In January of 2000, during that coveted two-week period between the end of the MLA convention and the beginning of spring term, I began working in earnest on a teaching anthology called *Three Oriental Tales*. The proposal for this volume had grown out of my own teaching needs, as I found myself developing new courses with titles like British Literature and Empire, British Literature in Global Context, and British Romanticism and Imperial Culture. I had long taught William Beckford’s *Vathek* in various incarnations of a course on the Gothic and Romantic novel, and this had given me a chance to introduce students to Orientalism and its critique. By the 1990s, however, especially in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, I found myself wanting to provide much more in the way of context for *Vathek*. Orientalist writings from periodicals like the *Spectator*, the *Rambler*, and Goldsmith’s “Chinese Letters” series from the *World* would give students a sense of how broadly eighteenth-century British culture became permeated with “Oriental” references, fantasies, and furniture; alternative Orientalist fictions, especially by woman writers, would demonstrate the multiple literary and ideological uses to which this material might be put. At least one Oriental tale in verse from my primary field, the Romantic era, could serve to show how the energies of Orientalist fiction passed from prose to poetic forms in the early nineteenth century. Since there had never been a single volume featuring anything like this range of materials, I decided to propose my own, and so was born *Three Oriental Tales*, with *Vathek*, Sheridan’s *History of Nourjahad*, and Byron’s *The Giaour*, as well as Maria Edgeworth’s “Murad the Unlucky” and a number of shorter works. With some due skepticism regarding the bottom line, the proposal was accepted for Houghton Mifflin’s British “New Riversides” series, just then getting underway.
For all the usual reasons, work on the volume did not go nearly as quickly as I’d hoped, which put me in an awkward position with the series editor, who happened to be myself. However, by late spring of 2001 the manuscript was finally ready to go into copyediting, ensuring that it would be out in time for the MLA convention that year and for my own undergraduate seminar on British Literature and Empire scheduled for Spring 2002. When the copyedited manuscript went to the typesetters on August 14, I had no way of knowing that less than a month later an event would occur that would make half-forgotten works of literary Orientalism live in a new way for my students. We can, and perhaps we should, continue to argue about how much and just what really changed on September 11, 2001. But there can be no argument that the conditions for teaching Orientalism changed significantly, and perhaps permanently.

Over the first forty-eight hours or so after the four passenger planes had been transformed into fuel-air bombs, it seemed that the old binaries—East and West, fanatic and secular, Islam and, what, the “free world,” Christendom?—were destined to become reasserted as simplistically as ever before. Television commentators began speaking without qualification of a “clash between civilizations”; a radio commentator—on public radio—confessed to wanting to see “the whole Middle East in flames,” as though it were one undifferentiated, anti-Western, fanatically Muslim East; Sikhs became targets because their turbans marked them as the stereotypical Oriental Other. Binary thinking was not limited to pro-American zealots. On the day of the suicide bombings, a colleague of mine who is from India worried out loud, as we all gathered in the hall to try to begin making sense of the overwhelming events, that we would soon witness massive mob violence across America amounting to the wholesale “ethnic cleansing” of Muslims. Thousands of Muslims were indeed murdered over the next twelve months in violent mob actions—in India.¹

In the United States, anti-Muslim hate crimes indeed rose, but not as dramatically as many of us had feared and with nothing like the homicidal mass hysteria my colleague had imagined. Our born-again, conspicuously Texan president surprised us by attending services at a mosque and declaring Islam a religion of peace; copies of the Koran flew off of bookstore shelves across the country; and public and private schools, churches, and television and radio interview programs invited Muslim scholars, clerics, or just neighbors to talk about their traditions and their faith. Virtually every presenter I heard or read about began by cautioning against entertaining any monolithic conception of Islam or of the Islamic world and, by extension, against deploying any simplistic East/West opposition. The distinctions—among various Islamic traditions, among different Islamic states and groups, among
a variety of political positions associated with Islam—pointed up by one presenter, commentator, or editorialist after another soon became a staple of the daily news, as the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, begun on October 7, rapidly progressed. The Muslim, largely non-Pashtun militias of the Northern Alliance, as well as the Muslim state of Pakistan, had suddenly become U.S. allies. Turkish soldiers would be stationed in Kabul by February of the next year, and take control of the International Security Assistance Force—and the Kabul airfield—by June. The most casual reader or viewer of the news couldn’t fail to become aware that some Muslim groups were no more fond of Taliban-style theocracy than any Western liberal democrat, that some Muslims lived under a rigorously secularist government, that Osama bin Laden did not typify Islam any more than Jerry Falwell did Christianity.

What, the attentive reader may by now be wondering, does all this have to do with teaching the first of Lord Byron’s “Eastern Tales” in verse, The Giaour? Not quite everything, but a great deal, as I hope to show in the remainder of this brief essay. The Giaour begins much as did the immediate public reaction to the horrors of September 11: by seeming to confirm a simplistically and remorselessly dichotomous view of East and West, Europe and its Oriental Other. The narrator—only one of several, as it will turn out—presents a scrupulously Eurocentric view of Greece under Ottoman dominion: enslaved (“servile offspring of the free”) though classically associated with freedom and democracy (111) and debased though once heroic: “Self-abasement pay’d the way / To vilain-bonds and despot-sway” (40–41). In contrast with its intellectual and moral vitality during the classical period, Greece must now be seen even as deathly, a beautiful corpse:

’Tis Greece—but living Greece no more!
So coldly sweet, so deadly fair,
We start—for soul is wanting there.
Hers is the loveliness in death. (91–94)

The metaphorical corpse of Greece under Muslim rule is the first of the series of dead bodies that haunt this text, establishing a rather ghoulish atmosphere from the start that persists to the poem’s last line, with its evocation of the Giaour’s two inseparable companions, the ghosts of “her he lov’d” and “him he slew” (l. 1334).

The pointed contrast between Ottoman Greece and the Greece of classical times does more, however, than merely to promote a sense of inevitable East/West antagonism, that “clash of civilizations.” Byron, or rather his unnamed narrator, deploys the contrast between then and now, a heroically free and a supinely dominated Greece, to imply as well that such antagonisms
are ancient and deeply rooted. References to Themistocles (“When will such hero live again?” [6]) and to the battles of Thermopylae (109) and Salamis (113), evoking Athenian and Spartan resistance to the invasion of Greece by Persia in the fifth century BCE, urge the reader to understand Ottoman rule as only the most recent in a series of attempts, successful or not, by Asiatic tyrants to destroy Greece and all it represents. Byron’s initial narrator, pro-Hellenic and classically educated like Byron himself, seems committed to a vision of Greece and Asia, Europe and the East that associates the first term with the birth of freedom and democratic aspirations, the second with an essentially despotic character and an endemic hostility toward freedom and self-rule, whether for Greece or for its European heirs.

Byron attempts in advance, however, to forestall any reading of The Giaour that naively takes the first narrator as the official voice of the poem. In editing a text, perhaps especially in editing it for the classroom, one becomes hypersensitized to matters of placement. Byron’s “Advertisement” to his poem, for example, is sometimes placed after the poem, among a mixture of Byron’s original notes and material supplied by a modern editor—when not omitted altogether. And yet early editions overseen by Byron himself position the “Advertisement” directly before the opening lines, a placement I followed in my own edition and one that has significant effects on a first reading of the poem. For the “Advertisement,” if read at all carefully, functions to instruct the reader in advance to take a more particularized, localized, and historically specific view of the events narrated through the purposefully (and notoriously) disjointed fragments of the poem that follows. That fragmentation itself suggests that the story of the Giaour, Leila, and Hasssan will not lend itself to a single viewpoint or ideological frame, nor willingly cohere into a neat structure built on a binary grid. But, in advance of any of the poem’s wrenching and defamiliarizing shifts in speaker, tone, and perspective—all part of what one might call its program of “dis-Orientalation”—the “Advertisement” establishes a remarkably different historical and ideological frame than the one that characterizes the poem’s introductory lines (1–167), with their marked Orientalist bias.

Byron was, of course, a great admirer of Vathek, and Byron’s praise of Vathek in his notes to this very poem would in fact lead to the republication of Beckford’s Oriental tale in 1816 and its eventual reputation as a minor classic. As the “Advertisement” to The Giaour makes clear, however, Byron’s Orientalist poem is as precisely contextualized, in historical time and in geopolitical space, as Beckford’s Orientalist fantasy is decontextualized. What Said famously declared of Orientalism generally—that it “stands forth and away from” the “Orient as such”—applies perfectly to Vathek but cannot be said of The Giaour, a poem that depends heavily on Byron’s firsthand experi-
ence in relevant parts of the East and his genuine interest in the Muslim cultures he encountered there. Scholars, most notably Mohammed Sharafuddin and Abdur Raheem Kidwai, in a position to comment authoritatively on Byron’s representations of Islamic beliefs, practices, and customs, have been impressed by their accuracy and by Byron’s sympathy for a non-Christian, Eastern belief system. Sharafuddin, in particular, credits Byron with a degree of “sympathy” for Islam “amounting to identification,” and quotes a remark attributed to Byron (dubiously enough) by his estranged wife, that he “was very near becoming a Mussalman” (224–25; original emphasis). Byron had no interest, he writes, in “reinforcing English perspectives, that is, English complacency and supremacy” (243)—no desire, in other terms, to create a work of what would now ordinarily be called “Orientalism.” He wished the full reality of Islam to become perceptible,” Sharafuddin continues, “not because he was seeking an alternative authority to the west”—not in order to construct the East as what Raymond Schwab terms the “alter-ego” to the Occident (4)—but “because, as a generous liberal who hated tyranny and believed in national independence, he took delight in racial, social, cultural and religious variety and otherness” (243). Whether taking a “delight” in otherness can be quite disentangled, in any British Orientalist work, from feelings of “complacency and supremacy” remains very much an open question, but Sharafuddin bears compelling testimony to Byron’s refusal to create a phantasmic Orient from whole cloth, or rather from the network of literary, historical, and pseudohistorical materials that Beckford drew upon in concocting the simulated Orient of *Vathek*.

If Byron refuses to create a simulated, pastiche Orient à la *Vathek* (and all the other progeny of the *Arabian Nights*), neither does he care to position the Giaour as the representative of a unified and hegemonic “West.” True, he leaves the text open to the temptation of reading it as a staged “political allegory,” with the Giaour standing in for a more or less undifferentiated Europe and Hassan for Ottoman Turkey, with Leila (who is, significantly, Circassian) closely associated with Greece (the “natural paradise of the landscape” evoked in the poem’s opening section), the “land over which the Turks and the Venetians have been fighting for centuries” (McGann, 156). And critics have sometimes succumbed. To do so, however, means losing a good deal of the ambivalence and, more to the point here, of the pedagogical value of Byron’s *Giaour*, not least its value for the present moment.

Teaching *The Giaour* that spring of 2002, then, I encouraged my students to analyze the binaristic structure of its first section, and to comment on Orientalist motifs they could recognize from *Nourjahad* and *Vathek*, before asking them to read carefully with me Byron’s “Advertisement” and then, if they wished, to connect it with recent events. It begins, Byronic enough,
by evoking a history of sexual relations between the “ladies” of “the East” and the “Christians” fortunate or enterprising enough to enjoy their favors: the exotic as the erotic, one of the most enduring of Orientalist tropes (Praz, 207). Twice Byron insists upon the fragmentary nature of the narrative to follow—“these disjointed fragments,” “the story, when entire”—preparing the reader for the kaleidoscopic experience to follow, a matter not so much of shifting as of shattered perspectives. Turning back to the fragmentary narrative itself, Byron then touches on an equally worn trope—Oriental tyranny and barbarity toward women—in introducing Leila as a “female slave,” thrown “in the Mussalman manner” into the sea for betraying the lord of the harem. But these stock Orientalist motifs immediately give way to a surprising density of historical specificity as the “Advertisement” goes on to give the setting a precision that I did not fully appreciate until I tried to annotate it:

The story, when entire, contained the adventures of a female slave, who is thrown, in the Mussalman manner, into the sea for infidelity, and avenged by a young Venetian, her lover, at the time the Seven Islands were possessed by the Republic of Venice, and soon after the Arnauts were beaten back from the Morea, which they had ravaged for some time subsequent to the Russian invasion. The desertion of the Mainotes, on being refused the plunder of Misitra, led to the abandonment of that enterprise, and to the desolation of the Morea, during which the cruelty on all sides was unparalleled even in the annals of the faithful.

By making the Giaour a Venetian rather than some other enterprising European—say, an Englishman—Byron hints at, not the inexorability, but the fragility of Western domination in the East. As Britain’s would be, Venice’s empire had been a maritime one, depending on strategic islands, like the seven Ionian islands off Greece, and built inward from stretches of coastline. And it had failed. Although the Ottoman Empire was already in decline, its implosion (not to mention the transformation of Turkey into a secular state) can be seen much more easily with historical hindsight than at the time; in 1824, in The Last Man, Mary Shelley has the Ottomans hanging on for a last great (and losing) battle with the West as late as the end of the twenty-first century (117). In Byron’s poem of 1813, it’s the Giaour, not Hassan, who might be taken to represent the “sick man of Europe,” representative of a dying empire struggling to hang on to its last few colonial possessions. Such shifts in global domination involve, Byron reminds us at the outset, an enormous human cost, one played out locally in “ravaged” areas like the Morea (the Peloponnesian peninsula) at the time of the poem’s fictional events. The ending of Russian occupation followed by a chaotic
and brutal period of warring militias, moving in and out of uneasy alliances, could only remind my students of Afghanistan, a daily front-page item in the news throughout the first half of 2002. And Byron’s emphasis on the cruelty shown by “all sides” and his pointed underdetermination of the “annals of the faithful”—which faith?—helped the discussion turn to how Byron sets up dichotomies only to undermine them throughout the poem. I had guessed that following recent events had unsettled inherited dichotomies for my students, I hoped that this would help them see how Byron unsettles analogous oppositions in *The Giaour*, and at best I wanted my students to become better readers both of nineteenth-century Orientalist poetry and of twenty-first-century news coverage by placing the two into juxtaposition.

Take costume, for example. Many readers of *The Giaour*, on encountering the passage that describes the Venetian adventurer of the title in Albanian (“Arnaut”) garb, will likely think in terms of fancy dress (see fig. 3). The portrait of Byron in his own dashing Albanian costume is so well known (it adorns the dust jacket, for example, of Sharafuddin’s book, as well as the paperback cover of Louis Crompton’s *Byron and Greek Love* and the cover of this book) as to make the connection nearly inevitable. Hassan, however, does not read the Giaour’s change of clothing in terms of masquerade or theater; quite the opposite:

I know him by his jet-black barb,
Though now array’d in Arnaut garb,
Apostate from his own vile faith. (614–16)

For Hassan, the change to Albanian dress signifies a change in loyalties, implying that in allying himself with a group of Muslim mercenaries (what we would call today an “unaligned Muslim militia group”), the Giaour has renounced his Christian faith and his European allegiance. And in fact, when the Giaour later turns up as a kind of boarder at a Greek monastery, he refuses to pray and defies classification in terms of “faith and race” (807). There’s no option of simply changing back out of this costume and reassuming an unproblematic “Western” identity. My students, in early 2002, had been presented dozens if not hundreds of time, on television, on the covers of newspapers, and on the Internet, with a comparably heterogeneous image: the so-called American Taliban, John Walker Lindh, arrayed in his own Muslim garb, looking anything but ready for a costume party. Lindh’s untrimmed beard, his waist-wrap (*wizar*), the various head coverings he sports in one oft-circulated image or another, all speak to his own version of apostasy, his transformation into the other, the enemy, the homegrown mujahadin. Bringing their associations with Lindh’s disheveled, alienating image to bear
on Byron’s poem, my students could much more readily grasp what it might mean for a stray Venetian to make common cause with a group of Muslim bandits, and why Hassan leaps to the conclusion he does. It helped them arrive at a reading of the Giaour, not as a representative of Occidentalism, but of hybridity—not only will he not pray with Christians, but he refers to God (in one of his gentlest moments) as “Alla” (l. 1133). To read the Giaour as representative of an ascendant, imperialist West means losing sight of that hybridity, and the sense of porousness and mutual vulnerability of cultures that goes with it.

The Giaour’s status as between cultures, neither Christian nor Muslim, should complicate any reading that casts him and Hassan as binary opposites representing two perennially antagonistic civilizations. More than that, Byron counters the predictable impulse toward such reading by constructing the relation between Hassan and the Giaour with at least as much thematic doubling as opposition. It’s not merely that both love the same woman, a relation that may mask as much homoerotic attraction as it displays heterosexual desire.

But love itself could never pant
For all that Beauty sights to grant
With half the fervour Hate bestows
Upon the last embrace of foes. (647–50)

Although The Giaour is not precisely a colonialist text, it exhibits the “predominately homoerotic cast” that Sara Suleri attributes to “narratives of colonialism,” participating as well in what Suleri, developing her homoerotic thesis, terms the “dynamic of complicity that renders the colonizer a secret sharer of the imputed cultural characteristics of the other race” (16). These characteristics include a common proclivity for violence and a gaze that others find hard to withstand: of the Giaour, “Oft will his glance the gazer rue” (837); of Hassan, “And glared his eye with fiercer fire” (594), contributing to a look “dreaded more than hostile sword” (600). The Giaour goes so far as to endorse the act—Hassan’s murder of his faithless paramour—that supposedly defines “Mussalman” barbarity: “Yet did he but what I had done / Had she been false to more than one” (1062–63). As the recent revelations concerning the torture and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in U.S. custody in Abu Ghraib, the prison that formerly epitomized Saddam Hussein’s tyrannical brutality, reminded a chastened American public, barbarity can never belong exclusively to East or West.

The figure of Leila, third term in the poem’s multicultural erotic triangle, also lends itself to a hybrid reading. Leila is from Circassia (which Byron,
after Beckford, also calls “Franguestan”), a region of the northern Caucasus sited precisely on the imaginary geopolitical line between Europe and Asia. One could make Circassia a site of the age-old “conflict” between East and West—Christianized in the sixth century CE, Islamized under Ottoman rule in the seventeenth (McGann, 156)—but that again would entail adopting the very bipolarity that Byron’s text seeks to undermine. Various assimilating and resisting the influence of the Greeks, Romans, Khazars, and Mongols, as well as the neighboring Georgians, Russians, and Turks, Circassia represents a commingling of cultures, part of a region where Muslim and Christian traditions had long co-existed (along with customs surviving from pagan times). This cultural ambiguity is underscored by Leila’s alleged disguise as a “Georgian page” (456), a reminder that, in the Caucasus, a mile or two south may mean a different religious identity and a markedly different alignment along the ideological East-West axis. In this region of the globe, East and West do meet, repeatedly, uncertainly, and in ways always subject to further revision and realignment. (Just ask the Chechens.) In Orientalist discourse, Circassia is associated not only with luxuriousness (because of the fabled beauty of its women) but with hybridity as well, as a region of fair-skinned, blue-eyed Muslims. Viewers of David Lean’s film Lawrence of Arabia will recall the scene in which the startlingly blue-eyed Peter O’Toole, desperately trying to pass as a Muslim while in Turkish hands, agrees with his captor, the Turkish bey (played with campy homoerotic inflections by Jose Ferrer), that he must be Circassian. The point is not to show that O’Toole’s Lawrence is clever enough to “pass” but rather that his disguise, like the Giaour’s, like Lindh’s, remains so thin, rendering him an icon not of “going native” but of Suleri’s “dynamic of complicity,” much like Byron’s Giaour before him. Lawrence, however, proves able to return to Britain, however uneasily; the Giaour remains in Greece, itself (in 1813) neither securely European nor Oriental, Christian nor Muslim.

The labor of editing and annotating a text like The Giaour can involve unusual (or at least unusually sustained) attention to matters of detail, involving everything from variant place names (Liakura, Franguestan), to obscure ethnic or tribal designations (Osmanlie, Mainote), to classical references (Thermopylae, Parne’s vale) that have lost their transparency for most contemporary readers. The process of pinning these down can leave one fascinated by an author’s blatant disregard for matters of historical or geographical plausibility—as with Vathek—or, alternatively, deeply impressed with the geopolitical precision of a text such as The Giaour. For Byron, history is a matter not of monolithic, eternally contending cultural blocs but of shifting loyalties and alliances, unstable identities, cultures that inter-penetrate as much as they collide. It remains possible to read The Giaour
as a xenophobic and chauvinistic attack on the Muslim world—his *Eastern Tales* have been characterized as “poems of the gratuitous violence, irrational vengeance, and cold-hearted barbarity of the Turks” (Sardar, 46)—but such readings must repress the very specificity of detail and fragmentation of perspective that, for a critic like Sharafuddin, differentiates Byron’s Orientalism from what may be termed the “alteritist” variety. And we are in as great a need of precision in geopolitical specificity, recognition of multiple perspectives, acceptance of cultural hybridity, and distinctions within broadly defined “civilizations” as ever.

Now in the summer of 2004, as I write, a U.S. army of occupation remains entrenched in Iraq while U.S. and allied NATO forces seem as far as ever from successfully stabilizing the military situation in Afghanistan. With the United States engaged in direct political and military intervention in Central Asia and in the Middle East as never before, in the name of a vaguely defined and infinitely extendable “war on terror,” teaching Orientalism critically remains one of our important tasks as professors of literature. Monolithic constructions of both “East” and “West” and simplistic oppositions between them have a vexingly insistent way of reasserting themselves again and again. When 70 percent of the American public assumes, for example, despite the lack of any evidence, that Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein collaborated with one another, one may reasonably suspect that this has more to do with Orientalist habits of thought than with a clever disinformation campaign; or, put differently, a disinformation campaign to this effect would not need to be very clever.5 Byron challenged and attempted to disrupt such habits of thought in *The Giaour*, some two centuries ago, much as many writers and speakers, in many different media and formats, attempted to disrupt them in the aftermath of September 11. This is clearly a task not to be accomplished once and for all, but taken up repeatedly. And it is one that we can be doing in our classrooms.

NOTES

1. “In February and March of 2002 more than two thousand Muslims were murdered on the streets of Gujurat . . . women were gang-raped and children were burned alive and 150,000 driven from their homes while the police and administration watched and sometimes actively participated” (Roy, 12). The striking contrast with India does not mean, of course, that there was no reaction against Muslims in the United States, where a large number of individuals, “more than 1,000,” nearly all of them Muslim, were detained
in the first two months following September 11, some indefinitely (Denniston, A2).

2. All quotations from The Giaour (cited by line) follow my edition included in Three Oriental Tales.

3. The Norton “Critical Edition” of Byron’s Poetry, for example, quotes only two words from the Advertisement in a footnote (84), while the Modern Library edition of Byron’s Selected Poetry simply omits the Advertisement without comment (539).

4. For a fascinating study of cultural hybridity (and sexual liaisons across ethnic lines) during the Romantic era in British India, see Dalrymple, White Mughals.

5. This survey, commissioned by the Washington Post and carried out by TNS Intersearch from August 7–11, 2003, was widely reported in the press; see, e.g., Benedetto’s report for USA Today.