

## TRIBUTE TO EDWARD W. SAID: 1935-2003

**E**dward W. Said: intellectual, humanist, scholar, author of seminal books, prolific essayist, teacher, musician, exile, inveterate traveler, champion of the dispossessed, enemy of dogma, relentless critic of the arrogance of power, and proud Palestinian. To those who knew him, he was a warm, forthright, generous man of exquisite taste and boundless curiosity; he expounded his views passionately and defended them tenaciously, even obdurately; brilliant in conversation, he was openly disdainful of triteness and sycophancy. To those who admired him from afar, he was a courageous dissident who gave voice to what they often thought or felt but could never so well express. Needless to say, he had—or, perhaps, I should say, he made—more than a few enemies, both political and professional. It could not have been otherwise, given his unwavering adherence to the vocation of the critical intellectual. In his words: ‘Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his/her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant.’<sup>1</sup> And further: ‘At bottom, the intellectual, in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly, but actively willing to say so in public... even though it doesn’t make one particularly popular.’<sup>2</sup>

Edward W. Said departed on his final journey on Wednesday, September 24<sup>th</sup>, almost exactly twelve years to the day after his physicians told him of the deadly disease that had invaded his body—‘this ‘sword of Damocles’ . . . hanging over me.’<sup>3</sup> News of his death spread quickly across the continents, for ever since the publication of *Orientalism*, twenty-five years ago, Said’s fame and visibility had continued to grow and spread worldwide. His major works have been translated into more than thirty languages. At the time of his death, Edward W. Said was generally regarded as one of the most learned and prominent public intellectuals of his generation and the Palestinian intellectual nonpareil.

Said’s disappearance should not have come as a complete surprise, at least not to those who knew of the severity of his affliction and who could not have failed to notice its increasingly debilitating physical effects. Yet, I have a sense that few were prepared for this devastating loss. Had we not all become accustomed to his resilience, his irrepressible energy as his books, essays, and newspaper articles kept appearing regularly, almost faster than we could read them? His joint initiatives with Daniel Barenboim; the interviews in print, on radio, and on television; his documentaries; the lecture series, talks, and formal speeches that

had him travelling constantly all over the world—who would have thought, or who would have dared think, that they would all come to such an abrupt end?

‘Don’t give up,’ was a motto that Said’s austere and demanding father sought to impress upon him during his rebellious childhood.<sup>4</sup> With willful determination, remarkable stamina, and exemplary self-discipline, Said engaged in a brave and, until the very end, defiant battle with leukemia. He worked harder than ever, producing greatly influential works of scholarship and criticism, such as *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994); a profound and moving memoir, *Out of Place* (1999); numerous essays on the most diverse topics and issues—several of which have now been gathered in such volumes as *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994), *Peace and Its Discontents* (1996), *The End of the Peace Process* (2000), and *Reflections on Exile* (2000); a steady stream of articles for newspapers and weeklies in Egypt (*Al Ahram*), Britain (*The Guardian* and *the London Review of Books*), Pakistan (*Dawn*), France (*Le Monde Diplomatique*), the U.S. (*The Nation*), and elsewhere; as well as other major writings, including *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), a superb new introductory essay for the fiftieth-anniversary edition of Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, and, in collaboration with Daniel Barenboim, *Parallels and Paradoxes* (2002). At the same time, he remained engaged in Palestinian affairs with undiminished intensity, notwithstanding his disillusionment with the PLO leadership and the dispiriting setbacks repeatedly suffered by the national cause as a result of Israeli intransigence, US bias, and Yasser Arafat’s incompetence. In the face of an increasingly grim situation, Said redoubled his efforts; so much so that he became—in the words of Mahmoud Darwish, the poet and compatriot Said so greatly admired—‘the Palestinians’ envoy to human conscience.’<sup>5</sup>

It is important to remember that Edward W. Said’s identification with the Palestinians’ quest for the restoration of their homeland stemmed from a deliberate choice on his part rather than brute necessity—though he did regard active resistance to injustice and barbarism obligatory. To be sure, during his boyhood in Cairo, he had witnessed first-hand the misery and despair of the victims of the *nakba*; in *Out of Place*, few memories are as poignantly evoked as that of his admirable aunt, Nabiha, who ran what amounted to a one-person refugee assistance agency. Still, he could have opted for the material rewards, security, and private pleasures of professional academic life, especially since even prior to the publication of *Orientalism* he had already made his mark as an outstanding literary critic and theorist. Furthermore, his privileged upbringing and schooling left him ill-equipped to speak authoritatively about the plight of his much less fortunate compatriots. As he explained in one of his retrospective reflections: ‘I grew up apolitically, my family being quite determined to shield us from the real world, the fall of Palestine, revolutions and wars, and so forth. Having become an

expatriate in the US in 1951 (I was 15 at the time), I had to work hard many years later to redevelop my attachment to the Arab world: my education ironically enough taught me more about the West than it did about my own culture and traditions, and this I later felt had to be remedied by self-education after I had become a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in 1963.<sup>6</sup>

By embarking on the research project that culminated in the publication of *Orientalism*, Said was amalgamating the knowledge of Western culture and history that he had acquired through his formal education and his scholarship with the insights generated by the studies he was conducting as part of his effort to ‘redevelop [his] attachment to the Arab world.’ The importance and value of *Orientalism*, however, the heated controversies it generated, the enormous impact it has had, and its continuing influence in virtually every branch of the human sciences stem from something else; namely, the distinctive critical and theoretical positions Said had already started to stake out and to elaborate more or less systematically in his earlier book, *Beginnings* (1975). Written at a time when many of the proponents of the new currents of theory and criticism in the United States, following the lead of the (mostly French) structuralists and poststructuralists, were turning back to Saussure by way of querying the stability of meaning in language, *Beginnings* proposed instead a careful reconsideration of the eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher, Giambattista Vico. (Said’s interest in and interpretation of Vico were inspired, to a very significant extent, by his reading of the works of the Romance philologist, Eric Auerbach—a decidedly unfashionable figure in the mid-1970s.)

From his close study of Vico’s texts, Said derived certain axioms that underlie most of his subsequent work: human beings make history (what Vico called ‘the world of nations’) which they can interpret and understand precisely because they make it; the philosopher or secular intellectual, like Vico’s ‘gentile,’ does not have access ‘to the true God’; it is the duty of the intellectual, then, to controvert the claims and refute the authority of those who purport to possess a ‘Truth’ and a ‘Knowledge’ that are absolute and incontrovertible (because they precede or are independent of history made by humans).<sup>7</sup> In *Orientalism*, Said drew attention to, among many other things, the fact that our received ‘knowledge’ of the Orient and the Oriental has been historically produced; that the critical study of the vast field encompassed by *Orientalism* does not so much enable one to grasp the ‘essence’ or ‘nature’ of the Orient and the Oriental as it reveals the complicated cultural processes through which the West has fashioned its own self-representation; and that, far from being innocent or harmless, these cultural processes are hegemonic—that is to say, they legitimize and reinforce the West’s sense of ‘intellectual authority’ over the Orient, and can also help validate other thinly disguised modes of domination. Describing *Orientalism* in this manner, however, may convey the

mistaken impression that the book's central argument is constructed around a series of theoretical abstractions, whereas in fact the entire exposition consists of extensive and detailed analyses of texts and of the culture that simultaneously produced them and was, to a very significant degree, shaped by them.

Several critics attacked *Orientalism* and what Said described as 'its sequel,' *Culture and Imperialism*, for being anti-Western, while some others celebrated it for much the same reason. Entrapped within the binary logic of 'us' versus 'them' (where 'us' is synonymous with civilization and 'them' with barbarism) both sets of critics either could not or did not want to move beyond the ethnocentrism, the nativism, the politics of identity or of 'warring essences'<sup>8</sup> that the two books criticize so strenuously. The misguided as well as the willful misreadings of Said's major works stem, more often than not, from the habit or the conscious decision to view cultures as distinct, self-contained, and self-sufficient monoliths that periodically clash with one another—whence the so-called 'clash of civilizations' theory of history. Said responded eloquently to these misinterpretations and instrumental appropriations of his work in his afterward to the 1994 edition of *Orientalism*. He had, however, already anticipated them and tried to forestall them in the concluding sentences of *Orientalism*: 'Above all, I hope to have shown my reader that the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism. No former 'Oriental' will be comforted by the thought that having been an Oriental himself he is likely—too likely—to study new 'Orientals'—or 'Occidentals'—of his own making. If the knowledge of Orientalism has any meaning, it is in being a reminder of the seductive degradation of knowledge, of any knowledge, anywhere, at any time. Now perhaps more than ever before.'<sup>9</sup>

Neither Orientalism nor Occidentalism—that would be a fair characterization of Edward W. Said's position, but only if it were not taken to imply an attitude of aloof neutrality. In reality, Said was, as everybody knows, the engaged intellectual par excellence, the antithesis of what Antonio Gramsci calls the 'traditional' intellectual whose prestige and authority depend on affecting a posture of Olympian detachment and an air of impartiality vis-à-vis, the querulous disputes taking place in the agora. This is how he described the function of criticism and, by implication, the character of his work as an intellectual: 'Were I to use one word consistently along with *criticism* (not as a modification but as an emphatic) it would be *oppositional*. If criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought and of method. In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment

it starts turning into organized dogma. . . . Criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are non-coercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom.’<sup>10</sup>

The notion that criticism is ‘oppositional’ has now become a commonplace. Indeed, in the field of literary criticism and theory, at least, ‘oppositionality’ is, much too often and paradoxically, an orthodoxy or ‘a habit of mind.’ Far from exhibiting an ‘impatience with guilds,’ much of the putatively oppositional criticism produced today seems content to reside and circulate exclusively within the confines of a relatively small fiefdom in academia. For these, as well as for other reasons, it is largely ineffectual. What distinguished Said’s criticism was, precisely, its ‘difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought and of method,’ which is why it has perplexed and frustrated the efforts of both his adversaries and some of his self-declared admirers to find a label for it, to place it within the map of established and recognized schools of thought, to identify it with some specific political ideology. Was Said a ‘Western’ or an ‘anti-Western’ thinker? Was he or was he not a ‘postmodernist’? Was he Marxist or was he an anti-Marxist? Did he or did he not remain a ‘humanist’? And in Palestinian politics, did he belong to the ‘rejectionist’ camp or was he a ‘moderate’? These questions are products of the very mentality that Said’s criticism relentlessly assailed, showing it to be pernicious and disabling—a mentality that wittingly or unwittingly reinforces the status quo, that works in the service of hegemony.

Because he defied not only labels but the mentality of labeling, because he resolutely refused to belong to any party, or system, or school of thought, Said was, in a very real sense, a lonely intellectual and a lightning rod for fierce attacks from right and left. In figurative terms, this is the oppositional intellectual’s condition of exile that Said embraced. Much has been said and written about Said’s description of the critic as ‘exile.’ Unfortunately, however, there has been a tendency to romanticize the exilic condition, a tendency that not only runs directly contrary to Said’s rigorous and unsentimental reflections on the topic, but is positively deplorable because it ‘banalizes’ the horrendous ‘mutilations,’ the crippling sorrow that exile engenders. ‘Exile,’ Said wrote, ‘cannot be made to serve notions of humanism. On the twentieth-century scale, exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible.’<sup>11</sup> Exile, moreover, is as likely to result in a closed mind as in an open, generous one. This is how Said described some of the debilitating effects of exile: ‘There is the sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around you were temporary and

perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as to querulous lovelessness. More common is the pressure on the exile to join—parties national movements, the state. The exile is offered a new set of affiliations and develops new loyalties. But there is also a loss—of critical perspective, of intellectual reserve, of moral courage.<sup>12</sup>

In his life and work Edward W. Said achieved a difficult and rare balance between unwavering commitment and unsparing critical rigor. With moral courage, he used his formidable intellectual skills to stand in opposition to ‘the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups seems so unfairly weighted against them.’<sup>13</sup> He engaged in a struggle which he knew would never bring him the rewards of ultimate victory. If worldly success and approbation were his goal he undoubtedly could have secured it by giving his allegiance to ‘the elite, dominant, or hegemonic class’; instead, he willingly affiliated himself with ‘the much greater mass of people ruled by coercive or sometimes mainly ideological domination from above.’<sup>14</sup> Now that he is gone, the struggle seems even harder; and the disadvantaged and the dispossessed have been rendered even more destitute by the permanent silencing of a voice that spoke truth to power with unmatched eloquence.

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## Notes

1. Edward W. Said (1994) *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon), p. 12.
2. *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. 23.
3. Edward W. Said (1999) *Out of Place* (New York: Knopf), p. 215.
4. See, *Out of Place*, p. 9.
5. *Al Ahram*, 2-8 October 2003
6. Edward W. Said, ‘The Hazards of Publishing a Memoir,’ *Al Ahram*, 2-8 December 1999.
7. See, Edward W. Said, *Beginnings* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), pp. 350 and 378.
8. Edward W. Said (1993) *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf), p. 229.
9. Edward W. Said (1978) *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon), p. 328.
10. Edward W. Said (1983) *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), p. 29.
11. Edward W. Said (2000) *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), p. 174.
12. *Reflections on Exile*, p. 183.
13. *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. xvii.
14. Edward W. Said (1988), ‘Foreword’ in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranjit Guha & Gyatri C. Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press), p. vi.