

Book Reviews

David LeHardy Sweet. *Avant-Garde Orientalism: The Eastern "Other" in Twentieth-Century Travel Narrative and Poetry*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. xii, 318. US\$89.

In *Avant-Garde Orientalism: The Eastern "Other" in Twentieth-Century Travel Narrative and Poetry*, David LeHardy Sweet examines avant-gardist travel writing on Africa and Asia by authors such as Jean Genet, André Gide, and William S. Burroughs. Sweet argues that while these travel writers often reproduce the exoticizing and racializing imperatives of the colonialist imaginary, they do so in an avant-gardist form that, because it challenges literary conventions, ultimately undermines the stability and authority of orientalist discourse. "As these forms of avant-garde critique, postmodern play, and carnivalesque hybridization inflect the genre of travel writing," Sweet writes, "it is fair to say that an alternative mode of postcolonial hybridization occurs *avant-la-lettre*, in which the colonialist discourse of orientalism is also subjected to a critique—either explicitly or as parody—by the Avant-garde" (59). In my view, the most salient aspect of Sweet's new book is its intervention into postcolonial theory.

According to Sweet, the still academically dominant mode of postcolonial theory, which he identifies as "Derridean," i.e., poststructuralist, unwittingly reproduces a static concept of the Other that formally parallels the monolithic fantasy of the Other in orientalist discourse. Orientalist discourse conceptualizes the Other as the absolute Other of the Western subject; the poststructuralist critique of orientalism presents the Other as "an absolute discursive Other" (40). Moreover, Sweet argues that the "Derridean inflection" (37) compelled postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha to reaffirm the centrality of Western knowledge practices. The recognition by such critics that Western power and knowledge practices had led to the construction and reproduction of the fantasy of the orientalist Other required (and justified) a return to Western philosophical and theoretical premises so as to deconstruct their racializing and colonialist logic. As a consequence of its admirable effort to reexamine the West's "own theoretical assumptions and priorities" (40), the Derridean school of postcolonialism ended up prizing the very knowledge traditions it had identified as the historical source of orientalism. Sweet argues that postcolonial theory needs to find other ways to critique and resist oriental-

ist discourse that neither culminate in absolute alterity nor reify Western knowledge practices.

Sweet's corrective is to turn to fiction, specifically travel fiction of a kind that he identifies as *avant-gardist*. *Avant-garde* travel writing challenges orientalist discourse through its experimental and unconventional form, which, as Sweet contends, speaks against the presumed veracity and objectivity of orientalist knowledge and power. "While much conventional travel writing is accused of perpetuating colonialist or at least exoticist assumptions," Sweet explains, *avant-gardist* travel texts, formally speaking, "veer towards overturning those assumptions" (53). Sweet goes so far as to claim that these travel writings can at times prove more effective than postcolonial critique because they work "by stealth and disguise to unleash a kind of generalized laughter" at orientalist assumptions (59). Fictional strategies, like parody, counter orientalism by showcasing its nonsensical nature, whereas postcolonial theory always risks aggrandizing orientalism through the very operation of critique. While critique takes orientalism too seriously, fiction knows it to be a fantasy ripe for parody.

Given that Sweet's argument depends on the concept of the *avant-garde*, his rather thin definition of the term is vexing. In the introduction, Sweet quickly scans, in one paragraph, possible definitions of the term; these include the "classic" *avant-garde*—the movements in the arts in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, for example—as well as "certain post-1960s, postmodern examples" (8). Sweet's theory needs a clearer line of demarcation between *avant-gardism* and conventional texts in order to distinguish those travel writers whose literary forms contest orientalism from those who merely confirm it. The closest Sweet comes to a definition of *avant-garde* travel writing is his claim that such writing is marked by "a kind of standard deviation from the norms of orientalist procedure" (8), but his refusal to specify what counts as "standard deviation" leaves his definition open to the charge of arbitrariness. However, Sweet celebrates the openness of his definition, calling it a "free-form hermeneutic investigation" that does not aim to "prove a particular ideological point, but to read broadly and to make connections not previously considered" (17). Indeed, Sweet notes that he is "engaged in a species of critical tourism with little pretense to the assumed expertise of the orientalist or area-studies specialist, but with what [he] hope[s] will prove a considerable interpretive fortitude in keeping with the tradition of comparative study" (17). But what is needed, surely, is something more than a cheery eclecticism based on broad reading and the illumination of suprising connections. Moreover, Sweet's critique of postcolonial theory's obsession with Western concepts might well be applied to Sweet's mobilization of the *avant-*

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garde, which is, of course, also a Western conceptual construct. But these weaknesses pale in comparison to the force of Sweet's critique of postcolonial theory and the care and exacting quality of his readings of his select authors. Sweet's study enacts a critical resistance that challenges both the orientalist concept of the Other as well as its poststructuralist critique. Sweet's book calls for a re-theorization of avant-gardism and a critical interrogation of the ideological imperatives of postcolonial theory's poststructuralist legacies.

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