



## THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF EDWARD SAID

JOSEPH MASSAD

*This essay examines Edward Said's philosophy of intellectual life and what an intellectual vocation entails. Said's major contribution, Orientalism, is discussed in light of his own concept of "traveling theory" and its impact on various disciplines, especially postcolonial studies. Said's views on Palestine and the Palestinians are also elaborated and contextualized in his own oeuvre. Finally, the essay discusses Said's interest in musical performance and attempts to read his work "musically," showing how all his interests are part of a larger whole that constitutes his intellectual legacy.*

PERHAPS ONE OF THE more important tenets that Edward Said abided by in his life and career was the centrality of his role as secular critic. He saw criticism as constitutive of the life of the intellectual, who must "speak truth to power." This is not as easy as it sounds, as Said's commitment to criticism as a basis for thinking and the intellect was what made him so controversial, whether in the United States, Europe, or the Arab world.

For Said, the life of an intellectual should be that of a migrant and an exile. By this, Said did not mean having to leave one's physical home, but rather leaving the conventions and accepted truths of one's community, engaging in insistent criticism of these truths, and not shrinking from addressing the failures of one's audience, no matter how powerful. Exile here is metaphorical, wherein intellectuals must be outsiders "so far as privileges, powers and honors, are concerned."<sup>1</sup> While respectful of religion as a personal relationship to the metaphysical, Said was a committed secularist when it came to intellectual life. He insisted on being politically godless in an age dominated by the worship of political deities—the "West," Soviet communism, U.S. imperialism, nationalisms of all varieties, to name the most prominent. His political atheism, however, did not mean neutrality, but rather an insistent critical stance on all political religions. He mocked the rites and rituals that worshippers of such gods staged, and insisted that these were proof of moral bankruptcy.

Said made use of the ideas and philosophies that these gods brought forth but refused the terms of worship and conversion they required. This was to

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*Journal of Palestine Studies* XXXIII, no. 3 (Spring 2004), pages 7–22.  
ISSN: 0377-919X; online ISSN: 1533-8614.

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become his hallmark. Commitment to secular criticism for him was consistent with his conviction that these gods always fail to deliver on their promises, and that intellectual life must be lived according to the understanding that “situations are contingent, not . . . inevitable . . . the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, . . . facts of society made by human beings, and not . . . natural or God-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible.”<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, Said resisted being enclosed by any type of society, including—and especially—nationality: “Does the fact of nationality commit the individual intellectual . . . to the public mood for reasons of solidarity, primordial loyalty, or national patriotism? Or can a better case be made for the intellectual as a dissenter from the corporate ensemble?”<sup>3</sup> This applies as much to Palestinian as it does to American intellectuals. Said insisted that

The history of thought, to say nothing of political movements, is extravagantly illustrative of how the dictum “solidarity before criticism,” means the end of criticism. I take criticism so seriously as to believe that, even in the very midst of battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for.<sup>4</sup>

Said took this dictum to heart when it came to the politics of Palestinian liberation, posing auto-critique as central to its success. It is in this vein that he launched his attack against the Oslo capitulation. His commitment to the rights of the Palestinian people is what mobilized his hostility to what he rightly predicted would be the Bantustan solution signed in Oslo and celebrated on the White House lawn. The subsequent metamorphosis of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) into the Palestinian Authority (PA), from a liberation movement into a police authority subcontracted to the Israeli occupation, confirmed his predictions. Moreover, Oslo marked another transformation—that of a number of well-known Palestinian intellectuals who switched allegiance from national liberation to what came to be known as political pragmatism. It was in the name of pragmatism and national unity that they suspended their critical faculties, for which they were paid handsomely by the PA’s new funders. Some quit academic jobs to become full-time advisers to Arafat and ministers in his Authority.<sup>5</sup> It was this fate that Said had feared would befall intellectuals whose vocation was not based on secular criticism.

Said insisted that the intellectual be an amateur, not a professional. He objected to the professional intellectual who views her or his work “as something you do for a living, between the hours of nine and five, with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behavior—not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence

uncontroversial and unpolitical and 'objective.'"<sup>6</sup> The intellectual amateur, for Said, is "someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of a society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity as it involves one's country, its power, its mode of interacting with its citizens as well as with other societies."<sup>7</sup> The intellectual as amateur, he insisted, should be able to go beyond the professional routine of doing what she or he is supposed to do by asking, "why one does it, who benefits from it, how can it reconnect with a personal project and original thoughts."<sup>8</sup>

### TRAVELING ORIENTALISM

For Said, these ideas about intellectual life were not merely musings, but a way of life. Perhaps the best exemplar of how he sought to unsettle rather than to accommodate his audience was his book *Orientalism*. Few books unraveled the archeology of Western identity the way *Orientalism* did. What was ingenious about Said's book was precisely its exposure of the connections, relationships, modulations, and displacements in Orientalism's production of an Orient that was a ruse for the production of the *Occident*. If, as Frantz Fanon had argued, "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World,"<sup>9</sup> Said would elaborate on that brilliant summation. Thus, for him, Orientalism was never about the Orient and its identity and culture, but about producing the West and *its* identity and culture, in short, "a kind of Western projection;"<sup>10</sup> that there would never be a West if the East were not invented as its antithesis, its opposite, its other.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* excavated a Western epistemological mode of production which projected an Oriental other from its own interiority, externalizing and banishing it outside the European self that was in the process of being defined. The book also tracked the travels of the discipline of Orientalism from Europe to America, where it was "degraded," as Said postulated would be the fate of much traveling theory, a concept he elaborated in a much-celebrated essay. For Said, degradation does not have a "moral implication, but rather . . . conveys the lowering of color, the greater degree of distance, the loss of immediate force . . ." <sup>11</sup> If Orientalism (the discipline) in Europe exemplified a type of erudite and sophisticated imperial knowledge, in America it was degraded to charlatanism.

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It was Said's role as anthropologist of Europe, its cultures, arts, and literatures that catapulted him to the forefront of knowledge production in the Western academy. His book also enraged his detractors, who were appalled at the presumed insolence of subjecting white Europeans to an Oriental gaze. In undertaking his study of Europe, Said, true to his method and contrary to traditional European scholarship on non-Europeans, did not objectify the European, but held himself accountable to the very people and cultures he studied and

wrote about. This is the exact opposite of what Orientalists (and most Western anthropologists) do when they study non-Europeans. As Said described it:

The Orientalist can imitate the Orient without the opposite being true. What he says about the Orient is therefore to be understood as description obtained in a one-way exchange: as *they* spoke and behaved, *he* observed and wrote down. His power was to have existed amongst them as a native speaker, as it were, and also as a secret writer. And what he wrote was intended as useful knowledge, not for them, but for Europe and its various disseminative institutions.<sup>12</sup>

It is precisely Said's refusal to objectify what he sought to know that allowed so many Americans and Europeans to engage with and respond to his ideas.

In engaging a partial reversal of European ontological authority, wherein Said, the Oriental, could act as a subject studying Europe and Europeans, Said was careful not to fall in the trap of "Occidentalism," which critics like Sadiq Jalal al-'Azam wrongly attributed to him.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, even were Said to have objectified the Occident, Occidentalism could not have been the result, given the nature of the global racial arrangement of hegemony, control, and power. Orientalism is the discourse of the powerful; the weak lack the power to formulate dominating objectifying discourses, whether of the Occidentalist or any other variety.

The discomfort engendered by *Orientalism* was felt particularly keenly by critics who insisted that Said never spoke of the "real Orient."<sup>14</sup> In enacting his critique, Said had indeed refused the position of native informant, which many critics wanted him to assume. Their discomfort is animated by Said's imputed arrogance in occupying the ontological position of a subject with a piercing, albeit nonobjectifying, gaze focused on Europeans and their systems of thought—a gaze to which Europe and its American manifestation remain highly resistant and with which they are uncomfortable. *Orientalism* therefore did not arouse hostility only for its method or political critique, but also for the ontological anxiety it induced in Euro-American critics, as much today as when it first appeared in 1978. Moreover, Said well understood that the "Orient" was a category invented by Orientalism and saw any attempt to describe a "real" Orient as destined to reinscribe itself within Orientalist discourse itself. His solution was simple: critical intellectuals must throw the very category of Orient into the dustbin of history, rather than try to "represent" it "truthfully."

Shattering the European monopoly on dictating subject-object positions, *Orientalism* traveled across disciplines, geographies, and histories. I address each briefly.

In traveling through academe, *Orientalism's* method and epistemological critique was taken up by a number of disciplines, ranging from feminism and gender studies to anthropology,<sup>15</sup> comparative literature,<sup>16</sup> and cultural and postcolonial studies (the latter owes its very existence to Said's contributions). In Said's method, the gaze of the other was now turned around to investigate

not only how the other was produced but also how the European self (itself based on many local elisions) came to be engineered *as* the universal self. The vigor of Said's method and its ontological boldness were appropriated readily and radicalized, allowing for the study not of blackness but of whiteness, not of femininity but of masculinity, not of homosexuality but of heterosexuality. If Frantz Fanon further radicalized George Lukács, as Said observed in "Traveling Theory Reconsidered,"<sup>17</sup> Said's own traveling *Orientalism* has been generative of similar radicalization.

In Middle East studies, it was *Orientalism's* political critique, not its method, that was the legacy. Thus, scores of books on the Middle East have been written paying homage to Said's work even as they proceeded with business as usual, Orientalist epistemology and all. For the most part, *Orientalism* remains poorly understood if not misunderstood altogether within Middle East studies. Fred Halliday, for example, one of the better-known European Middle East scholars, mistakenly believes that Said's book simply "identified" the "contestable" claim that there exists "a widespread and pervasive *single* error at the core of a range of literature."<sup>18</sup> In fact, the concept of error is foreign to Said's approach; *Orientalism* for him was neither a positive nor a positivist project. This has apparently eluded many in the field.

*Orientalism* has also traveled outside America to Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It traveled in translation and as a method. In the Arab world, it became an event, just as it had in America and Europe. Indeed, *Orientalism* and Said's subsequent translated books would become part and parcel of ongoing Arab intellectual debates that dealt not only with Western representations but also with Arab literary production itself.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, some of Said's Western and neoliberal Arab critics tried to emphasize its use by nativists of all shapes and colors to indict the book as "Occidentalism" as well as "Khumeinist."<sup>20</sup> Said's hostility to nativist appropriations notwithstanding, such critics refused to acknowledge the novelty of *Orientalism* in its new cultural context. Most Arab travelers to Europe since the 19th century who wrote about Europeans did so in Arabic for an Arab audience. This is true of the educator Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi and the literary genius Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, among others. Both accepted Europe as the new locus of civilization and believed that its identity and that of the Arab East were of a different order. Their books were judged by normative Arab values of the period. What made Said's *Orientalism* an event was its exploding the notion of Orient and Occident, its addressing the subjects of its very study, Europeans, in one of their own languages, and its evaluating them by their own normative evaluative criteria. *Orientalism's* major achievement in the Arab world is its uncovering the production of the European self to an Arab audience, mostly familiar with European adulatory views of Europeans, and of its production, and not merely its representation, of the Oriental.

*Orientalism* also traveled across time. Twenty-six years and myriad editions later, it remains in demand. In light of such peregrinations, can we subject the book to Said's own remarks about "traveling theory"? Has *Orientalism*,

which is admittedly both theory and criticism, in traveling across time, left its conditions of production and the normative values of its immediate environment to another time with its own power relations and normative values? It seems to me that this would indeed be the case were it not for a crucial difference, namely, that the conditions and normative values that governed the writing and publication of *Orientalism* in 1978 have changed very little, except in certain corridors of the academy. *Orientalism* was written a decade after Orientalist discourse in America and Europe was mobilized and intensified by the June 1967 war. If, on the morrow of that war, the *Daily Telegraph* could declare Israel's conquest of the remainder of Palestine and parts of Syria and Egypt as the "triumph of the civilized,"<sup>21</sup> the ongoing battles in which America is engaged today are still seen as part of the "civilized world's" continuous crusades against the uncivilized. It is true that the academic value of *Orientalism* and Said himself have appreciated considerably since 1978, but so has the Orientalism that Said subjected to his analytical gaze.

We are today in the throes of a battle for domination by a superpower that insists on seeing the Orient Orientalistically, while itself being nothing less than a reflection of all that it finds offensive about this fantastical Orient. If the Oriental Bin Laden's logic had it that the sacrifice of innocent civilians is justifiable in the service of defeating tyranny, George W. Bush and his cohorts employ the same logic in Afghanistan and Iraq sacrificing many more innocent civilians. If Bin Laden is condemned for his religious obscurantism and his belief that God is on his side against the infidels, Bush and his cabal of officials and pundits profess that God is on their side against the evil of the uncivilized. If the Oriental Saddam was feared because of his potential use of (the nowhere to be found) weapons of mass destruction against the civilized, Bush would use such weapons against civilians to rid the civilized of the Oriental despot. In this sense, as Arundhati Roy has argued, Bush and Bin Laden are each other's doppelgänger. Thus, if Orientalism holds the Arab and Muslim worlds as static, unchanging, frozen in time, it remains blind to how its own categories and epistemology continue to exist in a time warp.

Thus, while circumstances have changed measurably in the Western academy in the last quarter century, few circumstances have changed outside it. *Orientalism* has traveled the last twenty-six years and will continue to travel precisely because the conditions of its production remain unchanged (except in their local details and permutations). The persistence of Orientalism as epistemology has made the book's main goal of demystifying and decoding a Euro-American system of thought as valuable as it has ever been for resisting this increasingly administered and terrorized world.

Said had once asked: "What happens to a theory when it moves from one place to another . . . what happens to it when, in different circumstances, and for new reasons, it is used again and, in still more different circumstances, again? What can this tell us about theory itself—its limits, its possibilities, its inherent problems—and what can it suggest to us about the relationship between theory and criticism, on the one hand, and society and culture on the other?"<sup>22</sup> The

continuing and growing engagement with *Orientalism* is in itself an answer to Said's important query.

#### PALESTINE FROM THE STANDPOINT OF EDWARD SAID

If Walter Benjamin thought that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,"<sup>23</sup> and Theodor Adorno insisted that barbarism was internal rather than external to European culture,<sup>24</sup> Said asserted that European culture was defined fundamentally by (though not necessarily reducible to) the colonial venture it unleashed outward.<sup>25</sup> For this, Said is portrayed as dangerous by the self-appointed neoconservative commissars of American academe. But in fact, the neocons in this sense may be right, for Said's ideas are indeed dangerous to cultural commissars everywhere. It is this element of danger that inspires fear in the hearts of those who administer culture, and hope in the hearts of those who resist them. It is this element of danger that makes Said's voice so hard to silence, so difficult to mute.

But if *Orientalism* unsettled people in power, whether in academic life, or increasingly in political life (Congress has recently held hearings that included discussions of the corrupting influence of Said's *Orientalism* on university students), his work and advocacy for the Palestinian cause had earned him the enmity of far greater numbers, including fanatics who threatened his life and burned his office. Said's defense of Palestinian rights was never bound by his worship at the altar of nationalism, but the opposite: his refusal to accept that Zionism, as a form of nationalism and colonialism, should serve as another god for intellectuals. He was a good student of Jewish history, and spoke regularly and simultaneously about historical Jewish suffering and contemporary Palestinian suffering. The fact of nationality never limited his sympathy for oppressed Jews, any more than his secularism and refusal to worship the god of nationalism limited his defense of Palestinians against their Zionist oppressors.

Edward Said also understood the precarious nature of how the Palestinian struggle is represented in the West. He knew how the historic position of Jews in European history silenced all attempts by Palestinians to narrate our own story, and how the predicament of the Palestinian people as the "victims of the victims" of Europe conditioned the West's refusal of support or sympathy. He remarked in response that

[s]uch as it is, our existence is linked negatively to encomiums about Israel's democracy, achievements, excitement . . . [For] We have no known Einsteins, no Chagall, no Freud, or Rubinstein to protect us with a legacy of glorious achievements. We have had no Holocaust to protect us with the world's compassion. We are "other," and opposite, a flaw in the geometry of resettlement and exodus.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Said demanded that the world take notice of our predicament and our tragedy. He described in stark terms the Palestinian condition: "we lead our

lives under a sword of Damocles, whose dry rhetorical form is the query ‘When are you Palestinians going to accept a solution?’—the implication being that if we don’t, we’ll disappear.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, many in the Israeli and pro-Israeli camp continue to busy themselves with cataloging the many “missed opportunities” for Palestinians to capitulate, otherwise coded as opportunities for “peace.” Said understood well that we could not accept their solutions and that our fight would continue against all attempts to make us disappear. Indeed, Edward Said was central to that struggle of making the Palestinian narrative known.<sup>28</sup> He became a veritable passport for the Palestinian cause, allowing it to cross borders into territories where it was previously denied entry.

Said’s support of the Palestinian cause, however, never stopped him from criticizing modes of resistance that victimized innocent Israeli civilians, acts

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that he condemned unequivocally. Indeed, he understood Jewish intellectual history as a history of outsiders who effected crucial critiques of European Christian society, and was saddened by Zionism’s continuing attempts to suppress this Jewish tradition by transforming it into a new kind of worship of the State of Israel. In this sense, as he told the Israeli newspaper *Ha’Aretz*, he considered himself “the last Jewish intellectual.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, Said fought against the racism of Zionism inside Israel, its racist refusal to allow the expelled Palestinian refugees to return home in order to maintain a Jewish demographic supremacy, and against its continued occupation of Palestinian lands. He, as many of us do,

called for equality and democracy in a new binational Israel/Palestine where Palestinian and Israeli Jew can live with equal rights, free from the racist laws and privileges that continue to reign in Israel, and free from the violence of the Israeli military and of the resistance to it. These are the principles for which he fought until his dying day.

### TRAVELING THEORISTS

Said’s stance on Palestine influenced many scholars in the emerging field of postcolonial studies, which grew out of his critique of Orientalism. Yet, the reaction of postcolonial scholars to his work has not been uniform. While most shared his analysis of colonialism and its settler variety, some have espoused carefully articulated Zionist positions, criticizing the right-wing policies of various Israeli governments or political figures while insisting that Zionism is legitimate in itself. I have discussed elsewhere the shortcomings of such an approach in the telling case of Kwame Anthony Appiah, who, in his book *In My Father’s House*,<sup>30</sup> was offended only by Meir Kahane, who he thought was contaminating an otherwise pristine Zionism and the “moral stability of Israeli nationalism.”<sup>31</sup>



In this vein, it is perhaps noteworthy to consider Homi Bhabha's recent contribution to this line of argument. Bhabha's views are important here, as he is widely seen as one of the major scholars in the field alongside Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Unlike the latter two, however, his work appears committed to depoliticizing deeply political questions.

In a recent "tribute" to Edward Said, Bhabha represented him as a passionate Oriental whose rational faculties retreat before emotion:

there is much to agree with [in Said's arguments], but much to question also. The high Saidian style speaks with a moral passion that sometimes sacrifices analytic precision to polemical outrage, and his singular commitment to the Palestinian cause could create a severe hierarchy of historical choices. Said's desire to snatch some shred of dignity for his diasporic and misrepresented peoples led him, at times, to pass over distinctions, to resist shades of meaning and interpretations that might have widened the circle of empathetic dialogue.<sup>32</sup>

The example Bhabha uses to illustrate his charge is that Said, though unequivocally condemnatory of Palestinian suicide bombings as a form of resistance, offers an explanation for it, namely that it is

a direct, and in my opinion, a consciously programmed result of years of abuse, powerlessness and despair . . . the response of a desperate and horribly oppressed people, [which] has been stripped of its context and the terrible suffering from which it arises . . . the location of Palestinian terror—of course it is terror—is never allowed a moment's chance to appear . . . so remorseless has been the focus on it as a phenomenon apart, a pure, gratuitous evil which Israel, supposedly acting on behalf of pure good, has been virtuously battling . . .<sup>33</sup>

The problem with this analysis, according to Bhabha, is that it ignores Hamas's "perilous strategies of political control within the Palestinian camp," and most importantly that this "internally destabilizes the emergence of any representative Palestinian leadership that could have the power to negotiate a just and lasting peace on behalf of a united Palestinian people."<sup>34</sup> Bhabha, who as a postcolonial critic is presumably also anti-colonial, never describes the Zionist enterprise or Israeli occupation as having anything to do with colonialism, which leads him to call not for an end to Israel's colonization and occupation, but for a negotiated "just and lasting peace" (terms borrowed from U.S. State Department pronouncements that also never mention colonialism or occupation). And despite Bhabha's attempts to avoid any reference to "colonialism" in his text, it lurks behind every criticism that he levels against Said: ". . . Said's rage

sometimes drives him toward a dark two-dimensionality . . .”<sup>35</sup> presumably that of colonialism and anti-colonialism. Yet Bhabha seems blind to his own “dark two-dimensionality,” namely his juxtaposition of Hamas and Sharon as equally objectionable, on the one hand, and his implicit support for a U.S.-sponsored capitulation dubbed “peace,” on the other.

The question of Said’s “rage” is hardly a Bhabhaesque invention. Standard Zionist attacks on Said have always criticized his “rageful” and “angry” tone, in contrast to the cool rational tone taken by Zionists (and, in this case, by Bhabha).<sup>36</sup> Thus Bhabha, the more careful and nuanced observer who, unlike Said, can perceive “shades of meaning,” is not encumbered by the emotional passions dogging Orientals of the Said variety. Moreover, it would seem that Said, like all Orientals (Bhabha excepted), had mortgaged his reason for the benefit of his passion, as he is at pains to grasp philosophical abstractions: Said, according to Bhabha, was “quite chary of my taste (as he saw it) for conceptual complexities and theoretical abstractions!”<sup>37</sup>

Rejecting the irrational rebarbative solution of Said, Bhabha tells us that his presumably dispassionate “vision” of a solution for the Palestinian condition “would be based on a shared awareness that the territorial security of a peoples [sic] is more relevant today than a nationalistic demand for territorial *integrity* [emphasis in original].”<sup>38</sup> If this sounds suspiciously like the Israeli government formula of “security” as paramount over self-determination, that is because it is. As this Israeli recipe may not be sufficient to convince us in itself, Bhabha further expounds on his “own speculations:”

The time may soon be past for staging the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on a global scale, as the rallying cry of the Zionist-Jewish “project” or the pan-Arab “cause,” because these movements focus too much on the divisive “origins” of the conflict rather than concern themselves with the local lives and regional experiences of communities who live in the shadow lines of everyday conflict . . .<sup>39</sup>

Again, if this sounds like Zionist argumentation, or like a white American reproach to African Americans—namely, that the oppressed must forget the past and not be “stuck” in it and focus on the present situation instead—that is because it is. The fact that Zionist colonialism since its inception drove Palestinians off their lands using European Jewish racial privilege to justify its colonial venture and continues to do so at present seems immaterial to Bhabha. That he ends up calling for a binational state does not mean that Bhabha is endorsing Said’s solution, for Bhabha’s binational state will not undergo a process of decolonization, as the problem for him remains one of “conflict,” not colonialism. For Bhabha the “conflict” is one of competing nationalisms, not of colonialism and national liberation. His refusal to make distinctions between a settler-colonizing nationalism and anti-colonial nationalism manifests clearly in the following assertion: “Despite their enormous political

differences, both political bodies [the Israeli government and the PA] participate in forms of 'traditional nationalism' that are purist and provincial."<sup>40</sup> Such assessments could explain why Bhabha is so popular in some leftist Israeli academic circles.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps Said's concept of what happens to theory when it travels should be applied to *theorists* when *they* travel, becoming "tamed" and "domesticated."

Whatever praise Said receives in this dubious tribute is, at best, of a phatic order. Significantly, Bhabha did not share his views of Said on Palestine and Zionism during Said's lifetime, but chose the occasion of his death to voice them. Bhabha, whose entire oeuvre, as many of his critics have argued, is about *coding passing as resistance*, today represents the right wing of postcolonial studies. He fails to understand that many among the colonized refuse his recipe of "mimicry," no matter how "ambivalent," as a liberationist strategy.

### INTELLECTUALS AS PERFORMERS

Said's intellectual life was not only about particular struggles against injustice and oppression, but also about the struggle to know. He was most concerned with the degradation of knowledge that technicians in the guise of intellectuals would disseminate, whether in the televised and print media or in government parlance. He opposed the cult of the expert in society, as experts need to be certified by powerful institutions and to speak their language, thereby ceasing to be intellectuals. Their role then becomes one of closing debate, not opening it, of serving power, not challenging it, of humoring authority, not speaking truth to it. For Said, "the intellectual ought neither to be so uncontroversial and safe a figure as to be just a friendly technician nor should the intellectual try to be a full-time Cassandra, who was not only righteously unpleasant but also unheard . . . . But the alternatives are not total quiescence or total rebelliousness."<sup>42</sup>

Said's intellectual life was guided by a radical opposition to ignorance and an unwavering commitment to fighting injustice. These are the two axes around which everything he wrote revolved. As a tireless fighter for justice for the Palestinian people, he refused to compromise with racist half measures that kept the Palestinians oppressed while freeing Israel from moral and actual responsibility. In his defense of Islam and Muslims against the onslaught of American racist pronouncements, his principled analysis was not shaken by the events of September 11th. He continued to defend Islam as religion *and* culture against the monstrous misrepresentations of the Western media and Western governments, insisting on humanizing Muslims and Arabs in the face of absolute dehumanization. He did this with a simultaneous condemnation of the killing of civilians, whether by suicide bombers or the U.S. military. His hostility to those individuals (Arabs, Europeans, and Americans) who hired themselves out to the highest bidders, was located precisely in his commitment to informed knowledge against a world dominated by jejune technicians disseminating ignorance as knowledge for the right price.

Said spoke of those intellectuals who would give up their gods readily when a crisis in their belief system occurred and exchange them for other gods whom they would worship in the same way. He discerned this phenomenon in those who supported communism and then transferred allegiance to U.S. imperialism, in those who championed Trotskyism or fundamentalism and then switched to liberalism or neo-conservatism, and in those Arab intellectuals who championed Arab and Palestinian anti-colonial nationalism and then switched to U.S. imperialism and its Zionist subsidiary. He viewed such intellectuals as developing the “despicable habits of collecting rewards and privileges from one team, only for the same individual to switch sides, then collect rewards from a new patron.”<sup>43</sup> To him, such individuals were the antithesis of the intellectual. He asked:

Why as an intellectual did you believe in a god anyway? And besides, who gave you the right to imagine that your early belief and later disenchantment were so important? In and of itself, religious belief is to me both understandable and deeply personal: It is rather when a total dogmatic system in which one side is innocently good, the other irreducibly evil, is substituted for the process, the give-and-take of vital interchange, that the secular intellectual feels the unwelcome and inappropriate encroachment of one realm on another. Politics becomes religious enthusiasm . . . with results in ethnic cleansing, mass slaughter and unending conflicts that are horrible to contemplate.<sup>44</sup>

Said understood that the new god for most technicians is the West. “For the secular intellectuals,” he insisted, “*those* gods always fail.”<sup>45</sup>

Said’s interest in the role of intellectuals went beyond definitions: “In the outpouring of studies about intellectuals there has been far too much defining of the intellectual, and not enough stock taken of the image, the signature, the actual intervention and *performance*, all of which taken together constitute the very lifeblood of every real intellectual [emphasis added].”<sup>46</sup> Said’s peregrinations into the world of music are instructive in this regard. He was fascinated by the question of performance more generally, and by musical performance specifically.<sup>47</sup> For him, a musical performance “is rather like an athletic event in its demand for the admiringly rapt attention of its spectators.”<sup>48</sup> He would speak to the similarities between essayists and performers as commentators on a work of art, a novel, a musical composition, yet although he wrote with much depth about essayists and composers, he wrote with much vigor about novelists and performers (especially pianists). This contrast between his literary fascination with the novelist over the critic and his musical fascination with the performer over the composer comes through in his interest in Glenn Gould, Arturo Toscanini, Maurizio Pollini, and Alfred Brendel, among others. I

do not mean to suggest that Said was not interested in composers, about whom he wrote quite a bit, but merely that his fascination with performers was of a different order.

In discussing performance as “an extreme occasion,” Said stated that “we should begin by noting how the extreme specialization of all aesthetic activity in the contemporary West has overtaken and been inscribed within musical performance so effectively as to screen entirely the composer from the performer.”<sup>49</sup> Unlike Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, and Liszt, who performed their own compositions, modern performers perform the work of others and are rarely composers themselves. (Pierre Boulez and Leonard Bernstein are exceptions, but they are not known principally for performing their own works.<sup>50</sup>) For Said, this marks a major change: “Performance cut off from composing therefore constitutes a special form of ownership and work.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, one could see Said himself not only as a composer of his own work, but also as a performer of the work of others of which he took possession. If Gould appropriated Bach, and Pollini appropriated Chopin, then Said, in performing the works of Vico, Gramsci, Lukács, Adorno, Césaire, Auerbach, Fanon, Foucault, and many more, took ownership of their work and *affiliated* with it, accenting certain ideas over others and rearranging the score to produce different music.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, this is the sense that Said conveys in his essay “Traveling Theory Reconsidered” when discussing the transformation that the work of Lukács underwent at the hands of Adorno and Fanon. Said insisted in his essay that “to speak here only of borrowing and adaptation is not adequate. There is in particular an intellectual, and perhaps moral, community of a remarkable kind, affiliation in the deepest and most interesting sense of the word.”<sup>53</sup>

### READING SAID MUSICALLY

Said was fascinated by the connection between memory and music, by how remembrances of things played, as he once put it, are enacted. Indeed, one of his criticisms of piano performances was their veering off their structured programs, wherein after reaching a climax in the finale, some pianists would take away one’s remembrance of the performance just achieved with an encore that destroys the very structure of the program that one enjoyed.<sup>54</sup> Clearly Said, unlike Adorno, did not think that radio, television, and recordings of musical performances meant a regression in listening *tout court*, nor did he fully agree with Benjamin that mechanical reproducibility had leveled the original and the copy. He remained fascinated by the evanescence of sound in the context of concert performances, which are unrepeatable by definition.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the question of temporality was ever present in his understanding of performance as an extreme occasion. His praise of Umm Kulthum’s musical forms was that they “are based upon an inhabiting of time, not trying to dominate it. It’s a special relationship with temporality.”<sup>56</sup> The quintessential example of this was Glenn Gould, whose reluctance to perform public concerts after 1964

was the emblematic mark of his fame.<sup>57</sup> Said's fascination with Gould had as much to do with Gould's genius per se as it did with how this musical genius enveloped Gould's personal life, making him the eccentric performer he was.

Said, as is well-known, had high aspirations in his youth of becoming a concert pianist. As late as 1993, he gave two concerts with his friend Diana Takieddine (one at the Miller Theater in New York, the other at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.) to packed audiences. They played a range of piano pieces, including Mozart, Schubert, and Chopin. Said loved Chopin and strongly disagreed with those who saw him as a "salon" composer with "effeminate" style.<sup>58</sup> I still remember when a few years ago I mentioned that I enjoyed John Field's Nocturnes more than Chopin's, and that I liked less Chopin's Nocturne No. 2 than Field's No. 1 (both in E-flat major), which Chopin quoted extensively; Edward was furious, yelling at my utter ignorance of Chopin's beauty!

Music for Said was inspiring. When he played Schubert's *Fantasia in F Minor*, op. 103, for a film about him directed by Salem Brahim (the film, shot in late 2002, was titled *Selves and Others: A Portrait of Edward Said*), his face quivered with every note that his hands transposed on the keyboard. It is significant that Schubert wrote his *Fantasia* (a piano duet) in the last year of his short life. One of the most moving aspects in *Fantasia* is a beautiful and sad musical phrase, which Schubert, as in Proust's "little phrase," refuses to let go of. In Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, a sonata for violin and piano by the composer Vinteuil, in which a lovely "petite phrase" recurs again and again, haunts the imagination of Swann (Proust's most cultured and refined character) and leads again and again into the register of memory, where true love is encoded for him. In *Fantasia*, the music veers into more majestic terrain, traveling a whole spectrum of emotions and moods, but always comes back and succumbs to this somber "little phrase" that structures it. It is as if Schubert did not want to end the piece, clinging to the beauty and sadness of that "little phrase," which kept pulling him back, until the very end. One could postulate that Schubert's attachment might have reminded Said of his own attachment to Palestine, which, no matter how far from it he ventured into academic, literary, and musical terrains, always pulled him back. Indeed, Said would always make connections and references to Palestine, even in his more esoteric essays about literature, theory, or music. *Fantasia* might also have served as a kind of premonition for Said that it would be his swansong.

Indeed, Said had sensed his mortality drawing near for some time. This found expression in his commentary on Mozart's Da Ponte operas, where he concludes on a note about Mozart's affinity with and consciousness of his own mortality: "In [*Così fan tutte*], death is rendered less intimidating and formidable than it is for most people. This is not the usual, conventionally Christian sentiment, however, but a naturalist one; death as something familiar and even dear, a door to other experiences." Written in 1997, Said's text betrays his own sense of impending death. He goes on to write, "Yet [death's] prospect also induces a sense of fatalism and lateness—that is, the feeling that one is late in life and the end is near."<sup>59</sup>

One could perhaps read Said himself musically. While his ideas could be said to be chordal compositions when read as an oeuvre, he was always careful to present them in arpeggiated form as well, making certain that every element and every note is *elaborated* in a Gramscian sense.<sup>60</sup> Thus, when the chord is played, it could be appreciated for its synchronously performed constituent components, as a totality. As he wrote in his memoir, Edward Said felt “out of place” much of his life, but he created an intellectual place, even an intellectual world, where he could belong and where he called upon others to join him. The new place that Said created had a new language, a new syntax, a new vocabulary to which those of us who, like him, felt out of place in a terrifyingly unjust world, could belong. The new place he created as a resisting locale came to be populated by so many people around the world that it became a veritable place that protected us and him from the debasement of knowledge and the injustices perpetrated in the name of identities and imperial authority.

## NOTES

1. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 53. The book was first published in 1994 and consisted of the 1993 Reith Lectures.
2. *Ibid.*, 60–61.
3. *Ibid.*, 32.
4. Edward W. Said, “Secular Criticism,” in *The World, The Text and The Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 28.
5. On the transformation of Palestinian intellectuals, see my “Political Realists or Comprador Intelligentsia: Palestinian Intellectuals and the National Struggle,” *Critique* 11 (Fall 1997), pp. 21–35.
6. Said, *Representations*, p. 74.
7. *Ibid.*, 82.
8. *Ibid.*, 83.
9. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 102.
10. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 95.
11. Said, “Traveling Theory,” in *The World, The Text and The Critic*, p. 236.
12. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 160.
13. See Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm, “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse,” *Khamsin* 8 (1980), pp. 5–26.
14. Fred Halliday, for example, complained that Said focused “on discourses *about* the region, not the societies and politics themselves”; see Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* (London: IB Tauris, 1996), p. 201. See my review of Halliday’s book in *JPS* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1997), pp. 112–14.
15. On Said’s influence on the field of anthropology, see Nicholas Dirks’s article in this issue.
16. On Said’s impact on comparative literature, see Tim Brennan’s article in this issue.
17. Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory Reconsidered,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
18. Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, p. 210.
19. See the article by Sabry Hafiz in this issue.
20. Hazim Saghiyyah, the guru of the Arab neoliberals, wrote a deeply unlearned book about Said’s *Orientalism*, in which he dubbed it as part of the rising Khumeiniyist cultures (note the plural). See his *Thaqafat al-Khumayniyyah: Mawqif min al-Istishraq am Harb ‘ala Tayf?* [The Cultures of Khumeinyism: An Attitude towards Orientalism or a War against a Ghost?], (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 1995).
21. *Daily Telegraph*, 12 June 1967, cited in David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch, The Roots of Violence in the Middle East* (New York: Nation Books, 2003), p. 344.
22. Said, “Traveling Theory,” p. 230.
23. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations, Essays and Reflections*, ed.

Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 256.

24. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972).

25. See Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

26. Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), p. 17.

27. *Ibid.*, 46.

28. See his "Permission to Narrate," in Edward W. Said, *The Politics of Dispossession, The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969–1994* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), pp. 247–68.

29. Ari Shavit, "My Right of Return," an interview with Edward Said, *Ha'aretz*, 18 August 2000.

30. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House, Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 43.

31. See my "The 'Post-Colonial' Colony, Time, Space and Bodies in Palestine/Israel," in *The Pre-Occupation of Post-Colonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

32. Homi K. Bhabha, "Untimely Ends," *Artforum* (February 2004), p. 19.

33. *Ibid.*, 19.

34. *Ibid.*, 20.

35. *Ibid.*

36. On Zionist descriptions of Said's rage, see Ella Shohat, "Antinomies of Exile; Said at the Frontiers of National Narration," in *Edward Said, A Critical Reader*, ed. Michael Sprinker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 125–28.

37. Bhabha, "Untimely Ends," p. 20.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. See Ella Shohat's article in this issue.

42. Said, *Representations*, p. 69.

43. *Ibid.*, 112.

44. *Ibid.*, 114.

45. *Ibid.*, 121. For a study of Said's overall views of religion, see William D.

Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

46. Said, *Representations*, p. 13.

47. See Rashid Khalidi's interview with Daniel Barenboim in this issue.

48. Edward W. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 2.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

51. *Ibid.*, 5.

52. For Said's explication of the terms "filiation" and "affiliation," see his "Secular Criticism," in *The World, The Text and the Critic*, pp. 16–25.

53. Said, "Traveling Theory Reconsidered," p. 452.

54. Edward W. Said, "Remembrances of Things Played: Presence and Memory in the Pianist's Art," in Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, pp. 222–23.

55. See Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 270–99, and Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 217–51. For Said's brief discussion of mechanical reproducibility, see Said, "The World, The Text and the Critic," in *The World The Text and the Critic*, pp. 32–33.

56. Gauri Viswanathan, ed., *Power, Politics and Culture. Interviews with Edward W. Said* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), p. 100.

57. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, p. 32. See Said's discussion of Gould in *Musical Elaborations*, pp. 22–34.

58. Said, *Musical Elaborations*, p. 60.

59. Edward W. Said, "Cosi Fan Tutte at the Limits," *Grand Street* 62 (Fall 1997), p. 106.

60. For Said's explication of Gramscian elaboration, see his "Reflections on American 'Left' Literary Criticism," in *The World, The Text, and The Critic*, pp. 170–71.



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