

## Kyoko Yoshida (Japan)

### Disorientalism

*The book is what is real.*

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night*

#### I.

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade," the narrator claims that he has found a text called "Isitsöornot" which tells the true fate of our beloved, resourceful storyteller Scheherazade. According to Poe's source, on the 1,002<sup>nd</sup> night Scheherazade begins to relate a neglected episode of Sinbad the Sailor. In his last voyage, Sinbad encounters a giant passenger steamboat, and takes off to circumnavigate the globe. Sinbad visits a coral reef, a petrified forest in Texas, the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, and encounters a lava-gushing volcanic eruption whose ashes darken the sunlight. Finally he arrives in England, a nation of "most powerful magicians," where steam locomotives rush across the land, incubators ("hen[s] without feathers") produce hundreds of chicks everyday, the automaton chess-player and the computing machine beat the wisest of the nation, and the letterpress can print thousands of copies of the *Koran* in an hour. Scheherazade's list seems endless—the catalogue of the latest physical and astrological discoveries and cutting-edge technologies of late nineteenth-century England disturbs the King so much that he interrupts Scheherazade. The stories are so preposterous and outrageous, he can't stand any more of her lies and he decides Scheherazade is to be throttled the morning after.

The moral of this ironic parable is two-fold: (1) the historical facts sound too fantastic and bizarre; the reality is far more difficult to swallow than the fantasy; (2) the truth is often told in the form of apocrypha; and a text may metamorphose into apocrypha when it travels across borders and time. Poe's story is apocryphal in a double sense: Scheherazade's anachronistic narrative of Western technology that the King finds bogus, and the transcultural adaptation of "Isitsöornot" by Poe's narrator.

#### II.

The incredible comes true in the age of information technology and global terrors. In both cases, the realm of the real seems to be expanding every minute while our imagination, both collective and private, steadily dwindles, becoming compartmentalized. Poe's tale suggests pushing the limit of our imagination is as big a challenge as crossing borders between nation states, or the Orient and the Occident. Today when dealing with the fantastic, the writer and the reader are playing catch on the cliff—the two have different backgrounds, different ideas of the fantastic, different authorities in relation to the particular text, namely authorship and

the right to [mis]interpret—and one might well throw a ball to the other's pit, assuming it'd be a perfectly safe catch.

Here, following Poe's spirit of apocryphal tales, I would like to present my tenet as a pseudo-manifesto related to the kind of the fantastic I have in mind, namely Disorientalism. Recent literary scholarship continuously reveals that even the most sophisticated readers, including the admirable Edward Said, cannot totally liberate themselves from the mindset of Orientalism—so why not further complicate the game by actively and accidentally *dis*-orienting the reader?

### III. Disorientalist Manifesto

My dear audience, be aware—if you carelessly celebrate this assembly of writers from around the world, the alternative realities of the Orient, the "rich oral traditions" of the third world, the emergence of new hyphenated voices in American Literature, and the cohabitation of different cultures in America and the rest of the world, you may trick yourselves and become *dis*-oriented without your knowing it.

Hyphenated writers, postcolonial writers, be aware—your worthy efforts to recover your history in counter-narratives, to make use of your people's narratives, may only be taken into the larger efforts of the dominant power to rationalize Others by consuming your narratives as amazing but safe exotica.

Disorient your bona-fide readers with false promises of the authentic experience, anachronism, pan-ethnic settings, arbitrary foreign descriptions, and faux exoticism. Mimic, not the Occident, but the Orient, because we cannot naturally *be* Orientals any more, for we *become* one only through learning and imitating. Guide your good American readers westward because after all, that's the right way to the East.

People travel east and west. We sail over roaring billows to the rim of the western horizon where the burning sun sets and the seething saltwater thunders down into the void with dense clouds of steam. We trot over the gentle slopes, counting dozing sheep, to the edge of the eroded eastern wall pierced by the acute steel-blue moon. People travel to outer space. People play golf on the moon. People go north and south. None of them has any purpose. Everybody wants to see the Eiffel Tower, though we know how it looks. We are anxious to check the eight corners of the world. Yesterday Jerusalem, today Tunis, tomorrow Disneyland.

Goethe said—he said everything—that the more we travel, the more stupid we become. These are not his exact words. I like to think Goethe meant that as we travel we lose our intellect and memory. The ability to think critically and the capacity to cherish one's past. The idea that one

gains deeper insight by traveling to other parts of the planet is dangerous. The more we see, the blinder we become. The more excitement we seek, the more bored and boring we grow. The longer we travel, the longer we stop thinking. In the end we must keep traveling constantly to fill up the increasing void in our minds. No matter how fluent we are in foreign languages, no matter how long we stay in a foreign land, and no matter where we were born and raised, we cannot avoid being clueless tourists. As we travel east and west, our dead brain cells scatter right and left from our ear canals. The dead brain cells look, smell and taste like rotten tofu—both are flabby, spongy, high-protein, organic. Birds and squirrels follow and eat the droppings. And that's how we all get completely lost in the Black Forest of daydreaming. Which way is east? Which is west? Night falls; we get continue to get lost in our nightmares. And we ask each other, "Isitsöornot?"

Welcome to the Land of Disorient.

#### IV.

In Kajii Motojiro's very short story, "Lemon" (1925), an impoverished narrator roaming about Kyoto leaves a lemon in a bookstore, fantasizing it would blow up the whole building. Imagination is the only weapon the worn-out narrator has against overbearing reality:

Sometimes, as I walked along those streets, I tried to imagine that I had escaped from Kyoto to a faraway city where no one knew me.... If I wished hard enough, I felt, I could transform this place.... As the images took hold, I began to tint them one by one with the colors of my mind, until they could easily be superimposed on my dilapidated surroundings. Then and only then could I taste the joy of losing sight of my real self.

This cityscape is real and imaginary at the same time, as expressed in Gérard de Nerval's paradoxical conviction about the power of imagination: "Whatever the case, I believe that the human imagination has invented nothing which is not true, in this world or in others, and I could not doubt what I had so distinctly." Nerval's statement reflects Poe's thesis, "The mind of man can imagine nothing which has not really existed." "Dream *is* the real," writes Edogawa Rampo, another follower of Poe, whose penname, almost homophonous to Poe's, literally means "*flânerie* along the Edo River" in Japanese.

The synthetic cityscape in the Land of Disorient is a hybrid zone where the travelogue and the dystopian topography intermingle. It is not a mimesis of an actual city, but a reflection upon one's cerebral cortex projected by a narration: the lines on the cerebrum are the lines of the text, and lines and paragraphs become the passages—of Kyoto, Xian, Baghdad, or Iowa City.

Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as the zone of "hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event." It is a temporary yet intense moment like a trance that lasts only as long as the hesitation is sustained. "At the story's end, the reader makes a decision ... he opts for one solution or the other [choosing either the uncanny (the supernatural explained) or the marvelous (the supernatural accepted)], and thereby emerges from the fantastic.... The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment." If the Land of Disorient is a hybrid cityscape located on the frontier between reality and the imaginary, the cityscape becomes the subject of hesitation; therefore, the cityscape *is* the fantastic.

Yet everything seems, sounds, and smells so real in the impossible borderland of the fantastic, for it is this realness that makes us hesitate, despite the laws of physics to which we subscribe. Our favorite vindication of antirealist modes of writing is, "Writers write the truth, not the facts." To tell the *truth*, the Truth does not intrigue me as much as the Real. It is like when your body reacts to a nightmare and you know damn well it's just a dream.... The figurative language, the timbers that construct a Disorientalist cityscape, operate in this borderland—it embraces both the real and the fantastic, making the familiar strange and vice versa. Coleridge was definitely pursuing the real, not the truth, when he was desperately trying to rebuild the city of Xanadu.