

UNTIMELY ENDS

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ABSTRACT

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FULL TEXT

UNTIMELY ENDS HOMI K. BHABHA ON EDWARD SAID

When you think about it, when you think about Jew and Palestinian not separately, but as part of a symphony, there is something magnificently imposing about it. A very rich, also very tragic, also in many ways desperate history of extremes . . . that is yet to receive its due.

-Edward W. Said¹

THE UNTIMELINESS of Edward Said's death was persistently mentioned in the press and poignantly remarked upon, again and again, by his friends. By the time he passed away in the early hours of September 25, Edward Said had survived a decade of disease, his leukemia always lying in wait for him, drenching his nights in sweats, draining his days with medical tests, transfusions, and drug protocols. Nonetheless, Said resisted the lurking power of the illness to lay him waste; he embraced its dire circumstance as an authorial avocation—a way of living, working, and writing—in a world in which, for him at least, time was running out. After the diagnosis of his illness, Said embarked on a remarkable extension of his activities, adding over a dozen new books, hundreds of essays, and several television programs and piano recitals to an already daunting oeuvre. His travel schedule became a relentless game of catch-as-catch-can with his cancer, as Edward dodged the impediments of illness to take his message—political, literary, musical—to eager audiences who clamored for more. "If I stop moving and writing, I will die," he said to me early last summer; and this autumn, with only weeks to live, he tried to persuade me that he could hardly make an untimely exit while "those [expletives deleted] men, Arafat and Sharon, wreak their havoc." In Edward's passing there was as little a sense of peace or reconciliation as there exists today in that much troubled region of his mind and heart, the Middle East.

In one of his last essays, "Dignity, Solidarity and the Penal Colony,"² Said prefaces his political remarks with a reflection on the sort of clarity that comes from the incarceration of the infirm, a penal colony of a kind.

For the past three months now I have been in and out of the hospital, with days marked by lengthy and painful treatments, blood transfusions, endless tests, hours and hours of unproductive time spent staring at the ceiling, draining fatigue and infection, inability to do normal work, and thinking, thinking, thinking.

But there are also the intermittent passages of lucidity and reflection that sometimes give the mind a perspective

on daily life that allows it to see things (without being able to do much about them) from a different perspective.

A first reading of this essay does not provide a "different perspective" so much as a late summation of Said's lasting views on the political psychopathology of Ariel Sharon's policies and the injustices of various Israeli governments. There is much to agree with, 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.

For instance, while Said was unwavering in his belief that Palestinian violence is politically counter-productive and destructive of the ethical lifeworld of the community, he was equally resolute in his belief that Palestinian terror is, as he argues in "Dignity, Solidarity and the Penal Colony,"

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. . . .

Said was careful to note that he spoke for the "location" of terror rather than its justification. It must, however, be acknowledged, pace Said, that the complex, overdetermined conditions of "Palestinian terror"-desperation, despair, indignity, the asymmetries of power and influence-are now a vital part of most international discourses on the intractable impasse in the Middle East, while few members of the international community see the current Israeli government as the good knight engaged in a Manichaean battle against evil. Indeed, the chorus against such a view grows daily in progressive circles within Israel and beyond. If the location of terror is somewhat simplified in Said's account, its many, oddly angled implications are also planed down. The horror of suicide bombings, for instance, lies not only in the occasion they provide for Sharon to launch his deadly retaliations and provocations, as Said tirelessly pointed out. But these acts of desperate violence, most observers would now agree, are also supported by groups like Hamas who initiate perilous strategies of political control within the Palestinian camp. They create what could be called an "imbalance of terror," which 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.

If Said's rage sometimes drives him toward a dark two-dimensionality, there is often a fuller hopefulness that follows not far behind. For instance, toward the midpoint of "Dignity, Solidarity and the Penal Colony" something surprising happens. From behind the obstructive, otiose presences of the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government there emerges a fine rim of hope-a creative construction of Palestinian community becomes visible in a silhouette of survival and self-governance. This faint light is no mean thing for a peoples whose collective existence is deemed indeterminate, whose political sovereignty is as yet indistinct, and whose territorial integrity remains undefined. Here is the passage I have been alluding to:

Nonetheless it may seem quixotic for me to say, even if the immediate prospects are grim from a Palestinian perspective, they are not all dark. The Palestinians stubbornly survive, and Palestinian society-devastated, nearly ruined, desolate in so many ways-is, like Hardy's thrush in its blastberuffled plume, still capable of flinging its soul upon the growing gloom. . . . Only a minuscule fraction of this energy has ever found its way into the Palestinian Authority, which except for the highly ambivalent figure of Arafat has remained strangely marginal to the common

fate. According to recent polls [in the early summer of 2003], Fateh and Hamas between them have the support of roughly 45 percent of the Palestinian electorate, with the remaining 55 percent evolving quite different, much more hopeful-looking political formations.

One in particular has struck me as significant (and I have attached myself to it) inasmuch as it now provides the only genuine grassroots formation that steers clear both of the religious parties and their fundamentally sectarian politics, and of the traditional nationalism offered up by Arafat's old (rather than young) Fateh activists. It's been called the National Political Initiative (NPI) and its main figure is Mostapha Barghuti, a Moscow-trained physician, whose main work has been as director of the impressive Village Medical Relief Committee, which has brought health care to more than 100,000 rural Palestinians. . . . Singularly free of conventional rhetoric, Barghuti has worked with Israelis, Europeans, Americans, Africans, Asians, Arabs to build an enviably well-run solidarity movement that practices the pluralism and co-existence it preaches.

The dread untimeliness of Said's illness and death with which I began now turns full circle into a kind of hopeful untimeliness that inspires an idea of the survival of the Palestinian peoples. What is the spirit of untimeliness as a collective act of survival, and a communal form of self-constitution? In Said's late text, untimeliness represents a defiance of the dominant-yet doomed-forms of historical understanding and political representation embodied in both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli state. These governing bodies purport to own the present and speak dogmatically for the moment, and in that sense they empower themselves by laying claim to the timely truths that control the meanings and materials of contemporary life from the hegemonic perspective of the "reasons" of state. Despite their enormous political differences, both political bodies participate in forms of "traditional nationalism" that are purist and provincial. The untimely, like the thrush's leap into the gloom, invests its hopes in solidarity movements that practice pluralism rather than encourage polarization. "Maybe time is running out," a journalist once suggested to Said, who drew strength from the utopianism of the untimely. he shot back, "We fight on. And we keep saying, 'We're going to live together with you.' That no matter what they do, we're a shadow."³

Said did not, to my knowledge, extend this suggestive figure of the "shadow" into a fuller vision of solidarity, so what I propose here are very much my own speculations.⁴ As part of a politics of the untimely—a refusal to accept the proscriptions, prejudices, and protocols of an exigent, embattled present—a "shadowed" solidarity would represent a desire for collective survival rather than sovereignty. No matter how out of place (or time) such an aspiration would seem to be—"that no matter what they do, we're a shadow"—a shadowed mutuality does not demean the dominated, nor does it evacuate substance and authority from either the Palestinian or the Jewish peoples. It is a process of affiliation that conceives of sovereignty in ways that are different from the governing assumptions of ethno-nationalist exclusivity. "Shadowing" doggedly affirms the enduring hope for a politics of proximity in a current situation in which only polarization and alienation seem possible. It would be based on a shared awareness that the territorial security of a peoples is more relevant today than a nationalistic demand for territorial integrity. Physical barriers and border posts cannot ensure safety or security to either side in a conflict in which the annihilation of human life itself—Israel's "targeted assassinations" or Hamas's "suicide bombings"—have become the demonic symbols of a politics of death that tragically purports to keep alive the dignity and autonomy of people. The time may soon be past for staging the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on a global scale, as the rallying cry for 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—beset, day by day, with the problems of death and mourning, diaspora and resettlement, racial discrimination and human rights abuses, the immiseration of civic life and the militarization of citizenship. It is this kind of poetic and pragmatic thinking that, at its best, is invested in the aspirational ideal of Israel-Palestine as a binational state. Said's prefiguration of a shadowed, dual citizenship would see "sovereignty as a step toward a more generous idea of coexistence, of being-in-the-world ... [so that] the

better option would be to say that sovereignty should gradually give way to something that is more open and more livable."⁵

The wake and weary ghost of Edward Said will continue to stalk us not because we agreed or disagreed with him—he was quite chary of my taste (as he saw it) for conceptual complexities and theoretical abstractions!—but because he cared so desperately about the "worldliness" of knowledge and its powers of aesthetic and political "affiliation." Worldliness forces the location of cultural practices back into the mundane, the contextual, the historical detail of everyday life; affiliation is a process of dynamic articulation that draws explicit and metaphoric connections between practices, individuals, classes, geographies. Said's canonical texts—*Orientalism* (1978), *After the Last Sky* (1986), *Cultural and Imperialism* (1993)—chart the worldly course of colonial and postcolonial discourses of stereotype, "otherness," and foreignness as they are established in the imaginative and institutional archives of Empire. Said's critical power lies in revealing strategies of affiliation through which the abject "subject"—be it a person, a group, or a body of texts—can encounter the freedom of agency and interpretation, thereby fulfilling the mission of secular humanism. The secular intellectual is unfettered by absolutist or foundationalist beliefs: secularism is an interpretational, hermeneutic kind of humanism, open to dialogue and dispute; its values are relational and aspectual; its principles are to be found not in norms but in processes, in modes of making or in poesis. The philological pursuit, as Said puts it, consists in "making ... a place for works [and peoples] that are otherwise alien and distant. [It is concerned with]... the world of history as it is made by human beings . . . [and] . . . the mission of understanding to apprehend, criticize, influence and judge." Much of Said's best work is marked by his subversive location in a long line of historicists and philologists—Vico, Auerbach, Massignon, Lukacs—from whom he learned, and against whom he rebelled. If Massignon is, as in Said's memorable description, the "philologist as guest, as spiritual traveler extraordinary,"⁷ then Said is the secular traveler extraordinary, whose "traveling theory"⁸ introduces the phenomenology of the late-twentieth-century intellectual as exile—"on a constantly shifting ground, where relationships are not inherited, but created"—into the Eurocentric philology of an earlier age, changing the shape of our cultural maps and the course of our political questions.

Sidebar

THE DREAD UNTIMELINESS OF EDWARD SAID'S DEATH NOW TURNS FULL CIRCLE INTO A KIND OF HOPEFUL UNTIMELINESS THAT INSPIRES AN IDEA OF THE SURVIVAL OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLES.

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3. Edward W. Said, "I've Always Learnt During the Class," in *Power, Politics, and Culture*, 288.
4. See my extended version of this point in the forthcoming issue of *Critical Inquiry*, "Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation," ed. Homi K. Bhabha and W.J.T. Mitchell.
5. Said, "My Right of Return," 452-53.
6. Edward W. Said, preface to *Orientalism*, twenty-fifth-anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), xxix.
7. Edward W. Said, "Islam, Philology, and French Culture: Renan and Massignon," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 288.
8. The title of one of his most celebrated and central essays, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, ch. 10.
9. Said, "My Right of Return," 457.

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