Dissertation Abstract
“Populous Solitudes: The Orient and the Young Romantics”

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My project builds itself around a fairly simple question: why do the Young Romantics—Byron, Shelley, Keats—stage so much of their poetry in the Orient or Orientalized settings? In its most basic form, the answer is also simple: because the Orient, for the Young Romantics, was a historically privileged site in which to explore the limits, resources and contradictions of the self, of the self’s relations to others, and of the self’s relation to itself. Under a certain reading, this reduction of the Orient to that most private of spheres is Orientalism by definition. The Orientalist, says Edward Said, sees “the Orient not as it is, but the Orient as it has been Orientalized.” The Orientalist sees, in other words, only himself, a projection of his own fears, desires and ideals thrown against the blank screen of the Other. And indeed, my dissertation shares Said’s axiom that Orientalism is a kind of solipsism, one easily integrated into imperialist ideology. My project also claims, however, that the Young Romantics themselves understand “the Orient” as a colonialist fantasy, and systematically employ a complex poetics to critique it. In this way uncovering Orientalism’s unseemly truths coincides, for the Young Romantics, with the critical task of problematizing the self’s autonomy and pulling up entrenched traditions such as monarchy, empire, and patriarchy.

Their project is grown from long and tangled roots that reach deep into the history of philosophy, literature, and politics, and thus my introduction traces the twined genealogies of solipsism and Orientalism through the eighteenth century and early Romanticism. Beginning with readings of key thinkers of solitude and solipsism such as Wordsworth and Berkeley, my introductory chapter moves on to examine Montesquieu’s figure of the “Oriental” despot. The despotic state, firmly determined by an unchanging “Asiatic” climate, is defined solely in terms of the solipsistic whims of the Oriental despot: “referring everything to himself exclusively, [he] reduces the state to its capitol, the capitol to its court, and the court to his person alone.” Indeed, I later argue that the poems *Lara* (1814) and *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) make the case that such despotism defines not the Orient as such, but the European Orientalist. The remainder of my introduction argues for the centrality of the *étranger* and “foreign will” in the political thought of Rousseau, an indispensible model for thinking through the Young Romantics’ emancipatory political projects.

My first body chapter makes the long overdue case that Robert Southey’s Orientalist epics are the key influences on the Young Romantics’ poetic engagements with the East. Beginning from the unconventional premise that Southey is every bit as philosophically astute as his fellow First Generation Romantics, my chapter argues that he applies a very “High Romantic” sensibility to the more overtly empirical studies of the Orient from which he gathered his “facts.” His acumen—particularly his complex, if problematic, reading of fatalism, what he calls “the vice of the East”—reveals for the first time in the Romantic age that writing about “the East” was at once an empirically, epistemologically, aesthetically, and ethically fraught process. One could never know the extent to which one’s Orientalist sources were reliable, or exactly what sorts of information constituted “knowledge” of a foreign culture in the first place. Even more difficult was the task of finding the proper form in which to best convey the “pure truth, pure language, and pure manners,” as Southey put it, of a foreign culture. It has become common to read the copious footnotes of *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) as Southey’s clumsy attempt to qualify these questions and situate himself with respect to a particular reading of Islam. My chapter, by contrast, proposes that those footnotes, and hence Southey’s entire Orientalist project, cannot be understood outside of a careful reading of *Thalaba*’s convoluted verse, the portion of the poem that critics counterintuitively overlook. Specifically, I argue that Southey’s epic self-consciously borrows and distances itself from three versions of “Islamic” or “Eastern” writing: the arabesque, the Koran, and the oft-intoned “Book of Fate.” This textual dialectic of imitation and distanciation constitutes Southey’s conflicted brand of Orientalism, one which the Young Romantics subsequently inherit and critique.

“Byron’s Lament: *Lara* and the Specter of Orientalism,” my second chapter, reads Byron’s oblique, unpopular, final “Eastern” tale as an acute critique of Orientalism, both textual and political. The poem concerns the Byronic Lara, who returns to his Spanish home from years of unnamed Oriental travels. My reading focuses on Lara’s hidden “wound,” a recurring trauma that no “glance could well reveal, or accent breathe,” and argues that that psychic wound is complexly tied to the “wondrous wilds, and deserts vast, / In those far lands

where he had wander'd lone." That is, Lara's past trauma is deeply connected to the Orient, both via past fact and productive fantasy. After his death Lara's trauma becomes "some phantom's wound," an open fantasmatic sore that Kaled, Lara's gender-bending Eastern page, can never properly stanch. My chapter argues that such a self-perpetuating, phantom wound—which haunts the Western Lara and Eastern Kaled, and directly causes the poem's doomed and bloody peasant rebellion—is in fact constitutive of Orientalism itself. This fantasmatic projection of the East is what I call the Spectral Orient. With that concept *Lara* initiates a subtle critique of the Orientalism practiced in not only Southey and in eighteenth-century works such as William Beckford's *Vathek*, but also in Byron's own earlier Eastern tales, of which *Lara* is a rewriting.

Though largely unappreciated in Byron's time, *Lara* was, suggestively, Shelley's early favorite of Byron's poems, particularly as he composed *Alastor* in 1816. In the vein of my reading of *Lara*, Chapter Three ("The Spirit of Oriental Solitude") opens with the argument that both *Alastor*'s questing Poet and its unreliable Narrator are particular kinds of Orientalists, and that the poem as a whole works to undermine their authority. That Orientalism, further, is born of a kind of solitude that closes itself off from authentic, ethical interaction with others—in the Poet's case, from the "Arab maiden" who brings him food. That is, his (Orientalizing) solitude forecloses him from one of Shelley's most crucial and vexed concepts, love. The second half of the chapter extends and complicates this argument through an analysis of Shelley's late lyric *Epipsychidion*, making the case that the poem employs a Lucretian materialism to unmoor both Platonic idealism and High Romantic notions of unity. As in *Alastor*, the drive to such unity and ideality, even if propelled by love, bears the mark of despotism.

Building upon these critiques of imperialism, Chapter Four, "'The Great Sandy Desert of Politics': The Orient and Solitude in *The Revolt of Islam* (1818)," addresses a question that has plagued critics for two hundred years: why does *The Revolt* take place in "Constantinople and modern Greece" if it depicts "such a revolution as might be supposed to take place in an European nation"? I answer that the poem engages with a European political imaginary that is based in particular Orientalist notions, principally that of the Oriental despot. It undoes the binary between the East and the West in a far more thorough way than critics have given credit for, and then proceeds to confront European ideology on its proper plane: the level of the political imaginary. This critique happens not only via the poem's overtly allegorical treatment of "Constantinople"—Shelley all but dares us to find fault with its "manners," as though we were reading Southey's footnoted epics—but also through its pervasive critique of solipsism. Solipsism becomes in *The Revolt* not merely constitutive of Orientalism, but of European ideology far more generally. *The Revolt*'s Jacobin protagonists Laon and Laone (an anagram for the pregnant term *alone*) become *polis*-founding *ètrangers* in a very Rousseauian sense, cultivating their solitude to break the multitude out of their despotic solipsism. Their failure to satisfyingly do so, however, arises from a fundamental symmetry between the poem's two most "Oriental" tropes: the solipsistic Oriental Despot, and a recombinant poetics, the principle image of which is stereotypically Eastern: the revivifying whirlwind in the desert. These two figures—the Oriental despot and the poetic desert—are problematically interconnected, and *The Revolt* does a great deal of work to de-Orientalize them, with some success. That de-Orientalizing process is akin to the poetic one, and the persistent "return of repressed" Orientalism, because it is solipsistic and ego-driven, is shown to be akin to despotism itself. The poem's interminable—and perhaps impossible—critique of Orientalism is, in other words, directly thematized in the struggle between revolutionary poetics and despotic oppression. The poem, however, fails to entirely uncouple the two, and that is the source of *The Revolt*'s failure to imagine a lasting revolution.

My project's final chapter, "'Unperplexing Bliss': the Orient in Keats's Poetics," brings the project's investigation of solitude and Orientalism into the realm of consumerism. There I argue that the market discourse of Orientalism that Keats's critics and friends haphazardly associated with his poetic style comes to typify his understanding of Orientalism. In late works such as his 1820 romance *Lamia*, Orientalism is figured as a sort of discursive entanglement. It is a kind of "rhetorical luxuriance" which, given the poem's emphasis on "interwreathing" and entanglement, cannot be coherently "unperplexed" from the other discourses and thematics at play in Keats's work, just as the character Lamia—the poem's figure for poetry—fails to "unperplex bliss from its neighbor pain." That failure to unperplex one thing from another is not merely a principle trope of *Lamia*, but is for Keats a fundamental aspect of poetry, market ideology and Orientalism. These three factors, each of which is duly entangled with each of the others, meet in a puzzle hitherto unaddressed in *Lamia*'s critical literature: that is, the problem of "a few Persian mutes" who "were seen about the markets" of Corinth. Here Orientalism, in the guise of the Persian mutes, guards solitude.