Adagio

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On that day in the fall of 2003 when Edward Said lost his long struggle against all the odds, I remember thinking that we would never hear *that* voice again. His writings were indestructible, his presence memorable, but the fire and fragility of his voice—the ground note of the "individual particular" from which all human narration begins—[1] would be impossible to preserve for another conversation on literature, music, illness, and common friends. Ours was a friendship of infrequent meetings supplemented by telephone conversations, and it was the silencing of his voice that would mark his death. The large gathering of friends, colleagues, and admirers who met at Riverside Church to mourn Edward Said's passing bore testimony to a powerful, public voice that would be long remembered. But this was also the occasion on which his son, Wadie Said, spoke with love, courage, and a touch of childlike incredulity at his father's ability to ever get any work done because he was always on the telephone. "Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation" is an attempt to capture the telephonic timbre in his life and work. Our call to our contributors (the fellowship of the phone!) encouraged them to write with the telephone ringing in their ears waiting to be answered rather than the death knell of disconnection and silence. Speak to Edward, we said, in the spirit of a conversation interrupted, a call on hold, a letter waiting for a reply, a question hanging in the air. Our writers have responded with an imaginative expectancy, and they have turned to his work with questions, reflections, and interventions that have continued the conversation with a compelling candor. You can almost see Edward move

1. Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York, 2004), p. 80; hereafter abbreviated *HDC*.

Critical Inquiry 31 (Winter 2005)

ever so slightly forward to reply, his eyes lit by a friendly but guarded half-shy smile, his long fingers working busily through the argument, making his point, beating the air to rid us of some fond illusion. "What, *what?*" he would say, his voice rising slightly, incredulous and unshakable, "you can't really be serious."

A sudden turn in Said's voice, heard in a *Diacritics* interview when I was a graduate student at Oxford, set off a bell that summoned me to reflect on my own conflicted beginnings. The turn comes in the midst of a discussion of the work of Harold Bloom, when Said admits to performing "a kind of acrobatics" between parallel lives, as avant-garde critic and Palestinian exile.

> My whole background in the Middle East, my frequent and sometimes protracted visits there, my political involvement: all this exists in a totally different box from the one out of which I pop as a literary critic, professor, etc. . . . I am as aware as anyone that the ivory-tower concerns of technical criticism—I use the phrase because it is very useful as a way of setting off what I and the others we've mentioned do from the non-theoretical, non-philosophically based criticism normally found in academic departments of literature—are very far removed from the world of politics, power, domination, and struggle. But there are links between the two worlds which I for one am beginning to exploit in my own work.[2]

The acrobat attempts to achieve a balance between the two worlds, and he returns to the subject of Bloom in an expansive and generous mood: "whatever his political beliefs (Republican or Democratic, Marxist or anti-Marxist) he's hit on something I find absolutely true: that human activity . . . cannot take place without power relationships of the sort he talks about in poetry."[3] I immediately identified with the precariousness of Said's acrobatics and learnt much from his ability to be otherwise engaged, both politically and philosophically, and yet to be capable of a critical assessment that was free and fair. Said's reflections on the complexities of a working life—the twists and turns between theoretical interests and social commit-

2. Said, "Beginnings," interview with *Diacritics,* in *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said,* ed. Guari Viswanathan (New York, 2001), p. 14.
3. Ibid., p. 15.

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ments—were remarkably timely because I was involved in a balancing act of my own.

I was writing on V. S. Naipaul and found myself in something of a quandary. His political opinions on the history of the Third World can be provocative and offensive, even as his insights upon the lifeworld of postcolonial societies are subtle, sharp, surprising. It would have been easy to condemn the former and applaud the latter; and I could have argued, as critics often do, that artists and writers are most creative when they are most contradictory and that literary language works best when it embraces the arts of agonism and ambiguity. My task, however, was tougher than that because the imaginative value of Naipaul's writing lies in its peculiar perversity. His narratives embody their negative energies and prejudicial perspectives with a ferocious passion that is, at once, dogmatic and diagnostic. The reader is given unusual insights into the psychic and affective structures that inform the politics of everyday life as it is lived in the midst of the protocols of colonial power and its contest of cultures. You might find many of Naipaul's ideological positions to be morally and politically objectionable, as I do and Said certainly did; and you may be convinced that they need to be vigorously resisted and opposed, as Said famously did, and I have, too; but contestation and refutation, Said persuasively argues, should be grounded in a philological responsibility that extends to one's affiliates and to one's adversaries. Both aspects of the philological process—reception and resistance—are practices of a skeptical "*para-doxical mode of thought*" that have to risk offending "right-minded people on the two sides" if they are to achieve a humanistic perspective that is both worldly and oppositional (*HDC*, p. 83).

In his posthumously published *Humanism and Democratic Criticism,* Said argues powerfully for a philological practice at the very heart of the project of humanism:

> What I have been calling philological, that is, a detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history . . . . Thus a close reading of a literary text—a novel, poem, essay, or drama, say—in effect will gradually locate the text in its time as part of a whole network of relationships whose outlines and influence play an informing role *in* the text. And I think it is important to say that for the humanist, the act of reading is the act therefore of first putting oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words. [*HDC*, pp. 61–62]

The philological imperative is a curious, paradoxical thing: an exercise in "close reading" effected through critical distance; an act of interpretation

that inhabits the locality of the text (its times, decisions, choices) by wandering through the outlying networks of *les routes peripheriques;* and the process of putting yourself *in the place of* the author, which is a form of affiliation but also a partial substitution and subversion of authorial sovereignty in favor of the critic's revisionary practice. This philological commitment leads to an ironic and agonistic mode of humanistic resistance—a "technique of trouble," Said calls it—echoing R. P. Blackmur's definition of modernism. It is politically progressive *and* temporally recursive; historically contextual *because* it is aesthetically contrapuntal; secular and worldly, its feet on the ground, *despite* its engagement with the provisionality of the present, with "history as an agonistic process still being made" (*HDC*, p. 25). Such paradoxical forms of thought and belief yield the enigmatic burden of the critical humanist's view of emancipation: a song of freedom sung even as the shadows fall across our belief in human survival:

> Humanism, I think, is the means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again, as we encounter our own silence and mortality—all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation. [*HDC*, p. 83]

In this passage, as in so many others, Said speaks in a polyphonic voice weaving together his various subjects with a fugal virtuosity. The antinomian attitude references the radical culture of American humanism; oppositional analyses conceived of in spatial metaphors bring the occupied lands and displaced people of Palestine to the fore; and the quest for knowledge and justice joined in the face of silence and mortality encourages a more general reflection on the unending struggle between human survival and social sovereignty. I cannot read a line of Said's work without being reminded of the salience he gives to the Palestinian situation; and I do not encounter a word of his writings without being made aware of his concern for the human condition. What do we know, nonetheless, of the emergent, recurrent space *between* the realm of words and field of social action occupied by the humanist consciousness and its philological criticism? How do we describe the circuit of experience through which utterance is actualized and resistance achieved before both *turn back again* to silence and mortality?

These are not simply cyclical movements from life to death or from human history to mute nature; silence and mortality, as I read them, are also signs of social death, sites of oppression and exclusion, traces of the denial of human rights, memorials to those willed lapses of memory that bury the past of a displaced and colonized peoples. Said's humanism is not simply a contribution to philological hermeneutics and the philosophy of history; it is also a fruitful reflection on the place of narrative in the practices of everyday life. *After the Last Sky,* Said's poignant and polyphonic portrait of "scene[s] of regular life inside Palestine *[min dakhil Filastin],*"[4] is a meditation on the ethical and political rights that must be restored to subject peoples in order to enable them to narrate their authoritative histories. Said poses questions concerning the role of narrative in the struggle for equitable representation while plotting the displaced lives of the Palestinian peoples (now further fragmented by the Wall and overrun by new settlements) across the unsettled borders of diverse *genres*—testimonies, conversations, ethnographies, photographs, memoirs. Philological humanism harbors an interest in the idea of narration as part of its commitment to close reading and revisionary interpretation; but that pedagogical perspective is surpassed by the commitment of "humanistic resistance" (Said's term) to what appears to be the performative function of narration in "maintaining rather than resolving the tension between the aesthetic and the national, using the former to challenge, reexamine and resist the latter in those slow but rational modes of reception and understanding which is the humanist's way" (*HDC*, p. 78). Why must the narrative of resistance be "slow"?

In an earlier discussion of resistance Said inveighs against the media culture of headlines, sound bites, and telegraphic forms whose rapidity renders the world one-dimensional and homogeneous. Humanist critique must oppose such eye-catching, mind-numbing institutions of instantaneity and adopt narrative forms that are longer and slower, "longer essays, longer periods of reflection" (*HDC*, p. 73). But there is, in my view, more to be said about the uses of slow reflection for humanist practice than its association with the rational would lead us to believe. Slowness is a deliberative measure of ethical and political reflection that maintains tension rather than resolves it; it is a temporal register that regulates the narrative movement through which (in negotiating the unresolved tension between the aesthetic and the national) we make "those connections that allow us to see part and whole, that is the main thing: what to connect with, how, and how not?" (*HDC*, p. 78). In making visible the complex and conflictual relations of part and

4. Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York, 1999), p. 76; hereafter abbreviated *A*.

whole—overdetermination, liminality, translation, displacement, minoritization, domination—slowness articulates the movement that exists *between* the space of words and the social world, and it strengthens our resolve to make difficult and deliberate choices relating to knowledge and justice—"how, and how not?"—in the face of contingency, silence, and mortality.

The slow narrative of humanistic critique creates opportunities for oppositional writing—the resistance of the part to the hegemonic whole—in the process of constructing subaltern or antinomian solidarities: whom to connect with? how do I form my chain of witnesses, my interdependent systems of support that enable "the practice of identities other than those given by the flag or the national war of the moment" (*HDC*, p. 80)? Said's response to such questions would be twofold. He would suggest, perhaps, that the importance of keeping alive the tension between part and whole is crucial to his own Adorno-inspired political phenomenology of the exile—bearer of oppositional analyses and maker of antinomian alliances. In the realm of the new humanistic learning this slow tension of open questions and emerging fields—located between partial realms and holistic cultures—would promote a minoritarian curriculum based on what Said describes in an interview as "massive transversals of one realm into another; . . . . the study of . . . integrations and interdependence [that is, "emergent transnational forces like Islam"] versus studies dominated by nationalities and national traditions."[5] He recommends the study of refugee societies in order to unsettle the paradigmatic stability of cultural institutions that underpin the traditional assumptions of the social sciences; and he resists the "separate essentialization" of national or cultural ideal-types—*the* Jew, *the* Indian, *the* French—because such "universals" represent the imperial legacy "by which a dominant culture eliminated the impurities and hybrids that make up all cultures."[6] Salman Rushdie is enthusiastically welcomed into the humanistic fold for having performed a transformative act of postcolonial magic by "introduc[ing] a particular kind of hybrid experience into English."[7] And Said admires García Márquez and Rushdie for their interest in issues of exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries and considers the "whole notion of a hybrid text" as practiced by them to be "one of the major contributions of late-twentieth-century culture."[8]

5. Said, "Criticism, Culture, and Performance," interview with Bonnie Marranca, Marc Robinson, and Una Chaudhuri, *Power, Politics, and Culture,* p. 115.

6. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York, 1991), p. 52; hereafter abbreviated *ME.*

7. Said, "The Road Less Traveled," interview with Nirmala Lakshman, *Power, Politics, and Culture,* p. 416.

8. Said, "Criticism and the Art of Politics," interview with Jennifer Wicke and Michael Sprinker, *Power, Politics, and Culture,* p. 148.

The slow pace of critical reflection resists processes of totalization—analytic, aesthetic, or political—because they are prone to making "transitionless leaps" into realms of transcendental value, and such claims must be severely scrutinized (*HDC*, p. 80). The secular narrative of slowness and revisionary repetition has a remarkable capacity for enduring and enunciating unsettled states of transition, moments when history seems to be in a hiatus, times at which the humanist's faith hesitates or loses hope. In repeatedly asking the question of the part from the minoritarian perspective, posing that slow question of articulation and affiliation—"what to connect with, how, and how not?"—both enlarges and transgresses the civil society of the nation by confronting its self-regarding and self-enclosing sovereignty with the right to settlement of the unnamed and the undocumented:

> Always and constantly the undocumented turbulence of unsettled and unhoused exiles, immigrants, itinerant or captive populations for whom no document, no adequate expression yet exists to take account of what they go through . . . . Humanism, I strongly believe, must excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn't make it onto the reports. [*HDC*, p. 81]

When you are so severely out of place, your recovery may also seem somewhat slow, out of time, bit by bit, part upon part. And at that point, in the paradoxical style of humanist thinking, you are forced to ask: Who sets the pace of my historical recovery of land, rights, and respect? are these partial moments, and movements, a kind of regrouping of forces, or do they yield to a dominating strategy of divide and rule?

Said asks himself questions like these in the mid-1980s, and his response to them is mixed. Since 1967 there has been a growth of "smaller, more varied configurations," institutions of Palestinian civil society committed to the ideal of *sumud* (both the principles of and the group of Palestinians willing to stay in the Occupied Territories, being steadfast in their desire to stay on against the odds) that disrupt or disturb "the blanket of power over us." These efforts have led to alternative civic institutions like cultural centers that serve as networks for schools, women's groups, cooperatives, and NGOs. The destruction of tribal and clan-based leaderships has created a new cadre of leaders who have grown in confidence because they combine popular grassroots support with a genuine wish for an equitable coexistence with Israel. "Confident, educated, and above all open to the realities of Israel, these new men and women radiate a kind of hopeful security that exiles like myself envy" (*A*, p. 112). Is this form of partial, minoritarian affiliation, across class interests and gendered identities, the wave of the future for all

of us—irrespective of nation, race, and culture—who hope to survive the destructive element?

Committing himself to the "undocumented turbulence" of the wretched of the earth of our times, Said echoes Frantz Fanon's descriptions of the "occult instability" of the decolonizing consciousness in the mid-twentieth-century wars of independence. Both Fanon and Said died of leukemia, almost half a century apart, in hospital beds on the East Coast of the United States, only a few hundred miles from each other. Both of them produced last books beckoning the world towards an aspirational "new" humanism. Fanon, however, wrote (or so he thought) with his foot on the threshold of a Third World of nations, on the verge of "start[ing] over a new history of man." Said could be persuaded of no such humanist haven. The "unsettled energy" of the times, or what he describes elsewhere as "the implacable energy of place and displacement," provides him with a double vision of history in which tragedy and transition, incarceration and emancipation seem to be part of the same unravelling thread of events. It is from the turbulence of wars, occupations, segregations, and evictions that there emerges a resistant hope that these unsettled energies of place and displacement will settle into a design for living with shared borders and contrapuntal histories. If oppression and destruction can tear down walls and destroy frontiers, then why can't those gates remain open, those spaces be deterritorialized in times of peace? It is as if hostility brings us closer to our neighbors in a deadly embrace than hospitality ever can. "Why do you think I'm so interested in the bi-national state?" Said asks the Israeli journalist Ari Shavit. "Because I want a rich fabric of some sort, which no one can fully comprehend, and no one can fully own. I never understood the idea of this is my place, and you are out. I do not appreciate going back to the origin, to the pure."[9]

A rich tapestry of visions and voices appears in a photograph that accompanies a prose poem in *After the Last Sky;* it is part of a series of descriptions of the interiors of Palestinian homes. The patterns of life and art that Said associates with the Palestinian experience—"broken narratives, fragmentary compositions, and self-consciously staged testimonials" (*A*, p. 38)—are recognizably modernist forms of narrative representation that ring true for the persecution of minorities. Said starts the sequence by turning to Freud's concept of the compulsion to repeat as a leitmotif of everyday life. In a loose translation of the demonic dance between repetition and the death drive, he suggests that the Palestinian's fundamental sense of loss and displacement repeats and refigures itself in rituals of excess: "too many

9. Said, "My Right of Return," interview with Ari Shavit, *Power, Politics, and Culture,* p. 457.

places at a table; too many pictures; too many objects; too much food. . . . We keep recreating the interior. . . . but it inadvertently highlights and preserves the rift or break fundamental to our lives" (*A*, p. 58). There is a slowness, a deferral, in this narrative of an interior life where the baroque elements of excess barely conceal the fear of repetition, the possibility that evacuation and exile may occur again. And yet, if the compulsion to repeat is the tragic sign of a fundamental rift or displacement, its *excessive* (and asymmetric) embellishments of unfurnished lives—too many carpets, pictures, figurines, flags, photographs—are more comedic in their collective, communitarian spirit of survival and celebration. "The rift is usually expressed as a comic dislocation," Said writes, which leaves us, once again, with a version of a question I posed earlier: What do all these parts add up to? parts of a home; parts of a past; parts of an interior life; parts of memory; parts of a dispersed peoples? All part(s) of a larger pattern that repeatedly stages the problem of "those connections that allow us to see part and whole, that is the main thing: what to connect with, how, and how not?" (*HDC*, p. 78). What part do these partial connections play in providing us with some small, modest piece of knowledge that might help us to understand something about the shape of liberation?

An answer, I believe, is to be found in those interiors where the partial objects or symbols of a larger historic life continually vie for our attention, changing their locations and locutions, transiting from one narrative or phenomenal form to another. "Always infinitesimally varied, interiors will ultimately attract the attention of the outside observer—as it has caught Jean Mohr's eye" (*A*, p. 61). There is something fugal, a kind of polyphonic arrangement, in this repetition of peoples, things, images, and stories dedicated to the larger labor of memory and history. Sometimes this fugal figure is found in a rich tapestry or carpet of contrasting weaves; sometimes it hangs off the tongue or the page in a complex and constant transposition of the modalities of theme, character, and narrative person; sometimes it is heard in the polyphony of musical voices, in the contrapuntal arrangement of subjects and countersubjects. Each excessive element plays an equal part in the recall of memory and the remaking of a fragmented history: the carpet is of no greater value in this narrative than the photograph, or the broken doll, or the cherished teapot.

It is from Said's figurative descriptions of Palestinian interiors and interiority that we understand a certain measure of equality in representation that exists in the polyphonic voices and contrapuntal structures that make up the rich fabric of fugal music. Polyphony and contrapuntality are amongst Said's most commonly used poetic and political metaphors to describe the procedures of philological reception and resistance: "And so mul-

tiple identity, the polyphony of many voices playing off against each other, without, as I say, the need to reconcile them, just to hold them together, is what my work is all about."[10] Polyphonic music is, of course, a strict style with prescriptive formal procedures and progressions. But its enthralling impression of effortless improvisation—"something plastic and benign" (*ME*, p. 72)—comes from the way in which it structures and restructures an equitable, dialogic relationship between part and whole through the processes of repetition and counterpoint. I am tempted to suggest that even more than the sheer plurality and virtuosity of voices, polyphony provides us with a figurative vision of the possibilities of fairness and freedom in the midst of complex transitional structures. Is there a moral to be drawn from a musical form that might just illuminate the ethical and political norms by which we live? There is something resembling a democratic practice that runs through the fugal form and establishes the convention that several voices must, at different times, claim the character of a main part; that the contrapuntal process should express the feelings and aspirations of several peoples; and that the combination of subjects and structures ensures that each voice is answerable to the other.[11]

What, then, of the narrative of slowness? In developing this theme, I am aware that I may be making my own beginnings from what are, in the general scheme of things, only the odds and ends of Said's *oeuvre*. There is, however, a mention of slowness in Said's thoughts on musical elaboration, illustrated by a passage from Bruckner's Ninth Symphony, that is memorable in itself and would make a fitting memorial to the passing of Edward's life. As against the "administrative and executive authority" audible in the "finished perfection" of the sonata form, Said confesses to a preference for the contrapuntal elaborations of imitation, repetition, and ornamentation because there the process of transformation "can occur *slowly* not only because we affirm and reaffirm its repetition, its meandering course, but also because it too seems to be about the same process . . . something both reflective and circular" (*ME*, p. 102). And as I listened to that passage from Bruckner and reflected on the transformations that shaped Said's work a thought occurred to me: Supposing we considered death neither to be a cessation of life nor an afterlife, but a slowing down, a transformation that eases away from the administrative and executive burdens of life and labor and turns into the meandering ways of memory, the reflective surfaces of writing, the fluid embrace of music?

10. Said, "Criticism, Culture, and Performance," p. 99.

11. See *New Grove Dictionary of Music,* s.v. "polyphony." I have made a composite definition to suit my purposes here.