Persian version of the Upanishads, with the title Oupnek’hat. These works provoked lively interest.

The initial effect of Sanskrit literature on European audiences was tremendous. To study this Oriental renaissance would be a vast project doomed to only partial success at best. One must avoid the now-popular method of loose association, relying upon a pastiche of European literary and artistic creations. Examination of Western constructs with an oriental allure can present no cogent body of work by which one can examine the West’s encounter with the East. It is for this reason that I
have chosen to emphasize the particular in lieu of the general. For this purpose, a single and paradigmatic “Eastern” text and its dissemination through translation, criticism, and adaptation has been chosen. This grounding in the specificity of a given text shall form the basis for a larger discussion of the religious, philosophical, and aesthetic dynamics of Indian exoticism. When the Westerner comes in contact with a serious Eastern work of art, is not his use, appropriation, and distortion of this product a more significant index of the phenomena of Orientalism than a critique of his own artistic creation?

Sir William Jones’ English translation of Kālidāsa’s Abhijñānaśākuntala (1789)\(^{15}\) had an immediate and enthusiastic reception in Germany, France and Italy, and announced the birth of Orientalism. It was the first complete text\(^{16}\) translated from the Sanskrit without a Persian intermediary, and the first Sanskrit drama available to the European reader. Jones’ pioneering work inspired other scholars also to translate this text.

To a great extent, the first translations of Sanskrit texts were so naively uninformed by linguistic analysis as to encourage a free play of the translator’s creative imagination. This issue of free play shall be of central concern to our study. The discovery of Sanskrit literature, exemplified by the reception of the Śākuntala, provided translators with a screen upon which to both project and conceal specific cultural, psychological, and religious concerns. With so few pedagogical tools available, it was difficult to assimilate in any more than a rudimentary fashion this new and different literature. Later linguistic refinement overcame the distortions made by the first generation of Sanskritists and led to the loss of the “free play” which had characterized the Western appropriation of Indian thought. Whereas in the initial translations, the narrative process opened unlimited possibilities, with later perfection of linguistic tools, Sanskrit became an object of study. It gained a new authority as technology and lost the authority of multifaceted signification. Once the hidden significations were severed from the language, the multiple voices of the narrative were silenced. We will, therefore, examine the initial translations. Through their many voices and their inherent distortion, they shed considerable light on the nineteenth-century European reception
of Indian culture. How much of their distortion was part of an honest effort, given the limited knowledge of Sanskrit and the theories and ideologies of the time about Indian culture, to translate what they thought was in the text? By focusing our analysis upon the reception of a particular text, it is my hope to elucidate both the dynamics of this paradigmatic instance of East-West literary reception and the distortion of the Indian reality which resulted.