



Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siecle

Chris Bongie

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This book focuses on the literature of exoticism at the turn of the last century and how it foreshadows our own fin de siecle. Earlier writers of exoticism had turned away from the West and its modernity, rejecting the social changes caused by industrialization and displacing onto 'savage' or 'primitive' cultures their aspirations for political freedom. By the turn of the century, however, European nations had reduced vast areas of the globe to colonial status: this global exportation of Western cultural norms and economic systems had a critical effect on the literature of exoticism. In concentrating on writers from the age of the New Imperialism (1880-1920), this book reveals an important contradiction at the heart of the exoticist impulse: the very expansion that enabled European writers to go in search of exotic Others ensured the eventual disappearance of the exotic. Turn-of-the-century writers of exoticism thus give voice to a deep nostalgia both for the values supposedly lost to the West in its process of modernization and for those once exotic places in which they found, with increasing disappointment, not pristine innocence but merely the traces of their own culture. The author concentrates on four writers - Jules Verne, Pierre Loti, Victor Segalen, and Joseph Conrad - although he touches on a number of other writers, and even painters, like Paul Gauguin. The works of these four writers foreground attitudes and assumptions useful for understanding a wide array of phenomena: an examination of these works shows how nostalgia for a cultural Other was built into the intellectual configuration of modernism, throws light on the early history of anthropology, and helps us understand features of our own cultural formation that are becoming increasingly important in today's global village. Making an explicit link between turn-of-the-century exoticism and the present day, the book concludes with a critical assessment of Pier Paolo Pasolini's neo-exoticist attachment to a supposedly revolutionary Third World in his poetry and literary criticism. The book's critical stance is noteworthy, drawing its basic assumptions from pensiero debole, the 'weak thought' of the contemporary Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, whose poststructuralist theories are only now becoming known in the United States. 'Weak thought' seeks to supersede outmoded, metaphysical categories of thought, not by replacing them with something new, but by an elegaic, recollective, and rhetorical dwelling within those categories. The author also makes creative use of narrative theory, and draws on the recent 'new historicism', reading literary texts to excellent effect against the historical events that made them possible.<

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