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1.

On disembarking at Amsterdam's Schipol Airport, I am struck, only a few steps inside the terminal, by the appearance of a sign hanging from the ceiling, which announces the way to the arrivals hall, the exit and the transfer desks. It is a bright-yellow sign, one metre high and two metres across, simple in design, a plastic fascia in an illuminated aluminium box suspended on steel struts from a ceiling webbed with cables and air-conditioning ducts. Despite its simplicity, even its mundanity, the sign delights me, a delight for which the adjective *exotic*, though unusual, seems apt. The exoticism is located in particular areas: in the double *a* of *Aankomst*, in the neighbourliness of the *u* and the *i* in *Uitgang*, in the use of English subtitles, in the word for 'desk', *balies*, and in the choice of practical, modernist fonts, Frutiger or Univers.

If the sign provokes in me genuine pleasure, it is in part because it offers the first conclusive evidence of my having arrived elsewhere. It is a symbol of being abroad. Although it may not seem distinctive to the casual eye, such a sign would never exist in precisely this form in my own country. There it would be less yellow, the typeface would be softer and more nostalgic, there would—out of greater indifference to the confusion of foreigners—be no subtitles, and the language would contain no double *a*s, a repetition in which I sense, confusedly, the presence of another history and mind-set.

A plug socket, a bathroom tap, a jam jar or an airport sign may tell us more than its designer intended; it may speak of the nation that made it. And the nation that made the sign at Schipol Airport seems very far from my own. A bold archaeologist of national character might trace the influence of the lettering back to the de Stijl movement of the early twentieth century, the prominence of the English

subtitles to the Dutch openness towards foreign influences and the foundation of the East India Company in 1602, and the overall simplicity of the sign to the Calvinist aesthetic that became a part of Holland's identity during the war between the United Provinces and Spain in the sixteenth century.

That a sign could evolve so differently in two places is evidence of a simple but pleasing idea: countries are diverse, and practices variable across borders. Yet difference alone would not be enough to elicit pleasure, or not for long. The difference has to seem like an improvement on what my own country is capable of. If I call the Schipol sign exotic, it is because it succeeds in suggesting, vaguely but intensely, that the country that made it and that lies beyond the *uitgang* may in critical ways prove more congenial than my own to my temperament and concerns. The sign is a promise of happiness.

2.

The word *exotic* has traditionally been attached to more colourful things than Dutch signs, among them snake charmers, harems, minarets, camels, souks and mint tea poured from a great height into a tray of small glasses by a moustachioed servant.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the term became synonymous with the Middle East. When Victor Hugo published his cycle of poems *Les Orientales* in 1829, he could declare in the preface, 'We are all much more concerned with the Orient than ever before. The Orient has become a subject of general preoccupation, to which the author of this book has deferred.'

Hugo's poems featured the staples of European Orientalist literature: pirates, pashas, sultans, spices, moustaches and dervishes. Characters drank mint tea from small glasses. His work found an eager audience, as did the *Arabian Nights*, the Oriental novels of Wal-