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Recontextualizing Guy Endore’s Babouk in the Shadow of Orientalism

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Recontextualizing Guy Endore’s *Babouk* in the Shadow of *Orientalism*

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One can almost imagine a writer as schooled in tragedy as Guy Endore appreciating the irony that his 1934 anti-capitalist novel *Babouk* lies today on the outer fringes of literary and political discourse, despite the fact that it is arguably impossible to imagine a book that is more deliberately confrontational and nakedly ideological. In different ways, books as politically disparate as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or *Mein Kampf*, or in some quarters *The Communist Manifesto*, have ambitions just as politicized, saddled with the reductive label “propaganda”
and pushed into the literary margins. Yet *Babouk* has been forgotten both as a manifesto and as a novel, whereas those other works exist in our discourse as at least curiosities that help inform our shared sense of world history. Even a book like Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, which in its way is as vitriolic as *Babouk*, is renowned today as a famous and influential work that had a marked effect on American public policy. Why does no one pay attention to *Babouk*?

There remains in us a belief that books like Endore’s do us a disfavor by stating outright what the message is. Whereas a novel like *Robinson Crusoe* flourishes as a canonical text in part because it seems on the surface like nothing more than a story of an adventurer on an island, *Babouk* arguably takes to task what many people don’t consider when they read *Crusoe*—namely, that the latter propagates the notion that European “civil” society was superior and that the colonialist mentality was the necessary and right one.

Though I believe both *Babouk* and *Crusoe* can be qualified to some degree as “propaganda,” *Crusoe*’s depictions of infinitely wise and benevolent colonial Europeans could be used in part to serve the notion that today’s existing racial inequalities are somehow either nonexistent or just, which is a belief that can serve only to strengthen the hegemony. *Babouk* is more nakedly propagandistic, and its obvious far-left message is likely to disturb those who worry that our shared discourse is already disproportionately liberal. Since *Babouk*’s place in the canon is an unsure proposition at best, perhaps we shouldn’t even bother proposing arguments for its canonization and instead argue for *Babouk*’s value as a
means of framing a new form of discourse, a new grouping of texts that share the characteristic of being explicitly “anti-canonical.”

Scholarship on this bizarre and experimental novel has remained minimal since its initial publication in 1934; in 1991, it was republished by the leftist magazine The Monthly Review as part of their “Voices of Resistance” series. Since then, it has attracted exactly one scholarly article from Alan Wald, who hoped to rescue Babouk from obscurity by offering it as a useful riposte to Shakespeare’s The Tempest and the “ideological precepts of the master class and culture of Shakespeare’s time” (Wald 24). Like virtually all admirers of Babouk, Wald finds it difficult to separate an author’s personal claims from his or her political outlook. To him, “[e]ven a complex work of art such as the Tempest fails to confront head-on the dominating cultures giving voice to the dominated” (24). Babouk’s strengths as a text seem to lie in the fact that “Endore’s literary project is founded on opposite premises” (22). The idea of opposites is important to consider, given that the challenge remains of what to do with problematic texts like The Tempest that are so part of our DNA that the very act of trying to “remove” them from the canon seems like denying our cultural heritage. Wald’s piece is in itself problematic because he never states why he would contrast these two works: does he aim to see The Tempest fully supplanted by Babouk in our discourse, or does he want the two to coexist? His silence on this subject is understandable, as he admits that the book is “a work the literary value of which remains largely to be constructed
by readers and scholars of the present day” (35). Part of the aim of this paper is to construct a means by which we can consider Babouk as literature, using a set of rules and considerations that can be derived entirely apart from how we normally consider works to be canonized.

**Orientalism as the Basis for the Alternative Canon**

In order to level the discourse and put Babouk on an even playing field with novels that are reactionary but far more popular and aesthetically successful, we must reject the idea that literature is “art” and can’t be reduced to anything further. If Babouk is to be reappraised, we must recognize canonical claims of aesthetics to be fundamentally limited and misleading. Since many of Babouk’s more problematic aspects seem to raise theoretical questions about the limits of representation and construction of knowledge, Edward Said’s theories of discourse, informed by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, act as a useful cultural leveler. A Palestinian-born Christian thinker, philosopher, and critic, Said, in his book Orientalism, proposed that the entire concept of “the Orient,” or Eastern culture, is Western in origin and therefore a simulacrum that lacks true dimensions in the same way that the lifelike map in Jorge-Luis Borges’ “On Exactitude in Science” is only a representation, even as it fools those who perceive it as being legitimate. Some claim that Said is doing ineradicable damage to the world of literary analysis by claiming that literature and politics don’t exist independently, an idea he further elaborates upon in his book Culture and Imperialism. However, using Said’s
theory of Orientalism to interrogate Endore’s text gives us an opportunity to consider Babouk’s merits without having to deny or refute the obvious political bias. If Said were to have read Babouk, and it seems unlikely that he had, how could he have viewed it as anything more than an addition to the larger interdisciplinary discourse?

One of the main points that Said makes during the course of Orientalism that many of his West-defending critics tend to forget is that he is not roundly condemning any obviously colonial-leaning texts, such as E.S. Shaffer’s “Kubla Khan” and the Fall of Jerusalem or Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. In his own words, he finds the ideas presented, particularly in how they reflect or cast aspersions on the social or aesthetic norms of their period, to be “productive, not unilaterally inhibiting” (80-81). Buried in this supposed contradiction in terms (that the Western conception of the East exists as an absolute and is detrimental to human rights, but artistic representations of this mentality can hold merit) are questions that have plagued critics for hundreds of years prior to Orientalism: how do I hide or subvert my own political biases in critical form and how can I legitimately evaluate texts that may come from a time or geographic location whose practices seem either wholly alien or offensive to modern sensibilities? Said proposes to recognize this apparent critical imbalance within the writing itself. Since politics are unavoidable, why not devise a new way of criticism that recognizes inherent political biases and acknowledges how, in particular, left-leaning critics are more prone to taking older literature to
task for being pro-racist, pro-sexist, and pro-colonialist? *Orientalism* paved the way for a new kind of criticism, which came to be called postcolonial criticism.

Something Said never bothers to address in *Orientalism* or *Culture and Imperialism* is the possible existence of works that may have either radically challenged the hegemony or gone so far as to provide legitimate and sympathetic portrayals of the subaltern. Even if Said had read *Babouk*, there is no evidence that he put much thought and energy into considering literature that may have contradicted works like Schaffer’s and Conrad’s, and furthermore, if such works existed, that they could subvert the status quo. Said’s apparent unwillingness to put much time and effort into grouping an alternative body of literature that may challenge the colonial canon is consistent with his theoretical approach, and his primary work is still focused on the canon: in *Cultural and Imperialism*, for instance, he includes thoughtful treatises on Conrad, Jane Austen, Albert Camus, and W.B. Yeats, all of whom can be found in any number of literary anthologies. Even by considering these authors in light of how they reflect the views of colonizers, he is still adding to a growing body of literature that simply assumes these authors deserve continuing scholarly interest because they attracted earlier scholarship. By offering *Babouk* in terms of how it contrasts with *The Tempest*, Wald is doing something similar. If one takes *The Tempest* out of the equation, is there still literature out there that legitimizes radical or “alternative” viewpoints? Generally, when people propose ways of adding to the canon, it is usually with the
corrective intention of balancing the sea of white males with a few representative minorities, such as Aphra Behn or Phillis Wheatley, but neither of these authors actually published literature that was deliberately challenging or politically dangerous; their mere existence as minority artists was enough to make them objects of scholarship. Rather, in devising an “alternative canon,” the idea that each work must exist to refute some aspect of societies glutted with racist and imperialist ideology is most crucial. With that spirit in mind, I submit Guy Endore’s *Babouk* as the first entry in the continually expanding Saidian counter-canon, or “alternative canon.”

When discussing the concept of Orientalism specifically, it will be as a way of identifying Said’s main theories and ideas regarding representation and construction of knowledge and not as a way of defining Eastern and Western mentalities since *Babouk* is not about the “Orient” at all but rather about the African slave trade, so a better word to use might be “Africanism,” which in this context would mean precisely the same thing except applied to a different region of the world. There are, obviously, substantial differences between Africa and the East, and the West’s conception of the two varies by large degrees, but in the sense that Said is talking about the greater problem of “hegemony,” *Babouk*’s message can be easily transposed. Said was obviously writing about something he knew from experience, being a Palestinian raised in Western secular society, and there’s no evidence to suggest that he viewed the problems in creating representations of Africans to be any
less legitimate. For instance, he argues:

In countries like Algeria and Kenya one can watch the heroic resistance of a community partly formed out of colonial degradations, leading to a protracted armed and cultural conflict with the imperial powers, in turn giving way to a one-party state with dictatorial rule and, in the case of Algeria, an uncompromising fundamentalist opposition.

*(Culture and Imperialism* 230)

Many of Said’s writings on African responses to colonial imperialism and aggression can be found via his discussions of Joseph Conrad, a writer who was obviously uneasy with his country’s culture of subjugation and death. Additionally, while his main points of research don’t generally involve the United States (where Endore published *Babouk*), he does explicitly name it as an imperial power on a par with France or England.

**The New Rules of the Alternative Canon**

Given that critical considerations of the canon are hard enough to define on their own, it seems almost more useful to derive criteria for what makes a work canonized by accounting for gaps in the definition. The battle being waged among conservatives, liberals, Marxists, feminists, new historicists, and extreme bardophiles in the past few decades, while well-documented, has only succeeded in continually blurring the boundaries of what is to be considered canonical and what is not. Literary anthologies have reflected this, as
volumes of “key texts” have simultaneously become more diversified and more specialized, with special sub-canons being created every day to accommodate more fringe and minority voices. Even so, I will attempt to consider the primary means by which a work is canonized, even as I invite others to disagree with me.

In considering candidates for canonization, there are three central tenets that can be generally applied. First, and perhaps most obviously, canonized works are considered so because they are disproportionately famous and influential. Virtually any work of William Shakespeare’s, for instance, is famous enough to warrant repeated reprinting and repackaging of what is essentially the same material. The sheer number of writers that have since openly admitted their debt to Shakespeare, and the seemingly endless onslaught of artistic recontextualizations of Shakespearean themes and plot points provide abundant evidence for his hyper-canonized status. Second, the work must have some sort of novel component, either in an aesthetic or historical sense, that differentiates it from works that offer no new ideas and are forgotten as a result. Third—and this is perhaps the component that may produce the most controversy—is the fact that entries in the canon must at least partially reflect the values and beliefs of the hegemony, either as it exists today or in how it communicates tenets of an earlier era. I have already brought up the example of *Robinson Crusoe*. While most people don’t read the book with the consideration that it is essentially a pro-imperial text (most clearly shown via Friday’s subordinate role), the implications are obviously
there, and provide a good deal of the reason why it is considered such an essential work.

There is a temptation to define the alternative canon in terms of how, as Wald said, it is founded on opposite premises. An alternative canon is best viewed as a reactive measure that exerts symmetrical as opposed to dualistic properties: it contains some opposite tendencies, but is not, fundamentally, the “opposite.” Clearly, the presence of novelistic tendencies is more pronounced in agents of counter-canonization than it is of canonization because, by definition, texts that deliberately upbraid the status quo are likely to be provocative and original by this fact alone. However, in the interest of providing a more expansive forum that is meant to reappraise literature that has been forgotten, the notion that a book has to be overwhelmingly influential or well-known has to be dispelled. *Babouk* certainly doesn’t fit that criteria, as well it shouldn’t: the point of an alternative canon is to create a space to inject heretofore ignored works into the discourse, where they previously had no place.

Obviously, the most important consideration, as stated before, is that the alternative canon has to deliberately defy the status quo *within the text itself*. Aphra Behn and Phillis Wheatley do not meet these standards because it is Behn and Wheatley as individuals who challenge the canon, and not their writing, which often serves to preserve the pro-racist and pro-colonial social circumstances of England in the seventeenth century and the United States in the eighteenth century, respectively. The challenge of
defining an alternative canon like this is that it may be
difficult to find material, particularly prior to the twentieth
century, when challenges of those sorts were likely to lead
to the writer’s death or exile and the subsequent burial of
whatever dangerous ideas had been proposed. We may
need to look at unexpected sources and recognize that
our conception of anti-establishment literature is often
dependent on extenuating social circumstances. For
instance, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s essay “The Necessity
of Atheism” is groundbreaking in the sense that concrete
critiques of religion, and particularly of Christianity, were
exceedingly rare. However, as atheism becomes a more
commonly accepted social position, it is more difficult to
place explicitly anti-religious works in the alternative canon,
as some may exist to enforce the status quo of an anti-
religious hegemony like the one in the Soviet Union (even
that designation is problematic). Clearly, any prospective
entry must be evaluated by careful critical consideration,
and nothing in the alternative canon should be “hyper-
canonized”—that is, immune to arguments about its
placement in the alternative canon. Babouk is not exempt
from this, and as we will see, there are ways in which even
Babouk problematizes what I have just set forth as the
parameters of the alternative canon.

**Babouk’s Ironic Narrative as Anti-racist and Anti-
Hegemonic**

*Babouk* is a fictionalized account of the Haitian slave
revolution that lasted between 1791 and 1804, constituting
what many consider to be the first legitimate long-lasting slave revolt of its kind in the world. The character of Babouk was derived from the real-life figure of Dutty Boukman, a rebellious slave and vodoun priest whose death sparked a violent uprising, which some historians consider to be the primary catalyst for the revolution. In the book, Babouk is a vain trickster and storyteller who is captured in Africa and sent to work in Saint Domingue, the French colony that eventually became the independent nation of Haiti. After his nightmarish journey aboard a slave ship, he is forced to work in the sugar cane fields. His ear is cut off when he attempts to run away and, in a scene meant to suggest solidarity between different cultures that had been oppressed, meets a group of Native Americans. Recaptured and branded, he loses his storytelling ability until it is rekindled years later due to the increased savagery of his slave masters. Eventually, Babouk organizes an open revolt, killing the plantation owners and, in a controversial scene, impaling the white owners’ newborn baby on a spear. Babouk then leads his enslaved compatriots to victory for a brief time until they are finally defeated by the combined French and British military forces. Trying to save his fellow warriors by sticking his arm in a cannon, Babouk loses that appendage and ultimately faces the punishment of beheading. His decapitated head is eventually put on a pike and publically displayed as a warning to potential revolutionaries.

Endore constructs these plot points to be of secondary concern to his own voice, and he develops his
political manifesto by selectively illuminating numerous hypocrisies and fallacies in the pro-slavery (and by extension, he says, pro-capitalism and pro-religion) argument. The reader is made to believe that this book is more historical than fictional, and Endore creates this effect through two principal means. First, each chapter is accompanied by one or two epigraphs that either explain some horrifying detail about the slave trade or selectively quote an eighteenth century luminary, such as Montesquieu and Voltaire, in a way that serves to reinforce the hypocrisy of the dominant society. Second, Endore liberally provides commentary on the narrative itself to the point where it seems like he himself is a central character. Indeed, Endore occasionally interrupts the plot to allude to the research he did in writing this book, anticipating some of the tropes of literary postmodernism. For example, after Babouk witnesses the public execution of three slaves, Endore takes a break from the action to comment on how horrified he was when looking through historical records to see how lackadaisically events like this were recorded by whites:

Contrast the fortunate position of the modern educated white who can dip into old historical records and see that these burning Negroes are neither proof that the whites offer up human sacrifices to their gods, nor proof that they consume human flesh, nor proof that they do not know how to cook their meat […] We can go to the volumes of letters of Ordinator Lambert. In
the hundreds of letters he wrote we will not find more than four or five references to the Negroes. (52)

The references that Endore could find were invariably brief: “we condemned a Negro and a Negress to be burnt alive for having used poison” (52). Whether or not it was his intention, the effect is that the reader tends to believe the majority of what is happening is true based on the evidence provided, in the ways he describes it. Endore even devotes a whole chapter to explaining what effect the slave trade had on aboriginal Americans, which almost borders on historical non-fiction, apart from one metatextual reference to Babouk and a jaundiced reappraisal of Christopher Columbus’ legacy.

Another way in which it appears that Endore’s politics are deliberately provocative as they relate to anti-establishment themes is in his intentionally disturbing use of ironic statements. Scenes of Babouk in mortal anguish are often interrupted by Endore’s deliberately mocking tone, making it difficult to see Babouk’s pain as anything more than a prop, a means for Endore to prove how outrageous his situation really is. Particularly, he adopts a clearly sarcastic tone of agreement with Babouk’s oppressors, as well as their spiritual ancestors. Imitating the callousness of Ordinator Lambert and his peers, he observes that it is simply impossible for a slave-driver to have died without a slave being involved in some sinister way, and suddenly he dovetails into how such a mindset can be applied to a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. After
making this point, he flippantly backtracks and says, “I beg the reader’s pardon. That was an anachronistic slip. This is a novel about an eighteenth-century Negro. Today the black man is everywhere free and equal to the white” (53). There are more (comparatively) subtle examples of Endore’s sabotaging his own narrative when he believes he can insert a pithy observation or thought. When a rogue slave narrowly escapes his punishment by saying something that amuses his captors, for example, Endore once again takes the reins of the narrative: “Haha! The Negro’s sense of humor. Yes, the Negro is a funny fellow. Always good for a laugh. Dramatists, turn on a little laughter to lighten up your white man’s tragedies! Just bring a Negro on stage” (79).

Such a statement isn’t necessary to gauge Endore’s meaning, but it is consistent with the rest of the novel in that Endore ironically detaches himself in an effort to better illustrate the insanity of colonial society.

**Endore’s Irony as a Deliberate Distancer**

In evaluating the success of Endore’s narrative voice as a true alternative viewpoint, we once again turn to Said and ask ourselves if we find Endore’s depiction of the slave as Other to be sufficiently “productive.” Babouk may resemble a post-colonial representation of the Other, but by turning him and the other slaves into symbols of the debilitating effects of money and power, Endore’s voice ironically dehumanizes the characters as well as the narrative itself, even as he rails against the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. In *Orientalism*, Said asks a question
that is relevant in our continued discussion of canonization: “Isn’t there an obvious danger of distortion if either too general or too specific a level of description is maintained systematically?” (75). Since Said is trying to establish that Orientalism is a collection of ideas rather than something tangible, “too specific a level of description” ignores the varied discourse or shapes it in a way that ignores certain aspects. The other danger is, as Said says, the risk of ignoring history altogether and providing irrelevant or inaccurate statements. In Babouk, Endore specifically cites historical text as a way of reinforcing his political perspective, conflating the general with the specific in a way that Said deliberately avoids.

Both of these aspects can be illustrated interdependently or separately. Endore will often cite specific historical instances to make a broader point, such as when he refers to the accounts of Rev. Lindsay as a way to talk about the hypocrisy of European Christians: “On December 27th, 1759, Commodore Keppel’s four ships of the line, his frigate, his two bomb-ketches, dropped anchor as near as they might to the island of Goree, and at nine o’clock the action started” (19). To make the point more valid, he tells the reader that Rev. Lindsay has left us a “succinct account” of the battle. From here, Endore segues into his familiar mocking tone, chiding Rev. Lindsay for wishing he was not a clergyman so he could partake in the carnage. Clearly editorializing, he offers a general conception of the “stout-hearted British clergyman, whose arms are unfortunately entangled by his sacred robes” (19). This is just one example
of the kind of thing Said is deliberately trying to avoid, “the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a localized focus” (*Orientalism* 75). Endore does not hide what he is trying to do: he uses historical accounts replete with legitimate tropes of historical fiction, such as specific dates, and then devises a response that we assume applies to religious hypocrites in general as opposed to this one individual. There is, as Said says, a very obvious danger of distortion when one selects facts to pursue a particular point of view. Endore is reducing the dimensions of the discourse, failing to acknowledge that “Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field” (78).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said is similarly critical of Orientalists who try to correct past injustices by suggesting that non-Western cultures be granted hegemonic or cultural dominance of sorts. He takes issue with a comment made by a historian named Bernard Lewis, who argued, in Said’s words:

> Since modifications in the reading list would be equivalent to the demise of Western culture, such subjects (he named them specifically) as the restoration of slavery, polygamy, and child marriage would ensue. To this amazing thesis Lewis added that ‘curiosity about other cultures’ would also come to an end. (37)

Part of the reason why Said would later distance himself from postcolonial scholarship is that it provided too much of an opportunity for Westerners to assuage their own guilt
by welcoming self-punishment and refusing to apply the same set of critical strictures to non-Western works. Endore does this exactly in the final chapter of *Babouk*, which takes place entirely outside the narrative and acts as a call to arms for subjugated peoples (mainly black people, but Endore also mentions Holocaust victims) to rise up and presumably take violent action. Endore’s response is similar to Lewis, in that he seems to suggest that whatever good Western culture may have provided, it cannot be separated from its debased and sinister origins, and his final sentence in the novel is the following: “Oh, black man, when your turn comes, will you be so generous to us who do not deserve it?” (Endore 182). This deliberately pathetic plea for mercy is meant to suggest that it is now the black man’s turn to rule and kill without mercy. To Said, this proves there is something presumptuous and arrogant about suddenly declaring the subaltern to be the new hierarchy:

Rather than affirming the interdependence of various histories on one another, and the necessary interaction of contemporary societies with one another, the rhetorical separation of cultures assured a murderous imperial contest between them—the sorry tale is repeated again and again. (*Culture and Imperialism* 38)

Sanctimonious claims about the superior aspects of African or Eastern culture are Orientalism of a different sort, aiming to forge a new hegemony out of what was once oppressed, inverting the power structure instead of dismantling it a
crucial distinction whose theoretical basis separates Said from many other Orientalists.

*Babouk* fails, then, as a book that presumes to provide an alternative viewpoint and then subjugates its characters as a fictional means of making a political point. Endore’s main aim is the same as Rev. Lindsay’s: to proselytize, not theorize. It is only because Endore’s politics, by most contemporary academic standards, seem comparatively enlightened and somewhat unique in a 1930s context that scholars like Alan Wald can make the claim that the subaltern is finally getting a speaking role. In order to further differentiate the purposes of the alternative canon from the scholarly canon, alternative works must accurately reflect and convey the views and ideals of the colonized and depressed. On these grounds, *Babouk* does not completely satisfy this criterion.

**Reconsidering Babouk’s Role as a Litmus Test**

As I have shown, *Babouk* succeeds as an alternative text in some areas and not in others, so its value as a text that operates in opposition to the canon is still in flux. *Babouk*’s failures are large, and should be addressed by anyone who seeks to invest purpose in this book as a means to combat the ideology of more well-known literature. However, utilizing the book as a litmus test for the demands and strictures of the alternative canon has proved that, while *Babouk* may be a failure, it is undoubtedly a *useful failure*, one that proves that the critical consideration of any text as it relates to the larger discourse is never clear-cut. Endore’s approach to correcting
social ills should be recognized as ahead of its time, but he is still a pre-Saidian creature in many respects, and we should avoid imparting extra dimensions to a text whose ulterior meaning is quite obvious and simple. From Babouk we may learn to survey the vast and forgotten records of societal deviants and outcasts. We can trace the history of those who chose to be anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-monarchist, anti-religious, and anti-communist against common consent; and, in particular, we can emphasize the achievements of those who chose to stand up for the colonized and the oppressed. It will never be an easy task to recognize or even find exemplars of this behavior: much of it has probably never been published, and even more has probably been destroyed or neglected over time. As more material is discovered and collected and our conception of what constitutes anti-canonicity becomes more resolute, however, we can once again look back to Babouk and reconstruct its meaning and purpose. Perhaps the final chapter of Babouk, which once seemed to explicitly advocate armed revolution, will be retooled by future generations to signify a literary call to arms.
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