OBITUARY


The erudition, range and élan of Edward Said’s work as a literary scholar, cultural critic and politically engaged public intellectual have produced a mountain of commentary, within and beyond academic communities and across continents. With his death, friends, colleagues, collaborators, former students and acquaintances all over the world have been offering tributes to the reach of his intellect and imagination, his fervent convictions, integrity and courage. In all of these the pleasure of his iridescent company, the excitement of a formidable intelligence and the wit of his irreverent remarks have been remembered. Proper evaluations of his stature as an international figure with immense influence within the academy and the public sphere are still to come. Meanwhile, it has long been evident that he was an uncomfortable thinker who through a distinctive style and virtuoso eclecticism was prominent in redirecting interdisciplinary studies yet formed no school, and a polemicist who from an unattached position on the Left touched the consciousness of large constituencies with criticism of imperialism and the imperial world-view that was both analytic and engaged.

The ‘contradictory amalgam of the academic and the insurrectionary’ – a phrase Said used in his own measured assessment of Foucault’s place in ‘oppositional intellectual life’ – informed the vocation he advocated and lived as a dissenter against the status quo. Scorning accommodation and contemptuous of that generation of artists and intellectuals who had volunteered to serve in the Cold War, whose heirs today are apologists for the violent foreign policies of the USA, Said advised ‘there is a special duty to address the constituted and authorized powers of one’s own society’; and he went on to observe that in a political world ‘animated by considerations of power and interest writ large’, the intellectual must move ‘from relatively discrete questions of interpretation to much more significant ones of social change and transformation’. Although Said in interviews spoke of regret at being unable to reconcile his two lives as a literary scholar and a polemical spokesperson, his writings time and again make visible ‘the actual affiliations that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force on the other’. And indeed many of his essays are fashioned as a parabola which can swoop with acrobatic elegance from – for example – the dialectic of sound and silence in music, to the silences installed by the official record and broken by historians of the working class and the colonized: ‘There is no sound, no articulation that is adequate to what injustice and power inflict on the poor, the disadvantaged, and the disinherit ed. But there are approximations to it, not representations of it, which have the effect of punctuating discourse with disenchantment and demystifications.’

Those who have read Said’s newspaper and journal articles on the punitive practices of successive Israeli governments, and the cynicism and self-interest of their American defenders, or watched him addressing audiences on the insult and injury rained down on the Palestinian people, will recall both a capacious access to language’s rhetorical and discursive resources and the meticulous conceptualization of his own and others’ researches. Thus in popular forums and accessible prose, Said brought intellectual practice to bear on politics – exposing the strenuous efforts of canonical Zionist historiography to erase the presence of the Palestinians, the ‘atrociously biased diet of ignorance and misrepresentations’ about the history and heritage of Arabs fed to Americans by the media, the assault on Iraq ‘planned for domination of the resources of the region
and strategic control from the Gulf to the Caspian’, the baseness of Arab fiefdoms and the ‘combination of misplaced juvenile defiance and plaintive supplication’ characterizing the behaviour of the official Palestinian politicians.

Had Said continued in the vein of *Beginnings* (1965) and *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966) he would have been a formidable presence within literary studies, where his reflections on the intricacies of narrative were from the outset opposed to the evacuation of intellectual, political and social contexts, a stance that distanced him from the New Criticism already in place and the poststructuralism threatening its hegemony. But it was with the essays written in the late 1970s and early 1980s that Said articulated his notion of ‘secular criticism’, arguing that in the America of Ronald Reagan the radical origins of European literary theory had ‘retreated in the labyrinth of “textuality”’ to become the ‘antithesis and displacement of what might be called history’, and declaring:

> My position is that texts are worldly … a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moment in which they are located and interpreted.… The realities of power and authority – as well as the resistances offered by men, women and social movements, to institutions authorities and orthodoxies – are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of criticism.

This was a perspective on which Said never wavered, enabling him to elaborate unprecedented readings which joined a refined attention to form and stylistics with an insistence that literature is about experience and not just about itself, and inspiring a generation of disaffected young scholars to cross the disciplinary boundaries of history, political theory, anthropology and literary criticism in order to examine the multiple uses of representation in the exercise of domination. Within the field of literary studies, his writings on the imperial imaginary advanced an understanding of the extent to which the British Empire figured in English cultural life ‘as a fact and a source or subject of knowledge … based on its difference and its distance from, as well as its moral use to, the home society’; and the question he had asked in the mid-1980s on ‘why so few “great” novelists deal directly with the major social and economic outside facts of their existence – colonialism and imperialism – and why, too, critics of the novel have continued to honour this remarkable silence’, has since been addressed by a host of commentators prompted to hear this ‘silence’ as resonating with sounds and echoes of empire.

Although written during the same period as *The Question of Palestine* (1979), and soon to be followed by *Covering Islam* (1981), it was *Orientalism* (1978) that brought Said renown first outside literary studies and then beyond the academy; and it was this work of subtle textual exegesis combined with ideological critique – which according to Said owed as much to Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* as it did to Foucault – that was to take on another life as a begetter of colonial discourse theory, subsequently to mutate into postcolonial studies. The confines of this field could not contain Said’s multitudes and he was in time courteously to distance himself from its often acrimonious debates, perhaps in part because some practitioners, whose own eminence coincided with the high moment of deconstruction, were prone – and in terms that now appear quaint – to reprimand Said for adhering to a humanism which, they claimed, is generically unable to ‘decolonize Western thought’. By the time of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), where the emphasis of his humanism was on the agency, resistance and liberation struggles of oppressed peoples – potent vehicles indeed for decolonizing imperial thinking – Said had made known his irritation with ‘Theory’, and more specifically with ‘[C]ults like post-modernism, discourse analysis, New Historicism [and] deconstruction’ for giving intellectuals ‘an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history’.

58  *Radical Philosophy* 123 (January/February 2004)
Said’s notion of ‘worldliness’ as ‘a knowing and unafraid attitude towards exploring the world we live in’, and ‘secular’ as implying the earthly and the historical, is firmly within materialist traditions of thought; moreover for Said these terms ‘suggested a territorial grounding’ for an argument that attempted to understand ‘the imaginative geographies fashioned and then imposed by power on distant lands’. Yet, as is well known, Said, who designated Marxism as embedded in German idealism, resisted that very system of thought which has done most to theorize modern empire in historical terms – although simultaneously he acknowledged the influences of Marxists as distinct in situation as they were in methodology: not only Lukács and Adorno, who systematically grasped and opposed capitalism as a totality, and Gramsci, who pondered on the intellectual’s role in party organization, but also Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James and Eqbal Ahmed, whom he embraced as comrades in the struggle against imperialism, and who as Marxists of one denomination or another did not speak of modern empire without speaking of capitalism’s global trajectory.5

So many questions have been asked of Said’s work in bad faith – and I am not here referring only to the slanders of Zionist lobbies or Arab quislings or American state department apparatchiki – that at this moment it may seem inappropriate to ask any at all. This would be untrue to Said’s commitment to criticism, which he himself exercised even in his generous appreciations of other thinkers. Said wrote with passionate intensity about imperial aggression without referring to the analysis of Lenin or Luxemburg; he distinguished between anti-colonial nationalism and liberation movements without alluding to the communist orientation of the latter or the class interests of either; and he placed economic and political machinery at the centre of empire without mentioning capitalism’s world system. A consequence, as Neil Lazarus argues, is that although in Orientalism Said ‘compellingly demonstrated the ideological character’ of pseudo-geographical concepts such as ‘the West’ and ‘Europe’, he used these in ways which, in the absence of categories such as mode of production or a social formation, ‘dematerialise what they reference’.6

Such moves, together with a subsequent definition of imperialism as the theory and practice of ruling distant territories from a metropolitan centre, inadvertently gave comfort to the many postcolonial critics who excised capitalism from their accounts in order to advance an understanding of empire as a cultural event or a discursive construct. So, too, his poignant meditations on the loss and satisfaction of exile have been appropriated for both a sanguine representation of the diasporic condition that appears unaware of its own elitism, and a mindless celebration of nomadism which occludes the experiences and aspirations of those – the majority of the world’s populations – who cannot or would not choose displacement and deracination.

Said’s recent support for the single (sometimes called bi-national) state solution to the seemingly intractable Israel–Palestine conflict is not shared by many on the Left, who see this as a utopian wish which prematurely assumes that Arabs and Israeli Jews want to live together, ignores the absence of a clear political constituency calling for that position, overlooks that a dominated population will fight occupation under a variety of ideological banners, and sits uneasily with his membership of the Palestinian National Initiative. This secular organization, which Said together with Moustafa
Barghouti assisted in founding, is opposed to both Hamas and Fatah and describes itself as committed to the development of ‘a national emergency leadership’, the mobilization of the people’s ‘intellectual, cultural, social and political energies’ in the creation of national structures and the process of nation-building, and the furtherance of international solidarity.

Said did not arrive at this outlook by following Lenin and Trotsky, who called for the right of oppressed people to self-determination but understood that the winning of national independence was a transitional phase and would not in itself bring socialism. However, a similar logic seems to inform his dual allegiance to the immediate activities of a national liberation movement struggling against dispossession, and the farther goal of one secular state for all the inhabitants of the territories of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the returned Palestinian refugees, appears as both astute and honourable. Moreover, it is compatible with a mistrust of nationalism, which he strategically suspended in the case of colonized peoples. It is also in accord with his revulsion at the incapability and corruption of the Palestinian Authority, his unease at the prospect of an Islamic Palestinian state, and his scrupulous discrimination between Zionists, whose ideology and ambitions are inescapably colonialist, and Jews, whose larger historical experience includes more spacious traditions of cultural innovation and political dissent. Said’s cultivated tastes suggested an archetypal cosmopolitan; his writings testify to an internationalist.

If a case can be made for the consistency of Said simultaneously holding two positions on the future of Palestine, then other objects of his affections are more problematic. Reluctant to look too closely at the transition in the ‘new South Africa’, Said in this and other contexts appeared to be recommending the virtues of symbolic atonement and concord. Yet from his first monograph Beginnings, which concedes narrative no transparent origins, to his forthcoming studies on late style, where there are no happy endings, the will to confront and overcome the fissures within the real world coexists with an inconsolable but not demoralized intellectual pessimism:

I draw the distinction between late works that are about reconciliation, about the final work … where the artist has this vision of wholeness, of putting everything together, of reconciling conflict … versus another late style, which is the one I’m interested in, which is the opposite: where everything gets torn apart and instead of reconciliation there’s a kind of nihilism and a kind of tension that is quite unique.

This bespeaks a generative critical consciousness that refuses the solace of closure.

Benita Parry

Notes