**Journal of American Studies of Turkey**
**9 (1999) : 95-96.**

# Book Review

*American Literature and Orientalism*, by Marwan Obeidat, 1998, 147 pages. Available from Gerd Winkelhane Publishers, Klaus Schwarz Verlag GmbH, Postfach 4102 40 D-12112 Berlin, Germany.

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I must confess that I find this book very difficult to review. Its subject—how the Muslim World, or the Middle East has been represented (or mis-represented) in a series of American literary texts, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day—is an important one. However, it soon becomes clear that the author's main purpose is to expose "traditional prejudice[s] and misinformation" about the Muslim World—a methodology that becomes very repetitive. In Chapter I, for instance, we learn that most Americans' views of the Muslim East were fueled by prejudice (34); the second chapter censures Washington Irvingfor his "shallow and distorted" view of Islam (63); Ralph Waldo Emerson apparently "preferred to remain Occidental," even though his view of the Orient was "lightly prejudice-colored" (82), whatever that means. In a postmodern world, where such distinctions as Occident and Orient are continually subject to reassessment and redefinition, I do believe that it is important for critics to maintain a sense of "in-betweenness," operating within what Homi Bhabha_terms a "Third Space" (24).

The book begins with a chapter on the cultural and historical background to the topic. This includes examples of Orientalist literature extending as far back as the Crusades, and including Oriental tales originally published in American literary magazines in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The second chapter focuses specifically on Washington Irving's view of Muslim Spain, as represented in works such as the *Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada* (1829), and *The Alhambra* (1832). Obeidat characterizes Irving as a romantic who sacrifices historical accuracy in the search for "exotic detail" about the Moorish people (58). There is nothing inherently wrong with this (did Sir Walter Scott stick to the truth about Scottish history in *Ivanhoe* [1825] ?); but it does render Irving an "unreliable source" for anyone interested in Islamic history and character (58). The third chapter concentrates on Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Obeidat believes was "not motivated by any kind of bias against the Orient" (72). It is clear that Emerson read a great deal of Oriental literature, including Persian and Sufi poetry: Obeidat commends him for his "profound interest in, and fascination for, the Sufi ideals" (82), even if his work contains "certain simplifications of Islam and the Prophet" (79). The final chapter comprises a survey of American travelers' views of the

Levant; there are some familiar stereotypes here, such as the representation of Constantinople as dream-like, almost seductive in its beauty, Turkish women as objects of romantic curiosity (full of Eastern promise?), and their male counterparts as kind, yet strangely seductive with their low, broad brows and black mustaches. Obeidat is certainly thorough in his analysis—over twenty works are cited, including those of Herman Melville *(Clarel_* [1876]) and Mark Twain *(The Innocents Abroad* [1869]). His conclusion, however, is predictable: "few of the travel accounts acquainted the reader with real Arab, and thus Muslim manners" (123) (One might be prompted to ask two questions here: should the people in such a culturally diverse city as Constantinople (İstanbul) be characterized as Arabs; and what are "real Arabs" anyway?). The concluding chapter brings the story up to date, with extracts from recent Orientalist novels, including Leon Uris's *The Haj_* (1984).

Whilst it certainly makes a welcome change to read a book by a non-western critic, whose experiences have been shaped by postgraduate study in America, and work in the United Arab Emirates, I would have appreciated a less confrontational approach to the topic. There is certainly "misunderstanding and anxiety," when the "Muslim Orient" and "American culture" confront one another (131); but such misunderstandings can be best overcome through recognition, and subsequent negotiation of cultural differences. Nonetheless, the book contains a wealth of extracts, both familiar and unfamiliar, and contains an extensive bibliography. For this reason at least, it should prove valuable to anyone interested in literature about the Orient.

## Works Cited


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