The Public Discourse of Edward Said

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Few authors today are as prolific as Edward Said. The author of almost two dozen books, Said has written on a broad array of topics ranging from literary criticism to Middle East politics to opera, film, and travel. His views, marked by an engaging communicative energy, have reached a wide audience through his publications, articles and books, whether the subject is Joseph Conrad, Richard Wagner, or Palestine and the peace process. He is also the subject of several full-length works and anthologies of critical essays; indeed, there are at least a half dozen publications every year on his work, and books offering critical perspective on Edward Said have become a growth industry in themselves. So much has been written by and about him simply because he has had such a profound impact on so broad a range of fields that it is easy to lose sight of one important distinction: the difference between the realms of literature and culture, where Said has had his main effect, and the quite distinct reality of the question of Palestine.

Of course there are similarities in the ways in which Said has affected our understanding of both realms of literature and culture and the question of Palestine. Over nearly three decades, his seminal scholarly publications, formal public lectures, and classroom teaching have significantly changed the way in which Americans and others all over the world perceive the people of Palestine and the contours of the conflict between Arabs and the Israelis. Said's publications, including *The Question of Palestine*, *Covering*

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Islam, After the Last Sky, Blaming the Victims, The Politics of Dispossession, and *Peace and its Discontents*, have had a marked and sustained influence. Most of these titles are still in print, which is evidence of their continuing timeliness and relevance, confirming Said's presence on the international stage as one of the most forceful public intellectuals of our time, a man who evokes interest in the general public for his passionate humanism, his cultivation and erudition, his provocative views, and his unswerving commitment to the cause of Palestinian self-determination.

One measure of the fluidity and range of Said's thought is his ability to revisit arguments made in his books and essays not merely to defend and elaborate on them, but, more important, both to mark their limits and probe their extended possibilities, especially in contexts other than those which first gave rise to them. In other words, Said travels with his ideas as far as they can go, long after they were first articulated, and he applies the same skepticism toward uncritical assimilation of his work as he reserves in general to his now famous formulation about "traveling theory." In the essay of the same name, published in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), Said argued that theories developed in local contexts tend to lose their elasticity and become diluted in power and meaning when transported elsewhere. In their attenuated form, theories can be no more than strategic methods, with system and procedure taking the place of genuine thought.

The weakened force of traveling theories challenges the conventional notion that one of the ways influence carries its weight is by claiming the power of empire, too, that the "universal is always achieved at the expense of the native, as Said argues in an interview entitled "Criticism, Culture, and Performance." It is only when local knowledge can be brought to bear on texts, which are restored to their situations and locales, that readings can

contest the languages of universalism and standardization. An example of the productive uses of bringing in the local context is Said's description of Albert Camus's use of the cultural discourse of the French Lycee to stall the rise of an independent Algeria in the same interview above. This is an interpretative method Said uses when he reads his own work in response to interviewers' questions. Extending the critique of universalism to his own work, Said draws attention to the localized conditions of knowledge production affecting one's understanding not only of the works one studies but also of those one writes. Being interviewed in so many parts of the world, he is invariably asked to respond to the concerns most pertinent to those places and to rethink his own work in relation to those different concerns. Take, for example, the question of Said's impact on historians of India. He is asked in an interview at Calcutta ("I've Always Learnt During the Class") whether it is not the case that, as a result of his influence on colonial discourse studies, Indian history writing has been "derailed" from its social history agenda. The interviewer's suggestion is that the writing of Indian postcolonial history might have continued to follow the Marxist trajectory that dominated the school of Indian historiography were it not for Said's interventions in cultural politics, which diverted the scholarly focus from class analysis to a study of the discursive power of colonial texts and their representations. The interviewer's question highlights the fact that, in postcolonial societies, there is no commonly agreed-upon approach to "decolonizing the mind," to use N'gugi wa Thiong's famous phrase. We learn that what might appear as a revolutionary moment in the Western academy, with the advent of postcolonial studies stimulated largely by Said's work, is received with reserve and caution in some postcolonial societies.

Without minimizing the specificity of different colonial histories, Said's response bemoans the tendency to consider historical study as divorced

from considerations of language and form, just as literature is considered to be separate from history and politics. Both literature and history involve the sifting of evidence and interpretation, he points out, and the idea that somehow the writing of history can be hijacked by focusing on discourses of power begs the question of whether facts can be studied independently of the ways in which they have been presented and recorded in language. Nonetheless, the exchange is a reminder that resistances to a writer's influence also signal attempts to restore the local density of different histories. Ironically, both Said and his interviewers agree on this notion, though the point of departure in raising it is the charge that the sense of the local is lost in Saidian-inspired criticism. Once again, Said is provided with an opportunity to expand on his arguments and, through a questioning of this theory's limits, bring himself closer to the particular concerns of the cultures whose journalists and scholars are talking to him.

Said's response to interviewers' questions enact the way knowledge arises from interactions with others that he describes in *Orientalism, The World, the Text, and the Critic*, and *Culture and Imperialism*. How people know is an important part of his preoccupations, particularly when it is framed as cultural and political exchange and interviews like this go a long way toward illuminating this process. As Said repeatedly points out, his driving interest is in how systems and institutions come into being, how they acquire the force that they do, and what new forms of thought and representations they stabilize through their discursive power. If Said turns such questions inward on his own writings, it is a measure of how insistently he submits to the same standard of accountability to political exigencies and historical circumstances that he applies to the works he studies. Interviews like this show that the investigation of knowledge production is simultaneously an introspective project for Said, though not necessarily in the sense that its

ultimate goal is hermeneutic or psychoanalytical self-analysis. For in more than autobiographical ways, Said's public discourse has the virtue of compelling writers to turn their critical gaze on the circumstances that produce their own works, and thus acts as catalysts for self-examination. In Said's case, self-searching reproduces the forms and procedures of critical scrutiny of other texts.

This double movement is amply evident in interviews Said gives. Take, for instances, Said's reflections on the work that catapulted him onto the international stage, *Orientalism*. Obviously, many interviewers come back to this book as a pivotal point of reference for their queries about the relations between knowledge and power, representation and authority, and about the influence of such thinkers as Foucault, Gramsci, and Vico on Said's articulation of these connections. Many interviewers, riding the wave of poststructuralism, prod Said to think anew about what might be construed as a negative view of agency. In this perception, webs of power constructed by and around discourse rob individuals of the capacity to resist power or rewrite it in terms that restore agency to themselves. In other words, does Said truly believe that individuals are doomed to inhabit the representations that usurp their own lived reality? Is there no way out of the prison of Orientalist representations?

However, far from attributing total coercive power to discourse, Said refers on more than one occasion to Orientalism as a "meaningful" rather than meaningless system of discursive rule. In a move that puts distance between himself and Foucault, Said instead prefers to view Orientalist representations for what they enable through the mechanisms of power. At first glance, "enablement" appears to suggest no more than that Orientalism produces a whole field of study in the form of comparative religion, literary studies, and anthropology, so that its productive value — its establishment

of academic disciplines — is really an ironic outcome of negative perceptions of the non-Western world. After all, Foucault had earlier suggested that discourses of power did not constrain individuals so much as they produced civil subjects of the state, so that Said's analysis might appear merely an orthodox extension of Foucault's.

But by placing himself in the narrative as a formerly colonized subject, having gone through an Anglicized education in Cairo that trained him to know more about the Enclosure Act than Arab history, Said makes room for a dynamic concept of critical consciousness. In a major move, he turns Orientalism into a trigger for both critique and self-examination. Let us be clear about one thing: autobiography does not often intrude into Said's works. However, when it does, as in the introductory chapter in *Orientalism*, autobiography is turned to devastating effect. Under a subsection pointedly titled "The Personal Dimension," Said refers to the "punishing destiny" of being a Palestinian in the West, held hostage by dehumanizing ideologies. This disheartening experience leads him to study Orientalism, as he remarks, in order to "inventory the traces" upon him of the dominating culture. A term borrowed from the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci, "inventory" refers at once to stocktaking and filling out the historical record. One of the most significant lines in all of Said's works, in my view, is the one in *Orientalism* when he writes: "I have tried to maintain a critical consciousness as employing those instruments of historical, humanistic, and cultural research of which my education has made me the fortunate beneficiary."

This a vital key to Said's method and purpose: Orientalism is not finally an annihilating system; rather, in a boomerang effect, it equips its subjects with a critical repertoire that ultimately is used, ironically, to contest Orientalism's' power and reach. This conviction pervades much of Said's

works and interviews, and it provides the dialectical energy for considering negative representations of "Orientals," not in order to wallow in a rhetoric of victimization but to deflect such representations back toward their perpetrators, using the tools of humanistic research bestowed by them. This partly explains Said's avowed humanism, his repeated insistence on the pleasure of the text. No small part of Said's delight in the works he studies and teaches is that he can read them with keen attentiveness to the imagery, vocabulary, and structure of Orientalist representations, which he insistently shows as being at the aesthetic core of many literary texts. Far from rejecting these works as despicable products of modern Orientalism, Said is clearly fascinated by them, and he believes their aesthetic value is not compromised but rather defined by the political interests that determine their writing in the first place. Thus, to read literature outside its political contexts and origins in the name of aesthetic appreciation produces only false or incomplete readings. Such approaches, he argues, turn a blind eye to the vital conjunction between aesthetics and power.

Said's love of literature is writ large in both his writings and his interviews, even in those in which the main topic is Palestine and the peace process. Interestingly, he evokes the pleasure of aesthetics to drive home his point that systematized thinking narrows one's perspective and produces rigidities in place of a creative openness to discovery and knowledge. Even more than his writings, the interviews reveal a man in profound conflict with schematizations of all kinds. At times the conflict is so intense as to make palpable Said's impatience with patterned, predictable reasoning. He does so in ways that self-consciously evoke the dangers and risks of uncharted exploration. For instance, in a *Diacritics* interview "Beginnings," Said points up an opposition between systematized thinking and hedonism, defining the latter as the refusal to ply the well-trodden

path. It is the use of the word *hedonism* that compels attention, accounting perhaps for the reason that literary texts embedded in the perversions of Orientalist logic so fascinate him, as if there is an element of alienation in the very thing that attracts him. In fact, at times the literary becomes synonymous with a complex mix of unpredictability, self-indulgence, and unregulated, even unrestrained cognition. Most important, even as literature is believed to evoke cultural tradition and heritage, its resistance to predictable regimens paradoxically breaks it away from the sense of a past, or what Said describes as "freeing oneself of one's past attachments and habits and alliances." The residual hedonism in critical acts is thus for him a strategic form of knowledge.

Said's aesthetic concerns are therefore much larger than what discussions focused primarily on discourse and power in *Orientalism* allow. Such discussions confine his literary criticism to the analysis of representations and stereotypes, and minimize his notion of aesthetic experience as both a response to and an account of multiple cultural influences. On the contrary, his most recent work is the culmination of a critical path which began with the pressures upon him to reveal not a single identity or a single awareness, but rather a composite of cultures, identities, and affiliations. Such complex formations mark the advent of both the modern novel and the modern subject, deracinated and dislocated from one place and time. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said had already begun to explore imperialism's impact on the novel form by looking in the space and time of empire. In evoking the musical concept of counterpoint, he extended the range of analysis of literary texts by listening to the multiple mix of voices playing off against each other. Said explicitly links his critical method with his experience of exile: "If you're an exile — which I Felt myself, in many ways, to have been — you always bear within yourself a recollection of what

you've left behind and what you can remember, and you play it against the current experience." This a marvelous illustration of the productive uses of counterpoint, explaining Said's deep, abiding interest in music for the expressive means it offers him for living, thinking, and reading in modes of simultaneity, connection and opposition.

Even while Said estranges readings of *Orientalism* that stress only its Foucaultian derivation, there is another kind of estrangement that occurs when he is engaged in different parts of the globe, especially in the Arab world. One of his most revealing engagements, "*Orientalism*, Arab Intellectuals, Marxism, and Myth in Palestinian History," was published in the Arab periodical *Al Jadid*, in which he responds to an interlocutor's queries about the reception of *Orientalism* by Islamic figures. Said is categorical in his rejection of readings that appropriate the book for advancing an Islamic agenda, on the premise that his critique of Western representations of Islam opens the door for claiming him as a spokesperson for Islam. This is a delicate matter, as it might easily be argued that authors who critique distortions in the media and literature do so in order to uphold some idea of a "true" representation to which they are sympathetic. To disavow sympathy must surely invite the charge of insincerity at best or betrayal at worst. Said is aware of this, just as he is also conscious of how little control authors have over the ways in which their writings are interpreted or used.

If *Orientalism* has become a rallying text around which those frustrated by persistent distortions of their culture and religion have mobilized, Said finds himself challenged to accommodate interpretations that stretch the limits of his own purposes and intents. He realizes he cannot draw a line and claim he has written his work only to correct the historical record in the West and not to facilitate the restitution of those who have been

wronged by that history. That dilemma is already raised when Said was asked to respond to the fact that the front cover of one of his books bears an image of a Hamas slogan on a Palestinian wall, announcing that Hamas is the resistance. Contrary to his questioner's probable expectation that he would most certainly be defensive or discomfited, Said calmly states that the image, chosen by his publishers, did not conflict with the theme of his book, which was about protest and anger, and that writing on walls is a legitimate form of protest. By steadfastly refusing to allow the main issue to be diverted to whether he supports Hamas or not, Said keeps injustice and oppression at the center of attention. These should never be lost sight of, we are reminded, and that Said can keep them in view without legitimizing acts of violence is no small part of the challenge he confronted, and continues to confront.

But returning to the subject of *Orientalism's* reception in the Middle East, Said restores a pedagogical dimension to the discussion in reminding his readers that polemics is far easier than careful, serious research and reflection. To that end, he maintains, the purposes of his study were to equip readers with the critical apparatus to empower themselves through rational debate and argument, rather than through a simple reversal of terms — that is, tearing down Orientalism by putting up Occidentalism in its place. To those on the frontlines, this will appear an intellectualist rather than activist argument, and the tone of a number of Said's interviews reflects the tension between those two models of action. The tension is never fully resolved. The call to action that Said makes on numerous occasions can, in some instances, be read in terms of scrupulous research, criticism, and self-understanding. From the point of view of those entering the academy, there is a compelling appeal in such calls, but to those in the places that feed the Western imagination with false images and stereotypes,

much more is asked of Said's pedagogy than it can bear. One can hear the demands for programmatic action in the voices of the interviewers, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, and these demands make for a lively dynamic between Said and his interlocutors, which replays, in some respects, Said's articulation of Palestinian self-determination from the groundwork of intellectual responsibility and criticism.

As Said himself observes, while a great deal of his work concerns the Middle East, his writings are often received with more enthusiasm in countries outside the Arab world, such as in Latin America, Africa, and Japan, and he turns this observation around to contemplate the relative vitality of intellectual culture in various postcolonial societies. Nevertheless, Said's is a remarkable voice in contemporary criticism.